

# YOUTH LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SEEING AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS



*Isabel Coronado opens the Youth Listening Session with a Land Acknowledgement.*

As part of the 5th annual See Us, Support Us month, the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP) convened New York’s first ever Youth Listening Session focusing on parental incarceration in New York City on October 30, 2019. At this groundbreaking event, eight brave young people ranging in ages from 15 to 23 shared their experiences navigating their parents’ incarceration with an audience that included more than 80 decision-makers representing 14 local and state government agencies, as well as New York State Senators and Assemblymembers. The youth panel was moderated by Emani Davis, a long-time advocate for children with incarcerated parents whose own father was incarcerated for more than 20 years. The findings of a 2018 report on the impact of incarceration on families by FWD.us entitled Every Second were presented by Olivia Elder, herself directly affected by parental incarceration.

This document summarizes the issues discussed and the recommendations offered by these courageous young leaders.

The event began with a land acknowledgment, led by one of the youth who is a citizen of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation, to honor the history of our original ancestors from the land where we gathered that is now known as lower Manhattan and the resiliency of

The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, a special project of the Osborne Center for Justice Across Generations at The Osborne Association, is a statewide partnership of more than 60 representatives from government agencies, community and faith-based partners, and people with lived experience.

indigenous people. She asked us to consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement. Another youth read the *Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights* which served as a framework for the afternoon’s discussion. The young people shared their experiences related to each of the eight rights, and offered recommendations for how best to support children from the moment of a parent’s arrest through reentry in order to prevent others from experiencing some of the pain, hurdles, and challenges they faced.

“I could have been told where my mom was sooner. I mean, who wants to know that their mom is in prison one week before you go see her in prison?”



Throughout the discussion, youth spoke about what helped them and identified sources of support. They emphasized the importance of peer support, highlighting after school programs that provide affirming spaces and connections with other youth with incarcerated parents while learning life and leadership skills (many of them participate in

programs at the Osborne Association and Hour Children). Most were able to identify an adult who they felt understood them including a school safety officer, school counselor, therapist, and facilitators for after school programs specifically for children of incarcerated parents. In spite of this, they overwhelmingly felt judged by most adults in their life who they feel didn’t and don’t understand them. Many shared how important it was for them to maintain a connection with their incarcerated parent, with two youth sharing that their moms are their best friends. Several highlighted the systemic barriers to maintaining this relationship including distance and costs related to visits and phone calls.

As youth described difficult times—including time spent in foster care for some, the pain of separation, and stigma—they also spoke about their talents and the interests that fuel them, reminding the audience that having an incarcerated parent does not define who they are nor limit who they can become. Creative arts such as music, dancing, drawing, writing, photography, and film help them to cope with the incarceration and to better



*Olivia Elder from FWD.us presents the findings of their recent Every Second report.*



More than 80 people representing diverse agencies and organizations listened as youth speakers shared their experiences and their recommendations.

express themselves. The talented group were comprised of a filmmaker and actor, a field and track star, a multi-instrumentalist, a boy scout, a poet, an artist, and a rapper, and many are advocates working to enact the changes in the world they wish to see.

The youth put forth numerous recommendations during the discussion and in their preparatory meetings which can be found here. The youth's top recommendations include the following:

**1** We call on everyone to see us as children full of promise, rather than “at risk.” We are not defined by our parent’s mistakes and we thrive and succeed when we are supported.

*“We’re gonna reach the bar high if you set it high. If you set it low, that’s what’s going to happen unfortunately. People tend to feel like you’re going to follow in your parent’s footsteps and be bad. It’s just not true. The statistics that you hear are skewed.”*

**2** We call on adults to ask us for our input. We understand our recommendations may not always be possible, but we should at least be asked, considered, feel heard, and respected, and informed no matter what.

*“I do not feel like my voice was heard. I was placed in foster care and wasn’t able to live with my siblings. I could have lived with my godmother. That’s where I wanted to be but nobody asked me.”*

**3** We call on everyone to use humanizing language and refer to our parents as “parents” or “incarcerated people” rather than inmate, criminal, offender, or felon. We ask everyone to say “visit” rather than “visitation,” which is a term that systems that separate families use. **Words Matter!**

*“I want us to stray from using that terminology because we visit a parent, just like everybody else does. The setting might be different, but it’s still a visit. Don’t make us feel further institutionalized by the words you use.”*

**4** We call on parents, caregivers, and caseworkers to tell children an age-appropriate truth about a parent’s incarceration. We need to know a truth that can be built on so that we can trust our caregivers and try to make sense of our parent’s absence and begin to heal.

*“Nobody told us where our mom was for months. My little brother thought she was dead.”*

**5** We call on law enforcement—and anyone with the authority to make an arrest— to implement a written protocol to safeguard children of arrested parents and train officers on strategies to minimize trauma to children who are present during a parent or family member’s arrest. Treating us and our parents with respect and dignity can contribute to positive police-community relations now and into the future.

*“When my mom was arrested, they separated us and took us to our home where they ransacked the house in front of us. The experience was very traumatic and there are so many things that could have been done differently. NYC passed a bill, and I ask for people who can make these changes to be sure the NYPD is accountable because this isn’t something any child should have to witness ever.”*



NY State Senator Velmanette Montgomery hugs one of the youth speakers.

**6** We call on criminal courts to use Family Responsibility Statements so that our needs are considered when sentencing decisions are made about our parents. We ask for more alternatives to incarceration options so that our parents can remain in the community with us.

**7** We need better access to our incarcerated parents. We call on NYS DOCCS to place parents in prisons closer to their children, to let us know when our parent is transferred to a new facility, and to provide our parents with free phone calls so that we can speak with our parents regularly. We call on New York to restore the Family Visiting Buses to make it easier for us to visit our parents who are incarcerated in NY State prisons.

*“Me and my father’s relationship is inconsistent because he is 8 hours away. So, I don’t really have much of a father figure. It is hard for us to get there because we have to rent a car, pay for gas and tolls. It is stressful for my mom to make sure that the experience I have going all the way up there is remembered in a good way.”*

**8** We ask that corrections officers who interact with visitors are trained on child-friendly practices and for corrections to include child-friendly visiting areas in all prisons and jails. We call on jails to provide contact visits for children who are visiting a parent. No child should be separated from their mom or dad by a glass barrier or partition.

*“Searching toddlers and children in a way that is like a game would be less scary for kids.”*

**9** We call on Departments of Education, charter, and private schools to train and support staff to respond supportively, without judgment, when they learn about our parent’s incarceration, including guidance about how to create affirming spaces for us. We ask that our incarcerated parents be allowed to participate in parent-teacher conferences by phone, and that they are sent progress reports when our families support their involvement.

*“When my teacher learned I had an incarcerated parent she said, ‘Wow, are you really the child of an incarcerated parent? You don’t seem like the type, you don’t act like it.’ So in my head I’m like, ‘What do you mean I don’t act like it? Am I supposed to be violent? Am I supposed to act out in school and have bad grades?’ I guess she didn’t understand, but I was offended. Her response should have been much different.”*

**10** We call on the Office of Children and Family Services, the NYC Administration for Children’s Services, and the NYC Department for the Aging to provide supportive services for our relatives and grandparents so they are better able to care for us.

**11** We call on NYC (and other jurisdictions) to train mental health providers about how to support us and our parents without judgment. We ask that ThriveNYC initiatives include parental incarceration.

*“I was so embarrassed to talk about it. I would lie and tell people I was going on vacation because that was easier than saying I was going to do a prison visit. And when people are forced to lie about their situation or they’re forced into the shadows because of stigma, if they’re in the middle of a health crisis, how can they ask for help?”*

**12** We call for funding for after-school programs specifically for children of incarcerated parents and training about parental incarceration for all afterschool program staff.

*“I’m part of the Youth Action Council and I love it. It’s one of the best things that ever happened to me.”*

**13** We ask for our parents to have access to rehabilitative and educational programming while incarcerated and reentry support, especially housing, upon release. What happens to our parents directly affects us: we are supported when our parents succeed, and harmed when they face systemic barriers and discrimination.

*“It’s so important that skills are being taught while they’re in prison so it won’t seem like a waste of time to us. You know, like you’re taking my dad to do what? To just be punished. If they are improving as people and members of society, then that helps everyone. And it helps us with our connections to them and it helps us when they get out.”*

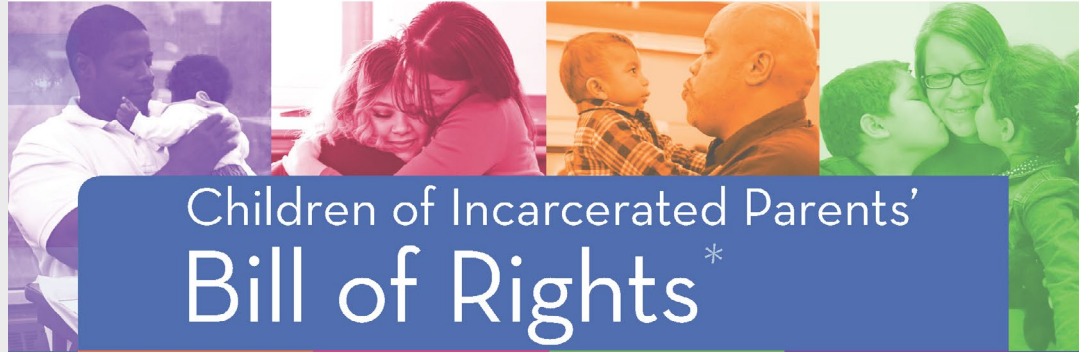
**14** We ask that the parole decision takes into account the impact on us of continued incarceration, considers the harm we have experienced from not having our parents physically present in our lives, and considers our parents contributions to our positive development.

**15** We ask for probation and parole departments to take us into account and develop supervision and reporting requirements that allow our caregivers to fulfill their parenting responsibilities (i.e., child-related appointments and emergencies, caring for us when we are ill, being there for important events).

**16** We ask for the creation of both a City and State-level interagency task force to ensure our needs are considered and addressed by government agencies, and services are coordinated so that we and our parents are not required to complete repetitive or competing services.

To learn more, please see [A Call to Action: Safeguarding New York’s Children of Incarcerated Parents bit.ly/CALLTOACTION20](#) and visit the [See Us, Support Us Resource Toolkit bit.ly/SUSUTOOKIT2019](#)

*We wish to acknowledge and thank Echoes of Incarceration for photographing the event, Gibney Dance Center for generously donating the space, and FWD.us for supporting the event and See Us, Support Us month.*



## Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights\*

- 1.** I have the right **to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.**
- 2.** I have the right **to be heard when decisions are made about me.**
- 3.** I have the right **to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.**
- 4.** I have the right **to be well cared for in my parent's absence.**
- 5.** I have the right **to speak with, see, and touch my parent.**
- 6.** I have the right **to support as I face my parent's incarceration.**
- 7.** I have the right **not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.**
- 8.** I have the right **to a lifelong relationship with my parent.**

\* Developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in 2005: [www.sfcipp.org](http://www.sfcipp.org)

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