Knowledge is power that can be wielded to advance and demand transformative changes in society, communities, systems, and more. Sadly, the history of this country is marked by the deeply embedded oppression and marginalization of specific groups of people – most notably girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people, specifically those of color – resulting in their invisibility and the erasure of their needs, potential, and contributions. Given this reality, addressing the significant gaps in the availability and use of intersectional data about girls and gender-expansive young people is critical if we are to truly transform society by shifting existing deficit, gendered, and biased narratives, informing current and future policies, and reimagining systems. Most importantly, those most impacted must not only be centered in the gathering of data but must be the leaders and researchers guiding, implementing, and analyzing the findings. The following information summarizes our collaborative and participatory action research efforts to date.

IN SOLIDARITY CONVERSATIONS: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

In February - March of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality in the United States. The pandemic and resulting economic crisis, along with the recent protests and uprisings ignited by ongoing police brutality and systemic racism in the United States have created multiple layers of stress, unrest, and chaos. While all of this has caused a tremendous shift and uncertainty for our nation as a whole, these crises uniquely and disproportionately impact communities of color and their families, exacerbating existing oppressions and injustices while further pushing them to the margins.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis, as well as the protests and uprisings ignited by ongoing police brutality and systemic racism in the United States, National Crittenton (Crittenton) and the National Collaborative of Young Women’s Initiatives (National YWI) organized 16 virtual, regional and Tribal In Solidarity Conversations led by young women and gender-expansive young people of color. From May to October 2020, over 400 girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color participated in the In Solidarity Conversations. The majority of participants identified as “she/her/ hers” (87.9%) with the remaining identifying as “they/them” (2.6%), “she/her/hers, they/them” (2.5%), “she/her/hers, he/him/his” (1.1), “he/him/his” (1.1%) and “she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them” (1.1%). Twenty-seven (4.7%) participants did not identify their pronouns. Participants came from a total of 39 states with the five largest groups of young people coming from Texas (11.6%), California (7.4%), Tennessee (6.5%), Ohio (6.1%) and Florida (5.4%). The remaining states each accounted for between .2% to 4.9% of participants. Ages of participants ranged from 13 - 26, with just over half being between the ages of 13 - 18 (55.8%). Finally, Black/African American young people represented more than half of all participants (51.8%), while Latina/Latino (16.2%), Asian/Asian American (8.2%), Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native (3.2%), Pacific Islander/Polynesian/Native Hawaiian (.7%), Middle Eastern/Arab American (.5%), Puerto Rican (.2%) and bi/multi-racial (9.4%) young people represented a smaller percentage of participants.

Beyond participating in conversations, a group of 20 young women/young folx (In Solidarity fellows) played a deeper role in co-leading this work; crafting overall strategy and format for the virtual series and working on policy and advocacy processes in Phase II.

Currently fellows are analyzing the data and content across all of the conversations to determine common themes and trends. These common themes and trends will be translated into a list of critical needs with recommended policy and/or practice responses. This information will be cross-walked with the Girls @ the Margin National Alliance, National Agenda for Black Girls, and other parallel policy and advocacy efforts, and with national legislation such as the Pushout Act. Outcomes will include a final report and organizing strategies identified by youth leaders. The final report will be available in February 2021. This project is supported in part by the Ms. Foundation for Women and a Love is Healing Grant from Grantmakers for Girls of Color.

YOUNG PARENTS SPEAK OUT: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

In 2018, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation the eight members of the Young Parent Advisory Committee (YPAC) from Montana, New York, New Mexico, Los Angeles, Bay Area -California, and Mississippi engaged in participatory action research with the goals of: determining key areas of policy and program needs, identifying gaps in current young parent-led advocacy efforts, and determining interest/need for more young parent-led advocacy. YPAC crafted and implemented a research approach that included listening sessions, individual interviews, and an online survey with custodial young parents across the country. A total of 65 racially/ethnically diverse current and former young parents, who had children at age 17 or younger and up to 23 years of age, participated. Outcomes from this research effort include a strategy to engage young parents, organizational leaders, and advocates in a national organizing and mobilization effort, and building the Justice for Young Families National Network.

Note: Findings and recommendations from this research effort can be found in two reports, Young Parents Speak Out: Barriers, Bias, and Broken Systems and Time for a Change: Supporting Young Families at NationalCrittenton.org.
In 2018, National Crittenton conducted a descriptive study of Girls Courts. These specialty courts were designed to address the needs of girls chronically involved in the juvenile justice system who often have histories of extensive trauma and failed service delivery by multiple systems (i.e., child welfare, education, mental health, etc.). While these courts were founded to specifically address the gender-specific needs of girls, little is known about the courts, their goals, theory of change, structure, and functioning — especially in comparison to other youth specialty courts. Site visits were conducted at three “girls courts” located in Ohio, Florida, and California and over 50 interviews were conducted with court personnel, community-based organizations, service providers, and impacted girls and their families about their perceptions of goals, successes, and failures of these specialty courts.

The first descriptive papers/reports are expected in early 2021.

CRITTENTON ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES STUDIES

National Crittenton and the Crittenton family of agencies periodically collect information about exposure to adversities during childhood among youth supported by the agencies. The administration of the survey mirrors that of the CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (1998) which is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse, neglect, and household challenges along with the impacts these have on later-life health and well-being. The goals of the Crittenton ACE studies have been to:

1) create a profile of the impact of childhood adversities among youth served by the agencies,
2) help inform supports and services, and
3) use the findings to educate the community and policymakers at the local, state, and national levels about the role of childhood adversities in the lives of youth living at the social, economic, and political margins.

The first administration was conducted in 2011 in a total of 18 states and included demographic questions and the 10 item ACE survey. Usable responses totaled 1,350: 916 females and 435 males. Based on findings from this administration, From Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) to Success for Young Mother Led Families was released in October 2012 at an event on Capitol Hill. Additional briefs were also created for girls in the juvenile justice system and those in residential care. In 2014 for the second ACE administration, well-being questions in the areas of stress, coping and connectedness were added to the survey. A total of 1,015 individuals were surveyed, including 745 females and 270 males. The survey was also completed for 109 children whose mothers were receiving support from Crittenton agencies and took the survey for them — allowing for a multigenerational analysis of ACEs. Beyond ACE was released in 2015 during an event on Capitol Hill focused on the needs of girls and gender-expansive young people involved in multiple systems.

Findings from both of the ACE administrations show that youth receiving services from Crittenton agencies have cumulative ACE scores significantly higher than those reported in the original ACE study and that girls and gender-expansive young people report a higher prevalence of exposure across all 10 adversity categories compared to boys. National Crittenton is currently conducting a third administration of the ACE. A finding report on this data will be available in 2021.

Reports on the findings from previous administrations can be found at NationalCrittenton.org.

VIEWS FROM THE STATES FIELD SCAN

In 2018-2019, National Crittenton conducted a national field scan of state level actors working in the youth delinquency system to assess the field’s understanding of the challenges faced by system actors charged with addressing the needs of system-involved cis, trans, and gender-expansive girls and young women. Information was gathered from state representatives in 35 states including Juvenile Justice Specialists and youth justice state representatives. In all cases, open-ended interviews were conducted by phone or email about the drivers leading girls into the deep end of their youth justice systems and the state of their continuum of community-based supports and services for girls.

The lack of available information about girls and young women is an ongoing challenge. National Crittenton is a hub for research and resources focused on girls and gender-expansive young people, producing original research (samples of which are summarized above) and aggregating the best and latest information from the field. We make this information available to partner organizations, advocates, stakeholders, and the public at NationalCrittenton.org.