

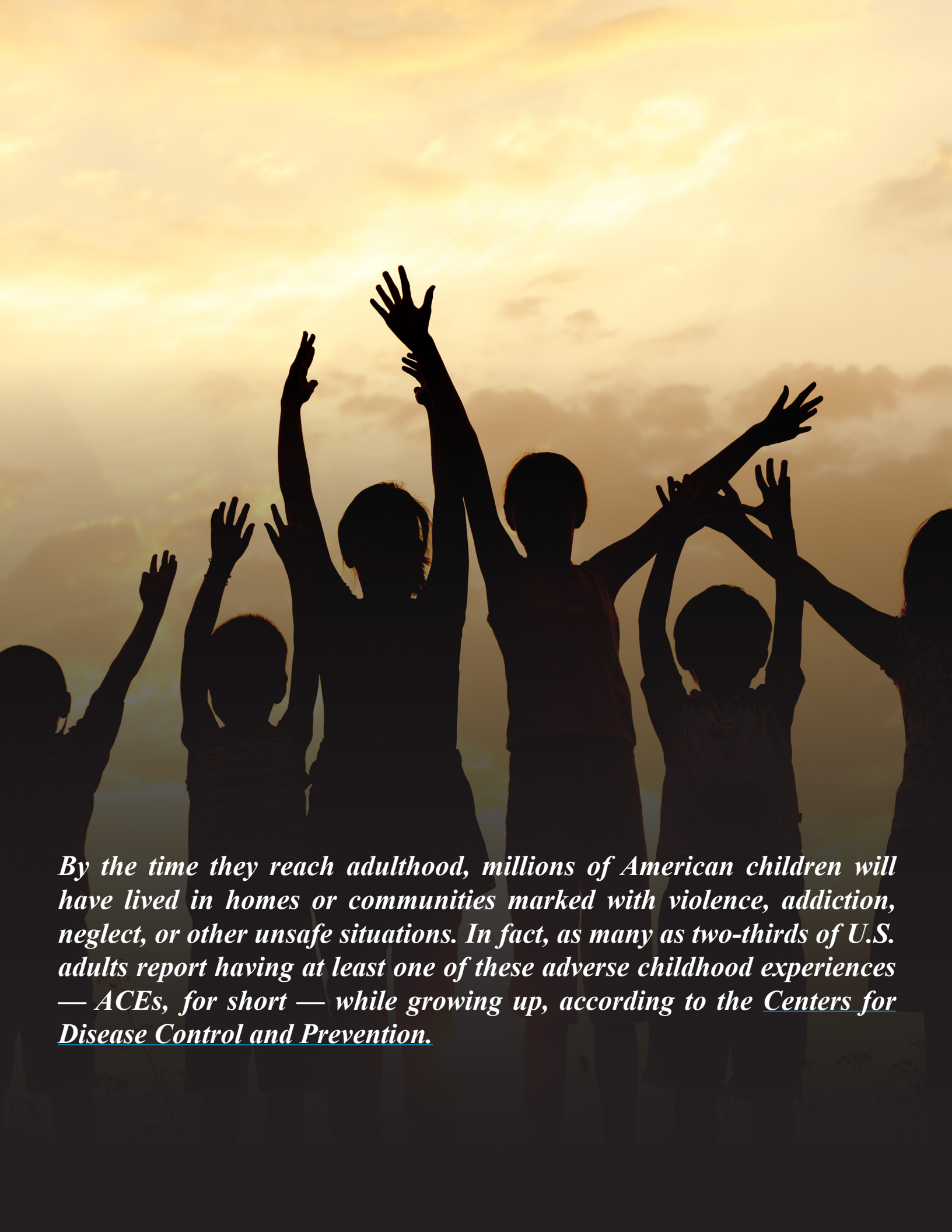


# Changing the story: How communities can empower young people and build pathways from adversity

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 **SAFETY+JUSTICE  
CHALLENGE**  
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*By the time they reach adulthood, millions of American children will have lived in homes or communities marked with violence, addiction, neglect, or other unsafe situations. In fact, as many as two-thirds of U.S. adults report having at least one of these adverse childhood experiences — ACEs, for short — while growing up, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).*

## THE ENVIRONMENTS IN WHICH WE'RE RAISED DON'T DEFINE US, BUT THEY CAN HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON OUR CHILDHOODS — AND IN MANY CASES, THE REST OF OUR LIVES.

In 2024, the National Center for Victims of Crime gathered a group of people with lived experience in the criminal justice system. These experts are people who have overcome great challenges in their personal lives and now work tirelessly to advocate for change and to keep vulnerable young people from becoming incarcerated. Our staff asked these experts what could have helped them when they were children and what could make an impact on today's children. A common theme quickly arose from their answers: the urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally grounded community resources; credible mentorship rooted in lived experience; and schools equipped not only to identify students facing adversity but to respond with relational support, not punishment.



It was also clear from their answers that what isn't working is business as usual.

The criminal justice system is designed primarily to punish, rather than rehabilitate, and does not create safer communities in the long run. In fact, this approach often perpetuates cycles of harm, especially when it ignores that many incarcerated individuals are themselves victims of trauma, abuse, and neglect, often beginning in early childhood. By focusing solely on punishment, the system overlooks the root causes of behavior and misses key opportunities for healing and transformation. This is particularly harmful to young people, whose brains and identities are still developing. Incarceration without support or intervention not only damages their future prospects but also increases the likelihood of reoffending. A truly effective justice system must prioritize rehabilitation, restorative practices, and trauma-informed care, especially for youth, if we hope to build safer, healthier, and more equitable communities.



*“We need a world where we humanize, not criminalize. The burden of responsibility is on the informed. Let’s be intentional about helping instead of punishing.” – Tamika Paige*

While the phrase “hurt people hurt people” can be true in some instances, it is important to understand that not all people who experience harm are predisposed to causing harm themselves. However, exposure from an early age to harmful experiences, with few viable options for safer and more positive alternatives, can stack the deck against a child. Untreated trauma combined with a lack of viable pathways to safety, stability, and connection often leads children into survival-based choices that society later criminalizes. With limited examples of success through education, entrepreneurship, or civic leadership, illegal activity may appear to be the only visible and attainable route to financial stability or respect. Sadly, institutional failures and systemic bias, particularly against youth of color, often result in these children being disciplined or criminalized rather than supported.

A child who grows up in a home where family members steal goods or engage in sex work, for example, might consider such activities to be normal and emulate them. Similarly, a child from a home lacking resources or positive mentor figures may see a neighborhood drug dealer as successful and financially secure, inspiring them to pursue a similar path to obtain basic needs and a sense of security. That can be especially true, as one of our experts pointed out, when authority figures at traditional institutions, such as teachers or coaches at school, push them away instead of nurturing their needs.

With the help of our group of experts, we’ve gathered some practical suggestions for communities across the United States to consider. Empowering young people who are at risk — or already involved in, through no fault of their own — harmful or illegal lifestyles can create positive trajectories for their lives and safer communities.

This report would not be possible without the contributions of Tanisha Murden, Fernando Smith, and Tamika Paige. We thank them for sharing their expertise with us and contributing invaluable insights to the conversation about how to create safer communities for all.



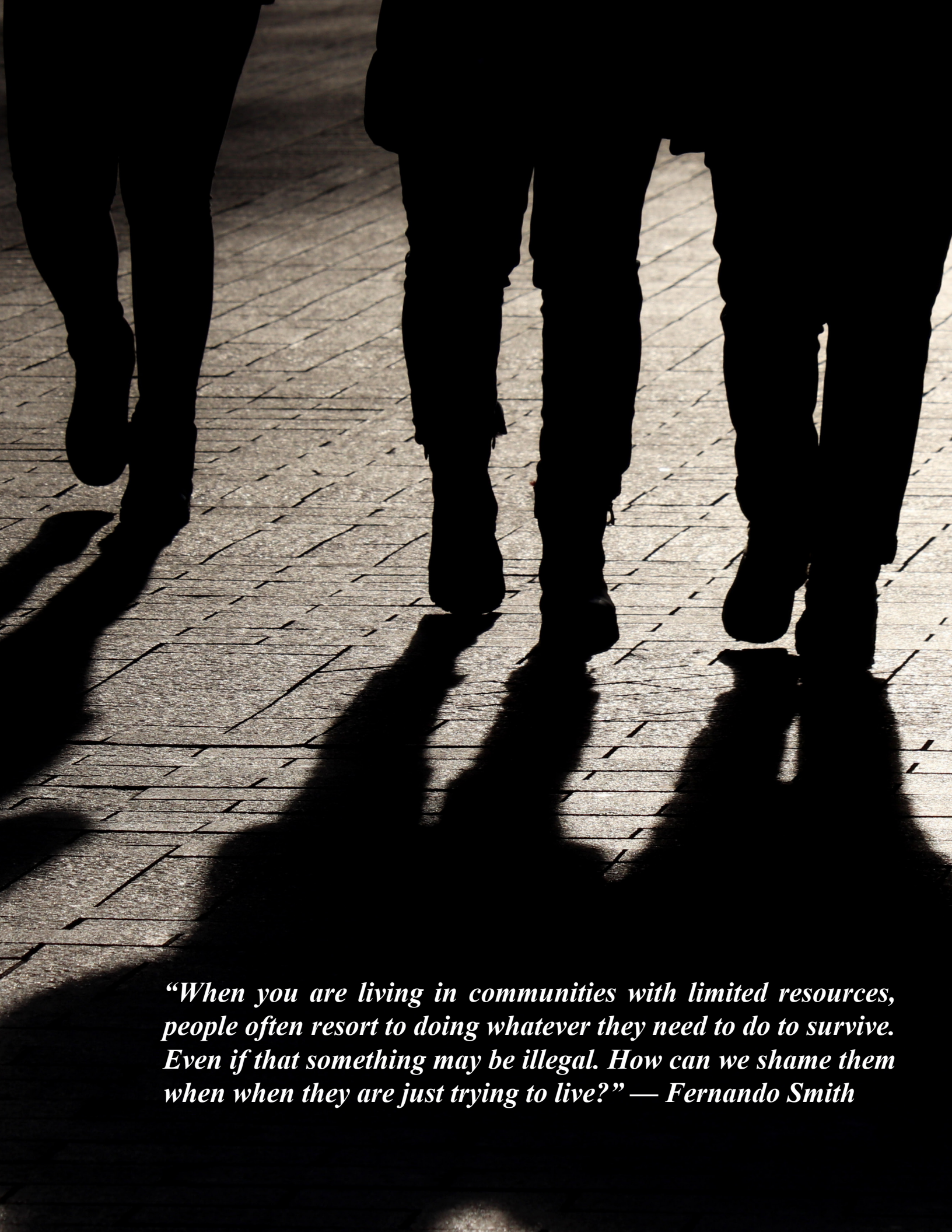
## THE CRIMINALIZATION OF YOUTH SURVIVORS

### The environments we grow up in shape us—often far into adulthood.

It's nearly universally accepted that the environment someone is raised in can affect their later life. This can be seen through the presence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their impact on adult mental, emotional, and physical health. Young people who are incarcerated have much higher rates of ACEs (97%) than the general public (61%), and about 50% of juvenile offenders have experienced four or more ACEs<sup>1</sup>. When experts in our working group discussed factors that could lead to young people intentionally or inadvertently participating in criminal activity, a recurrent underlying issue was scarcity in communities. Young people may feel like they have to engage in behaviors that they otherwise wouldn't to support their families, or they may model their behavior after others in the community who are making money in illegal ways.

Our group also discussed the normalization of such behaviors within their communities. One member shared that their sisters, while they were teenagers, were frequently involved with adult men, and that other adults in the family ignored the abuse they were experiencing. Participants discussed that while they believed that the members of their family should've put a stop to this and other adverse experiences, they were also survivors of the same types of issues; the cycle continued with their children. Rather than criminalizing responses to poverty, trauma, and abandonment, communities must invest in healing, mentorship, and economic justice — especially for youth navigating chronic adversity.





*“When you are living in communities with limited resources, people often resort to doing whatever they need to do to survive. Even if that something may be illegal. How can we shame them when when they are just trying to live?” — Fernando Smith*



## **YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATIONS SURROUNDING THEIR FUTURES AND WELL-BEING.**

NCVC has long advocated for the voices of people with lived experience to be involved in every step of the reform process — and that includes people who were incarcerated as minors. Their perspectives are essential to creating systems that truly reflect the needs, realities, and potential of those most impacted. When we include young people in conversations about their futures, we not only validate their experiences but also empower them to take ownership of their lives and choices. Young people should be given the opportunity to make their own positive decisions with support from role models and mentors who are there to provide guidance.

*“Before we can advocate for or engage with youth, we must build trust and create safety: Acceptance plus listening minus judgment equals a safe space. This gives us a baseline as we navigate difficult conversations with ACEs.” — Tamika Paige*

Our working group discussed the idea of positive mentors at length and felt mentors could be especially impactful for young people who have no role models in their homes or neighborhoods. Mentors can also help young people reframe their beliefs around systems and how those systems can be helpful. Many young people have negative experiences with schools, law enforcement agencies, and other social services. Others may have seen their families mistreated by these systems. Mentors who uplift, support, and empower young people can help mitigate some of these adverse experiences.

*“When we include the voices of the young with lived experiences, we not only honor their journeys, we amplify their impact. As a servant of my community, it may not be my fault, but it is my responsibility.” — Tamika Paige*

**In order to better understand the reasoning behind young people becoming incarcerated, we need to address the “school-to-prison pipeline.”**

The school-to-prison pipeline describes policies and practices that disproportionately push children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, out of schools and into the criminal justice system<sup>2</sup>. Zero-tolerance policies that impose harsh punishments regardless of individual circumstances have led to increased school suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement referrals. During the 2021-22 school year, approximately 2.4 million K-12 students received an out-of-school suspension, and 220,000 students were referred to law enforcement, with 17% of those referrals resulting in school-related arrests<sup>3</sup>. Data has also shown that students of color and students with disabilities experience disproportionate rates of suspensions, expulsions, law enforcement referrals, and arrests.

*“The only safety net I had was school and the streets, because at home, it wasn’t safe for me... It’s a generational behavior and a generational curse, and we are still living it until we come to the realization that enough is enough.” – Tanisha Murden*

To effectively address the school-to-prison pipeline, we must first understand each child’s unique experience within their community. For many young people, a safe school environment can play an important role in positive outcomes, particularly when home life is unstable or unsafe. Alternatively, when children experience harm or exclusion from the classroom, they experience increased rates of dropout, delinquent behaviors, victimization, and arrest<sup>4</sup>. One of our contributors, Fernando Smith, shared that he once loved going to school until a teacher harmed him. That betrayal shifted his perception of school from a place of safety to a source of pain. With no support at home and no refuge at school, his path led to incarceration. His story underscores a broader truth: When institutions meant to support youth instead alienate or criminalize them, the consequences can be devastating.



## YOUTH NEED SPECIFIC PROGRAMMING, TAILORED TO THEIR UNIQUE NEEDS, WHEN REENTERING COMMUNITIES AFTER INCARCERATION.

Given what we know about the intersection of ACEs and youth incarceration, programs that address ACEs can positively contribute to disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. Our group discussed the importance of holistic approaches that meet the individual needs of young people as they transition from incarceration back into the community. Youth reentry programs are designed to reduce the likelihood of young people reoffending after release. Typically, these programs focus on addressing common challenges of reentry, such as safe and stable housing, employment, and accessing healthcare or mental health services through case management, mentoring, and counseling.

In 2008, the Second Chance Act was passed in response to the growing incarceration population and the need for new approaches for reentry. It authorized federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide reentry services and programs<sup>5</sup>. These grants fund a wide range of initiatives, including comprehensive reentry planning, education, counseling, needs assessment, screening for risk of reoffending, coordination of community-based services, and assistance with housing, mental health, and substance use treatment and victim support. Programs funded by the Second Chance Act between 2009-2015 have helped over 24,000 young people<sup>6</sup>.

There are a number of successful youth reentry programs that are making a difference in their community. For instance, the [Fresh Lifelines for Youth \(FLY\) Reentry Program](#), which provides law-related education, case management, and peer socialization to young people transitioning from incarceration, has seen an 80% reduction in participants' justice-system involvement, 75% increased educational attainment, and over 75% increased social-emotional skills. Similarly, young people who have participated in [Young Women Free](#) mentorship, training, and employment programs are 85% less likely to be incarcerated again, and up to 90% of participants maintain employment and reach their educational goals. The [Washington state Department of Children, Youth and Families Juvenile Rehabilitation Program](#) recognizes the reality that many incarcerated young people have experienced violence, neglect, trauma, and addiction prior to their involvement in the criminal justice system. The department uses a comprehensive approach that includes treatment for substance use, mental health, and behavioral health as well as educational and vocational programs, including financial literacy and parenting classes.

There are many other youth reentry programs, but these examples help demonstrate the importance of supportive services in helping young people successfully reintegrate into their communities and prevent future incarceration.

*“There should be a continuity of care — not just a name on a piece of paper.” — Fernando Smith*

## **SURVIVORS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES NEED TO BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF ANY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TRANSFORMING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.**

As with any implementation of new programming and resources that we advocate for at NCVC, we firmly believe that survivors need to not only have a seat at the table, but also need to be driving changes by sharing their experiences with the criminal justice system. This meaningful involvement in justice system change not only validates the experiences of survivors as worthy of being listened to but also increases the likelihood that the changes will be useful for communities.

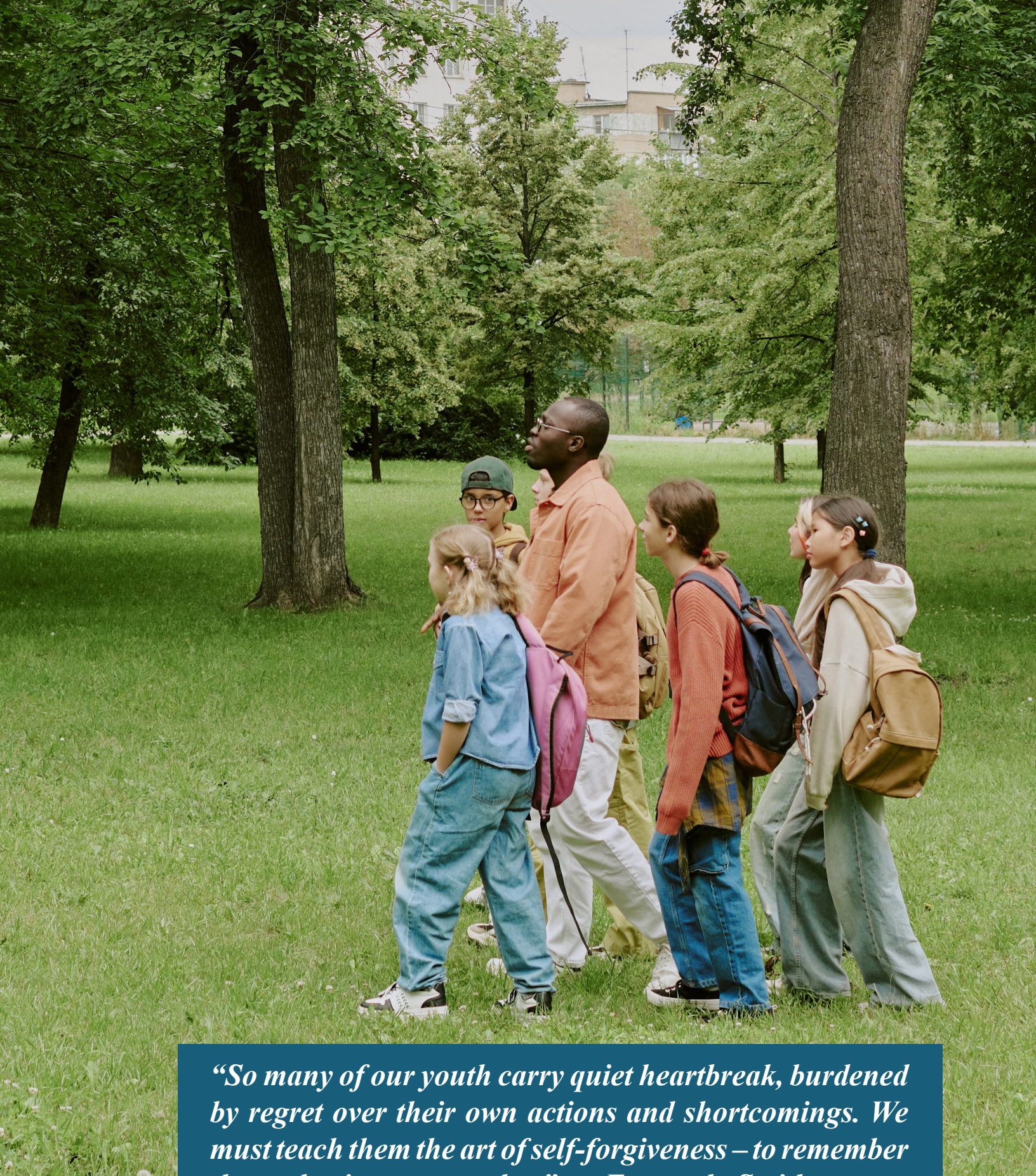
As mentioned throughout this report, many young people feel disengaged and apathetic toward systems that have historically failed, criminalized, or ignored them and their families. When young survivors feel unsafe or unheard, they are unlikely to participate in or trust processes that claim to serve them.

Engaging survivors starts with building trust. Individuals with experience in the justice system may feel like their opinions and perspectives are often ignored or that they are only useful when sharing the worst moments of their lives. We encourage both systems-based and community groups to engage authentically with survivors by building relationships and creating open and transparent environments. This requires moving beyond transactional interactions and toward a culture of shared power and mutual respect.

Only when survivors feel genuinely supported and valued, not used or tokenized, can we begin to build systems that truly heal, empower, and transform.

*“Building trust is showing up, listening, understanding and being honest.” – Tanisha Murden*





*“So many of our youth carry quiet heartbreak, burdened by regret over their own actions and shortcomings. We must teach them the art of self-forgiveness – to remember that today is not yesterday.” — Fernando Smith*

## A FINAL NOTE

In closing, it's clear that we must bolster community services and rework aspects of the criminal justice system to support children who would benefit more from support than punishment alone. Though people who cause harm should be held accountable, it is also beneficial to ensure access to resources, mentors, and safe spaces that help them thrive, not just survive. By recognizing when young people need help, by actively listening to them, believing in their potential, and offering them consistent, trauma-informed alternatives, we can prevent harm before it occurs. This means investing not only in intervention but also in prevention: mentorship programs, restorative practices in schools, youth employment opportunities, accessible mental health services, and safe outlets for creativity and growth.

We know this to be true of adults who transition out of incarceration: Formerly incarcerated people who are given the resources to succeed outside of prison are more likely to avoid reoffending. The same is true for the youngest among us. It should be incumbent upon all of our communities to support young people who are facing adversity that could result in dangerous or harmful lifestyles. By recognizing when young people need help — by listening to them and genuinely supporting them, and offering them alternatives — lives and entire communities can be changed for the better.

Our shared responsibility is to make sure every young person knows that they matter, that they are not alone, and that their future is not defined by their past or by the conditions they were born into. That's how real, lasting change begins.

*“Give yourself grace. You can’t control everything. You feel the way you feel because you think the way you think.”*

*– Tanisha Murden*



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