YOUNG PARENTS SPEAK OUT: Barriers, Bias, and Broken Systems (May 2023)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Special Recognition:
Tayla Easterla, Editor
Tyler Azure, Editor
INTRODUCTION

IMPACT (Invincible Mamas Pushing Action and Change Together), founded in 2019, is a national advocacy alliance, originally known as YPAC (Young Parents Advisory Committee). The development of IMPACT is hosted, and supported by National Crittenton. Today, IMPACT is led by a Steering Committee of mamas from various states, and tribal nations across the country. Our mission at IMPACT is to work collaboratively to dismantle oppressive social, political, and economic policies, practices, and systems; by boldly advocating for freedoms, opportunities, and equity for all young families, communities, and the mamas that unite them.

Even in the best of circumstances, parenting is a challenging and often a daunting process. While fraught with daily obstacles, we look forward to the surprising, and unexpected rewards that our children will offer us through their accomplishments. Parenting challenges us to overcome our own fears, social pressures, and expectations in order to meet our responsibility to our child(ren). All of these things are what inspire IMPACT to be invincible in the work we do. While IMPACT addresses the needs of all young families, our project is primarily focused on young mamas of color who have been impacted by public systems, and have faced multiple forms of oppression, and adversity.

The goals of IMPACT are to:

- Build, and expand the IMPACT National Advocacy Alliance into a powerful movement that engages young mamas across the country in advocacy work;
- Identify, and address key areas of policy, program, and system change needed to better support young families;
- Identify, and fill the gaps in current young parent-led advocacy efforts, and engage more young mamas as leaders;
- Close the information gap by expanding data available on the needs, and potential of young mamas, and their families;
- Increase direct advocacy with lawmakers, and decision makers focused on the needs of young families.
IMPACT (formerly known as “YPAC”) crafted, and implemented a research approach that included young parent-led listening sessions, individual interviews, and an online survey with custodial young parents across the country. A total of 89 racially/ethnically diverse current, and former young parents, who had children at age 17 or younger, and up to 23 years of age, participated. Current ages of participants were relatively evenly distributed with the largest group currently being 21 years or younger, followed by 26 and older, and then those 25 to 22 years of age. Participants were racially/ethnically diverse including Asian American/Pacific islander, African American, Latino, American Indian, multi-racial, and not disclosed. Roughly 50 percent identified as being involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system. Finally, about one-third is currently part of a young parent program. The vast majority of participants in this research process were young mothers. The information that follows is the result of research conducted by young parents focusing on the challenges they face, and their ideas for change. The current members of the IMPACT Steering Committee are releasing this report which is an update of an earlier version created for internal purposes that guides the creation of a national advocacy alliance.
We, as young mamas, face social, political, and economic systems that do not effectively address or recognize our complex lives. Additionally, we face explicit, and implicit biases related to race/ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity, varying ability levels, mental health, and immigration status. Furthermore, varying levels of exposure to childhood abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction also compounds these challenges we endure. Little data exists on the specific, and complex needs of the diverse group we identify as young mamas, and on the ways in which we can be supported to heal, thrive, and achieve economic security as families, and individuals.

We know that it is possible to break generational cycles in one generation, but it will require us as a society to focus on more than access to reproductive health services, and preventing pregnancy. The reasons we as teens, and young adults choose to parent are complex, and influenced by social norms, cultural values, and practices, exposure to adversity, the search for unconditional love, and family history. It is not uncommon for the unique needs of us young parents, and our children to be minimized even by those whose work focuses on us, and our child(ren). This is reflected in statements that indicate our needs as young parents’ are the same as “adult or older” parents, and require no specific focus. This is alarming, and does not recognize the ways in which the complex context of our lives as young mamas including our age, race, gender, and other factors that impact our ability to secure effective services, and supports.

It is our responsibility to use a two/multi-generational approach to build the public, and political will to change the attitudes, practices, systems, and policies; to meet us as young families where we are by listening to us, as leaders for change in addressing the root causes of the obstacles we face.
CORE FACTORS

The research conducted for this project highlights, and validates a set of core factors that impact how we as young parents are seen, and treated, how we see ourselves, and measure our own successes, and failures. These factors influence the design of programs, and policies designated to serve us. They also reflect the deficit attitude, and implicit bias of those providing support, and making policies about young parents. These core factors create a powerful barrier against the success of young families; particularly those of us living in low-income situations who have a wide range of complex needs, created not by our own making, but as a result of the core factors that shape the context of our lives.
• **Structural “isms” and implicit bias** of institutions, and individuals based on race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, immigration status, geography, completed educational level, age, disability, and more, has a profound impact on the context of our lives as young parents’ in all areas, beginning with the generations who come before us. It cuts across all systems, and fields, and shapes programs, and policies theoretically designed to support young families. Using an intersectional lens, one can imagine the layers of oppression we face as a result of the many identities we simultaneously live, and the unbeknownst “labels” prescribed by others.

• All systems, and its policies, and in many cases staff, have **attitudes that reflect narrow traditional gender role expectations** for all young mothers, and fathers. These expectations impact the perception of the roles we will play in filling specific needs for our child(ren). We as mothers are expected to be the caretakers, and fathers the providers. When we are not meeting these expectations the implicit bias is reflected in the “loose women/moms,” and “deadbeat dads” assumption. This results in systems that pit us against each other, rather than supporting us in building a family structure that works for us. Young mamas are all too often shamed for becoming mothers—“too early” in the eyes of family, community, society, and systems.

• **Stigma, and moral judgment of young parents** results in punitive approaches to program delivery, and policy-making. There are a multitude of ways the systems around us as young parents are built on punitive approaches that only increase our sense of being judged, monitored or disregarded, rather than actively supported.
CORE FACTORS (cont’d)

- **Internalized oppression**, the combination of bias, and oppression with stigma, and moral judgment results in a serious crisis of confidence for young parents. Many interviewees spoke of the harm that comes from the social stigma young parents face, and the assumption about young parents’ incapacity to care for their own child(ren). The net impact on custodial young parents is that they are in a constant state of anxiety about the threat of losing their child(ren) to the system, and noncustodial parents live in fear of not having the opportunity to be involved in the lives of their child(ren).

- **Generational patterns of young parenthood** are most often ignored by systems, and programs in favor of a transactional approach to solving a single “problem.” What is required is a comprehensive approach that works with multiple generations to recognize, and address the root causes of the family, community, and social levels. Many young parents express their struggle with insecurity about whether they can be a good parent when they weren’t given the tools it takes to be a good parent.

- **Immediate Family Context** is most often disregarded, and the reality of high exposure to chronic adversity such as abuse, neglect, violence, addiction, and family dysfunction is most often not considered. The focus remains “what did they do,” versus “what happened to them” prior to them becoming a young parent. This is particularly profound, and marginalizing for us young mothers.

- **Catch 22 of developmental needs** exists when young parents are expected to be adults even though science suggests the brain is still developing. Furthermore, by not investing in supporting the development of young parents with their child(ren), a lose-lose scenario is created for them when they are held accountable under “adult” standards.
Supporting our needs, and potential as young families provides all of us with an opportunity to invest in two-/multi-generations at the same time. If we work together to do this effectively, the benefits will have a positive impact on us, but also on our children, and grandchildren. Young mother-led families constantly face the stigma of moralistic judgment about “our motherhood,” and our choices, but we also know that it is possible to break destructive cycles in one generation when we have the support, and opportunities we need to grow, and thrive. We know this is true because we are doing it—each, and every day. In this spirit, we share with you the common themes that emerged from our research process.
Not surprisingly, we as young parents identify a diverse, and complex set of needs for ourselves, and our child(ren) that are not being met.

The following are a few examples:

a. Access to education (high school, college, trade school/certification).

b. Health insurance/care (includes reproductive, physical, and mental health care including trauma informed mental health services).

c. Early childhood education/child care assistance (quality, reliable, affordable child care).

d. Livable wage jobs including career/workforce development support.

e. Safe, affordable short (shelter/emergency), and long term stable housing.

f. Support in navigating the child welfare system from family support to foster care, and reunification (if needed).
Lack of data about young parents disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender identity, etc.

For example, states are not required to report the numbers of expectant, and parenting youth involved in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. While legislation passed requiring states to report the number of expectant, and parenting youth involved in the child welfare system, implementation has been delayed. Therefore, data on our population remains unavailable. Moreover, as interviewees pointed out, the systems that young parents engage in often have poor data collection, and too few data driven solutions that focus on understanding, and addressing the needs of young parents. As one interviewee said, You can’t provide services if you don’t understand what the need is, and if after, you don’t know how well the service worked.

A failure to understand, and respond effectively to young parents’ developmental needs.

Interviewees report that systems, and programs generally lack a full appreciation of the complex needs of young parents in the context of parents’ own cognitive development, need to heal from trauma, and growth as adults, and parents. This may also be true for advocates who focus on a single issue or system without a focus on the developmental needs of young mothers, young fathers, and our child(ren). Newer research on the complexity, and pace of human brain development doesn’t yet shape most of the programs, policies, and services for young parents, nor the set of expectations held for young parents often resulting in ineffective, and often re-traumatizing “supports.”
Policies are not being directly shaped by us young parents that they are designed to serve. This results in unintended, negative consequences, and ineffective support for our population, creating additional barriers to progress.

Programs that do work closely with us young parents on a daily basis, often lack the time, and resources to prepare the population with the leadership, and tools we may need; when (and if) we get to engage in policy, and program development, and advocacy at the national, state, or local level. One example is the work requirement for the receipt of TANF benefits which forces many of us young parents to choose between furthering their education, and working. Legislative solutions allowing young parents to substitute education for work has not yet found support from policy makers. The general consensus is that there is little to no true holistic young parent advocacy, particularly at the national level.

The nonprofit advocacy sector should, and could be working with us young parents as leaders, and doing so more collaboratively across systems, fields, and specific issue areas.

By working together we can create policies that improve services, and remove barriers for us as young parents, and our children. As young parents, we are still marginalized, and largely invisible in policy considerations. This is particularly true for us child welfare, and juvenile justice involved young mothers – this must change.
The current transactional, and problem/crisis focused approach to supporting young parents is marked by little attention to prevention, family support, and the root causes of young parenthood, and family instability. For example, an emphasis on access to reproductive health services to prevent young parenthood does not support our needs as young parents, and families, often stigmatizes us as irresponsible, and does not offer the support we need to be good parents, and to break generational cycles of young parenthood.

Public systems, and programs do not recognize the unique challenges of young parents. They do not support the economic stability, health, and family structure of our young families; whether they are single parents, co-parents not living together, or couples living together. Universally, our young parent participants in the project strongly expressed the experience of being required to make difficult choices to access benefits to the detriment of their family stability, and relationship with their child’s other parent. One prime example is the requirement for custodial parents to prove they have sought child support from the noncustodial parent in order to receive childcare assistance. Child support that is paid by or may be garnished from the noncustodial parents’ wages directly go to pay the state first, and not to the custodial parent. Custodial parents shared experiences of receiving $20 or less after the state is paid. This policy leaves less income to be directed to the care of the child by noncustodial parents. Additionally, in situations where a mother chooses not to associate with the father for safety reasons, she may be unable to seek childcare assistance. It is fair to say that neither mothers or fathers felt supported or understood by programs, and systems, rather they believe the current structure is designed to pit them against each other.

For example, an emphasis on access to reproductive health services to prevent young parenthood does not support our needs as young parents, and families, often stigmatizes us as irresponsible, and does not offer the support we need to be good parents, and to break generational cycles of young parenthood. Another example offered is housing instability, and the requirements of maintaining housing benefits for single mamas who are not allowed to have their child’s father in the housing unit to care for their child while they are working or are in school.
There is a lack of recognition of the depth of social isolation young parents experience, and our need for connection.

This includes relationships with other young parents, and with parents who were former young parents. Social connections are not well supported by public or private programs, and their value is not recognized as an important factor in supporting young families to be stable, and healthy. While mentor, coaching, and case management relationships are beneficial, they do not replace the need for connection with others who share similar experiences.

Systems are siloed, and each of these systems comes with their own set of obstacles or negative impacts young parents must navigate.

Generally speaking, these systems are not designed to support young parents, and our child(ren). Therefore, the burden of accessing, and coordinating services/programs/ supports is placed on young parents who are already overloaded. “We often fail to center the family, and pull all the providers who touch that family together. Right now, the parent is running around to all the agencies, and providers to organize us, share their information each time, and the programs aren’t in alignment. And it’s exhausting, and it might not sync up, and they might miss an opportunity.”
POLICY ISSUES

The prior section outlining major themes includes some areas that describe serious policy, and practice issues that us young parents experience. The delineation of specific policy issues was an intended part of this project. However, the complexity of the barriers, the number of systems involved, and the number of issues identified makes it impossible to call out specific policy changes to be addressed in each system; much less across systems without additional research. This is compounded by the reality that we do not identify systems as discrete, and separate entities. Furthermore, based on the research completed thus far, it is difficult to identify whether the “problem” is created by:

- Ineffective federal policy,
- Problems or inconsistency between different federal agencies implementation of federal policy,
- How federal policy is implemented at state/local/tribal levels,
- Ineffective state law or practice/enforcement,
- Specific agencies own internal policies,
- Issues with specific service provider misinformation,
- Poor communication between providers, and us young parents,
- Discrimination against us young parents, and/or
- Lack of inclusion of young parents in policymaking.

Additional research completed in collaboration with our population of young parents is needed to identify, and prioritize specific policy changes that must be made in order for public systems, and the “safety net” to effectively support us as young families.
CURRENT WORK AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Our team at IMPACT has developed, and recently launched a national alliance based on the information collected in the listening sessions, individual interviews, and the online survey with custodial young parents. The IMPACT National Advocacy Alliance is working diligently to expand, and will focus on advocating with, for, and by young parents, and their/our families. The Alliance will consciously center young mamas, provide them with training, and leadership opportunities, and listen to their expertise in an effort to bridge the variety of systems, and policy frameworks that shape their experiences.

As a collective, IMPACT has worked toward our commitment of eradicating biased policies, and broken systems by using our voices in many different panels, and meetings with policy, and decision makers. A few examples include speaking at the White House about mental health needs, submitting public comments on Title IX, and meeting with the Gender Policy Council to bring awareness to issues that were important to us, such as mental health, proper health care, especially surrounding birthing experiences, and the foster care system failing families. Additionally, at the invitation of The Children’s Bureau Learning and Coordination Center, IMPACT conducted a webinar, Young Mamas in Foster Care: Setting the Stage for Success. Finally, in addition to numerous national speaking opportunities we hosted conversations at the local level in New Mexico, and California to connect with young mamas in their community to hear directly from them.

At IMPACT we are passionate about moving the work forward, and bringing attention to the experiences, wisdom, and strengths of mamas everywhere. We are united by our love for our children, and their destinies, as well as our shared experiences of discrimination, and our dedication to our power, and passion to change the world. Even in the best of circumstances, parenting is a challenging, and often a daunting process. Fraught with daily obstacles, and surprising unexpected rewards—parenting challenges us to overcome our own fears, social pressures, and expectations in order to meet our responsibility to our child(ren). One thing you can always count on with mamas is that we are going to rise to the occasion every time it comes to our child(ren), and make the world a better place for them.
CONCLUSION

We, as young mamas, face social, political, and economic systems that do not effectively address or recognize our complex lives. Additionally, we face explicit, and implicit biases related to race/ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity, varying ability levels, mental health, and immigration status. Furthermore, varying levels of exposure to childhood abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction also compounds these challenges we endure. Little data exists on the specific, and complex needs of the diverse group we identify as young mamas, and on the ways in which we can be supported to heal, thrive, and achieve economic security as families, and individuals.

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