Preliminary Summary of Themes from In Solidarity Conversations:

*Girls and Gender-Expansive Young People of Color Respond to COVID-19, Economic Crisis, and Social Unrest*

**INTRODUCTION**

These are confusing and complicated times for everyone with the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting economic crisis, and social uprisings in reaction to the murders of Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, George Floyd and so many others, and to ongoing racism in the United States. While all of this has caused a tremendous shift and uncertainty for our nation as a whole, these crises uniquely and disproportionately impact communities of color and their families across the country. Public and policy responses, especially those taken by the newly elected Administration, must engage and address the needs of girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color if effective and lasting change is to be realized.

To expand the voices heard by decision-makers tasked with addressing these critical issues, National Crittenton (Crittenton) in partnership with the National Collaborative of Young Women’s Initiatives (NYWI) co-hosted a series of In Solidarity Conversations. These conversations served as a space for girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color, including indigenous youth, to engage in conversations across the country and help us better understand the impact of COVID-19, police brutality, and racism in their communities and lives. While the in-depth analysis of these conversations is still underway, this memo provides an initial summary of common themes heard in the 14 conversations organized and hosted by National Crittenton and NYWI. A more comprehensive report is expected in early 2021.

Crittenton and NYWI extend much thanks to Alliance for Girls, Girls for Gender Equity, Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute and The Cook Inlet Tribal Council for co-hosting conversations and to the many partners across the country who helped recruit participants to share their wisdom and experiences.

**SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF METHODS**

Using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach, 14 virtual In Solidarity Conversations were led by and held with girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color across the country, including young people from Hawaii and Alaska. For consistency, conversation facilitators were provided a conversation guide that included three main questions of interest and several related follow-up questions generated during the planning process. Participants were given the option to respond to questions by unmuting their microphones and speaking or by using the chat box. Finally, all facilitators and participants were provided compensation for their time and expertise. The following section provides a general overview of some identified themes. However, it is important to note that a deeper dive into the conversations will unearth additional themes, content, and policy recommendations which will be included in the final report.
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

From July to October 2020, over 400 girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color participated in the In Solidarity Conversations. The majority of participants identified as “she/her/hers” (87.9%) with the remaining identifying as “they/them” (2.6%), “she/her/hers, they/them” (2.5%), “she/her/hers, he/him/his” (1.1%), “he/him/his” (1.1%) and “she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them” (1.1%). Twenty-seven (4.7%) participants did not identify their pronouns.

Participants came from a total of 39 states with the five largest groups of young people coming from Texas (11.6%), California (7.4%), Tennessee (6.5%), Ohio (6.1%) and Florida (5.4%). The remaining states each accounted for between 2% to 4.9% of participants. Ages of participants ranged from 13 - 26, with just over half being between the ages of 13 - 18 (55.8%). Finally, Black/African American young people represented more than half of all participants (51.8%), while Latina/Latinx (16.2%), Asian/Asian American (8.2%), Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native (3.2%), Pacific Islander/Polynesian/Native Hawaiian (7%), Middle Eastern/Arab American (5%), Puerto Rican (2%) and bi/multi-racial (9.4%) young people represented a smaller percentage of participants.

IN SOLIDARITY CONVERSATION THEMES

The initial conversation themes identified below focus on the struggles mentioned by participants. However, it is important to note that there were positive highlights shared during the conversations. For example, some participants noted improved family relationships and closeness, while others expressed feeling energized to continue organizing and mobilizing to create change in their communities and the country overall. Further, participants provided recommendations throughout the conversations on how to make improvements and changes to better address their needs and those of their families and communities. These will be expanded upon and presented in the final report. Three questions were asked consistently across all In Solidarity Conversations. Each question is listed below and includes bulleted themes or experiences heard across conversations.
Q1: We know that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacts communities of color, and specifically Black communities. This is not only this health crisis—it is a result of inequities and systemic oppression that exist in our healthcare system. As young women of color and gender-expansive young people of color, has the COVID-19 crisis impacted you? If so, how? Has it impacted your community? How have you been feeling since the start of the pandemic?

- Isolation, frustration and disconnection from their communities due to quarantine and diminished interpersonal interaction.
- Feelings of helplessness and distrust in the healthcare system. Frustration with the lack of available testing and access to testing where available given restrictions on who could get tested (i.e., only those with symptoms).
- Experiencing and witnessing increased instances of racism, blame and overt hostility towards Asian communities for the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Difficulties adjusting to changes in the educational process, including inequitable access to reliable technology for distance learning, teacher support to address learning challenges, and reduced access to critical social and health services and supports normally provided within school settings.
- Fears and anxieties of being exposed to COVID-19 and in turn, infecting friends and family members, especially those with existing health conditions. Also, concern about the health of family members who are essential employees.
- Feelings of being overwhelmed with expanded responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings and other family members while attempting to balance school and other obligations such as work.
- Feelings of uncertainty about their futures and missing their usual routines which provided a sense of stability. Feelings of concern and helplessness at the loss of financial assistance for those unable to attend school in person for fear of contracting the virus.

Q2: This pandemic has also led to an economic crisis that communities of color feel disproportionately. Has COVID-19 had a financial impact on you and your family? Your community?

- Increased sense of fear regarding stability due to loss of income and employment by parents or family members. Some participants noted a shift in financial and economic responsibilities to them as their parents and/or families struggled financially to survive due to changes in job status or parental unemployment. Participants also noted heightened stress about not being able to help as jobs were not available in general but especially for young people.
- Feelings of disappointment and frustration as participants noted the loss of internships and summer jobs, many of which were related to their ability to support themselves, their families and to continue their education in the following school term.
- Lack of financial support for mixed immigration status families.
- Disappointment in the lack of access to healthcare and support from employers for a safe working environment (e.g., not enforcing mask requirements of customers).
- Pressure to go to work even if there are no systems in place to help support families.
Q3: Recently, we’ve seen Black bodies dehumanized as continued victims of police and state violence. How have the murders of Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, and George Floyd (and so many others) and ongoing racism impacted you? How are you processing everything? What would you like to see your community and leaders doing to fight against and push back on police violence and brutality?

- Anger, heartbreak, fear, and disappointment in the systems that they felt were built to protect them (e.g., witnessing or being victims of police aggression).
- Shock and a loss of innocence of some participants who felt unsupported as young people of color, especially by their white peers and witnessing the increasing presence of white supremacist groups in public spaces, such as protests, rallies and everyday settings like grocery stores.
- Helplessness and fear in living and being in spaces as girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color. Comments ranged from feeling scared to do routine activities in their lives to feelings of despair. Participants were concerned about walking in public space for fear of being attacked, harmed, or even killed because of their racial and ethnic identities.
- Interest in wanting to be more involved in public protest and rallies, but also fearful of becoming infected by COVID-19 or victims of police aggression. Many expressed an interest in learning about different ways to be active that did not require their presence in public spaces.
- Interest in learning more about the issues, but also noted feelings of frustration due to mixed messages from movement leaders and/or a lack of accessible information.
- Concerns about “performative” behaviors, ultimately leading to little change or improvement in their lives or their families and communities.
- Frustration and anger about the lack of attention paid to girls, women, and gender-expansive people of color who also experience oppression and police brutality. Participants expressed unwavering support for Black men who most often receive the majority of media coverage and public outrage, but also were adamant about the need for equal support for girls, young women, and gender-expansive people of color in discussions about social and systems change, especially for transgender communities of color.
- Frustration around elected officials’ lack of accountability to the communities they serve for the issues communities are facing.

“Being alive is having power but sometimes you just don’t have that microphone to amplify that power—but those small decisions you make and the little things you do in your life make a difference.”

In Solidarity Conversation Participant
NEXT STEPS

Continuing with a YPAR approach, National Crittenton staff and In Solidarity Youth Research Fellows (approx. 15) are currently reviewing and coding transcripts. The deeper analysis will include expanded exploration of the three primary questions, an examination of additional questions explored during the breakout sessions, and comparison of responses across regions. The full analysis is expected to be complete in early 2021 with a final report and youth led recommendations to follow. Further, the release of the report will include a virtual Hill briefing highlighting major findings and continued engagement with In Solidarity Conversations participants to collectively strategize for promoting the report and addressing issues identified during the conversations.

Finally, while efforts were made to engage a diverse population of young people of color, gaps in that data exist. To address these gaps, additional conversations will be scheduled with young mothers, young people with disabilities, LGBTQ and gender-expansive young people, and young people representing a variety of immigration statuses.

**National Crittenton**

National Crittenton (Crittenton) advocates for social, economic, and political justice with and for girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people impacted by chronic adversity, violence, and oppression. Crittenton is the convener of the 25 members of the Crittenton family of agencies that provide direct services in more than 30 states and the District of Columbia and has strategic partners on the ground in nearly all states and many tribal nations. In 2011, Crittenton co-founded the National Girls @ the Margin Alliance with Rights4Girls and in 2017 and 2019 hosted In Solidarity We Rise: Healing, Justice and Opportunity for Girls. Currently, Crittenton is supporting young mothers in building IMPACT (Invincible Mamas Pushing for Action and Change Together) a national advocacy network of young mothers.

**The National Collaborative of Young Women’s Initiatives**

National Young Women’s Initiative (National YWI) is a national, cross-sector initiative—bringing together philanthropic partners, community partners, government and young people from across localities—focused on centering the leadership and advocacy on young women and TGNC youth of color, and addressing the structural and systemic barriers that they face. National YWI is co-led by The National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women’s Initiatives—a cohort of nine leading women’s foundation’s across the country—and Girls for Gender Equity, who leads the National Young Women’s Advisory Council, coordination with community partners across the country, and curriculum development for YWAC members.

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