

# AN UNAVOIDABLE SYSTEM

THE HARMS OF FAMILY POLICING AND PARENTS' VISION FOR INVESTING IN COMMUNITY CARE

FALL 2021



PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH LED BY PARENTS IMPACTED BY THE FAMILY POLICING SYSTEM



## RISE

Rise envisions communities that are free from injustice, family policing and separation, and a society that is cultivating new ways of preventing and addressing harm. We imagine a radical commitment to ensuring that all families have what they need to live beyond survival and truly thrive. Led by parents impacted by the family policing system, Rise believes that parents have the answers for their families and communities. Our mission is to support parents' leadership to dismantle the current family policing system by eliminating cycles of harm, surveillance and punishment and creating communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing and support. We create safe spaces where impacted parents can reflect on their lives, connect with peers, learn about family policing's history and policies, strengthen their writing, public speaking and advocacy skills, and mobilize their communities for justice.

## TAKEROOT JUSTICE

TakeRoot Justice provides legal, participatory research and policy support to strengthen the work of grassroots and community-based groups in New York City to dismantle racial, economic and social oppression. TakeRoot Justice employs a unique model of partnership with grassroots and community-based groups. Our partners take the lead in determining the priorities and goals for our work and advance our understanding of justice. This upends the traditional power dynamics between communities and service providers. We believe in a theory of change where short-term and individual successes help build the capacity and power of our partners, who in turn can have longer-term impact on policies, laws and systems that affect their communities. Our work has a greater impact because it is done in connection with organizing, building power and leadership development.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Rise Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project was led by our PAR Team of six parents directly impacted by the family policing system: Halimah Washington, Naashia B., Shamara Kelly, Melissa Landrau, Yvonne Smith and Imani Worthy.

This report was authored collaboratively by the Rise PAR Team, Erin Markman, Irene Linares, Tracy Serdjenian and Nora McCarthy, with support from Teresa Bachiller, Noshin Hoque, Bianca Shaw and Robbyne Wiley. This report also reflects the work and input of all Rise staff, including: Ashanti Bryant, Keyna Franklin, Teresa Marrero, Shakira Paige, Zoraida Ramirez, Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker and Jeanette Vega.

We extend deep gratitude to everyone who participated in community conversations and completed surveys. Your voices were heard and valued and will make a difference to families and communities in New York City and beyond. We are grateful for your willingness to be vulnerable in speaking your truth and sharing your experiences with the family policing system, as well as your vision for change.

We are so appreciative of the dedication, research expertise,

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Special thanks to [Maria Herron](#) for photography, [Mickey Ferrara](#) for floral imagery, [Eileen Jimenez](#) for art, [Karl Snyder](#) for editing and Jeff Faerber for report layout and design.

## AUTHORS' NOTE

By Naashia B., Shamara Kelly, Melissa Landrau, Yvonne Smith, Halimah Washington and Imani Worthy

We are parents in New York City who are impacted by the family policing system. We love and care about our children and families. We are community members, mothers, advocates and activists.

We are survivors of multiple forms of violence and multiple systems that have tried to kill us. We are aware of systemic injustices and human rights violations that continue to harm us, our families and our communities.

We do not believe that the system exists to help us. We believe that the system targets, surveils and punishes Black and brown families. We do not believe the system can be reformed or fixed. While we work toward abolition, we demand immediate accountability and transparency from the system.

We are passionate about our work and have varied experiences and areas of expertise. We are interested in exploring different tactics that lead to and help to create an abolitionist future. We believe in restorative, transformative and healing justice as practices to achieve abolition.

We are the experts in our own lives and the lives of our families. We know what we need to thrive. Although we have the solutions to our problems, we are aware that we are the furthest away from the resources needed to fix these problems.

We believe in relationship building, base building and coalition building to strengthen our movement to abolish the family policing system. We believe in connectedness and community care.

We believe that another world is possible. We are committed to creating a world where children, families and communities have everything they deserve to flourish. Safety, joy, connection and access to resources are our right.



**RISE PAR TEAM: (STANDING, LEFT TO RIGHT) HALIMAH WASHINGTON, YVONNE SMITH, SHAMARA KELLY; (FRONT, LEFT TO RIGHT) IMANI WORTHY, NAASHIA B.**

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## Introduction

This report shares the results of a participatory action research project that Rise conducted in winter 2021 in partnership with TakeRoot Justice. Our research documents the harm of the family policing system and outlines how parents impacted by the system believe families can receive care and support without the surveillance, control, trauma and loss inflicted by the current system.

Over 40% of Black children—and over 30% of all children—in New York City are at risk of experiencing a child maltreatment investigation by age 18.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of 90 days, investigators with the power to remove your children search your home, examine your children’s bodies and interview your neighbors and children’s teachers. This is a frightening, intrusive and often shameful experience for families. Additionally, despite COVID-related declines, nearly 7,000 families were under court-ordered ACS supervision in Fiscal Year 2020, with much higher numbers in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Yet the system’s impact is so segregated that many people with political power may not know anyone who has been investigated or subjected to court-ordered monitoring by ACS, and may not understand the full scope and harm of the system.

### A SYSTEM THAT HARMS BLACK AND BROWN FAMILIES

Like policing and incarceration by the criminal legal system, surveillance and family separation by the family policing system impact predominantly Black and brown, low-income families living in communities marked by societal neglect. Involvement with ACS often lasts for years and [for generations](#), and, for families in these communities, can be unavoidable.<sup>3</sup> Rise knows from our work with impacted parents, and from our partner organizations, that parents have been reported and investigated for suspected child maltreatment when they’ve rinsed their children’s clothes in a tub without detergent, left younger children in the care of an older child, run late for picking their child up from school, or sought medical care for an infant with health challenges. Investigations are not limited to the issue reported and parents are not told their rights. Nationally, Black families are disproportionately negatively impacted; they are more likely to be investigated, less likely to be offered family support services, more likely to have their children enter the foster system and more likely to be permanently separated.<sup>4</sup>

### FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rise’s research documents parents’ experiences with the system and explores a collective vision to transform our society’s structures, policies and practices related to family and community support. Imaginative and sometimes painful community conversations with 48 parents impacted by ACS provide the foundation of this report. Findings also reflect 58 anonymous surveys by parents impacted by ACS.

Many of our research findings on the trauma and harm inflicted by ACS will be unsurprising to parents who have experienced the system, yet the devastation to children, parents, extended family networks and communities is not broadly understood and is therefore essential to document and amplify. Key findings include:

- ACS is an unavoidable system in Black and brown communities.
- ACS fails to help parents. Economic supports—financial and employment assistance—were the *least* common services included in parents’ ACS service plans. Even when connections to services were helpful to families, they came at the cost of negative experiences with the system.
- ACS intervention inflicts lasting and layered trauma, including harming children physically and emotionally and actively harming families instead of helping them.
- ACS does not respect parents’ cultural practices and values, and violates norms of privacy and autonomy for parents and children.
- ACS involvement damages the relationships which parents and families need to thrive.
- Parents lose their jobs—and identities—and live in fear.

Secondly, our research asked parents to envision new approaches to providing care. Key findings include:

- Community care networks—the constellation of people and places that care for parents in difficult times and help them achieve their goals—are deeply important and multifaceted.
- Parents call for well-resourced communities, including childcare, jobs, housing, community centers and supports such as therapy.
- Parents want financial investment in families, access to information about their rights, non-judgmental and compassionate care, and care from people with similar experiences and backgrounds.

Rise calls for abolition of the system, including an end to mandated reporting and elimination of the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment, as well as deep investment to support safe and flourishing families and communities. Based on our research, our recommendations lay out specific concrete legal, policy and budgetary changes that can be made immediately to shift away from reliance on ACS and strengthen family support in communities:

## **Why We Use the Term "Family Policing System"**

Rise is using the term “family policing system” instead of “child welfare system” because our team believes that it most accurately and directly describes the system’s purpose and impact.<sup>5</sup> While Rise has often also used the term “family regulation system,” Rise staff led by parents who have experienced the system considered this term “too soft” in describing the harmful role of the system in the lives of families it impacts. “Family policing” highlights the system’s connection to and similarities with the criminal legal system, and also links our work to broader movements to abolish policing.

Researcher, scholar and activist Dorothy Roberts explains, “*The terms traditionally used to describe the system are all positive. ‘Child welfare system’ implies that the system’s purpose is to improve or protect the welfare of children. ‘Child protective services’ states that they are services, and that these services are designed to protect children. ‘Foster care’ explicitly states that it is a form of care. In fact, this system is not about child or family welfare, protection or care. This system is about regulating, policing, punishing and destroying families.*”

“*We’ve challenged terms that give a false impression of what the system does. Now, we are exploring different descriptions of it. To me, the most accurate term is ‘family policing system.’ Policing captures what this system does. It polices families with the threat of taking children away. Even when its agents don’t remove children, they can take children and that threat is how they impose their power and terror. It is a form of punishment, harm and oppression. I’m not necessarily saying anybody should adopt one term or another, but it is important to challenge the false impression that terms for this system give — that it is about welfare, protection and care — because that is not what it does.*”<sup>6</sup>

For this reason, we are also using the term “foster system” instead of “foster care system.” As one member of the PAR team stated, “There is nothing caring about it.”

- **Reduce reports to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment**, also called the “hotline.” Shrink the pipelines that funnel families into the family policing system by reducing hotline calls.
- **Divest from ACS and invest in communities.** Shift funding away from ACS and invest deeply and in new ways in community-led approaches to family and community safety and wellness. Invest in innovation to explore and adapt community-led healing justice, restorative justice and transformative justice practices.
- **Reduce investigations and the harm of investigations.** Investigate fewer hotline reports and limit the unchecked power of the family policing system during investigations by ensuring that parents know their rights at the start of an investigation.
- **Shrink the Statewide Central Register (SCR).** Stop listing parents on the SCR for neglect, end the time limit to appeal placement on the SCR and reduce the economic harm of the SCR by limiting its use in employment decisions.
- **Begin the process of making reparations to families and communities impacted by ACS.** Reinforce a truthful narrative about the historical and current impact of the family policing system.

Our report offers more detail about both our findings and recommendations.

## SHIFTING TO COMMUNITY CARE

In the past year, as part of a broad uprising for racial justice and against racist police violence, protesters have flooded New York City streets to demand that the city invest in approaches to public safety that don’t inflict state violence or cause additional emotional and economic devastation. Similarly, this report shares a vision for a new approach to supporting families and keeping children safe without state violence. For a large majority of families, system involvement is tied to economic stress, racism and community conditions that make it difficult for families to find support and resolve problems.<sup>7</sup> The 10 NYC neighborhoods with the highest number of ACS cases are the same neighborhoods with the lowest incomes, highest unemployment and greatest income-to-rent disparities in the city.<sup>8 9</sup> Meanwhile, NYC spends a tremendous amount of money investigating families and using the court to monitor and control parents.<sup>10</sup>

## The Problem With ACS Preventive Services

ACS has dramatically reduced the number of children in the NYC foster system in the past two decades; however, despite years of reform, ACS continues to be a pervasive, threatening presence in Black and brown communities and continues to harm Black and brown families through investigations and interventions in much the same ways as it has for decades.<sup>11 12</sup> New York City has been lauded for developing an array of “preventive services,” described by ACS as services to support families to avoid placement in the foster system. However, most parents are mandated to preventive services *after* being reported and experiencing an investigation. In most neighborhoods, around 80% of referrals are from ACS investigators.<sup>13</sup> While some parents access preventive services voluntarily, we know from our experience at Rise that parents may be threatened into accepting services and may not be able to close their case, even when the service is supposedly voluntary.

By law, ACS’s work is about making safety determinations around families considered at risk of a crisis.<sup>14</sup> Funding stipulations require ACS-contracted preventive service provider agencies to serve families in which children are at risk of harm and foster system placement and to monitor child safety risks.<sup>15</sup> One of the first steps in accessing preventive services is completing a family assessment that includes extensive documentation of safety risks.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on risk shapes organizational culture to focus on monitoring families—but while all families need support, not all families are in crisis or at risk. It is essential that as a city and society, we aspire far beyond preventing abuse and neglect and consider what all parents need to raise their children, and how to support families experiencing difficulties. Until the Family Enrichment Centers piloted three years ago, ACS did not run any general family support and community-building programs, while many community groups have been doing this type of work for many, many years.

Parents at Rise do not consider services through ACS to be appealing or trustworthy. As [parents at Rise documented](#) and research shows, fear of family policing prevents families from accessing needed support and resources.<sup>17</sup> Because the family policing system is so present in low-income communities of color, [this fear can affect parents who have never had a case or report](#).<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, support and resources for families should be completely delinked from ACS. This report outlines recommendations to build and strengthen supports that families want and need.

This report documents how public dollars could be better spent on ensuring that communities offer the resources and services families need and that parents have the economic capacity to meet children's needs.

We are releasing this report against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a drastic drop in reports in NYC in spring 2020 yet showed no impact on child safety.<sup>19</sup> During COVID, communities have mobilized to protect families, with evictions halted, food available through mutual aid networks, nonprofits providing cash grants, and an array of organizations offering healing workshops on coping with racism, family stress, isolation and grief. It has offered a window into what collective care can look like.

## CALLS TO ACTION

We are sharing this report to mobilize parents and allies to build political power to fundamentally change how New York City supports families. Our calls to action include:

- **Parents impacted by the system** can get involved in advocacy campaigns, speak out about the harm of the system and engage in healing together.
- **Community members, parents, advocates and activists** can advocate for legislative change and support political candidates who promote platforms aligned with our policy recommendations.
- **Elected representatives** at local, state and federal levels can listen to directly-impacted parents and youth and fight for legislative change and community investment.
- **The philanthropic community and foundations** can invest in and support approaches to care led by directly-impacted people and communities.
- **Professionals working in mandated reporter roles** can connect families with support needs to resources, rather than reporting, and can speak out about the harm of mandated reporting.
- **The media** can work to correct the dominant narrative of the family policing system and expand awareness about effective community-based approaches to safety and wellness.
- **Everyone** can raise awareness about the injustice of the family policing system, continue to build networks of community-led care and continue to engage and learn together in community.

There is a role for everyone in moving toward this vision. In our calls to action, we invite you to consider the part you can play and join in. It's critical that we move forward parents' vision for strong relationships, connected communities and an end to family policing.

Even within Black liberation and justice movements, family policing has not been at the forefront, although spotlighted by pathbreakers like Dorothy Roberts and by parents and allies in NYC who have been fighting for justice for more than 20 years. It's crucial that parents are heard and that family policing becomes widely understood as a social justice issue interconnected with racial, economic, reproductive health and disability justice movements. The system shames, silences, dehumanizes and labels Black and Indigenous mothers as child abusers, so it will take courage to build a wider movement of people hitting the streets. As we work toward this together, we are excited to amplify the stories, experiences and solutions named by those who are impacted; to share parents' beautiful vision for abolition; and to join with all of you in building a city and society that better cares for families. ■





# Methodology

Rise, with the support of TakeRoot Justice, used the following methods for this participatory research project, a model in which people directly impacted by an issue are centered in the design, implementation and interpretation of the research. The Rise PAR Team was a group of directly-impacted parents who led this research. They attended training on participatory action research methods, worked with TakeRoot Justice to develop and refine the research instruments, conducted the research and helped to develop findings and recommendations from the data.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Rise held 10 focus groups, which we called [community conversations](#), from January to May 2021. These groups engaged 48 people impacted by the family policing system. Groups were facilitated by trained members of our PAR Team, using a focus group guide. Groups were held virtually and attended by people directly impacted by family policing system involvement, who shared their experiences with the system and their perspectives on building safe, just and healing-centered structures and supports for children, families and communities.

*Methodological note on focus groups:* Several participants joined more than one focus group. To avoid over-inclusion of their responses, we reviewed their responses to each question and chose either the most representative quotations to record as their response or created a composite quotation that drew from their contributions on multiple dates.

## SURVEYS

Rise surveyed 58 parents impacted by involvement with New York City’s family policing system, ACS. The surveys explored the nature of their experiences as well as the impact and opinions of ACS involvement in their homes, families and communities. The survey also explored the ways parents imagine community care and support and how those visions differ from their experiences with ACS. Surveys were administered to parents who joined Rise’s focus groups. Participants were encouraged to send the survey to other parents, and Rise sent the survey link to organizations in their network, as well. Surveys were conducted online in English. Surveying took place from January to May 2021.

The survey used the term “child welfare system,” rather than “family policing system,” because it is more widely known and we believed it would be most clear and understandable to parents completing the survey. Therefore, we use the term “child welfare system” when presenting our survey findings in this report.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND RESEARCH

TakeRoot researchers conducted a literature review of research, reports, media and other documents related to the family policing system in the United States focusing on New York, how the system is connected to and impacts poverty, the experiences of low-income parents in the system, the impact of the system on families and communities, and on abolition of the current family policing system.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Our focus groups and surveys were conducted in English, and thus parents with primary languages other than English are underrepresented in our research. Key themes related to language access were not explored. We identify this as an important area for future research. We also note that our survey did not reach parents who identified as transgender or as a gender identity other than “female” or “male.” (No parents self-identified in these ways on our survey.) Thus, the experience of those parents is underrepresented in our findings. The experiences of transgender, gender-expansive and nonbinary parents in interaction with ACS are important to explore and uplift in future work. We acknowledge that focus group participants and survey respondents are within Rise’s parent network, and there may be a disproportionate number of parents already involved with advocacy. ■

## Demographics of Survey Sample

(58 total surveys)

|   |   |            |
|---|---|------------|
| <b>Gender</b><br>n=57   | Female  | <b>88%</b> |
|   | Male  | <b>12%</b> |
| <b>Age</b><br>n=57  | 25 to 44 years  | <b>75%</b> |
|   | 45 to 64 years  | <b>19%</b> |
|   | 19 to 24 years  | <b>4%</b>  |
|   | 65 years and over   | <b>2%</b>  |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity*</b><br>n=57                                      | Black or African American                                   | <b>60%</b> |
|   | Latinx (any race)   | <b>16%</b> |
|   | Other   | <b>14%</b> |
|   | White   | <b>12%</b> |
|   | Asian   | <b>4%</b>  |
|   | Middle Eastern/SWANA (SouthWest Asian North African)/Arab   | <b>4%</b>  |
|   | American Indian or Alaskan Native                           | <b>2%</b>  |
|   | Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander                   | <b>2%</b>  |
| <b>Primary language*</b><br>n=58                                    | English   | <b>95%</b> |
|   | Spanish   | <b>10%</b> |
| <b>Estimated annual household income</b><br>n=57                    | Under \$10,000  | <b>28%</b> |
|   | \$10,000-\$24,999   | <b>25%</b> |
|   | \$25,000-\$49,999   | <b>19%</b> |
|   | \$50,000-\$79,999   | <b>18%</b> |
|   | \$80,000-\$109,999  | <b>5%</b>  |
|   | \$110,000 or above  | <b>5%</b>  |
| <b>ACS interventions experienced by survey respondents*</b><br>n=58 | Child welfare investigation by ACS                          | <b>81%</b> |
|   | Foster care placement by ACS (child removed)                | <b>45%</b> |
|   | Preventive services   | <b>43%</b> |
|   | Court-ordered supervision                                   | <b>43%</b> |
|   | Foster care placement to kinship (child placed with family) | <b>33%</b> |
|   | Termination of parental rights                              | <b>12%</b> |

\*Respondents could select more than one answer option, so percentages add to more than 100%.

## A Note on Shame, Courage and Community

It was important that our research was led by parents directly impacted by the family policing system. Our experiences informed our research process and the language we used in our survey and community conversations. Before the Rise PAR Team engaged with our community, we took the survey and held the conversations ourselves. It was a lot for us. We were asking difficult questions about people's lives. We included prompts to take breaths in between survey questions, so that people would take breaks as they responded. We also used breathing techniques together.

At times people said, "I'm not answering that. I can't go there." We could say, "We're not here to delve into your privacy. We feel the way you feel. We are angry, too. These conversations are going to help us develop a report. The world pretends not to know what we go through." They would put their cape on and start talking.

Sometimes they said, "This is my first time speaking about my case, because I felt ashamed." We didn't force people to share, but it can be good to get it out. People wanted to come again, to keep talking, and asked how to get involved. It was a privilege to hear from parents and to build community with people who understood our mission.

>> Read more about the PAR Team's process by visiting the [Rise website](#).



NAASHIA B. (LEFT) AND  
SHAMARA KELLY (RIGHT)  
OF THE RISE PAR TEAM.



## Research Findings Harm of the System

Our research participants were primarily Black and brown parents in highly-impacted communities, with life histories of ACS contact through investigations, court-ordered services, “preventive services,” removal of their children and/or being in the foster system as children.

Above all, research participants described ACS as an unavoidable system. The family policing system is deeply entwined with systems families come into contact with and/or rely on in daily life, and the possibility of a report is always there. Black and brown parents are penalized for doing things differently than white supremacist institutions dictate, standards they may not know about, share or be in a position to follow—and are also punished for asking for help. Parents describe the injustice of different treatment of and assumptions about parents of color and the disconnect of working with people who don’t understand your experience.

### Finding 1: ACS is an unavoidable system in Black and brown communities.

#### Focus group participants described how impossible it is to avoid ACS.

- *“If you’re a person of color, you live in a certain zip code, you’re not exempt from the system.”* —Focus Group Participant 47
- *“Culturally, as a woman of color who is an African American woman, I’m always thinking of our culture, our history, being enslaved. And how this system has continued to perpetuate that. So it is real, it’s very real. Is it draining? Yes. Does it have a long-term lasting effect on my mental health? Yes. Because being a woman of color walking into any room where it’s us against them, it’s draining.”* —Focus Group Participant 37
- *“It is hard, hard—I’m going to say ‘hard’ again, to avoid ACS. Especially when they’re in the school system, the juvenile system, the court system, it is really hard to avoid them.”* —Focus Group Participant 24
- *“They’re all over the place. In school, in daycare. They’re just all over the place, but for the wrong reasons. And I think that if people had more support... things like this wouldn’t happen. Why wait until you catch a case. You know? It’s absurd.”* —Focus Group Participant 23
- *“They also have ACS in the shelter system. And even HRA centers, they got a little ACS division there too. For those little daycares they got in the HRA centers. I’ve seen it happen. It’s really unavoidable, it’s so ingrained. I just don’t think it’s possible to avoid them. Even my friend won’t go into a shelter system because she’s scared of ACS involvement.”* —Focus Group Participant 22



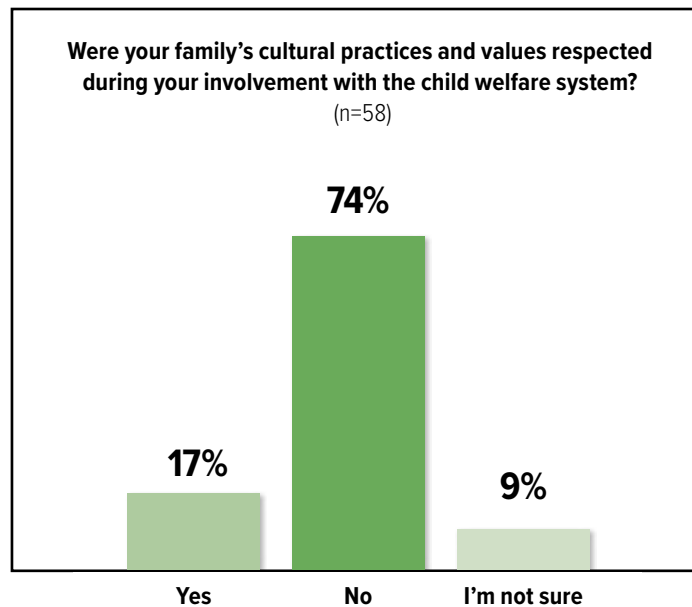
- “They contributed to a lot of trauma with my children and a lot of trauma with me.” —Focus Group Participant 41

**Several focus group participants described the heartbreaking reality that children who were removed from parental care were then physically harmed in the system. They also discussed various forms of long-lasting emotional harms to children.**

- “My son was five and ended up getting hurt in the damn system.” —Focus Group Participant 28
- “My daughter was harmed when she was in care. She was in your care, and she got harmed in your care. It was horrible for us.” —Focus Group Participant 18
- “We like to build confidence in our house, and the worker had the nerve to tell my daughter: ‘Why is your hair so dry? Why is your hair this and that?’ She’s three. And she has a 3C curl pattern. So I felt like he wasn’t even respecting her. And I had to tell her afterwards, ‘Don’t listen to him, baby, you’re beautiful.’ So they didn’t even respect the self-confidence in building it up.” —Focus Group Participant 22

**Finding 4: ACS does not respect parents' cultural practices and values, and violates norms of privacy and autonomy for parents and children.**

**Three quarters of parents said that their cultural practices and values were not respected during their involvement with child welfare (74%).** A focus group participant stated it plainly: “I feel like ACS disrespected all of my values.” —Focus Group Participant 25.



**In investigations and services, ACS violates norms of privacy and autonomy for both children and parents.**

- “They want you to drug test because somebody—your neighbor—somebody is mad at you, or whatever. And you gotta bend and cough basically, and let someone peek at you while you go to the bathroom.” —Focus Group Participant 21
- “They didn’t want to give me the services that they was supposed to help me with. But they wanted to come in my house and violate me and pop up on me.” —Focus Group Participant 25
- “They had my children in the same room when they examined them. We don’t even do that in our house, because I have a boy and a girl, and I keep them separate because they are very young.” —Focus Group Participant 22
- “I really don’t like people around my children, like men. I have nothing against men, but I don’t want them around my daughter, especially. And they were giving me a male worker. He wanted to see her body and stuff. I was uncomfortable with that, and they really violated that value.” —Focus Group Participant 25

**Finding 5: ACS involvement damages the relationships which parents and families need to thrive.**

**Relationships are central to our lives—bringing us care, joy, belonging and companionship. Relationships are also critically important for families to navigate times of crisis. Relationships minimize isolation, help parents access resources and reduce stress. But ACS involvement disrupts relationships to a high degree.**

- More than two thirds of parents reported that child welfare had a negative impact on their romantic relationships (68%).
- More than half of parents said that child welfare had a negative impact on their familial and platonic relationships (60%).
  - ◆ *“It ruined my family—my side of the family, and there’s been no contact with them. It’s devastating. I’m still devastated. Something that’s gonna stay with me, with my family, for the rest of our lives.”* —Focus Group Participant 38
  - ◆ *“Once you mentioned ACS—it’s a negative—people don’t want to know about ACS, people don’t want to hear ACS... It’s not that they don’t want to help you, they just say ‘Don’t say my name. Don’t tell them to call me to try to vouch for you.’ They just don’t want to be a part of the system and ACS involvement... It did change relationships, even with my friends and family.”* —Focus Group Participant 17
  - ◆ *“I find it hard to trust people, to trust anyone. That’s one of the things I always had a problem with before and now that made it even worse. Trusting anyone, I’m alone now. I don’t have friends like that, the only friends I have are my children. I don’t trust no one at this point... I can’t believe anyone or trust anyone. That’s how they make you.”* —Focus Group Participant 32

**83% of parents reported that they felt ashamed by their involvement with child welfare. That shame can cause isolation.**

- *“I could not tell friends because of the judgment of just having a child welfare case and thinking that they were going to judge me themselves. So no one ever knew that my son was in foster care.”* —Focus Group Participant 48

**Finding 6: Parents lose their jobs—and identities—and live in fear.**

**Focus group participants describe the ways the course of their lives were changed because of ACS involvement.**

- *“It messed up my life. It messed up life really bad. When I first got my first case, it messed up my group spaces. I was a parole officer, I was an evaluation specialist for the Board of Ed, I lost those jobs. It just messed up my life for no reason. So, it affected me emotionally in so many ways. Because I was doing so good, and this case happened, and I felt like I didn’t need to be on this earth anymore. I was really angry.”*—Focus Group Participant 29
- *“It’s terrifying. It’s like a stamp. And then knowing that you do have a stamp, you can’t even work with children... those types of effects. You know, it’s like a mark.”* —Focus Group Participant 34
- *“[It has] a lasting impact—PTSD. When [my child] falls down, gets a bump or a scratch, his doctor’s visits—it’s just so stressful now. Like, I can’t even enjoy him doing kid things, I have to be like ‘Be careful, calm down.’ I can’t even let him be him.”* —Focus Group Participant 38

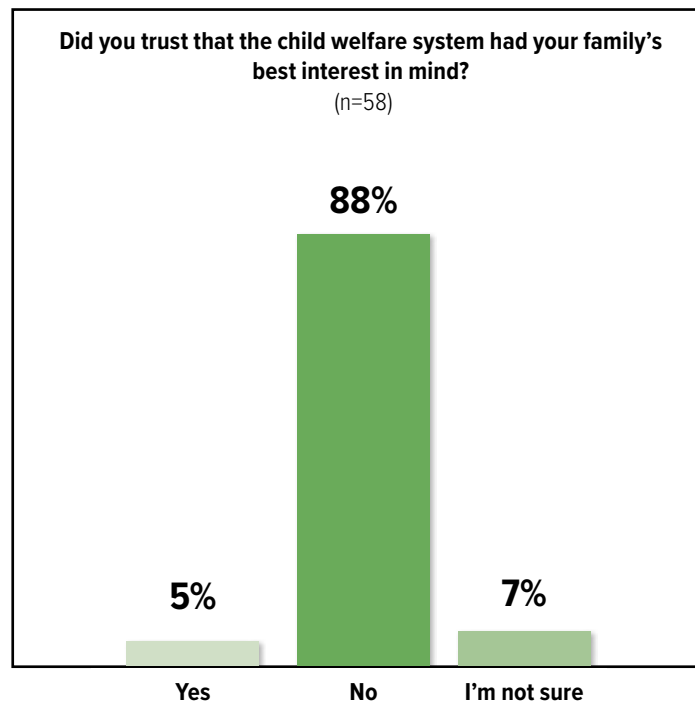




## Research Findings Community Care

### Care Outside the System: Support from Community Care Networks

Research participants, like parents involved with Rise more broadly, could not have been clearer that they wanted support and resources to come from people, networks and organizations outside of ACS, an agency they don't trust to provide family support. Of survey respondents, 88% said they did not trust the child welfare system had their family's best interest in mind.





## Our Definition of Community Care Networks

The PAR Team defined “community care networks” as the set of people and places in your life that help you to achieve your goals and care for you during difficult times. Your community care network might include people like neighbors, friends, family, faith leaders and many others. Your community care network may also include places like faith-based groups, community centers, clubs, building associations, coworker hangouts and so on. It may even include online resources like Facebook groups, chat rooms and group texts.

### This is What Community Care Looks Like

Not all participants had care networks, but those who did named a range of people, communities and institutions, including: children, parents, grandparents, siblings, partners and spouses, extended family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, therapists, doctors, spiritual and religious groups, social media and the internet, and advocacy organizations and community-based organizations. Key themes of community support included being there for anything, making sure people don't feel alone, non-judgmental and empathetic listening, emotional support, sharing information and advocating.

#### Children as a source of strength

*“My support circle has always been my kids. Back then I know they were young, but they still kept me grounded emotionally.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 3

#### Therapy

*“My therapist, she was a great help. She helped me and my son to bond.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 36

#### Family

*“You know, my mom and my older aunties always said, ‘Well as long as we got an extra cup of rice, we got something to eat. As long as we have floor space, you got some place to sleep.’ And that’s for real. And that’s what family does for each other.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 1

#### Friends

*“My best friend would show up for visits with me, court dates. She would take the kids out to McDonald’s when we started having day-passes. She offered her support as a resource for me.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 22

#### Spiritual support

*“Sometimes human people can’t always fix situations. The spiritual part of my being comes into play, and it fulfills me, and it is very helpful and is a support in the sense of, when all else fails, that’s who I count on.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 6

#### Community organizations

*“Rise was a big part of [my support]. Because when I first joined Rise I was ready to give up everything. Then they were there for me and they did not let me give up. And I didn’t, and I’m happy about that. So happy I didn’t give up.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 19

#### Access to information

*“I used to go to the library and borrow books from there and ask the librarian to help me find books that help me take care of the children, so that’s how they helped me. And after being involved with the system, Facebook was helpful, in that I found Rise from it.”*  
—Focus Group Participant 30

The PAR Team asked focus group participants about the varied networks of support, or community care networks, they drew on—and to imagine what could be built outside of the system to better support New York City families. Below are findings from our community conversations and survey about the resources and support that parents want.

### Finding 7: Community care networks are deeply important.

#### Focus group participants described how community care networks provide valuable support.

- *“Having a strong community support network is overwhelmingly important. If I had just the parent advocacy portion of my network, that I had when ACS knocked on my door, oh my God, that case would have been closed in a week.”* —Focus Group Participant 11
- *“I think it’s important to have a network, because through that network you get assistance, collect information and you feel supported and loved.”* —Focus Group Participant 2
- *“I feel like the importance of having a community care network is that when you have people behind you, when you have support, it helps in so many ways. Like, you can avoid so many accidents being around people who are there to vouch for you, who are going to pick you up, let me say. ... It’s support, it’s knowledge, it’s education, it’s everything.”* —Focus Group Participant 10

### Finding 8: Parents named information as an important aspect of their care network and wanted greater access to information about their rights and advocacy support.

Legal aid agencies and advocacy groups including **Rise** share **information about parents’ rights** and available legal and advocacy support resources. Peer and community supporters can also provide parents with resources about their rights, information about **early legal representation** and support and services available for parents and families, increasing awareness of and access to these resources.

- *“What I wish was different is that there was some kind of way for me to know what my rights are with ACS and what ACS is about. I wish I knew that instead of knowing it as the case went on.”* —Focus Group Participant 30
- *“When I went through my issues with ACS, someone from my practice worked at the hospital. She was a social worker and she referred me to Bronx Defenders. She was like ‘Get you a lawyer, quick.’”* —Focus Group Participant 10

## Parent Advocates

Rise hears from parents impacted by the system about how deeply they value the support of parent advocates. Parent advocates who are employed in legal agencies and **within the system** (preventive and foster agencies) work to limit its harm, advocate for families to be reunified quickly and assist parents in building networks of support so they are not as vulnerable to future system involvement.<sup>20</sup> They support parents in navigating the system, including navigating the trauma and emotions of their case, and providing information and guidance to support parents in advocating for their families.

Several participants in community conversations mentioned parent advocates—and some participants are current or former parent advocates:

- *“After that experience, being a parent advocate today, I wish I had an advocate like myself.”* —Focus Group Participant 6
- *“I wish I would have had a parent advocate when I had cases back then.”* —Focus Group Participant 48

While we work toward abolition, we recognize that many parents experiencing the harm of the system right now value the support provided by advocates who have access to spaces within the system.



## Research Findings

### Imagining New Structures of Care

**Finding 9: Parents envisioned well-resourced communities, including childcare, jobs, housing, community centers and supports such as therapy.**

**Focus group participants described the resources they want and need in their communities.**

- *“More housing, more job opportunities, I would have avoided a lot of issues with involvement with ACS... More resources in the community to help single mothers out, to help people who are about to have children, or even help the children out. I’m older, so I remember there were so many free things to help out, there was always community centers, there was always games, there was always something free we could find, and they took all that away from these communities. I feel like they should do that.”* —Focus Group Participant 29
- *“What about housing? In an ideal community network, there are available apartments, for example, for a mother with children.”* —Focus Group Participant 30
- *“I think having an on-site therapist would be awesome.”* —Focus Group Participant 40
- *“I think that if we had better babysitters so people could go to work, or they had a better school system where they had like more after-school programs for children to go to. Because most of the time it’s either a neglect case you got ‘cause you left your child at home ‘cause you got to run to the grocery store to get some food, and you don’t really got your children. But I think that if communities had more daycare centers that was probably free for like six months, where you can work for six months and save money to pay a babysitter, I think that would be great.”* —Focus Group Participant 24

**Finding 10: Participants drew a strong contrast between the culture of service provision through ACS and the culture of support they envision and desire.**

**Participants described the coldness of the family policing system and the ways in which they felt the system was impersonal and diminished them to just a “case.”**

The system:

- Is impersonal:
  - ◆ *“We were just a number. They kept it moving and it didn’t matter what we were.”* —Focus Group Participant 38
  - ◆ *“Just whatever they wanted me to do, I had to do. They didn’t care about anything else.”* —Focus Group Participant 15

- ◆ *“The people were just not genuine. And they didn’t care. It was like something to do to pass these hours to get that check, and then get back to the office.”* —Focus Group Participant 14
- ◆ *“It’s just that the system is one size fits all so it doesn’t fit everyone in, and it causes harm, and they need to be flexible and give each family what it needs to feel good about themselves and make personal, really private changes.”* —Focus Group Participant 56
- Does not listen to parents:
  - ◆ *“All I really wanted them to do was listen and give me the things that I needed, and they wasn’t.”* —Focus Group Participant 9
  - ◆ *“I asked for so much, and none of it was heard. They didn’t care about what I needed, what my kids needed.”* —Focus Group Participant 18
  - ◆ *“My voice didn’t matter. Nothing that was pertaining to me mattered to the system. It was based on the allegation, and a system that thought they were doing something right.”* —Focus Group Participant 6
- Is judgmental:
  - ◆ *“I felt like I was being judged instead of being understood based on the situation.”* —Focus Group Participant 33
  - ◆ *“I was judged [by ACS]. That was it.”* —Focus Group Participant 35
  - ◆ *“We were already judged before anything.”* —Focus Group Participant 38
- Lacks compassion:
  - ◆ *“[ACS] didn’t have any compassion, any understanding.”* —Focus Group Participant 29
  - ◆ *“They didn’t have empathy regarding whatever situation someone is facing at the moment. Because at that moment in time, I had lost my first child. So they didn’t have no empathy towards what our family was going through at that moment in time.”* —Focus Group Participant 32
  - ◆ *“You have to have empathy for people. You can’t just check off the box without any empathy. You have to meet people where they’re at.”* —Focus Group Participant 20

**In contrast, participants imagined new approaches that center non-judgmental and compassionate care, focus on strengths and a deep understanding of trauma and are led by peers with shared experiences and backgrounds.**

Participants want:

- Non-judgmental and compassionate care:
  - ◆ *“So, my perfect network will be to just speak, and just speak without having to watch what I say, or... use my words wisely. You know, just to just say how I feel. Just to be able to communicate with someone that can lead me to the right path or to lead me to the right help or resources without any judgment.”* —Focus Group Participant 42
  - ◆ *“You don’t want to feel judged; you don’t want to feel ashamed of asking your ideal community to... support you. But a good ideal community support would look like somebody that would help you, or have a community that wouldn’t judge you, or make you feel ashamed.”* —Focus Group Participant 24
- LGBTQ-competent services:
  - ◆ *“[I would want] a lot of resources for LGBTQ families, because I’ve learned the hard way that they don’t respect us. Their favorite question is ‘Which one of you actually had the child?’ I don’t think that’s nobody’s business. I just don’t think that that matters. It just doesn’t matter. More respect towards the LGBTQ community. Even if you don’t understand, don’t be disrespectful.”* —Focus Group Participant 40
- Strength-based and trauma-informed services:
  - ◆ *“It would be trauma informed, it would be supportive, it would be many Black women in there, a lot of social workers in there.”* —Focus Group Participant 17
  - ◆ *“It wouldn’t be someone coming from a poverty base. It would be asset based. All of our conversations.”* —Focus Group Participant 16
  - ◆ *“Trauma. Knowing how to deal with people who have mental health issues. Dealing with family houses that have mental health issues. Knowing how to deal with that.”* —Focus Group Participant 40
- Accessible resources and support provided by people with shared experience and background:
  - ◆ *“The fact that they give you workers that don’t even have kids themselves to tell you how to be a parent is like the worst thing ever.”* —Focus Group Participant 18
  - ◆ *“I would have liked maybe an advocate that was maybe around my age at the time, or not even my age, or that just understood what was going on that day and didn’t judge me just by looking at my skin color. Because mostly, all of the people that I’ve encountered when it came to those type of agencies was mostly white. Not to say that they can’t relate to my situation. It’s just*

*that I felt like I was being judged before I even got a chance to speak.”—Focus Group Participant 46*

- ◆ *“Make it easier, don’t make it like a challenge to get help. Don’t make it like a hoop to jump through. Don’t make it like, you have to be charged as this monster person just to get some assistance, don’t make it like that. Make it easier, make it down the street, make it in my neighborhood, make it someone that I know, maybe, or someone that I would have seen, just parents, and whether it’s taking the kids to school or just through the normal avenues of life. That’s what makes people feel reliable. It’s because people are there. In the places that we come from, trust is few and far between. So having things that are too new or too external to people’s neighborhoods and their identity and their groups, that never really works, it has to really come from people who know what it’s like, and people who live in neighborhoods that are hyper policed.”—Focus Group Participant 43*

## **Finding 11: The impact of new structures and approaches to care would be significant.**

### **Parents would not feel alone and would feel safe to ask for support.**

- *“It would feel good to have that support and just relief. And I wouldn’t feel the complete fear you would being alone, going through that situation. The importance is so that you could be supported, so if had to go through that experience, you won’t break down ‘cause it could definitely break you, mentally, physically, in every way. Going through that is draining.”—Focus Group Participant 25*
- *“Well, I know that I have support and that I’m not alone. We are humans, we make mistakes. That there are others out there that are caring and understanding of my needs. And that’s gonna help me work through it, supportive. And it means achievement, peace, harmony, you know. To feel secure. The world is big and I’m not on my own because I have support from my community.”—Focus Group Participant 34*

### **Strong community care would feel and be transformative, personally and societally.**

- *“I would feel supported if I had a supportive community. I would feel more relieved, I would feel happy, I would feel like somebody understands me. That’s what people need, especially young mothers, when you have people coming into your homes, that’s a very scary thing, very traumatic. People need that support, it’s very important... People need to feel that, not just to snatch my kid with strangers, throw them to wolves, mistreat my child, treat them any kind of way, turn my child against me. That’s very traumatic for a parent, for a child, they don’t care. I would love that type of support. If I had that type of support, I think I wouldn’t have so much anxiety, I wouldn’t be so depressed.”—Focus Group Participant 28*
- *“I would feel like my life doesn’t have so much injustice. I would feel supported, I would feel just right. That everything is going correctly. There’s no cruelty going on. I would feel that I got my justice, or that there was nothing injustice that happened. If my ideal community care network was real, it would feel like my life was close to perfect, that there was nothing wrong in it. It’s important [for] these kinds of things to exist in my ideal community care network to be real because that way, families are not being broken up, strangers are not taking care of your children, and your community care network will also not judge you, your community care network will accept you.”—Focus Group Participant 30*

### **ACS can and should be obsolete—and strong community care and access to resources are needed to make that vision a reality.**

- *“I have a real issue with the word ‘heal’ or ‘healing.’ Because in my mind the wound is still open. As long as ACS is around, the wound is still open, and the tumor is intact.”—Focus Group Participant 1*
- *“I think the idea of a community support, basically there wouldn’t be so many ACS cases in the air, period. And then not only would parents have the support and stuff that they need, and the resources they need like housing, special care for their kids with special needs and for themselves, daycares, and all the help they need, so ACS would be out of a job, technically. If everybody had that support and stuff, there wouldn’t really be much ACS involvement.”—Focus Group Participant 23* ■



## Recommendations

Rise is working toward abolition of the family policing system. This includes an end to mandated reporting as we know it, which is increasingly being called for by parents, advocates and social workers. We also support eliminating the Statewide Central Register. This is not impossible and, in fact, was recently made the reality in Georgia.<sup>21</sup>

In this section, we outline recommendations based on our research that can serve as immediate concrete stepping stones to move New York City toward eliminating reliance on ACS and strengthening networks of community care that truly support families.

**Recommendation 1: Reduce reports to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.** Shrink the pipeline that funnels families into the family policing system.

In the eyes of the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), New York State’s family policing agency, being unable to provide food, clothing and shelter are seen as signs of child neglect.<sup>22</sup> This broad category of neglect accounts for 76% of all “child maltreatment” allegations made to ACS.<sup>23 24</sup> About two thirds of reports to the SCR are made by mandated reporters—“certain professionals mandated by New York State law to report suspected child abuse and neglect.”<sup>25</sup>

If mandated reporting laws are not abolished quickly, immediate steps must be taken to reduce reporting so that fewer families become involved with the system through hotline calls made by mandated reporters. This could start with narrowing mandated reporting requirements to focus only on physical or sexual abuse, not neglect. Immediate changes can also be made to reduce false and malicious reports.

- **Require all City and City-contracted agencies to engage in organizational review processes to identify and address existing internal policies that drive staff to make hotline calls instead of directly serving and supporting families—as well as policies that are working well to address family support needs.**
  - ◆ Organizations and institutions with mandated reporters on staff, such as shelters, schools and hospitals, should review their existing policies and develop concrete plans for increasing the number of direct support referrals they make and decreasing the number of hotline calls. For example, a lack of school guidance counselors may lead to reports instead of support. City Council’s Committee on General Welfare could oversee the implementation of these public action plans.

- ◆ Organizations and institutions that have effective policies and practices to meet family support needs should document and share what works. Currently, effective organizations may not feel they can be transparent about their work with families.
- **City Council should require that ACS make data about drivers of hotline calls public, and implement corrective action plans for institutions with high ACS call numbers.**
  - ◆ City Council should mandate that ACS release a public record of the number of calls made by individual schools, shelters and other government-supported institutions, and the proportion that meet the minimum standard for being deemed “indicated” by ACS.
  - ◆ Institutions with high call numbers should be required to create a public action plan for better serving families, by maximizing their referrals to direct support services, minimizing ACS calls and retraining staff. Plans can draw on documented effective practices used by other family-serving organizations.
- **Replace anonymous reporting with confidential reporting, and address the problem of malicious reporting.** We know from the experience of parents at Rise that false, malicious reporting is a pervasive problem and a tactic used by perpetrators of abuse and others who wish to cause harm.<sup>26</sup> The passage of NY State Senate Bill S5572, which replaces anonymous reporting with confidential reporting, would be a start to deterring malicious and false calls.<sup>27</sup>
- **OCFS should update all mandated reporter training and protocols immediately to distinguish poverty-related neglect from child endangerment and abuse and to address family support needs directly. This can begin to reduce the number of reports, shrink reliance on the system and effectively connect families to resources.**
  - ◆ Train mandated reporters to understand that a report is not a referral to services and should not be misused for that purpose. Mandated reporter training should identify potential consequences of reporting and the harm of family separation.
  - ◆ Provide clear standards for recognizing the difference between poverty and neglect<sup>28</sup> and resources for responding to poverty-related needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing concerns).
  - ◆ Set clear limits for when a mandated reporter can be held criminally liable for not making a report.
  - ◆ Any organization that employs mandated reporters should be required to develop a clear, written internal process to assess concerns and options and determine whether a report is required. The process should identify and define steps to connect families to resources and support prior to making a hotline report, except in cases of suspected physical or sexual abuse or imminent risk. Protocols should emphasize the importance of engaging directly with parents and families and connecting parents to legal representation if a report will be made.

**Recommendation 2: Divest from ACS. Invest in communities.** Shift funding away from ACS and invest deeply in community-led approaches to family and community safety and wellness. In particular, invest in innovation to explore and adapt community-led healing justice, restorative justice and transformative justice practices to build new networks of support for parents, promote healing and prevent and address harm in families.

- **The City should end the expansion of ACS into our communities.** New York City plans to expand ACS-led, neighborhood-based “Family Enrichment Centers” tenfold by 2025, increasing from three sites to 30 sites.<sup>29</sup> ACS does not hold a position of trust within low-income communities and communities of color in New York City. ACS workers are feared as “baby-snatchers” in these communities and ACS cannot simultaneously present itself as offering solutions in communities it harms. The plans for expansion should be scrapped and those funds should be reinvested in community-based, community-led care that is not affiliated with or trained, funded or overseen by ACS, private agencies highly associated with ACS, or other systems of surveillance. Parents want support for their families and communities—but not through ACS. Who provides support and how matters deeply.
- **Resource the development and implementation of peer support networks for parents in crisis.** Our research shows that parents want support from those who have been through similar experiences, and studies show that peer support models can create safety without policing and punishment.<sup>30</sup> The City, State and philanthropic community should resource such programs by and for parents, and work with parents, community members and advocates who can develop, pilot and scale a peer first-responder program for families in crisis, modeled on [Rise’s vision for peer care](#), which Rise’s Peer Vision Team developed in 2020-21.<sup>31</sup> A program of trained peer responders, who are not affiliated with ACS or mandated reports, could effectively provide support and vital information and connect parents to resources and services. Such a peer support initiative would reduce reliance on state intervention.

- **Create *real* community centers in neighborhoods now highly impacted by ACS.** Such centers need to be more than just informational one-stop locations. They need to be holistic centers that provide after-school programs, camps, community services, peer mentoring and more in a single accessible place.
- **Resource community-based supports for trauma recovery, especially healing from sexual and intimate partner violence, that recognize the historical and current vulnerability of Black and brown women.** At Rise, the vast majority of parents impacted by the family policing system are Black women and women of color who are survivors of domestic violence and/or sexual violence. Supports should operate from community and liberatory frameworks, and be led by Black and brown women as both practitioners and peer supporters, to address trauma on both interpersonal and systemic global levels. Programs should not require parents to be in crisis or system involved to access resources and support.
- **Options for trauma-informed services should also be much more widely available, including age-appropriate services for children.** Services must be non-coercive, culturally appropriate and without waiting lists. Trauma-informed services for fathers who have been accused of an intimate partner violence incident are currently used as diversion programs following an arrest and plea deal. Likewise, many trauma-focused therapeutic parenting supports are only available through ACS. Programs such as this, which focus on parents understanding their own trauma history and the impact of their actions on their children, should be freely accessible and offered in non-stigmatizing, non-coercive settings that invite families in to explore how to resolve conflicts within their family and community.
- **Make culturally relevant individual therapy, family therapy and grief support readily accessible for children, adults and families.** Many parents at Rise have connected their system involvement to lack of support around grief and mental health for themselves and their families. Many quality mental health services are financially out of reach for parents, and Medicaid coverage for mental health services is lacking. Psychiatrists, for example, have become increasingly unlikely to accept Medicaid.<sup>32</sup> This leaves families who cannot pay out of pocket with extremely limited options.
- **Invest in peer mental health support.** Creative models for peer mental health support to decrease barriers to accessing care have already been developed and could be adapted and implemented.<sup>33</sup>
- **Resource and conduct public education and outreach about voluntary parenting classes in communities,** so that parents can access support without having to be involved with ACS. While many parents have had good experiences with programs such as [Parenting Journey](#) and programs run by [NAMI-NY](#), these are largely available only through organizations affiliated with ACS. Resource the development of new parenting support organizations and circles, particularly Black-led organizations, outside of ACS.
- **Support the creation of family mediation programs using restorative justice and ensure that programs addressing harm are not required to report families to the Statewide Central Registry.** Families that have identified the need for support to prevent and address harm should not have to risk ACS involvement when seeking help. Mediation and restorative justice circles can be used to strengthen relationships, help families plan for higher levels of support and prevent challenges from escalating.
- **Programs centering the needs of families with LGBTQ+ children should be expanded, as LGBTQ+ identifying youth are overrepresented in the foster system.** Resources for LGBTQ+ children and youth should be accessible in the community. Parents and families need resources to support LGBTQ+, non-binary and gender-expansive children and youth in being affirmed, safe and celebrated in their homes, schools and communities. Resources and support should be available without ACS involvement and should not be linked to ACS.
- **Resource respite and community-based drop-off childcare.** Local drop-off emergency childcare is crucial for parents to meet work and other obligations and minimize family stress when last-minute childcare needs arise. In fact, many high-end employers now offer emergency childcare as a benefit. Research shows that difficulty finding childcare is a stronger predictor of “maternal neglect” than almost any other factor, waiting lists for subsidized childcare are significantly associated with an increase in family policing investigations, and childcare subsidies for low-income mothers are linked to decreases in neglect reports.<sup>34</sup> High-quality, safe respite and childcare should be readily available and should not be affiliated with ACS.



**Eliminate approaches to housing, education, domestic violence, mental health and addiction that drive ACS involvement. Disentangle ACS from important systems and structures of family support and end ACS resource gatekeeping.**

- **The city should develop a task force to evaluate family support services that are currently accessible only or primarily through ACS and create an action plan for separating them**, so that parents can access them without being subject to the trauma, fear, coercion, surveillance and control of the family policing system. This task force should include impacted parents and youth as expert advisors and decision makers.
- **City agencies must center the needs of parents in family-serving systems and public policy.** This requires consciously assessing policies' consequences for family stability and sanctity and listening to the expertise of constituent community groups, such as [VOCAL-NY](#), [Make the Road](#), [Housing Justice for All](#), [Healing-Centered Schools Working Group](#), [Movement for Family Power](#) and [Rise](#).

Specific adjustments include:

- **Education:** Implement the roadmap of the [Bronx Healing-Centered Schools Working Group](#) citywide, to make schools places that address child and family stress, not increase it.<sup>35</sup>
- **Housing:** Adopt a [Housing First](#) approach for parents and families to eliminate barriers to housing stability.<sup>36</sup> Enable families in crisis to access priority housing vouchers without ACS involvement. Eliminate shelter rules and practices that increase families' stress and isolation. Family shelter rules and practices now maximize the likelihood of ACS involvement by hindering relationships and limiting opportunities for respite and support. Overnight visitation should be widely permitted and visitation policies should be made transparent.<sup>37</sup>
- **Childcare:** Disconnect access to childcare from ACS administration so that parents do not need to interact with ACS for childcare vouchers or information.
- **Intimate Partner Violence/Domestic Violence:** Invest in flexible, low-barrier economic assistance and parent-centered systems of care and support to address the harms and trauma caused by domestic and gender-based violence. In New York City, domestic violence is one of the main drivers of family policing system involvement and is now the leading driver of homeless family shelters, which often report parents to ACS.<sup>38 39</sup>
  - ◆ Fund community groups that focus on restorative justice, family care and healing.
  - ◆ Invest in peer intervention and peer-run services. Survivors of domestic and gender-based violence can be retraumatized by the current mental health system. Peer-run programs can help increase trust, leadership skills and mental health.<sup>40</sup>
  - ◆ Prioritize funding progressive forms of public assistance for survivors such as no-strings-attached cash; accessible and quality food; affordable, quality housing; and free childcare. Studies show that families who receive these types of benefits experience



significant reductions in domestic violence compared with families that receive traditional benefits.<sup>41</sup>

- **Substance Use:** End the punitive approach to drug and alcohol use by parents, and adopt harm reduction approaches and community-based care models, expanding options for parents.
  - ◆ Pass New York State Senate Bill S4821, which prohibits drug or alcohol testing of pregnant people without their consent except in a medical emergency.<sup>42</sup> The bill also prohibits drug and alcohol testing of newborns without prior consent of an authorized adult.
  - ◆ Increase access to family-based/mother-child treatment programs so that voluntary treatment can be accessed without the separation of parents from their newborns.
  - ◆ Create and expand voluntary in-home drug treatment programs, without connections to ACS, for parents with children at home.
  - ◆ Support [harm reduction and peer support models](#), which take a public health approach rather than a punitive or criminalizing approach, including syringe access, exchange programs and safe consumption spaces.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the task force should examine New York City's policies and approaches to services and assistance, addressing financial instability as a root cause. For instance, domestic violence policy should prioritize immediate housing access, not shelter. Low TANF funds cause families to run short on food, and extremely low rates for parents on SSI cause family stress that could be addressed by living wage policies. The task force should explore how New York City could provide a basic guaranteed income.

## Meaningful Investment in Community-Based Organizations and Groups

Our recommendations require the City and philanthropic community to invest deeply, holistically and sustainably in community-based organizations and grassroots groups that have long served and built trust with their communities. These groups must be resourced in ways that allow them to build the capacity to serve the thousands of families currently ensnared in the ACS system. Currently, large social service organizations with weak community ties and minimal community accountability are able to dominate the service space without having the roots within communities that are needed to effect meaningful change. Community-based organizations, many of which are smaller and run by Black and brown leaders with community roots, are uniquely positioned to build trust with families and better serve their communities. Increased funding, resources and infrastructure support would help grow the impact of community groups and their ability to transform how family-centered care can be provided.

We recommend that the philanthropic community, City and State:

- Provide multi-year general operating funding for security and sustainability;
- Facilitate fiscal sponsorships and mentorships by experienced nonprofit leaders as needed;
- Support needs like grant writing or other technical needs;
- Support the formation of worker cooperatives owned, controlled and run by and for their members to realize their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations.

The City, State and philanthropic community must also recognize that family support is an under-funded category of support. While youth development broadly supports positive investments in young people, most programs and services for adults are focused only on narrow categories of crisis, such as criminal legal system involvement or domestic violence. Organizations seeking to holistically serve their communities must cobble together funding, much of it narrowly and negatively focused. Holistic family support organizations that help parents access the fundamentals of family life and provide programming that lifts stress and builds community must become a priority area of investment.

There is funding available to invest in communities. Funding can be shifted away from harmful systems of policing, including both ACS and the New York Police Department. Additionally, it is anticipated that the legalization of marijuana has the potential to result in \$350 million in tax revenue for New York State per year and New York will dedicate a portion of the revenue to a Community Reinvestment Fund.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> This fund should support family investments, particularly as many parents have become irreparably system involved based on marijuana-related allegations.

**Recommendation 3: Reduce investigations and the harm of investigations.** Investigate fewer hotline reports and limit the unchecked power of the family policing system during investigations by ensuring that parents know their rights.

While changes to mandated reporting requirements and affirmative investment in families will, over time, result in fewer investigations, immediate steps can be taken at the state and local level to continue to reduce the likelihood that reports will lead to investigations and to strengthen parents' rights when investigations do occur.

- **Screen out more hotline calls instead of investigating the vast majority.** OCFS should be required to screen out low-level allegations and direct callers to provide direct support and/or refer parents to resources and family support organizations.
- **Pass New York State Senate Bill S5484A/A6792** to require child protective specialists to orally and in writing provide information to parents and caretakers about their rights at the start of a child protective services investigation (similar to “Miranda rights” in the criminal legal system).<sup>46</sup>
- **Pass proposed legislation in New York City Council requiring child protective specialists to verbally disseminate information to parents or caretakers about their rights during initial contact at the start of an ACS investigation.**<sup>47</sup>

**Recommendation 4: Shrink the Statewide Central Register.** Stop listing parents on the SCR for neglect and reduce the economic harm of the SCR by limiting its use in employment decisions.

If the SCR is not abolished quickly, it should immediately be limited to abuse cases like in Pennsylvania, where there is no neglect registry.<sup>48</sup> Other immediate steps to shrink the SCR in New York State can include:

- **Remove any parents from the SCR who are on the list because of marijuana use.** This should be done proactively, and should apply retroactively. This should be a full removal from the register, rather than sealing the record, in alignment with the expungement of cases in the criminal legal system.<sup>49</sup> This is a matter of racial and economic justice in a time when marijuana is increasingly becoming legalized.
- **Pass state legislation to end the time limit to appeal placement on the SCR.** Parents currently have only 90 days to appeal when placed on the SCR,<sup>50</sup> a very short period of time to prepare for and schedule an appeal, particularly for parents who are in crisis.

Reduce the economic harm and unnecessary stigma of listing on the Statewide Central Register:

- **Develop and pass legislation to limit the use of the SCR in background checks that influence employment decisions.**

## How does the SCR lead to discriminatory hiring processes?

As Washcarina Martinez Alonzo, economic justice attorney at Manhattan Legal Services, explains, the vast majority of abuse and maltreatment cases in New York are for maltreatment or “neglect”—and most cases are for poverty-related neglect. Black and Latinx New Yorkers are disproportionately represented on the SCR.<sup>51</sup>

Being listed on the SCR creates barriers to employment regardless of the relevance of the case to job responsibilities. Even after cases are closed, the SCR is used by employers to exclude parents from employment in a range of settings, including schools, daycares and home health aid positions—fields with workforces that are largely women of color. Locking parents on the SCR—also primarily women of color—out of these jobs is a devastating economic blow. It perpetuates a cycle of system involvement, as lack of financial resources can create barriers to reunification or lead to a new neglect report. By limiting the use of SCR in employment decisions, the economic harm and insecurity it causes families can be reduced.

**Ban the Box:** In the context of criminal legal system advocacy, [Ban the Box](#) is a similar movement to remove job barriers and stigma employers may initially have towards people who were formerly incarcerated. As of August 2021, 36 states have passed Ban the Box, including New York.<sup>52</sup>

**Recommendation 5: Provide reparations.** Begin the process of making reparations to families and communities impacted by ACS. Reinforce a truthful narrative about the historical and current impact of the family policing system.

- **The City should begin the process of providing reparations to individuals, families and communities impacted by ACS**— both reparations directly related to the harm of ACS involvement and broader reparations to impacted neighborhoods in the form of community-directed investment to accelerate the economic stability of families. The City should partner with impacted parents and communities, advocates and experts in such processes to develop a detailed plan for reparations. The process and plan can draw on Movement for Black Lives’ [Reparations Now Toolkit](#), which highlights five conditions for full reparations outlined by The United Nations.<sup>53</sup>
- **Develop a genuine truth and reparations process, in which ACS must participate fully and with depth, avoiding a process that is mere political performance.** The City should work with impacted parents, advocates and experts in such a process to develop, implement and oversee it. As part of the process of reparations, ACS and contracted agencies must reckon with the harms of family policing, centering impacted parents and youth in that reckoning. It is critical that ACS and related agencies acknowledge the harmful racist and classist structures and views that were foundational to the creation of the foster system in New York City and persist today. The statements and findings of this process should be made public.
- **Elected officials should work in partnership with families impacted by ACS to develop concrete recommendations for further eliminating harm in family support and to develop a plan for City officials to reinforce a more accurate public narrative of the family policing system.** ■





## Calls to Action: How You Can Be Involved in Making This Vision a Reality

**"Come one, come all! Let's make a difference and a change for our children's and families' futures. Join us in making this change!"**

—Yvonne Smith, Rise PAR Team

**Join Rise's Membership Meetings.** Our work to conduct participatory action research and develop this report was a first step to developing a Parents' Platform for organizing and advocacy. We invite parents and family members who are directly impacted by ACS or live in communities impacted by ACS to join us as we move forward in campaigning for change.

**Be engaged in advocating for legislative change.** Community members, parents, advocates and activists can develop relationships with elected officials to create urgency to implement changes. Attend and/or speak your truth at town halls and city council meetings to build awareness of parents' experiences. We also call on advocacy groups to endorse progressive candidates who understand family policing issues and promote platforms aligned with our policy recommendations.

**Elected representatives at local, state and federal levels can listen to directly-impacted parents and youth, continue to learn about the truth of the family policing system and fight for legislative change and community investment.** Federal and state dollars need to be freed up for flexible use in the ways outlined in our recommendations.

**Invest in the movement leadership of impacted people.** We want to build broad leadership of directly-impacted people in our movement. The philanthropic community and foundations can invest in and support leadership development of directly-impacted people and the implementation and sustainability of approaches to care led by directly-impacted people and communities.

**Build community and support community-led solutions.** Together, let's continue to build networks of community-led care, support

and safety by engaging with and growing peer support, mutual aid and the work of community-based groups we trust. Many local organizations in New York City offer opportunities for community members to access credible messenger training, restorative justice circle keeper training and parent leadership development opportunities related to educational justice that can build our capacity to advocate and provide community care for one another. In the coming months, Rise will begin training parents impacted by ACS as peer supporters to build connections, skills and access to information that you can bring to your community. Community organizations can partner with Rise in building peer and community care networks.

**Support, don't report.** Organizations can prepare and train all staff or a point person to be knowledgeable about trusted resources in the community and prepared to connect parents to material resources and services that they want. Professionals in mandated reporter roles can join the growing calls to end mandated reporting and speak out about its harm to families and negative impact on service provision, organizational climate and therapeutic relationships.

**Raise awareness about the injustice of the family policing system and how to fight it.** Everyone can help to deepen public understanding of the injustice of the system. Share this report, share information on social media, engage in conversations about the family policing system and abolition and encourage your networks to get involved. Advocates and organizers involved in intersecting justice movements can highlight the overlap with family policing and grow understanding of family policing as a social justice issue. If you work or previously worked in the system, you can share the truth of that experience.

**The media can play an important role in public education in correcting the dominant narrative of the family policing system** and expanding awareness about effective community-based approaches to family and community safety and wellness. Listen to and amplify the experiences of parents impacted by the system and people who were impacted as children. Reference research on the harm of mandated reporting, investigations, family separation and the racism of the system. Together we can build understanding of the harms of the current system.

**Normalize speaking out about the injustices and harm of the system—and healing from it.** When parents and youth impacted by the system, and adults impacted by the system as children, come together and speak our truth, our voices are louder, our protests are noticed and our vision is amplified. We can also support one another in healing because “healed people heal people.” We recognize that the trauma many people experience in childhood impacts us in adulthood as we raise our own families. Therefore we center healing, rest and joy in our movement—and joy in resistance. This will take practice and intention because it is not commonly done.

**Continue to engage and learn together in community.** We recognize that some of the ideas shared in this report may feel a little uncomfortable. We ask you to sit with that and explore and try to understand where it is coming from. We encourage you to share your thoughts, continue to engage in discussions and ask questions as we continue learning together. ■



# Appendices: Resources for Continued Learning

These report appendices offer information, resources and examples to address common questions and begin to dive deeper into abolition and community care.

## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS WE'RE USING—AND HOW AND WHY WE'RE USING THEM IN THIS REPORT

Here, we provide context about terms Rise is using in a specific way in this report, describing what these terms mean to us and why we've chosen them. A full glossary of terms used in this report is available on the [Rise website](#).

**Community-based organizations:** Organizations that are trusted in our community, have a track record for genuinely supporting the community and are intentional about practicing their values and seeking to avoid causing harm. They do not invite policing systems in and are not run by and do not operate under ACS. Their reputation is known by word of mouth by people in our networks.

**In community:** People you are in relationship with—your neighbors and networks. There is care, trust and understanding between you. You can go to each other and share resources, information and events.

**Community care networks:** The set of people and places in your life that help you to achieve your goals and care for you during difficult times. This network is usually composed of groups that are grassroots-/community-led and are not affiliated with punitive government systems.

**Community conversation:** A facilitated, open conversation guided by prompts, in a safe space among impacted parents (led by and for impacted parents) where we share our joys, tears, laughter, trials and tribulations. It is an open platform to share experiences with the family policing system and vent, with no right or wrong or restrictions. Rise community conversations were held with the goals of learning about and documenting our experiences, creating a report with our findings and building community relationships.

**Focus group participants:** We wanted to avoid using clinical or dehumanizing terms in our research. We were interested in describing those who engaged in community conversations as “parents”; however, some people shared their experiences of being impacted by the system as a child or grandparent. We decided on “participants” to be inclusive of everyone who participated and honor their experiences.

**Impacted parent:** Parent who is or has been involved with the family policing system. (This may include experiencing an investigation, preventive services, foster care and/or termination of parental rights.)

**Interconnected systems:** As impacted parents, the systems we encounter relate to one another with a harmful and racist impact.

## APPENDIX B: EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

*The road to abolishing the family policing system and creating a community-centered society requires addressing intersectional issues including, but not limited to, abolishing the prison industrial complex; empowering racial, reproductive and healing justice movements; centering survivors of domestic violence; and creating accessible, quality housing, education and childcare for all.*

*Below are a few examples of community-based organizations doing work that is crucial to building a society free of oppressive systems and practices. Additional examples are listed on the [Rise website](#).*

**Alliance for Quality Education:** [The Alliance for Quality Education](#) (AQE) is a people-powered and -led organization educating and mobilizing communities across New York State to end systemic racism in public education. The main focus is on education justice through parent power statewide. Resources on their website include advocacy toolkits, action updates and publications.

**Ancient Song Doula Services:** [Ancient Song](#) offers free and low-cost doula services for women of color and low-income families. Their services focus on building a community and support system to end racial disparities in the medical system and advance birthing and reproductive justice. Ancient Song also offers full-spectrum doula training virtually to receive a certificate in evidence-based care for preconception and postnatal health.

**Project Hajra/Centro Corona:** [Project Hajra](#) and [Centro Corona](#) are partner organizations working to build collective safety and healing in communities. Project Hajra is membership based, and provides peer support and community-based alternatives to services for interpersonal violence. They mainly work with Arab, Middle Eastern and South/Central Asian communities. Centro Corona is a community center advancing community autonomy through art and organizing. They center the voices and experiences of the working-class and immigrant families in Corona, Queens, and adjacent neighborhoods.

**Operation Stop CPS:** [Operation Stop CPS](#) is a movement to protect families from Child Protective Services (CPS). The movement focuses on exposing the harms of CPS and creating campaigns for families that are currently forced to interact with the system.

### Targeting Societal Injustice, Centering Joy, Valuing Families

Parents love their children and want to care for them well—and they need community resources and support that allow families to thrive. Divesting from ACS involves shifting away from “services” that view parents who are Black and/or low-income with suspicion to approaches that recognize the inherent value and rights of Black women and children, and all families. It involves [promoting the positive](#) and centering joy.<sup>54</sup> Families need support, care, community and access to safe places for children to play, opportunities to connect with other parents and neighbors, and services that are a fit for their specific needs and honor their cultures and identities.

Many community-based groups and organizations operate from values and frameworks that recognize societal conditions and inequity as targets for change, rather than focusing on people as problems or only addressing symptoms of injustice. They are trusted by the communities they serve and often provide opportunities for individuals and families to have fun, build community connections, heal and grow, and engage in political education and advocacy—opportunities that support family and child well-being.



## APPENDIX C: SUPPORTING SAFETY AND PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO HARM WITHOUT SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

Harm does occur in our society and within families, and steps must be taken to prevent and address harm—but reports and system intervention don't ensure that children are protected. The family policing system does not create safety or effectively prevent or respond to harm. In fact, many children are harmed while in the foster system.<sup>55</sup>

Many groups nationwide have been working to develop collective care and accountability practices that build community safety and address harm without involving the criminal legal or family policing systems. Immigrants, queer people, Black and Indigenous people and people with disabilities (recognizing the intersectionality of these experiences and identities) are not safe relying on police and prisons, and some communities have developed responses to violence outside of these systems. Many organizations have developed processes, training and practices to respond to concerns [without engaging policing systems](#).<sup>56</sup>

Restorative, transformative and healing justice practices build on ancestral practices of collective care, joyful connection, healing and accountability. They are being used formally and informally to address violence, child sexual abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence and to heal from trauma. While different, these approaches have some common principles. They:

- Center the needs and self-determination of the person or people harmed.
- Build community, recognizing that trauma causes isolation, that naming harm can lead people to be shunned in their families and communities, and that people who have harmed others also need and deserve healing, inclusion and community care.
- Involve people making agreements to stop harm and to make reparation for harm.
- Use frameworks of collective healing and liberation that acknowledge not only interpersonal trauma but historical trauma, racism and societal harm, as well as post-traumatic growth.

Some use trauma healing practices that engage the physical body, such as communal singing, moving, dancing, breathing, yoga and meditation.

Over the past few years as Rise has built a culture of peer care and healing, we have learned from other groups experienced in these approaches. There are groups we can look to that are taking radically different approaches to preventing and addressing violence and sexual abuse that are grounded in relationships, restorative and transformative justice principles and healing and liberatory practices that recognize all people's humanity and do not discard anyone. While the examples offered in this report do not focus on addressing child abuse and neglect without family policing systems, these practices offer a starting point for community accountability and healing practices related to preventing and addressing harm within families, and for generations harmed by family surveillance and separation.

### Restorative justice circles:

- Restorative justice circles create spaces of vulnerability and connection that help people reflect, solve problems, get support and resources and interrupt painful patterns. The [BREATHE Collective](#) trains people as restorative justice circle keepers who can [hold space to build relationships](#) that support collective care and accountability.

### Transformative justice:

- The [Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective](#), [Philly Stands Up!](#) and [Generation Five](#) have developed processes to address healing and reparation for survivors of child sexual abuse and sexual assault. Community accountability processes and facilitation skills are described in detail in the [Creative Interventions Toolkit](#) and [Fumbling Toward Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators](#).
- Transformative justice also includes a focus on building people's skills to engage in healthy conflict and accountability, so that people have support, conflicts don't build and harm is addressed. The video [Everyday Practices of Transformative Justice](#) shares strategies for practicing boundaries, dealing with conflict and giving a good apology.

- Another strategy is [pod mapping](#), a method for people to map out who they can count on and to intentionally build their networks of support so they are not alone at times when they are under stress, have been harmed or have caused harm.<sup>57</sup>

### Credible messengers and peer support:

- Multiple organizations in NYC, including [Community Connections for Youth \(CCFY\)](#) and [Institute for Transformative Mentoring at The New School \(ITM\)](#), train people impacted by the juvenile/criminal legal system as “credible messenger mentors” who use restorative justice circle keeping to support system-impacted young people and reduce violence and criminal legal system involvement.
- Other organizations train parent [volunteer advocates](#) (SPAN) or [community health ambassadors](#) (New Haven MOMS) to be knowledgeable about children’s development, navigation of systems including healthcare and school-based services for children with special needs and financial resources and services for families.
- Peer support is also a core value of many [harm reduction programs](#) and a tenet of [mutual aid](#).
- Another approach is to interrupt cycles of violence by engaging [community presence](#) to support safety in place of police presence. In NYC, [Cure Violence](#) and [KAVI](#) hire and train community members to anticipate where violence will occur and intervene, working with culturally appropriate outreach workers. Independent evaluations of the model show that violence interrupters reduce shootings and homicides.<sup>58</sup>

### Community-based safety strategies:

- [SafeWalks NYC](#) organizes community volunteers to provide accompanied walks to/from home for those who feel unsafe.
- [MillionExperiments.com](#) shares snapshots of emerging community-based safety strategies that can expand our ideas about what keeps us safe.

## Someone To Turn To: Rise's Vision for Peer Support

This report references a May 2021 white paper, [Someone to Turn To](#), that Rise published to share our Peer Vision Team model for peer and community care in New York City.<sup>59</sup> Our Peer Team spent six months interviewing organizations that use credible messenger mentoring, mutual aid, harm reduction and parent peer support to build transformative communities.

Our vision is that trained networks of parent peer supporters with credible life experience will:

- Increase the likelihood that parents in emerging crises safely get support without state intervention;
- Increase the flourishing of peer relationships that reduce stress, trauma and isolation and strengthen healing, care, connectedness and joy.



Rise envisions that training hundreds of parents in impacted communities to intentionally build relationships with their neighbors, offer emotional support, make connections to trusted community resources and ultimately advocate to improve community resources can reduce family stress before it builds and lead to healthier, thriving families.

As the Peer Vision Team explained, “We’re not your doctor, attorney or judge. We’re here to support you and give resources. We’re not here to say, ‘You’re going through depression,’ but to say, ‘Do you want to talk to someone about how you are feeling?’” Peer supporters will have access to a broad network of fellow peer supporters to help them identify resources to meet families’ needs. They will be able to connect parents to legal agencies for early legal representation and to help parents prepare for conversations with mandated reporters and understand risks to their families.

## APPENDIX D: ABOLITION OF THE FAMILY POLICING SYSTEM

### PARENTS' VISION FOR ABOLITION

*For the past three years, Rise has been [learning about abolition as a community](#) and steadily shifting to an abolitionist framework. Here, parents share their vision for abolition of the family policing system.*

**Abolition involves building networks of support and strong, trusting relationships, so that parents don't go through difficult experiences alone.** We want to build community so that people trust each other and have someone to go to for support with navigating the challenges of daily living. Being a parent is not easy at all. Experiencing challenges doesn't mean we are failing, or abusing or neglecting our children. We want structures in place and people available to support us without traumatizing and judging our families. Parents want to be able to go to peers who have experienced systems in similar ways and who will listen to people's individual challenges. We want access to, and information about, resources to be able to share them in our communities.

**Abolition involves communities coming together to create the change we want to see.** We envision people in the community stepping up and uniting. That's where community care networks come into play—grassroots organizations, small businesses, barber shops and nail salons all can come together. If someone needs food, let's get them food. It involves supporting families without surveillance, without going into people's homes uninvited.

**Abolition includes creating space for joy and wellness.** We want more opportunities that are free and shared with the community, like spaces to crochet, play basketball or paint. We envision block parties, with people being together to play games, and the community taking care of each other and watching each other's children.

**Abolition involves ending harmful, punitive systems.** The family policing system must admit to its failings and racism and to inflicting trauma for years and years—intergenerational trauma—and it is still going on. The family policing system causes shame that leads to disconnection and destroys relationships. Children are taken from their families, abused, put on unnecessary medications. The system views parents as cases, without compassion. People's cultures are disrespected and even used against them. You can't revise a system that has caused all that damage and there's no way we will trust them after all they've done. The family policing system should be shut down.

**Abolition involves focusing on accountability, not punishment, shame or blame.** Harm does happen—but let's look differently at how we prevent and address it. We need to have spaces to heal instead of punishment. We want informed, compassionate responses, safety and safe spaces. It is important to listen to what families need and invite people in and give them support, information and an opportunity to address concerns. If our society hurts people, hurt spreads, but if we center healing, more people have the opportunity to work through experiences of oppression and trauma.

**Abolition requires societal change and centering those who are impacted.** We want to create new ways of providing care and accountability that get to the root of issues and are trauma informed. We want equality and equity. We want safe spaces that we trust. We know that when Black women and children are safe, our collective liberation is more possible. Abolition involves listening to real people and respecting their experiences, not being dismissive. Solutions will come from the people, from families.



ART BY EILEEN JIMENEZ

**"My vision for abolition is investment in healing spaces to help process trauma, resources that help the community to thrive and restorative and transformative justice. My vision for families is for all Black and brown families to be free from the surveillance of systems that target and punish and instead to be connected to healing spaces that move them from surviving to thriving. My vision for abolition includes reparations for, and reinvestment in, BIPOC communities. It includes reparations in the form of money and free healthcare for families."**

—Halimah Washington

**"My people are hurting, still hurting. Black and brown communities lack real support, real protection. The reality is, I have to bring resources to my community, and I will. We take care of one another. That's how I imagine a world without any systems—we serve and protect one another, feed one another. We support our own communities. That's a world we need and want!"**

—Shamara Kelly

**"My vision is dismantling a system that has created harm for generations—for the family policing system to reckon with its past offenses against Black and brown families, and for the government to be held accountable. Punitive systems add stress. They don't help us. They break us down. They affect our mental health. We need to be able to embrace our roots and our culture, and the government should not dictate how to live our lives. They should not control it. We need counseling, we need more opportunities for growth in our community. We need investment. My vision for my community is that it is safe and includes healing spaces for people who need them. People who are happy and who are thriving."**

—Imani Worthy

## The Path to Abolition

Rise’s vision and goal is abolition of the family policing system. This system was built upon a history of slavery and genocide and was not created to provide care—and we do not believe it can be reformed to do so.<sup>60</sup> We are learning that the pathway to abolition is complex, in part because of the ways the family policing system intersects with other oppressive systems. Our recommendations are influenced by this complexity that we must hold as we navigate—and create—this evolving path as an organization, community and movement. It is urgent that we take immediate action, and we have identified specific abolitionist changes that can be made in the short term, as envisioned by directly-impacted people. It is also essential to engage in an ongoing process of bringing everyone into the conversation about what community safety and wellness means—including those who do not share this vision or the experience of directly-impacted parents. We hope our report contributes to that process.



### RESOURCES

- [Cosmic Possibilities: An Intergalactic Youth Guide to Abolition](#) by AYO, NYC!
- Rise’s [Abolition Resources](#) —Learning List

## Dorothy Roberts Describes Abolition of the Family Policing System

Dorothy Roberts has described what family policing system abolition means to her:

*“Abolition means completely dismantling this system of family policing—not reforming it or replacing the current system with a new and improved system. It means ending its philosophy, design, practices and policies and building a different way of caring for families. Ending the system doesn’t mean leaving people to fend for themselves in a society that is structured unequally. We are talking about transforming society, including making structural changes at a societal level and changes in our communities. Ending structural racism is a tall order, but we need to work toward that. We need to care for families by providing housing and food, as well as universal, equal and free health care and education. At a community level, we need to care for each other without relying on violent systems like police, prisons and child removal. It involves mutual aid and figuring out how to deal with families’ problems and needs and the conflict and violence that occurs in families, in ways that are not punitive, inhumane, violent and terroristic.”<sup>61</sup>*



## APPENDIX E: RISE PAR TEAM PROFILES



### Halimah Washington

*Community Coordinator, PAR Project Lead*

I am a Black Mama from New York City who is directly impacted by the family policing system with involvement going back multiple generations. My experience with the family policing system speaks to how it stays in people's lives for multiple generations, never helping, but continuing to cause harm and trauma throughout the generations. I am passionate about this work because Black and brown families deserve to thrive and to not be targeted by punitive systems. The most amazing part of this PAR journey for me was seeing the growth in confidence and skills of the parents leading the project as they became researchers, facilitators and organizers. It was meaningful to help to create a safe space for parents to talk about their family policing system involvement and dream of a future without systems involvement. Having a safe space to share your parenting experiences is priceless. In community conversations, parents stated that they appreciated this space. Parents wanted more safe spaces and investment in their communities and less investment in systems that target and punish Black and brown families.



### Naashia B.

*Rise & Shine (2020); Organizer and PAR Team Member*

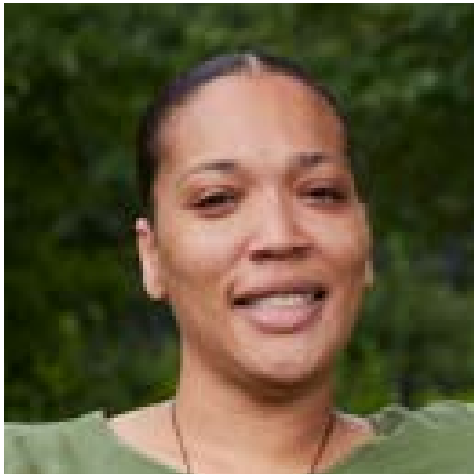
As part of the Rise & Shine Parent Leadership Program, I had access to information, training and networks of people who experienced the family policing system negatively, just as I had. I gained a different perspective on the many biases too often unspoken and publicly overlooked. The Rise family helped me to embrace the reality that I, too, was an impacted parent surviving the web of harmful systems, and to begin writing my story unapologetically. Post-Rise & Shine graduation, I began working with the PAR project, leading community conversations with other impacted parents around family policing and the injustices we face. As an impacted parent, I want to accurately and wholeheartedly share our truths about oppressive systems that constantly paint us with their standards. The most meaningful aspect of the project has been giving space for parents to name and address harmful systemic failures. I want to continue making room for us to write and tell our own narratives.



### Yvonne Smith

*Rise & Shine (2020); Contributor and PAR Team Member*

I started at Rise in 2020 as an impacted mother, grandmother and former foster parent. I thought that ACS helped to keep families together and keep children safe. Little did I know, that's not true! I went through twelve years of abuse by ACS and other systems as I tried to keep my family together—but still, we were separated. Even though my cases were all unfounded, my life turned into a living hell. I didn't know my rights, they looked at my grandkids' bodies and showed up at my grandkids' school, doctor's and camp. I was also impacted financially but didn't get any financial support. When you're going through this, you feel alone, but you're not—there are a whole lot of Black and brown families impacted. No one should go through this, and ACS should be held accountable for the lasting harm they inflict on children and families. At Rise, I was introduced to the PAR project, which has led me to great growth, new knowledge and insight into life. I've become an advocate for impacted families, a facilitator and a researcher. In this project, I work with an amazing team of women who are very passionate. They are not just a team, but a family, for we help each other find our inner strengths.



### Shamara Kelly

*Rise & Shine (2020); Organizer and PAR Team Member*

I am a resilient Black mother, sister, daughter, friend, aunt and thriver, despite many systems that have impacted me in many ways. One system in particular, ACS, affected my emotional and mental well-being. At 19, I got my first case from the family policing system. I was in an abusive relationship, and I still felt I had to protect myself from ACS. I didn't want to be seen as an angry Black woman or bitter—I'm neither. I needed to take my power back, not only from the person that abused me but from systems that victimize Black mothers—Black women, period. That led me to do this work alongside powerful parents who have the same passion I have. Facilitating community conversations and building relationships with parents around their experiences with the family policing system brought me ease and made my passion for this work even stronger. My passion has always been to bring resources back to my community and educate them on their rights. It's a must that we keep our foot on the system's neck the same way they do to Black and brown communities. I'm still growing in many ways, from being angry at the system, to turning my pain into medicine and using it against the system. Healing takes time and there's no time limit on it. I love the process and allow myself to be fully present in any space I'm in. I learned to live unapologetically, use my truth and hold my experiences and parents' experiences with systems as a reminder that there's so much more to be done.



### **Melissa Landrau**

*Joined Rise in 2013; Contributor and PAR Team Member*

I've experienced the family policing system and all the tribulations of it. I still came out on top, but with damage and lack of support. The PAR project has been meaningful to my recovery and understanding after all the things I went through in the family policing system. I have learned to reflect on, understand and manage my feelings and how to accept both criticism and positive feedback. I'm learning new things and becoming the best version of myself through advocacy. I do the work because it helps me grow and I want a career in social work and advocacy. I've learned important tools and strengthened roots that can take me that way. The past determines the future, and we're fighting for societal change and to be better people. I've learned to use my voice and skills to empower other parents and call for the changes we envision, including safe communities where we can look to our neighbors for help.



### **Imani Worthy**

*Public Speaking Coordinator; Rise & Shine (2020); PAR Team Member*

My experience with the family policing system was traumatic. I will never forget what I went through and empathize with other mothers who have gone through similar experiences. Together, we are trying to turn the tables. The PAR project has been an opportunity for me to begin to sow seeds of equity within my community. It has been meaningful being in community, in a space with other impacted people. I have learned that healing spaces are crucial for the advancement of our community. I am most passionate about dismantling systems that have created more harm than good. I needed to be part of a healing space, because I can't help others if I'm not helping myself first. While I was involved with ACS, I was struck by the necessity of strong peer support—how important it is to be around like-minded people, understand that I am not alone in my personal struggles and realize that there are so many other people like me in the same predicament. When my husband and I were labeled “child abusers,” people who knew us knew this was false. Their support and advocacy for us empowered us to fight for a greater purpose. People need to come together and unite against social injustices.



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