

YOUNG WOMEN'S
FREEDOM CENTER

ALLIANCE
FOR GIRLS

Funded by



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Office of Women's Policy
Division of Equity & Social Justice

WHEN YOUNG MOMS THRIVE

REIMAGINING CHILD CARE, COMMUNITY, AND YOUNG MOTHERHOOD





THIS REPORT IS DEDICATED TO YOUNG MOMS AND TRANS PARENTS OF ALL GENDERS WHO HAVE STRUGGLED THROUGH THE LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE OF EARLY PARENTHOOD. THIS IS FOR THE YOUNG MOMS WHO WERE IN SPACE WITH THE YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER AND SHARED THEIR HARDSHIPS AND BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCES.

WE BELIEVE IN YOU AND ARE HERE FOR YOU BECAUSE WHEN YOUNG MOMS THRIVE, WE ALL DO.

YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER

For nearly 30 years, Young Women's Freedom Center – YWFC has provided support, mentorship, training, employment, and advocacy to young women and trans youth of all genders in California who have grown up in poverty, experienced the juvenile legal and foster care systems, have had to survive living and working on the streets, and who have experienced significant violence in their lives.

Our Mission is to build the power and leadership of directly impacted young people and inspire them to create positive change in their lives and communities. We meet young people where they're at: on the streets, in jails and detention centers, and in the neighborhoods and communities where we live.

Together, we build our personal and collective power, heal from trauma, advocate on behalf of ourselves and each other, gain access to education, and work to transform the conditions, systems, and policies that lead to intergenerational cycles of violence, incarceration, and poverty.

ALLIANCE FOR GIRLS

Alliance for Girls – AFG is the nation's largest regional alliance of girl-serving organizations with a membership of 180 organizations and individuals that serve over 300,000 girls across the Bay Area and L.A. County.

AFG has a decade of experience working with girl-serving organizations, schools, and government agencies to address violence faced by girls and gender-expansive youth and create more equitable communities in which every girl and gender expansive youth thrives. Their model is rooted in the power of the collective, catalyzing agencies and systems to amplify girls' and gender-expansive youth voices and work strategically with youth and member organizations to meet their expressed needs. AFG is committed to intervening and preventing gender-based violence and promoting gender equity by advocating for and working with girls, particularly girls who face the intersections of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, to change systems to better serve their needs. Through girl-driven research, intergenerational leadership, cross-sectoral partnerships, and community-driven solutions, we can stop these cycles of violence and injustice and shift the gender and cultural norms that normalize them.

CREDITS

DATA ANALYSIS TEAM

Young Women's Freedom Center

Joycelyn Aguilar – Lead Research Fellow

Anastacia Cisneros – Research Fellow

Arabella Guevara – Research Fellow

Jocelyn Arenas – Research Fellow

Pricilla Yruegas – Research Fellow

Alliance for Girls

Viviana Arenas – Advocacy Fellow

JOYCELYN AGUILAR

LEAD RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

Joycelyn is a first-generation Latina, and the youngest in her family. She was born and raised on the west side of San Jose. Joycelyn joined Young Women's Freedom Center as a part of the Siblings on the Rise – SOTR Internship¹ and progressed to Organizing Fellow. Prior to the launch of When Young Moms Thrive, she was a part of an initiative² to provide young mothers the opportunity to create systems change. Joycelyn is grateful for the opportunity to do this work, and is dedicated to ensuring her community has its power restored.

JOCELYN ARENAS

RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

Jocelyn came to YWFC at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 while expecting. She joined Freedom Circles³ and received support through life coaching and participating

in internships, and was eventually hired for When Young Moms Thrive. She saw this initiative as a beautiful opportunity to further her career in a supportive environment. She has grown as a result of this work and is grateful for the opportunity to transform her life and support young moms in her community.

ARABELLA GUEVARA

RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

Arabella graduated from SOTR Internship and progressed as a Fellow with When Young Moms Thrive. She is committed to working to shift the narrative around young motherhood and has used her role as an opportunity to reimagine how resources can be made more accessible. She appreciates being able to participate in something so big and hopes to see generational change.

ANASTACIA CISNEROS

RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

Anastacia became involved with YWFC in December of 2021 at 19, having just given birth to her son Christian Mateo. Though she has experienced many hardships as a young mom, Anastacia wants to do whatever she can to never be separated from her son. She is passionate about supporting foster children experiencing abuse and undocumented

1 Siblings on the Rise is a paid internship and fellowship that supports young people who have been involved in the juvenile justice system, foster care, welfare, and/or the underground street economies to gain skills to access sustainable employment.

2 Joycelyn was an organizing fellow who partnered with VERA to conduct a research project on violence in homes for youth in Santa Clara County.

3 Weekly 2-hour circles grounded in self-determination, positive peer relationships and caring support from self-determination advocates. Our Freedom Circles provide healing and support for young people navigating to stay out of the system. This work includes court support and systems navigation.

CREDITS

families.

PRISCILLA YRUEGAS

RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

Priscilla became involved with YWFC in 2021 at 21. Being a part of WYMT has encouraged her to achieve her goals for not only herself but for her son as well. Priscilla sees this opportunity as a chance to heal and help others by shaping the system and its resources to sustain her community. Throughout high school, Priscilla was also involved with community organizations such as Bright Futures and Conxion, which enabled her to find her voice and deepened her passion for her community. She believes advocacy supports the self-determination of young women and trans youth. It is her vision to promote change in the system to break negative stigmas and redistribute resources to those in need.

2022 she won the Hon. Teresa Guerra-Daley Inspiration Award on behalf of Shine Together as recognition of her dedication to social justice.

VIVIANA ARENAS

ADVOCACY FELLOW AT AFG

Viviana is the Advocacy Fellow at Alliance for Girls where she joined the team to co-lead When Young Moms Thrive. Viviana is passionate about breaking down the barriers that young families face such as unaffordable child care costs, access to basic resources, and gender inequity. She envisions a world where all young families and their children have the resources and support they need to thrive. Viviana's dedication to supporting families like hers began when she joined Shine Together⁴ as an ambassador four years ago. In

⁴ Shine Together formally known as Teen Success Inc. is a program that empowers young moms to thrive by assisting them with the tools and resources that best fit their needs. Shine Together has an impact on two generations at a time by empowering young moms to complete high school, pursue post-secondary education, and nurture their child's positive development.

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LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP



DEAR READER,

I write this letter with the intention to uplift and highlight the amazing advocacy done by young mothers who worked diligently on this project while holding infants in their arms. As a former young mother at 15 and 17, I know too well the discrimination and shame experienced by young moms.

Harmful narratives about young motherhood have influenced and shaped the resources that are available to young moms, and their delivery. Young moms are often excluded from the support that they need, with lasting implications for their lives and those of their children.

But, I know from my own experience that in order for young moms to thrive, they need support and resources, and to be treated with dignity and respect.

The Young Women's Freedom Center has always centered the strength, resilience, and most importantly - the self-determination of young women, and trans youth of all genders who have been impacted by the system. We believe that those most harmed by poverty, the juvenile legal and foster care systems, living and working on the streets, and significant violence are best positioned to imagine and create solutions.

It is with this lens and experience, unique to YWFC, that When Young Moms Thrive and this research were approached and carried out with utmost respect for the expertise of the young mamas we worked with.

Desiree Victor

DIRECTOR FOR THE YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER
SANTA CLARA COUNTY

LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP



MOTHERING IS REVOLUTIONARY.

When I think of the word “mothering,” images of my mother, my tias (aunts), cousins, abuelas (grandmas), and all the powerful mamas I’ve had the honor of working with at YWFC come to mind. I think about the ways I was mothered through radical love and wisdom.

It’s expected of mothers – young and older – struggling financially and navigating systems to have it all figured out. They usually do figure it out, over and over again, living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to meet all their needs. They are rarely asked what they need, so when we did, they wasted no time answering. That was a big lesson for me in this project. That we don’t need to invent care for young moms, we need to listen to them, and let them determine what would best support them.

In this initiative, I worked closely with 5 young moms who shared their experiences navigating motherhood while formerly incarcerated or transitioning out of foster care. They talked about having to make tough decisions about being present for their little ones’ milestones or working late shifts to meet financial needs. Sometimes, they even had to choose which needs they would prioritize. It was clear from speaking to each mom that these challenges were common. Later, over 100 moms would echo the same obstacles.

Throughout the project, I heard young moms articulate clearly, what they needed to feel supported. These young moms were intent on different conditions and bright futures for their children. They didn’t need to be saved, only heard.

Young moms in this revolutionary project embodied the words of my favorite feminist scholar, Angela Davis, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change; I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

Alexis Roman

SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER AT THE
YOUNG WOMEN’S FREEDOM CENTER

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ADVOCACY FELLOW

Individual who advocates for systemic change through campaigning, commitment, and knowledge of state policy proposals that directly impact members of the community.

CHILD CARE

Parents discussed difficulty having someone to care for their child so they can work/study as part of the significant findings of this work. In this study, we include child care as extended family care, community care, etc.

COMMUNITY EXPERTS

People who know what goes on in the community i.e.; only young parents know how the system treats young parents and also know what they can or can't qualify for because they have experience facing those barriers.

RESEARCHER/RESEARCH FELLOW

WYMT defines a research fellow as: directly-impacted youth trained as researchers. They combine their skills as researchers and real-lived experiences to explore political, systemic, and community development.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is generally described as having control and agency over one's life, goals, and decisions. In this study, self-determination is defined as young parents being in charge and in control of their own goals, in their own lives.

STIGMA

A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person; young moms face several negative stigmas such as 'won't graduate,' 'single parent,' and 'can't make ends meet.'

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

A network of people who provide practical, emotional, and/or physical support. We define it here as those systems that offer unconditional support for young moms.

SYSTEM-IMPACTED

People who experience the criminalization and control of government entities, organizations, or networks. Systems include the juvenile delinquency system, adult criminal system, foster care, child protective services, welfare, subsidized housing, mental health institutions, and addiction treatment centers.

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH - YPAR

YPAR is a youth-led research design; it is used to describe the community-based research that youth partake in to bring researchers together from diverse backgrounds to work to address similar experiences. Using YPAR to produce knowledge of those most impacted, Fellows and Experts in this work are trained in research approaches to improve their lives, communities, and the institutions that serve them.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

YOUNG MOM

A parent between the ages of 12 – 26 with at least one child, including those who are expecting. We use this term to take back our power as young mothers and parents who thrive by overcoming the struggles as we face obstacles.

CULTURAL AND NARRATIVE CHANGE

Identifying, reimagining, creating framework, and implementing redress to negative stigmas through positive and empowering stories and messaging.



PURPOSE

Young mothers in SCC experience many challenges accessing critical resources to support themselves and their children. Despite the current supports intended for young moms and their families, they struggle to utilize them because of stigma, discrimination, and stringent eligibility requirements.

The purpose of the When Young Moms Thrive, We All Do Initiative at Young Women’s Freedom Center and Alliance for Girls was to bring young moms and young trans parents of all genders together to reframe common stereotypes about young parenthood and shed light on the social structures and systemic barriers challenging young mothers across California. And to use Youth Participatory Action Research – YPAR, to provide an insights-driven roadmap for the State of California and the nation to provide services to better support the self-determination of young moms. WYMT also offers insights around the national crisis facing all parents amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questions at the core of this report were: “What is your experience being a young mother in San Jose? What is difficult? What is working?” In order to better understand and provide recommendations to meet the needs of young moms.

We have the right to access (touch, hear, and see) our children, family, and loved ones when we are in the systems that criminalize and control us. We have a right to inform who cares for our children while we are unable to due to incarceration, houselessness, poverty, or other conditions. We have a right to get support and resources to stay connected to and reunite with our children as soon as we are able to.

YOUNG WOMEN’S FREEDOM CENTER AND SISTER WARRIORS FREEDOM COALITION
FREEDOM CHARTER

The purpose of this report is to take back all that help that was denied to us when all we wanted to do was to be able to provide for our children. We not only want quantity, but quality – calling on more access to high-quality care for moms to know their children are not treated any differently because of their socio-economic background or the color of their skin. We are human. We are mothers. We will make mistakes. No matter how many times we make mistakes, we should not be treated differently from older moms who are perceived as more “responsible” or “mature” to wear the title of “mom.” We are all moms with different stories. We are all amazing mothers who want the best for our children. As first-time parents, many of us share the knowledge we have about navigating systems and learning from our previous obstacles so that we can pass them on to another mom.

Anastacia Cisneros

YWFC RESEARCH FELLOW

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF WHEN YOUNG MOMS THRIVE INITIATIVE

When Young Moms Thrive Initiative, a collaboration between the Young Women’s Freedom Center and Alliance for Girls, is a Santa Clara County–funded pilot program that engaged over 100 young moms in East San Jose and South County in youth participatory action research (YPAR), professional development and job training, and advocacy.

From its foundation, Young Women’s Freedom Center has always been a space where young system–impacted moms could find safety, resources, and support to reach their self–determined goals. YWFC views those most impacted by harmful systems as the best positioned to imagine and create solutions, which is why they’ve invested in the leadership of young moms. By supporting legislation for family reunification and through their programming such as Young Mothers United¹ in San Francisco, YWFC puts system–impacted young moms at the forefront of decisions that help them to thrive.

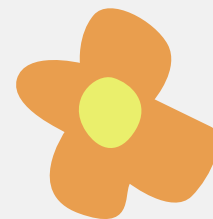
Between 2018 and 2021, Alliance for Girls (AFG) led a series of girl–centered research projects highlighting the needs of girls and gender–expansive youth in the San Francisco Bay Area and California at large, including their [Together We Rise](#) report (2019) and the [Radical Visions of Safety](#) report (2021). In *Together We Rise*, girls and gender–expansive youth highlighted how safety, gender, and race–based biases impact them. Young moms shared how the stigma of young parenthood impacted family spaces, school, and their communities. “One young mother described the withdrawal of family support impacting her wellbeing and the wellbeing of her child: ‘I don’t get a lot of support from my family . . . I get mistreated by relatives . . . I have no one to talk to about my child.’” (Alliance for Girls, 2019, p. 24). Young moms also talked about the financial difficulty they faced. As one young mother shared, “I don’t want to be like women that work all day and not be with their kids . . . I never want him to feel hunger or anything like that, ever.” (ibid) In 2021, AFG’s *Radical Visions of Safety* report explored how girls and gender–expansive youth, including young moms, define safety and some of the best practices organizations can put in place to protect their rights and meet their needs. The report illustrated the personal and environmental factors that are often excluded from political conversations, and demonstrated how social narratives impact the conditions, treatment, and accessibility for young girls from marginalized communities navigating social and political systems. Armed with these two reports and YWFC’s nearly 3 decades of work supporting young parents’ self–determination and leadership, YWFC and AFG created the When Young Moms Thrive Initiative.

In 2019, youth–serving organizations, including AFG, YWFC, YWCA, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, CARAS, and others, came together to devise a strategy and advocate for county funding

1 Advocacy and support for pregnant and parenting moms to gain knowledge and support to interrupt the cycle of violence and trauma they have experienced and to heal in order to create healthier habits and routines as a parent.

to actualize the solutions proposed by young moms in the Together We Rise report. By September 2020, the group² was successful in working with Supervisor Cindy Chavez to secure county funding with unanimous support from the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors (BOS).

When Young Moms Thrive is an extension of the decades of advocacy, leadership, and policy narrative shifts that center the voices, expertise, and stories of young women in Santa Clara County navigating motherhood, experiencing stigmas, systems, and equity gaps. The “When Young Moms Thrive, We All Do” report is a result of a proposal made in 2020 on behalf of YWFC and AFG for funding a year-long pilot project in Santa Clara County to work alongside young mothers and families residing in East Side San Jose and South County. In the Fall of 2021 and Winter of 2022, Research Fellows at YWFC spent 6 months hosting listening sessions and workshops for young mothers age 26 and younger residing in Santa Clara County to learn about their experience navigating motherhood.



² Coalition of Community Advocates and Supporters. Thank you to community organizations including Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, YWCA Silicon Valley, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Shine Together, CARAS, and YOALI for serving as community advisors and strategists. These service providers also supported the WYMT with outreach efforts, feedback on report recommendations, and communications. We also want to thank the county partners Office of Women's Policy, Office of First 5, and Office of Education who helped to implement changes in support of young moms.

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

The research team at YWFC has remained committed to YPAR as a way to decolonize research practices and position those directly impacted at the forefront.

For nearly 30 years, YWFC has invested in the leadership of cis and trans young women and girls, trans young men and boys, and gender-expansive youth who have been impacted by incarceration, poverty, and gender-based violence. YPAR and the YWFC share a commitment to youth leadership and activism to prioritize lived experience as a source of expertise and wisdom. In YPAR projects, adult researchers train youth in research methods, data collection, and data analysis to become co-researchers; together, they actively transgress traditional power dynamics about who can be considered an expert (Ginwright & James, 2002). Intergenerational YPAR teams explore social issues in their communities, utilizing research as a transformative tool to engage in civic and democratic activism (ibid).

As part of YWFC'S YPAR framework, the Research Fellows leading this initiative were young mothers. Additionally, Research Fellows dedicated a portion of their time to structuring 18 listening sessions and 8 educational and interactive workshops. This was conducted to provide the County with actionable recommendations to design and implement programs rooted in culturally responsive wrap-around service delivery to systems-impacted young parents. Through these sessions the 158 young mothers who participated in this initiative (or, Community Experts) shared details regarding their experiences while navigating child care, stigmas, mental health, COVID-19, and economic stability. Research Fellows identified these as the significant findings that capture the realities for young mothers and the impacts these barriers place on their children and families. The Research Team continued to analyze the data until the end of the Spring of 2022, working with 158 young mothers to develop policy recommendations that address the barriers they and their peers face. It is imperative to YWFC and AFG to support the design and implementation of culturally-responsive programs for young mothers through a paradigm shift centered on youth experience. By working alongside stakeholders and community members we can honor and uplift the diversity of the populations who create our futures.

**RESEARCH
TEAM**

AUGUST 2021

- Joycelyn Aguilar hired as the Lead Research Fellow for WYMT at YWFC.
- Alexis Roman hired as the Program Coordinator for WYMT at YWFC.

SEPTEMBER 2021

- YWFC receives 51 applications for the When Young Moms Thrive fellowship.
- 4 young mothers, Arabella Guevara, Priscilla Yruegas, Victoria Ramirez, and Nevaeh Gutierrez¹ hired as Research Fellows for When Young Moms Thrive at YWFC.
- Joycelyn and Alexis meet with YWFC Research Director to map out the ten-month quantitative and qualitative data collection processes.

OCTOBER 2021

- WYMT Orientation for Research Fellows.

¹ Retention of Research Fellows was contingent on the realities young mothers applying for this position were navigating – some had two or more part-time jobs that were not supportive or flexible with their needs as young mothers. In mid October 2021, Jocelyn Arenas and Odalys Nolasco were hired on as Research Fellows. In January 2022, Anastacia Cisneros was hired on as the

**POLICY
TEAM**

SEPTEMBER 2021

- Viviana Arenas hired as the advocacy fellow for WYMT at AFG. Research for the policy memo began in November 2021 to capture nationwide context.
- Haleema Bharoocha serves as project lead on behalf of AFG, mentoring, training, and supporting Viviana to take ownership of WYMT and offering insight on policy writing and facilitating community meetings.

JANUARY 2022

- Early drafts based on preliminary findings and research of policy structures begin.

FEBRUARY-JULY 2022

- Policy research and analysis go through iterations, informed by the community organizations, report data, and most importantly, the young moms.
- The final policy memo was completed in July 2022.

CULTURAL
AND
NARRATIVE
ACTIONS

FEBRUARY 2022-JULY 2022

- WYMT created a roadmap for Santa Clara County Office of Education developed to address program goals overall.
 - Deliverables included early learning campaigns, practices, and language that are inclusive of young moms.
 - Develop and publish language that is stigma-free and addresses harmful gender norms for county websites that provide services for young moms.
- Establish an official child care resource referral process with community partners and close gaps in childcare access for young moms.
- WYMT produced a video that centers on the stories of young moms and uplifts their work in SCC as a way to showcase to their community.

TRAINING

OCTOBER 2021

- Research Fellows receive weekly training for 15 hours covering the following curriculum: *Introduction to Research, Research and Social Movements, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and the Participatory Model, Surveying and Coding, Coding with Confidence, and YPAR in Practice.*
- Research Fellows prepare and practice facilitation for listening sessions.

RECRUIT-
MENT
AND
RETENTION
OF COM-
MUNITY
EXPERTS

OCTOBER 2021-JUNE 2022

- Research Fellows review deliverables and population of focus to ensure Experts consulted are young mothers facing financial hardship and residing in Santa Clara County.
- Research Fellows connect with 100+ young parents through a variety of outreaching strategies and follow up to maintain connections.

DATA COLLEC- TION AND ANALYSIS

QUALITATIVE DATA

NOVEMBER 2021-JUNE 2022

- Series 1: 18 focus groups held and eventually transcribed and codebook created. These preliminary findings lead Research Fellows to identify 14 major themes that would later be refined to five themes, 11 subcategories, and recommendations.
- Series 2: 8 self-determination workshops are held, seventy goal plans collected, transcribed, and incorporated into codebook.
- Series 3: YWFC holds a final session in celebration of young mothers and honors the time Experts shared with YWFC and AFG throughout the WYMT Initiative.

QUANTITATIVE DATA: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEYS

NOVEMBER 2021-JUNE 2022

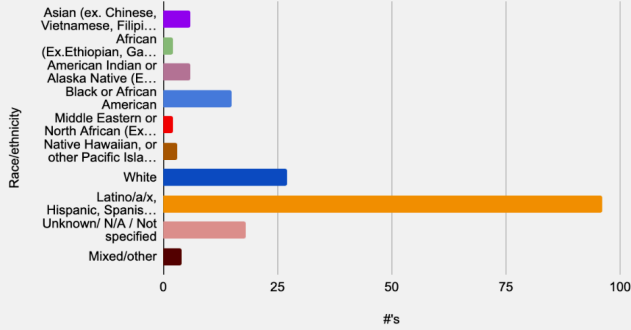
- YWFC Research Fellows receive 100+ demographic surveys from participating Community Experts¹ to better understand the realities of young mothers in Santa Clara County.

¹ For every Community Expert who contributed to WYMT, YWFC asked if they would complete a Young Parent Survey (demographic survey) – with all personal identifying information removed to protect confidentiality. 100+ current and former young mothers who contributed their time and expertise – through either listening sessions, educational workshops, and or working groups – were asked to complete a demographic survey to supplement the narratives and provide a greater understanding of the diverse and complex realities of young mothers living in SCC.

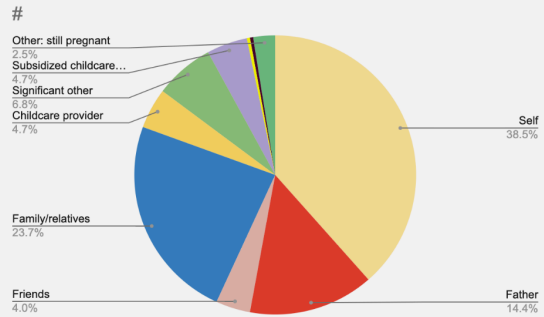
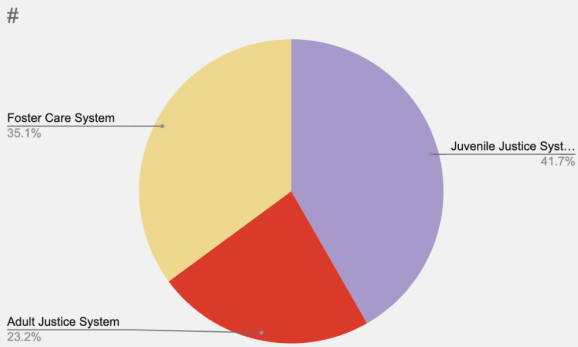
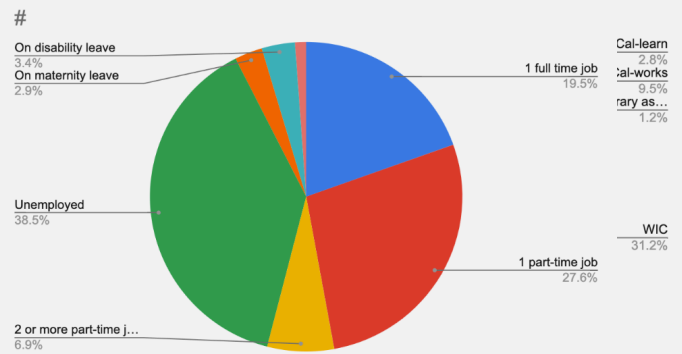
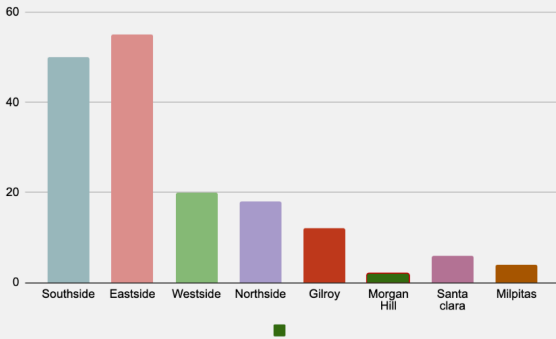
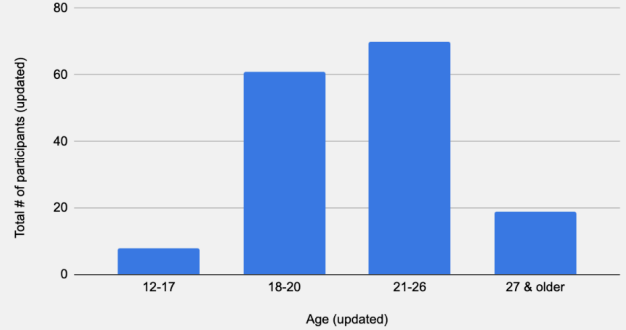
Among the 158 young mothers ~**43%** (n=69) were between the ages of 12 – 20. **65%** of young moms identified as Latina/o/x, Hispanic, Spanish, and or Mexican (n= 96) residing in the Southside (n=55) and Eastside (n=50) area of Santa Clara County.

Additionally, ~**61%** (n=98) of young moms were involved in Santa Clara County’s juvenile and/ or adult justice system, while one-third (n=53) were involved in foster care. Additionally, ~**20%** (n=34) of young mothers had full-time employment, while ~**38%** of mothers (n=67) were unemployed. When asked about child care, ~ **5%** (n=13) of parents were enrolled in a subsidized child care program.

#s vs. Race/ethnicity



Total # of participants (updated) vs. Age (updated)



FINDINGS

THEME 1

CHALLENGES OF MOTHERHOOD: CHILD CARE

This theme represents the realities mothers shared regarding the importance of acquiring trusted, meaningful sources of care for their children and families.

SYSTEMS FAILURE: THE DOMINO EFFECT

This focused on the rippling effect of a lack of access to child care. Young mothers rarely felt confident about their child care and expressed that the lack of access to child care impacted their mental health, education, and ability to find and retain work.

Young mothers expressed feeling like “the system [child care] is broken,” noting that the services that are meant to support mothers with child care are difficult to access because of extensive application processes and long waitlists.

“Child care is probably the biggest struggle that I have had since the beginning and now. We couldn’t afford child care. So I took the first year off with my first son. And then when I got pregnant with my second, I was like, “I have to work. There’s no way we’re going to survive. And then when you go and you seek assistance, like everyone, my sister, my mom they’re like, “Go to welfare. You can get help with child care. You can get food stamps, cash, and all this.” I’m like, “Okay.” I go with my husband’s paycheck and they’re like, “You make too much.” Like, “How do I make too much? I can’t even survive. My fridge is almost empty.”

COMMUNITY EXPERT

Throughout the initial series of focus groups, it was clear that young mothers often had to negotiate their needs. While there were opportunities and programs for subsidized child care and housing to alleviate financial burdens, eligibility often required forfeiting other opportunities for financial stability.

Community Experts spoke about wanting to find work in order to bring more income home, but had to consider how this impacted their ability to receive child care subsidy support(s). Without subsidies, child care could range between \$1,000.00 – \$3,000.00 a month depending on the institution, a mother’s working hours, and age of the child.

In many cases, mothers are forced to choose between child care subsidy support(s) or entering the workforce. This is echoed by studies showing that the absence of universal child care remains one of the key institutional barriers to employment and acts as a key motivator for mothers in the domestic sphere (Ruppaner et al., 2019; *Demanding Change*, p.16). Community Experts said that even after getting off a waitlist or using a combined income, they were still ineligible for subsidized support.



My husband and I wouldn't qualify for any programs based on being married, but yet our combined income... I mean, I was not making good money. He was not making good money. Not enough to survive at least, or pay for housing for ourselves, let alone the daycare and everything else. And so that's always been a struggle because it's, I don't make enough, yet you make too much. So it's just this weird place to be. So that's kind of always been the struggle for us as being kind of in the middle.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

67% of Experts were the sole providers for their children, regardless of dating, being involved in a relationship, or living with their child's father, friends, or family. This reflects an inherently single-headed dynamic that women are often subjected to (Katz, 2013).

Child care is a must to succeed in Santa Clara County as a young mom. Most of us young moms are struggling to provide for our children because we do not have the child care we need to be able to work a full-time job and/ or go to school.

PRISCILLA, RESEARCH FELLOW AT YWFC

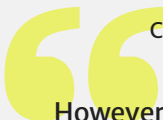


WE NEED ACCESS: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Community Experts and Research Fellows believe that child care and early learning programs are critical, contribute to child development, and can be supportive of working mothers.

We got the kids into a program during the summer to help them out so we could still work. And they were also helping us when the kids were doing learning at home. They were able to go there and do the Zoom learning and they helped the kids with that, which was great.

COMMUNITY EXPERT



However, a majority of early child education programs operate on a part-day basis, making it challenging for mothers who work more than one job or non-traditional hours. Studies report that counties that ensure and maintain a variation in scheduling and accessibility for extended child care and early education programs are positively associated with maternal employment

and educational outcomes (Ruppaner, 2019, p. 3). Young moms in SCC faced many barriers to accessing early childhood education programs.

Child care is probably the biggest struggle that I have had since the beginning and now. And then also for my daughter, I had to homeschool her for two years, I think everybody has, but that was a really big struggle and it set my daughter's education back. So she's behind grade level.



COMMUNITY EXPERT

CHILD CARE ALTERNATIVES COME FROM COMMUNITY

Access to trustworthy child care providers was a key theme throughout the focus groups. Research Fellows expressed gratitude for the community-based child care approach¹ they experienced during When Young Moms Thrive at YWFC. Qualitative data² made it clear that child care should be determined and vetted by mothers themselves, rather than governmental agents/entities. Community Experts stressed the importance of having alternative models of child care that are centered within and around community. Research Fellows had oversight over commissioning child care for the celebratory event held on June 4, 2022, for young moms in Santa Clara County. They interviewed 8 mothers in the community and selected and paid 4. After the event, parents expressed that they had rarely experienced so much support.

THEME 2

EXPERIENCING STIGMA AND JUDGMENT

Even when young moms felt empowered and aware of their strengths, this was overshadowed by stigma and judgment.

AGE DISCRIMINATION: CRITICISM AND STIGMA

A major goal for When Young Moms Thrive was to shift the narrative around young parenthood from a shameful one to one that highlighted young mothers' expertise, brilliance, strength, and courage.

Both Research Fellows and Community Experts recounted being shamed for the knowledge gaps experienced by most first-time parents. They also shared experiences of their needs or concerns

¹ This approach was grounded in The Freedom 2030 Charter which was adopted at the founding Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition convening in Oakland California in February 2018 and updated in August 2019. The Charter sets out: We have the right to access (touch, hear, and see) our children, family, and loved ones when we are in the systems that criminalize and control us. We have a right to inform who cares for our children while we are unable to due to incarceration, houselessness, poverty, or other conditions. We have a right to get support and resources to stay connected to and reunite with our children as soon as we are able to.

² From the data gathered across 8 workshops from series 2, Researchers coded 18 instances when young mothers expressed "choice of provider" and "trust in child care environment" as factors that made them feel secure in their choice of child care.

not being taken seriously while navigating the welfare system. This was concerning because 33% (n=111) of Experts utilized Medi-Cal, 16% (n=53) were on CalFresh (formerly known as food stamps), and 31% (n=102) used WIC for maternity, post-partum, or child-specific clinical needs.

““

The thing that I don't like about these services is that people judge. They shouldn't judge us based on how we look because they just put us in a box. When they see a young mom they assume everything about our lives when it's inaccurate. And that's why it's hard for certain people to look for resources because they don't feel comfortable going and speaking with people that are judging them, and letting them handle everything that has to do with their families.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

Clinicians, nurses, and case workers frequently interacted with Experts as if they were not the parent, undermining their expertise as the main providers.

I would go to my appointments with my mom, because she would be by my side and they wouldn't really tell me any information. They would always ask my mom questions and stuff. So they would take me still as a kid and just tell her everything. So that was kind of hard.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

””

““

And then Medi-Cal, it's been a pain in the ass, having to deal with the clinics, having to deal with the doctors there who basically, they know you're a first time mom and they basically judge you because you freak out when something's wrong with them [referring to their child]. Like, 'Oh it's normal'. But like how are you supposed to know that it's normal. That would be my only concern.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

PARENTING IS NOT A “ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL”

Parenting decisions, behaviors, and circumstances often reflect the needs and realities of every individual mother and their child(ren). Many Community Experts experienced negative responses for the ways they approached parenting. Often, their children's behavior was also negatively received. The widespread notions around what is “developmentally appropriate” are constrained to western ideologies; additionally, these ideologies suggest that it is “okay” and “encouraged” for only *some* children to behave energetically and authentically themselves (ie., children of the upper class, older mothers) (Winkler, 2009).

Community Experts who had been involved in the juvenile, adult justice, and/or foster care systems were especially deemed “unfit” and more likely to encounter systems like child protective services and be placed under the supervision of the state (Melendrez, 2021, p. 11). The diverse perspectives on infant and adolescent parenting for the Community Experts in this work

show how first-time mothers negotiate parenting. For many of the young moms we spoke with, parenting styles were influenced by how they were raised; some mothers spoke of changing how toxic masculinity and lack of empathy were normalized in their adolescent years³.

YOUNG MOMS DESERVE RESPECT

Community Experts frequently expressed that WYMT was the first time they felt validated, supported, and seen as not solely mothers, but also as individuals. Listening sessions, focus groups, and workshops intentionally focused on the self-determination of Community Experts to ensure they felt cared for, heard, and validated.

THEME 3

NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH

This theme reflects on the impact of inadequate care and support on young moms' mental health, well-being, and sense of empowerment.

A PICTURE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Community Experts experienced a variety of mental health challenges, including postpartum depression, stress, and struggling with overall well-being.



I think the biggest struggle is, I dealt with a lot of postpartum depression and my patience was really running thin from being sleep deprived. And if you had more support, I feel you can get through it. But if you have no support system, it's really hard.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

Community Experts frequently expressed feelings of isolation, loneliness, and increased levels of stress and anxiety related to first-time parenting and COVID-19. Some mothers stated that being in groups with other young moms helped them feel more supported.

3 From the data gathered across 8 workshops from series 2, Researchers coded 25 instances when young mothers expressed “breaking unhealthy learned generational behaviors” and “positive influences” as narratives specifically regarding young mothers that they wanted to break while raising their children.

BECAUSE IF WE'RE GOING TO BE GOOD MOMS TO OUR KIDS, WE HAVE TO BE GOOD FIRST IN OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND BE STABLE ENOUGH AND DEAL WITH OUR TRAUMA AND OUR ISSUES. AND A LOT OF THE TIME, PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE THAT DOCTORS DON'T REALIZE THAT OR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS DON'T REALIZE THAT, HOLD ON, FOR THIS FAMILY TO BE ALL GOOD, LET ME WORK WITH THE MOM FIRST, MAKE SURE THAT SHE'S GOOD.



Community Expert

Community Experts described being forced to neglect their own needs and wellbeing in order to pivot to support their children during COVID-19.

INSIGHTS TO EMPOWERMENT

Feelings of empowerment also emerged as important for young mothers' mental health and well-being. Specifically, Community Experts stated that they were more successful when they felt empowered and were supported in their needs and mental health.

Community Experts also expressed needing support to manage substance abuse, self-esteem issues, postpartum/generalized anxiety and depression, social supports, and emotional/physical abuse.

THEME 4

ECONOMIC STABILITY

Economic and financial stability emerged as a primary worry for Community Experts. This theme explores the need for economic opportunities as well as the barriers facing young mothers.

OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING FINANCIAL STABILITY

Community Experts named the level of education, involvement with the system, and child care as the primary obstacles to financial stability. Another obstacle was ineligibility for support services even when Experts worked minimum wage jobs and were also responsible for rent and other bills.

Community Experts also shared that limited or inadequate financial aid impeded their ability to complete or pursue their education goals. Experts stated that they found financial aid and programs like CalLearn not only hard to apply for, but also didn't cover the full cost of education.

UNREASONABLE EMPLOYMENT QUALIFICATIONS

In our Series 2 focus groups, Community Experts expressed that it was hard to provide for their basic needs (e.g., food, housing, child care) because of limited opportunities. Another major obstacle was qualifying for jobs while system-impacted⁴ – barring many young parents from the higher-paying career paths they want (Melendrez, 2019, p. 45).

⁴ Of the Experts we consulted, ~41% (n=63) were formerly involved in the juvenile justice system and ~23% (n=35) were formerly involved in the adult justice system. In Santa Clara County specifically, this has resulted in little to no job security for many families and an increased demand for child care, especially among system-impacted and low-income young mothers and parents.

“

I just feel like they should be more prominent [job opportunities and employers], and more on top of these sorts of things. Rather than just letting it go, and not being so... Just being there for the check, is what it seems like. It makes it hard for me to find a job, because right now I'm a student and I was convicted of a felony last year. So now it's even harder to find a job. I've applied to 34 jobs. Other than that felony, I've had a clean record, but they just look at that one bad thing and they don't care about all the other good things you're doing.

COMMUNITY EXPERT

My biggest struggle was, or is actually, it's finding daycare and finding work, which is just really hard, because it's only me and his dad that live here, his dad works from literally 7:00 AM in the morning until 5:00 at night. A lot of places expect ... I don't have a clean record and they expect someone with a clean record. I'm a felon. I have a strike and it's just way harder to find work and get help honestly too, from the government because it has a lot of resources...

COMMUNITY EXPERT

In addition to systemic obstacles to employment, Experts reported working in positions that made it harder for them to see and get appropriate care for their children, including working graveyard schedules.

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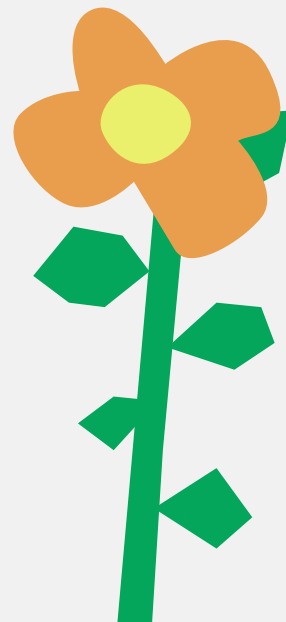
Before this, my job search was so hard because of my past on quitting jobs because I was denied maternity leave. What held me back [from employment opportunities] was not wanting to miss out on the milestones of my baby learning to crawl, walk. But the reality is - I have to. When I thought of working somewhere else I also had to think of the fact that I didn't have child care and had already been denied because I'm under my dad's insurance. I also have no family or friends who have the time to stay home and watch him.

ANASTACIA CISNEROS - WYMT RESEARCH FELLOW

THEME 5**IMPACTS OF COVID-19**

This theme summarizes how the COVID-19 pandemic affected young parents and their children in a variety of ways, from work, home, and school to being able to take their child out to play.

Community Experts continued to feel the effects of COVID-19 in access to education, stable employment, financial security, health, well-being, and empowerment. Like mothers across the country, Experts felt especially professionally challenged. They also reported needing to reduce their hours at work because of increased child care responsibilities (Schaeffer, 2022).



NOTES TO READER

THIS REPORT WORKS FROM THE ASSUMPTION THAT POLICIES AND PRACTICES MADE AND/OR CONSIDERED FOR YOUNG MOTHERS AS A RESULT OF THE SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS OUTLINED ABOVE- WHILE MULTIFACETED - DO NOT SOLELY IMPACT THOSE INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDERS, BUT THEIR CHILDREN, NIECES, AUNTIES, AND GENERATIONS WHOSE VOICES HAVE YET TO BE INCLUDED IN THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY. THE RECOMMENDATIONS PRESENTED IN THIS NEXT SECTION ARE REFLECTIVE OF A LONG AND COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE YPAR FINDINGS GATHERED AS A RESULT OF THIS PILOT TO REIMAGINE HOW CURRENT SYSTEMS AND ORGANIZATIONS COULD BE IMPROVED FOR YOUNG MOTHERS.

WHILE WE UPLIFT AND SUPPORT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FULLEST, WE UNDERSTAND THE CRITICAL STEPS THAT MUST FOLLOW WITH POLICY SHIFTS AND CHANGES, AND THESE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE A CRITICAL STEP IN ADDRESSING SOME OF THE OBSTACLES YOUNG MOTHERS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY FACE AND WILL CONTINUE TO ENCOUNTER.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Early childhood education is a necessity for children and families to thrive. However, cost, eligibility restrictions, stigma, and lack of transparency impede low-income young mothers from accessing existing high-quality child care. The following recommendations were authored by WYMT Advocacy Fellow Viviana Arenas at AFG in response to the findings in this report. They provide a plan of action to equitably and substantially support young families in Santa Clara County. If implemented, these recommendations can create a multi-generational impact for families and lay the groundwork for all parents in the county to thrive.

1. EXPAND CHILD CARE SUBSIDY ELIGIBILITY TO INCLUDE PARAMETERS AROUND AGE, SPECIFICALLY FOR PARENTS UNDER THE AGE OF 18

Current federal and state age eligibility requirements do not allow most parents under 18 to independently qualify for subsidized child care. Instead, the parent of the minor is seen as the qualifying individual. However, the majority of mothers under the age of 18 who financially support themselves are unlikely to make above minimum wage. Given that the average wage in SCC is \$16.40 an hour, these individuals would be considered low-income by county metrics and, as a result, would otherwise qualify for CalFresh (Food Stamps), Medi-Cal, and CalWorks (City of Santa Clara, Business Services). Low-income mothers under the age of 18 who do not live/reside in the home of their own parents are at a particular disadvantage. In order to expand child care access to low-income parents under 18, SCC should develop and implement special eligibility guidelines regardless of whether the under-18 parent is living with their own parents.

The establishment of special eligibility guidelines to include those under 18 should consider:

- Expanding guidelines to reflect those used by WIC, which have more flexible eligibility and broader timeframes for renewal.
- Ensuring that the language used in the guidelines is stigma-free, culturally responsive, and easily understood across multiple audiences, ages, and identity groups.
- Developing a countywide waiver that allows parents who are under the age of 18 to qualify as financially independent, and not have to obtain permission from their own parents.
- Providing alternate avenues for parents under 18 to use their own financial information for eligibility.

2. INCREASE FUNDING FOR CHILDCARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR YOUNG MOMS

SCC child care needs systematic changes, as highlighted by young moms in the findings. Many subsidized child care programs require direct referrals through the county to expedite the process, which perpetuates inequalities. Without these referrals, young parents can wait up to more than a

year. Even after getting off a waiting list, young moms face additional barriers, including a limited choice of providers and provider availability.

Many young parents in SCC report low confidence in the options available to them and uneasiness about the safety of their children. To address these concerns, the county should:

- Push for increased federal funding for subsidized programs such as Head Start, Go Kids, Kidango, and Choices for Children. This would allow families on the waitlist to be eligible for assistance.
- Reserve 800 subsidized spots through Choices for Children and Go Kids for young parents between the ages of 12–26, regionally prioritizing East San Jose and South Santa Clara County, where a higher percentage of low-income young parents of color reside (Santa Clara County...).
- Issue a uniform, clear, and transparent selection process for subsidized child care spots for all county agencies that interact with child care services should adhere to and be aware of.
- Adapt the [Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool \(VI-SPDAT\)](#) as a primary assessment to determine eligibility for child care referrals with a supplementary form with up to five questions on child care.
- Invest in adequately funding county-provided child care infrastructure to maintain facilities, make necessary repairs, and address unsafe conditions for children.

3. RESEARCH, DEVELOP, AND IMPLEMENT A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME (UBI) PILOT THAT WILL ALLOW YOUNG MOMS TO ACCESS THE CHILD CARE OF THEIR CHOICE.

Young mothers in Santa Clara County experienced challenges both acquiring and covering the costs of a trusted child care provider. The process and wait times for mothers given referrals and getting on waiting lists for subsidized child care programs does not address the financial support needed to cover the temporary costs that come with choosing an alternative trusted child care provider (ie., relatives, friends, etc.). The When Young Moms Thrive Initiative is one of few pilot programs in SCC¹ that offers young mothers² access to direct funds to cover their child care-related costs. Recipients used funds for food and child care providers of their choice.

Adopting a more expansive government-funded guaranteed income for young mothers to cover the costs of child care of their choice, the County should:

- Research and identify a structure for the UBI program while considering the limitations on resources, capacity, and funds for the project.
- Provide an unrestricted universal child care UBI payment for 100 young mothers, ages 12–

¹ Models of universal basic income have been implemented more recently in the County. Santa Clara County has implemented a model of an unrestricted income pilot program supporting young adults transitioning out of foster care with \$1,000 in monthly payments (County of Santa Clara). These models have also demonstrated individual success stories from recipients who were able to utilize the stipends to cover the costs of their housing which in turn allowed individuals to focus their attention on other financial or professional goals (ibid).

² Research Fellows were recipients of \$250 in monthly payments for child care related costs for the duration of their fellowship (10 months)

26, residing in Santa Clara County with monthly payments of \$1,728 – \$2,200 based on annual child care costs for infants and toddlers (Population Reference Bureau).

- Push for State or Federal ask, (SCC pilot this) Commitment to support the UBI program.
 - This unrestricted income will cover the costs of chosen trusted child care providers, food and formula, diapers, educational materials, transportation, and associated costs that the provider of care needs for a happy and healthy child.
 - Serve as a pilot county for a State or Federally funded UBI program, the issued payments should reflect the cost of child care in the County that will implement and distribute the UBI income to the program participants.

4. MANDATE ANNUAL PAID TRAINING ON STIGMA-FREE SERVICE DELIVERY FOR ALL RESOURCE PROVIDING AGENCIES INCLUDING CHILD CARE PROVIDERS SERVING YOUNG PARENTS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 12 - 26.

There is currently no formalized process for child care providers to understand how implicit bias and stigma impact how they deliver child care services. In addition, there are too few opportunities for young parents to have their voices and experiences centered in adapting services to be responsive to their experiences and needs. To address these problems, SCC should:

- Mandate paid training for child care providers, to be led by young parents and administered by the County Office of Education and First 5 Santa Clara County.
- Allocate an initial amount of \$50,000, through the County Board of Supervisors, to develop a standard training for facilitators to use and an annual recurring \$30,000 in the county budget for at least 5 consultants to provide this training.
 - Consultants hired to lead this should be former or current young moms with lived experiences navigating stigma and barriers. This hiring process for consultants can be done through a county vendor or an RFP process.

5. PROVIDE YOUNG MOMS WITH INCREASED EMPLOYMENT AND VOCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

When young parents have access to upward financial mobility, their children and broader family also benefit, showing the multi-generational benefits of programs that can break the cycle of poverty. While there are currently programs in the county that provide workforce development support, many are not attuned to the needs of or, visibly promoted to young parents. This initiative itself is an employment opportunity catered to the needs of young parents³ by providing competitive benefits such as childcare stipends, paid time off, sick days, travel reimbursement, and healing and restoration workshops. Another example of an affirming employment opportunity model in SCC is the YWCA Golden Gate Silicon Valleys' childcare department's 6 month paid training program for young parents, which includes subsidized child care as a benefit. Programs like this that meet the self-determined needs of young mothers should be invested in.

³ Another example of an affirming employment opportunity model in SCC is the YWCA Golden Gate Silicon Valleys' child care department's 6-month paid training program for young parents, which includes subsidized child care as a benefit.

Young moms and their families in SCC expressed employment loss/ job insecurity, mental health issues, and that federal and social service assistance were even more difficult to receive as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To support access to economic and educational opportunities, SCC should consider:

- Providing incentives for nonprofits providing economic and educational opportunities to also include subsidized child care.
- Partnering with nonprofits in SCC to incorporate job opportunities and vocational trainings in their job center and website to increase the visibility of employment opportunities to young moms.
 - These job opportunities should include at least three options for systems-impacted youth including formerly incarcerated youth and those on probation.
- Developing a countywide workforce program, modeled off WYMT Initiative and the YWCA paid training program, that is attuned to the needs of system-impacted young moms⁴.
 - This should include competitive benefits such as: child care stipend, medical, dental, vision, holiday pay, paid time off, paid sick days, 401k or another form of savings.

Santa Clara County must implement solutions to the barriers young parents face in accessing child care and mitigate the severe financial circumstances that young families experience. Implementing the recommendations outlined above, which were informed and designed by those who directly experience the limitations of current policies, would positively impact all families in the county and have a positive multi-generational impact.

⁴ We identified 16 existing programs for systems-impacted girls through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Of those 16, only 2 attune specifically to young mothers and those are only identified as “promising” based on OJJDP, but neither program attends to the specific needs expressed by young mothers related to employment here.

LETTER TO OUR MAMAS



LET ME START THIS LETTER BY TELLING YOU A LITTLE ABOUT WHEN YOUNG MOMS THRIVE.

We are a group of Black, Brown, POC women who stood up and took back the power that was once taken away from our ancestors. We come from various backgrounds, with different stories and identities. Some of us are first-generation with roots back in Mexico. We come from single-parent households. We are a representation that motherhood comes at any age and that there is no guidebook that tells you how to be a mother. We are the ones who will break generational curses and turn the hurt into hustle for our babies.

We have powerful voice as women and People of Color. Systems, society, and the world try to shut us down and blame us for our situations when in reality, the odds are against us. But we know that our children are the future, and they deserve to dream big and envision a world where there is no hatred for being themselves, and where they are free to become anything they want to be.

Over the course of this 10-month project, we, as a community of first-time parents and expecting mothers, came together to share stories and experiences, and learn from one another. We created bonds and chosen-families for our little ones. When Young Moms Thrive gave us the opportunity to build a safe and supportive environment to speak about issues that are often brushed off.

I hope that this is a reminder for all young mothers that we are much more than “just another young mom.” **We are daughters, sisters, and friends, and most importantly, we are human beings who are powerful and insightful. I want you to imagine a world where you could be anything you wanted to be.** Picture yourself being a teacher, traveling, and becoming the first president who is a woman. Now I want you to tell yourself, “I can, and I will be that,” because you are more than capable, and you have it in you.

“Quisieron enterrarnos, pero se les olvido que somos semillas,” “They tried to bury us, they didn’t know we were seeds.” You are the seed that will bloom and expand, you will plant your wisdom on this world, and your little ones will take over to follow in your footsteps. When Young Moms Thrive, We ALL Do.

Joycelyn Aguilar

YWFC LEAD RESEARCH FELLOW

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This team provided invaluable analysis around the creation and formulation of this report. They exchanged countless conversations, emails, and phone calls amongst themselves and various stakeholders to share the insight they hold as mothers, advocates, and allies working in the field of social justice to integrate into this report.

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