

## Children with incarcerated parents across the globe: Challenges and flourishing in five countries

Julie Poehlmann<sup>a</sup>, Lorna Brookes<sup>b</sup>, Liz Gordon<sup>c</sup>, Kyoung Hyeon Park<sup>d</sup>, Francis Ssuubi<sup>e</sup>, Koen Sevenants<sup>f</sup>, Rodrigo J. Carcedo González<sup>g,\*</sup>, Chandni Anandha Krishnan<sup>a</sup>, Orhan Kahya<sup>h</sup>, Kaitlyn Pritzl<sup>a</sup>, Nancy Loucks<sup>i</sup>, Luciano Cadoni<sup>j</sup>, Ji Sun Lee<sup>k</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States

<sup>b</sup> Time-Matters, Liverpool John Moores University, England, UK

<sup>c</sup> Pillars, New Zealand

<sup>d</sup> Seum, the Republic of Korea

<sup>e</sup> Wells of Hope, Uganda

<sup>f</sup> Families of Children and Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents, Universidad de Salamanca, España, Spain

<sup>g</sup> Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, University of Salamanca, Spain

<sup>h</sup> Department of Educational Sciences, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Türkiye

<sup>i</sup> Families Outside, and Centre for Law, Crime & Justice, University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK

<sup>j</sup> Protection of the Rights of the Child, Church World Service, Argentina

<sup>k</sup> Department of Social Welfare, Ewha Woman's University, Seoul, the Republic of Korea

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Coping  
Global  
Parental imprisonment  
Parental incarceration  
International  
Support  
Youth

### ABSTRACT

The International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents (INCCIP), a global nonprofit organization, envisions the well-being of children with incarcerated parents addressed at all societal levels in all countries and has a mission to collaborate with and support diverse organisations and individuals to promote the well-being of affected children more effectively, especially as guided by youth voices. Led by INCCIP and nonprofit organizations within five countries, the current study sought to document coping, strengths, and flourishing through interviews with 57 youths with incarcerated parents in New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, Uganda, and England. After the interviews were transcribed and translated into English, thematic analysis was used to code children's reactions to parental incarceration and how they coped with the experience. Themes coded about challenges following parental incarceration were initial emotional distress, health and mental health impacts, family stress and role changes, school and social impacts, and experiences of stigma and shame. Themes coded about coping, strengths, and flourishing included support from relationships; developing aspirations; recognition of personal growth; resistance to negative expectations; and the role of spirituality in coping. Common themes were identified across countries, with some country-specific nuances. Results highlight the importance of listening to youth voices, supporting youth at multiple contextual levels, and recognizing personal strengths and growth when a parent is incarcerated.

### 1. Introduction

More than 22 million children worldwide experience the imprisonment of a parent (INCCIP, 2019). Parental incarceration is internationally recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) (e.g., Massetti et al., 2020), with more ACEs associated with elevated risks to health

(Hughes et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2017), mental health (Sahle et al., 2022), and academic outcomes (Qu et al., 2024) in youth and adults. Yet, when a parent is incarcerated, documenting elevated risk is only part of the story. Calls for a more positive focus on children with incarcerated parents and their families have increased (Arditti & Johnson, 2022), though studies documenting strengths in this

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [japoehlmann@wisc.edu](mailto:japoehlmann@wisc.edu) (J. Poehlmann), [L.M.Brookes@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:L.M.Brookes@ljmu.ac.uk) (L. Brookes), [khjoyjoy@naver.com](mailto:khjoyjoy@naver.com) (K.H. Park), [francis@ssuubi.com](mailto:francis@ssuubi.com) (F. Ssuubi), [rcarcedo@usal.es](mailto:rcarcedo@usal.es) (R.J. Carcedo González), [anandhakrish@wisc.edu](mailto:anandhakrish@wisc.edu) (C.A. Krishnan), [orhankahya@mu.edu.tr](mailto:orhankahya@mu.edu.tr) (O. Kahya), [kepritzl@wisc.edu](mailto:kepritzl@wisc.edu) (K. Pritzl), [Nancy.Loucks@familiesoutside.org.uk](mailto:Nancy.Loucks@familiesoutside.org.uk) (N. Loucks), [lcadoni@cwsglobal.org](mailto:lcadoni@cwsglobal.org) (L. Cadoni), [ezsun@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:ezsun@ewha.ac.kr) (J.S. Lee).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.109104>

Received 13 February 2026; Received in revised form 6 June 2026; Accepted 8 June 2026

Available online 10 June 2026

0190-7409/© 2026 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

population have only recently emerged (e.g., Gatewood et al., 2025). Research has also highlighted the importance of including the voices of children with incarcerated parents (Benninger et al., 2023), especially when studying coping or flourishing. Given these factors, the primary goal of the present study was to document youth perspectives on their own coping, strengths, and flourishing following parental imprisonment in five countries that have been underrepresented in international research on this population. To provide a context for our focus on strengths, we also document some of the challenges experienced by youth following parental incarceration.

In a recent qualitative scoping review highlighting international youth voices in the context of parental incarceration, Zhang and Flynn (2025) reviewed studies that had collected data directly from children or adults who had, as a child, experienced parental incarceration. The review included 59 articles (from 41 studies) published since 1978, with sample sizes ranging from 5 to 161, with a total of 905 individuals. The articles originated mostly from the U.S. ( $n = 22$ ) and Europe ( $n = 20$ ), including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Turkey, the Netherlands, Germany, Romania, and Sweden, with smaller numbers of studies originating from Asia ( $n = 9$ , including Singapore, China, India, Israel, and Palestine), Australia ( $n = 6$ ), and Africa ( $n = 2$ , including Uganda and Ghana). Results indicated that individuals with lived experience of parental incarceration reported various challenges reflecting needs at multiple levels, including the need to share their feelings (instead of maintaining secrecy about the parent's incarceration), to have a childhood (instead of taking on parenting roles early), to maintain meaningful contact with their incarcerated parents, and to increase community awareness and education to combat stigma and stereotyping. All of these needs contributed to the need for agency to resist a sense of powerlessness from the unfolding of events beyond their control following parental incarceration. An additional study that was not reviewed by Zhang and Flynn (2025) included seven focus groups conducted with 52 Czech youth 7 to 14 years of age focusing on their needs following parental incarceration (Navrátilová et al., 2024). The focus groups were conducted with youth during a weeklong summer camp sponsored by a nonprofit religious organization (Prison Fellowship International). Youth spontaneously discussed multiple needs, including basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and safety; a person to care for and love them; opportunities for contact with and information about their incarcerated parent; hope that their parent will return; having the inner resources to cope with challenges; not to be judged by others. Taken together, these studies are important in highlighting the voices of young people with lived experience and their needs; however, additional research is required to document youth perspectives on coping, strengths, and flourishing following parental incarceration across the globe.

Several related constructs have been applied to understand youth coping and strengths, including flourishing and resilience models. Multiple models of flourishing have focused on youth mental health and well-being, encompassing experiences of pleasure and happiness as well as self-actualization, meaning-making, and virtue (see Waigel & Lemos, 2023, for a review). These flourishing models have been found to have six overlapping components, including positive relationships, engagement, meaning, competence, positive emotions, and self-esteem (Agenor et al., 2017). A recent review found that empirical studies have investigated flourishing in adolescence: (a) in various cultural, social, and health contexts; (b) as related to positive psychological characteristics and mental health concerns; (c) in contexts characterized by adversity; and (d) in terms of measurement (Waigel & Lemos, 2023). Five of the 28 studies reviewed were conducted in the U.S., but the other 23 were conducted in India, China, Indonesia, Chile, South Korea, Spain, the Philippines, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Portugal, and South Africa. Few empirical studies about flourishing have included youth with incarcerated parents, however. In two exceptions, data from a nationally representative cross-sectional study of U.S. youth were analyzed, finding that flourishing (including curiosity, perseverance, and self-regulation)

in 6- to 17-year-old youth with incarcerated parents was more likely when youth participated in cash assistance programs and food stamps (Tolliver et al., 2024, 2022) and when Black youth had more connectedness with their families (Boch & Ford, 2021).

Multisystemic resilience models (e.g., Ungar et al., 2023; Masten, 2025) have defined resilience as a dynamic system's successful adaptation to significant challenges that might compromise its development, competence, or survival. These models consider adaptation from a contextual perspective, recognizing that resilience is a process reflecting the dynamic interaction between individuals and the surrounding familial, community, and cultural processes and structures, and they have been applied across different countries and cultures (e.g., Jefferies et al., 2023; Ungar et al., 2023). Factors associated with resilience—or processes related to competence or flourishing in development following significant risk—occur when a person grows in positive ways that are consistent with cultural expectations based on age, gender, and context, despite exposure to threats that have the potential to derail typical growth and development (Masten, 2014). Prior research with youth affected by parental incarceration (primarily conducted in the U.S., Australia, and several European countries) has found that youth are better able to cope when multiple contexts support their development, including resources within families, schools, communities, and policies and practices in the larger society (e.g., justice system, child welfare system), as well as having individual strengths such as the ability to self-regulate (Höltge et al., 2026; Johnson & Arditti, 2023; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). In a recent example, an analysis of Danish data on 727 children with incarcerated fathers showed that caregiver mental health mediated the effects of material hardship on youth academic adjustment during paternal incarceration (Morgan et al., 2021). Moreover, a recent study comparing the well-being of Canadian and South African youth who experienced parental incarceration identified a number of contextual resources associated with positive adolescent development (Höltge et al., 2026).

Consistent with these approaches, the International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents (INCCIP), a global nonprofit organization, envisions the well-being of children with incarcerated parents addressed at all societal levels in all countries, with a mission to collaborate with and support diverse organisations and individuals to promote the well-being of affected children more effectively, especially as guided by youth voices. One of INCCIP's values is to make children's and families' voices, participation, and representation a key basis for all decisions made about affected families (INCCIP, 2025). Thus, a primary goal of this study was to document youth perspectives on coping with the challenges of parental incarceration, especially in countries that are not currently well-represented in the research literature, including South Korea, New Zealand, Uganda, Spain, and England.

To address the study's goal of documenting youth perspectives on their own coping and strengths following parental incarceration, we propose the following objectives:

1. Elevate collective youth voices by highlighting commonalities in their descriptions of ways of coping with challenges related to parental incarceration.
2. Determine if youth from five countries report similar or different ways of coping with parental incarceration based on the gender of the incarcerated parent.
3. Determine if existing models of flourishing and resilience apply cross-nationally for children affected by parental incarceration to help address gaps in the literature and guide policies and practices.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

A total of 57 youth, ranging in age from 11–20 years, with a mean of 15 years, participated in the study (Table 1). Youth were enrolled into

**Table 1**

Demographic characteristics of children from each country (N = 57).

| Variable                                    | Country                |                        |                        |                        |                        |                        |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                                             | Uganda<br>n = 11       | Spain<br>n = 10        | South Korea<br>n = 10  | New Zealand<br>n = 11  | England<br>n = 15      | Total<br>N = 57        |
|                                             | Range<br>M, SD<br>n(%) | Range<br>M, SD<br>n(%) | Range<br>M, SD<br>n(%) | Range<br>M, SD<br>n(%) | Range<br>M, SD<br>n(%) | Range<br>M, SD<br>N(%) |
| Child age (years)                           | 12–20<br>16            | 12–18<br>15            | 15–18<br>17            | 11–19<br>14            | 12–17<br>13            | 11–20<br>15            |
| Child Female                                | 6 (55%)                | 5 (50%)                | 4 (40%)                | 5 (45%)                | 8 (53%)                | 28 (49%)               |
| Child Male                                  | 5 (45%)                | 5 (50%)                | 6 (60%)                | 6 (55%)                | 7 (47%)                | 29 (51%)               |
| Mother incarcerated                         | 1 (9%)                 | 1 (10%)                | 2 (20%)                | 1 (9%)                 | 3 (20%)                | 8 (14%)                |
| Father incarcerated                         | 9 (82%)                | 8 (80%)                | 4 (40%)                | 8 (73%)                | 12 (80%)               | 41 (72%)               |
| Both parents incarcerated                   | 1 (9%)                 | 1 (10%)                | 4 (40%)                | 2 (18%)                | 0 (0%)                 | 8 (14%)                |
| Currently incarcerated                      | 11 (100%)              | 10 (100%)              | 4 (40%)                | 7 (64%)                | 7 (47%)                | 39 (68%)               |
| Child's age at first parental incarceration | 1–6<br>3               | 0–12<br>7              | 5–14<br>11             | 4–13<br>9              | 0–12<br>6              | 0–14<br>7              |

the study through a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) from their own country, with the support of INCCIP (Uganda n = 11; Spain n = 10; South Korea n = 10; New Zealand n = 11; England n = 15). The initial aim was to interview 10 youth in each country, as determined by the scope of the research questions, funding, and pragmatic issues. Uganda and New Zealand exceeded this number by one because siblings volunteered to be interviewed. In England, five youth were initially provided with a self-report form and then staff then conducted 1:1 interviews with ten youth.

Following a review of the international literature, the Board of Directors of INCCIP created a list of countries that were underrepresented in research on children with incarcerated parents, with the original list naming multiple countries in Africa, Asia, and South America, in addition to Canada and several countries in Europe. We discussed the strengths and limitations of comparative cross-cultural research approaches and the recommendations for collaboration with researchers in countries studied (e.g., Broesch et al., 2020; Gvirtz & Sabherwal, 2024; Liamputtong, 2022). Based on our collaborations with an extensive international network of people from the Global North/South and Global Majority/Minority countries, and listening to the voices of youth involved in INCCIP conferences and member NGOs over time, we heard a desire for understanding youth experiences across countries. Youth with lived experience of parental incarceration who have engaged in cross-national dialogue with other youth in similar circumstances through INCCIP have talked about how similar their experiences are, and we wanted to honor their voices in our approach. Thus, to ensure that we had collaborators within each country, the list of countries was narrowed based on our knowledge of NGOs and researchers in each region. The primary criteria for selecting NGOs were: (1) limited research had been conducted with children affected by parental incarceration in that area; (2) the availability of an NGO that was open to participating in international research; and (3) the availability of a formal review process to ensure that the research was carried out in an ethical manner. Subsequently, researchers and NGOs were contacted and five countries were identified with NGOs and/or researchers who wished to participate in the research. The INCCIP Board of Directors then applied for grant funding to interview youth in each country, including Uganda, South Korea, New Zealand, Canada, and England. After obtaining IRB approval, our Canadian contacts were not successful in their repeated attempts to enroll participants into the study, and they made a decision to drop out of the project. At the same time, we were approached by a researcher in Spain who ended up using our interview protocol with youth in an ongoing study, and thus we added Spain to the project. Additional countries could not be added because of funding and time limitations.

NGOs that participated in the research offered a wide range of services and supports for youth with incarcerated parents ranging from

comprehensive services (e.g., residential schools that provided education, health, and emotional well-being; wraparound home-based social work supports that included assistance with housing and food security) to school-based supports and after school community-based services. Specific services offered at the different organizations included: counseling; mentoring; peer support groups; online support to reduce isolation; vocational skills training; therapeutic activities; community support; advocacy to protect children's rights; facilitating visits to parents in prison; and holistic support to help overcome stigma, build resilience, and reduce intergenerational trauma.

The INCCIP Board of Directors developed the research questions and the initial draft of the interview protocol in English. Individuals from each participating NGO also reviewed the questions and provided feedback regarding developmental and cultural appropriateness and to minimize stigma and re-traumatizing youth with sensitive questions. NGO staff translated the questions into their respective languages prior to interviewing youth. The scope of the research questions and amount of funding determined the number of youth that could be interviewed, as all families were compensated for their participation with the grant funding.

INCCIP has been registered as a non-profit NGO in Scotland since 2019, and was granted consultative status at the United Nations (UN) in 2025. It has held conferences in New Zealand, England, the U.S., and South Korea, typically including a special track for youth with incarcerated parents to attend and connect with one another. Even prior to registering officially as an NGO, INCCIP's international work began in 2011, when the Quaker UN Office in Geneva supported the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to focus their Day of General Discussion on children with incarcerated parents. INCCIP's members are from 28 countries around the world, and their Board of Directors represent nine of those countries.

## 2.2. Procedures

Each participating country received research ethics approval from their nonprofit organization or local university, upon request from INCCIP. Staff members from participating NGOs approached youth to see if they were interested in the study. Following verbal assent, adult participants signed informed consent forms for the study. For participants who were minors, written parental permission was obtained from the child's legal guardian, and verbal assent was obtained from youth. Youth were interviewed by adults who worked at the nonprofit organizations in their own language. Interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed, de-identified, and translated into English (if not originally conducted in English) by the NGO staff. The translations were reviewed by the researchers within that country for accuracy and meaning. De-identified data were provided to the U.S. researchers, whose

university deemed the study exempt (masked for blind review). Youth and their families were compensated for their participation.

### 2.3. Measures

**Demographic information.** Interviews began by collecting child age and sex; with whom the child was living and for how long; which parent was or had been in prison; how many times they were in prison and for how long; the child's age at the parent's first imprisonment; is the parent currently in prison; the country and NGO where data collection occurred.

**Interviews.** After the demographic questions, nine general areas of questioning were specified (see Appendix A), with follow-up questions that depended on the child's response. The questions were developed through a review of the international literature on children with incarcerated parents and discussion with consensus among the original co-investigator team, the INCCIP Board of Directors, and representatives of the NGOs participating in data collection.

In the present study, youth responses to two sets of questions were summarized: (1) Many children and young people report feeling very sad, angry, upset or anxious as a result of parental imprisonment, or their health getting worse. Did that happen to you? Did it affect how you felt about yourself?; (2) Is there anything else you would like to say about being the child of a parent in prison? What has it all meant for you? Do you feel confident about your own future? What helps make you strong?

### 2.4. Plan of analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out in six phases (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2022) by the US-based research team. The interviewers from each country did not directly participate in data analysis, but the US team checked back to ensure that the analyses were proceeding in a manner that was sensitive to age, development, culture, and gender.

The US-based team involved a professor and doctoral student from the US and two international scholars (a doctoral student from India and a post-doctoral fellow from Türkiye). Phase 1 involved becoming familiar with the data, which involved careful reading of the transcripts and notes, and reading about the organizations that enrolled youth into the study. During Phase 1, the US-based team asked researchers from Spain and South Korea to review transcripts to ensure that the English translations that they had provided were consistent with the original language of the interviews. Phase 2 consisted of generating initial codes from the transcripts based on specific quotes and discussing the codes with team members; double coding and consensus discussions were used to increase qualitative rigor. Phase 3 involved searching for themes and links among the various codes; initially this coding was conducted individually and then it was completed in pairs in the form of consensus discussions. Phase 4 consisted of reviewing the various themes (at the level of the coded data—especially individual team members examining the quotes that were identified) to consider whether they formed a pattern (Level 1) and, as a group, refining them by considering the validity of individual themes in relation to the entire dataset. As a group, the researchers also examined whether the themes reflected the broader meanings seen in the dataset, especially across countries (Level 2). During Phase 4, feedback was requested from researchers and the non-profit organizations within each country that enrolled participants. NGOs were asked to review quotes selected as examples of themes to ensure that the meaning was accurate and developmentally and culturally sensitive and that the information was presented in a non-stigmatizing manner. Information about carceral and child welfare policies and practices was also collected from each country and from the literature to help contextualize the findings and increase cultural sensitivity. Phase 5 involved defining and naming the themes—for each theme, a detailed analysis was conducted, including specifying relations to other themes. Following revision of the themes, findings from Phase 5

were presented at the INCCIP conference in South Korea in 2025; additional feedback was gathered from participating NGOs and INCCIP members, especially regarding cultural sensitivity and non-stigmatizing language, and feedback was incorporated into the Phase 6 report. Phase 6 consisted of producing a written report and presenting it to the research team for feedback (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2022). Team feedback was incorporated into the final draft.

## 3. Results

First, we summarize themes from the total sample. We start by discussing the challenges described by youth, in their own words, in order to provide a context for youth coping and strengths during parental incarceration. As these challenges have been described in the literature, we do not go into a high level of detail about them, nor do we quantify the number of youth discussing each challenge. When we turn to discussion of themes related to coping and strengths, we provide longer quotes, identify the age and country of the youth who provided the quote, and indicate the number of youth who discussed each code and theme. We go into more detail in our analysis as well because flourishing is the focus of the paper. We do not indicate the gender of the youth who provided the quote to protect youth confidentiality (as the sample size within each country is small).

Second, we summarize themes that differed based on the gender of the incarcerated parent (i.e., father only incarcerated, mother only incarcerated, both mother and father incarcerated). Finally, we present a model that integrates findings across themes.

### 3.1. Themes from the total sample

**Challenges related to parental incarceration.** Five themes were coded based on youth reports of challenges associated with having an incarcerated parent: (1) initial emotional distress, (2) physical and mental health impacts, (3) family stress and role changes, (4) school and social impacts, and (5) experiences of stigma and shame (Table 2). Most youth reported initial emotional distress that included intense feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and/or numbness, typically occurring in the days and weeks following the parent's arrest and incarceration, but sometimes continuing. Youth from each country reported such reactions.

**Table 2**

Perspectives of youth, aged 11–20 years, from England, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, and Uganda, on how parental incarceration affected them personally,  $N = 57$ .

| Theme Coded                        | Description of Theme                                                                                                                                                  | Quotes that Illustrate Theme                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Initial Emotional Distress         | Sadness, anger, fear, guilt, numbness                                                                                                                                 | "Any little thing made me feel anger."<br>"I was sad and anxious."<br>"Sometimes you think it's your fault."                                  |
| Physical and Mental Health Impacts | Weight loss, appetite changes, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, withdrawal                                                                                        | "I lost a lot of weight."<br>"I had nightmares for months."<br>"I stopped eating... stayed in my room all day." "I felt my trust was broken." |
| Family Stress and Role Changes     | Forced maturity, financial pressure                                                                                                                                   | "I had to grow up early for my sisters." "We don't have enough money."                                                                        |
| School and Social Impacts          | Trouble concentrating in school, failing classes, dropping out, being bullied, losing friends, social isolation, aggression with peers, fear of being judged by peers | "I failed every subject."<br>"I lost all my friends." "I became very violent...used to fight kids."                                           |
| Experiences of Stigma and Shame    | Community judgment, name-calling, shame, embarrassment                                                                                                                | "They called me 'child of a thief.'" "I was embarrassed to be seen with him."                                                                 |

Youth stated that “Any little thing made me feel anger,” and “I was sad and anxious.” Some youth also reported feelings of guilt: “Sometimes you think it’s your fault.”

Following this initial emotional distress, most youth also described areas that they felt were significantly affected by their parent’s incarceration. Most commonly, youth described changes to their own health and mental health, including appetite changes and weight loss (e.g., “I lost a lot of weight.”), difficulties sleeping (e.g., “I had nightmares for months”), feelings of depression and anxiety, and/or withdrawal (even if temporarily) from the activities that they normally engaged in. One youth stated that “I felt my trust was broken” and another said “I stopped eating... stayed in my room all day.” This social withdrawal often led to feelings of isolation, which fed back into elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Many youth also reported significant changes in their families, including an increase in family stress especially related to finances, housing instability, and day-to-day responsibilities, including caring for younger siblings and doing household chores. Many youth reported feeling that they “grew up too fast” because of these responsibilities, often discussing this as “forced maturity” based on their family context instead of choosing to engage in more adult roles (e.g., “I had to grow up early for my sisters”). Financial pressures were often ongoing, and some youth felt that they needed to contribute to the household financial situation (e.g., “We don’t have enough money”). Two Ugandan youth and one English youth discussed worrying about their basic needs being met following parental incarceration.

Most youth also reported challenges related to their education and peer relationships, including difficulties concentrating in school, failing classes (and even dropping out of school in some cases), being bullied by peers, engaging in aggression with peers, experiencing fear of being judged by their peers, losing friends, and/or increasing levels of social isolation. One youth stated that “I failed every subject” while another stated “I lost all my friends...I became very violent...used to fight kids.” Youth reported that these challenging experiences with peers were particularly painful when they occurred during adolescence. They saw adolescence as a time when young people often hang out together and rely on each other for companionship, and the school situations sometimes became quite difficult, often causing loneliness.

Across each of the countries, youth reported experiencing stigma and shame. Stigmatization often took the form of community judgment, shunning, and name-calling, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Although these experiences occurred across all countries, the intensity of stigma and shame reported were highest in Uganda and South Korea. One Ugandan youth indicated that people in his village “called me ‘child of a thief’” and another was called “child of a murderer.” Two Ugandan youth reported that they were chased out of their villages following their parent’s imprisonment. In South Korea, youth felt that people in society extended their parent’s guilt to the whole family. One youth reported about his formerly incarcerated father: “I was embarrassed to be seen with him.”

**Coping and strengths related to parental incarceration.** Five themes were also coded from youth narratives about their strengths, coping, supports, and feelings of hope about the future, including: (1) the importance of support from relationships, (2) pride in developing aspirations, (3) recognition of personal growth, (4) resistance to negative expectations, and (5) the role of spirituality in coping (Table 3). Fig. 1 depicts the number of youth who indicated strengths related to each code and theme.

The vast majority of youth reported on the importance of support received from their nuclear and extended family members. A 17-year old from Spain said that “My grandmother is my foundation. She helped me a lot to let go of all that anger I had.” Similarly, an 18-year old from South Korea stated: “I think about my grandmother as well. A 16-year old from New Zealand stated that “Me and my brother ...went up north and lived with my auntie and all my uncles and that was quite hard. We didn’t know anyone and I wasn’t that close with all of my

**Table 3**

Perspectives of youth, aged 11–20 years, from England, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, and Uganda, on what gives them hope and strength following parental incarceration, *N* = 57.

| Code                                         | Description of Code                                                                | Quotes that Illustrate Code                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Importance of Support from Relationships | Family, organizations, friends, communication/visits with incarcerated parent, pet | <p>“My grandmother, especially. My grandmother is my foundation. She helped me a lot to let go of all that anger I had.” –17 year old, Spain</p> <p>“I think about my grandmother as well. I pull myself together by thinking about the director of the child center. He is my role model, someone like a father to me.” –18 year old, South Korea</p> <p>“[Organization] pulled children [like me] off the street. I also find time and talk to someone there in case I have any issue, so that it gets resolved and [I can] carry on smoothly with my life.” –14 year old, Uganda</p> <p>“Me and my brother ...went up north and lived with my auntie and all my uncles and that was quite hard. We didn’t know anyone and I wasn’t that close with all of my family either—I mean, that made us much closer but... I started a new high school and that was scary. It was welcoming because we had cousins,... My cousins were quite shocked [about my parents], but they wanted to be there for me.” –16 year old, New Zealand</p> <p>“My friends keep me strong.” –12 year old, England</p> <p>“The first time I ever lit something off my chest was when I started high school, cause I was doing bad in school and I had to go to this counselor. I never tell anyone that I’ve had a parent that’s been in jail but then ...there was this one day at school and we were saying what parents we have around and don’t-home questions—and some of me mates didn’t have they dads around, so I’m going to put my hand up because I don’t have my dad around, so I did and ... that was the first day that anyone found out that I didn’t have two parents in my home, I went to this counselor and told, and I feel like it helped.” –15 year old, New Zealand</p> <p>“Mom sent us letters twice a week... and we video chatted and Mom still sends letters all the time. I think I have received about a thousand letters from her. She wrote a lot.... We write to each other all the time and when I am having difficulty with a career path, my dad gives me a lot of advice through letters</p> |

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

| Code                            | Description of Code                                                            | Quotes that Illustrate Code                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pride in Developing Aspirations | Goals related to career, education, school, and extracurricular activities     | and phone calls. He advises me to do things this or that way. He sends his advice for me to read all the time. Mom and Dad were the ones who applied to [organization] ... so here we are now." –17 year old, South Korea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                 |                                                                                | "When I grow up, I want to be helpful to other people as I wouldn't want anyone to suffer. We have been helped so it's our duty to also support and advocate for other children." –20 year old, Uganda<br>"I want to be better than my dad. I'm doing that by going into the army and serving my country. I'll have a bigger purpose, helping other people, and have good people around me." –17 year old, New Zealand<br>"I feel confident about me own future; me dad helps cause like he was a joiner ... and I want to be a joiner with him, make a business, that's what I want to achieve and be a joiner, work with wood." –12 year old, England<br>"I'll wait a little bit, I'm going to finish high school, take some courses. I want to have a job, a future, you know? A nice house, a family– but first I'll focus on my studies and then we'll see." –14 year old, Spain<br>"As a child with a father in prison it drives me to study hard and be an important person in future. I have confidence in my future and I know that I will be successful as long as I continue studying. I at one time thought of dropping out of school, but I made up my mind: I intend to complete my studies to have a better life and attain what I need. The fact that am still able to get an education keeps me strong, with strong faith in my future." –20 year old, Uganda<br>"I like playing basketball a lot, so when I felt bad I used to go play by myself. Also playing video games distracts me and I don't think about sad things." –13 year old, Spain |
| Recognition of Personal Growth  | Persistence/toughness/strength, learning from the pain of experience or trauma | "But I do think that going through this has provided an opportunity for me to become more mature. Now, I just feel like the way I think became a bit more mature. I realize that the way I think about parents is a bit different from my friends. My friends, they just think, 'why should I clean the dishes when mom can do                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

Table 3 (continued)

| Code                                | Description of Code                                     | Quotes that Illustrate Code                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Resistance to Negative Expectations | Not be like incarcerated parent, ignore what people say | that' and seeing them think like that made me feel like I am a bit more mature or something." –18 year old, South Korea<br>"What makes me feel strong is just keep going and don't let anyone get in your way." –13 year old, England<br>"You become used to it, and it becomes part of your life, and then it gets better." –12 year old, England<br>"Look, I love my mother very much, but I don't want to be like her or my sister when I grow up. I'm not going to get married at thirteen years old as she did." –14 year old, Spain<br>"Don't go down the same path as them [your parent], whatever your mates say that is bringing you down." –16 year old, New Zealand<br>"I don't take in what they say; I listen to it and only leave it there." –18 year old, Uganda<br>"I feel this shame but I have nothing to do with it!" –14 year old, Uganda<br>"As children with parents in prison we should often pray to God for our parents to be released. Let us also take courage and remain hopeful that at one time our parents will be released and will leave prison when they are alive." –12 year old, Uganda<br>"Praying really makes me strong because I often spare some time to pray to God, and I know with God everything is possible because he changes our destiny and rewards those who trust in him." –14 year old, Uganda<br>"Praying and trusting God make me spiritually strong and see all things as being possible." –18 year old, Uganda |
| The Role of Spirituality in Coping  | Prayer, God, faith                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

family either—I mean, that made us much closer but ... I started a new high school and that was scary. It was welcoming because we had cousins... My cousins were quite shocked [about my parents], but they wanted to be there for me." Although family members were primarily sources of support, sometimes youth discussed extended family members as a source of conflict or ambiguity.

Support from friends, teachers and counselors, and youth organizations was also discussed by youth. For example, a 12-year old from England said "My friends keep me strong." Organizations that focused on supporting youth with incarcerated parents were particularly helpful. An 18-year old from South Korea reported that "I pull myself together by thinking about the director of the child center. He is my role model, someone like a father to me." A 14-year old from Uganda indicated that "[Organization] pulled children [like me] off the street. I also find time and talk to someone there in case I have any issue, so that it gets resolved and [I can] carry on smoothly with my life." A 15-year old from New Zealand discussed how important it was for him to disclose the fact that his father was incarcerated to a trusted adult. "The first time I ever lit

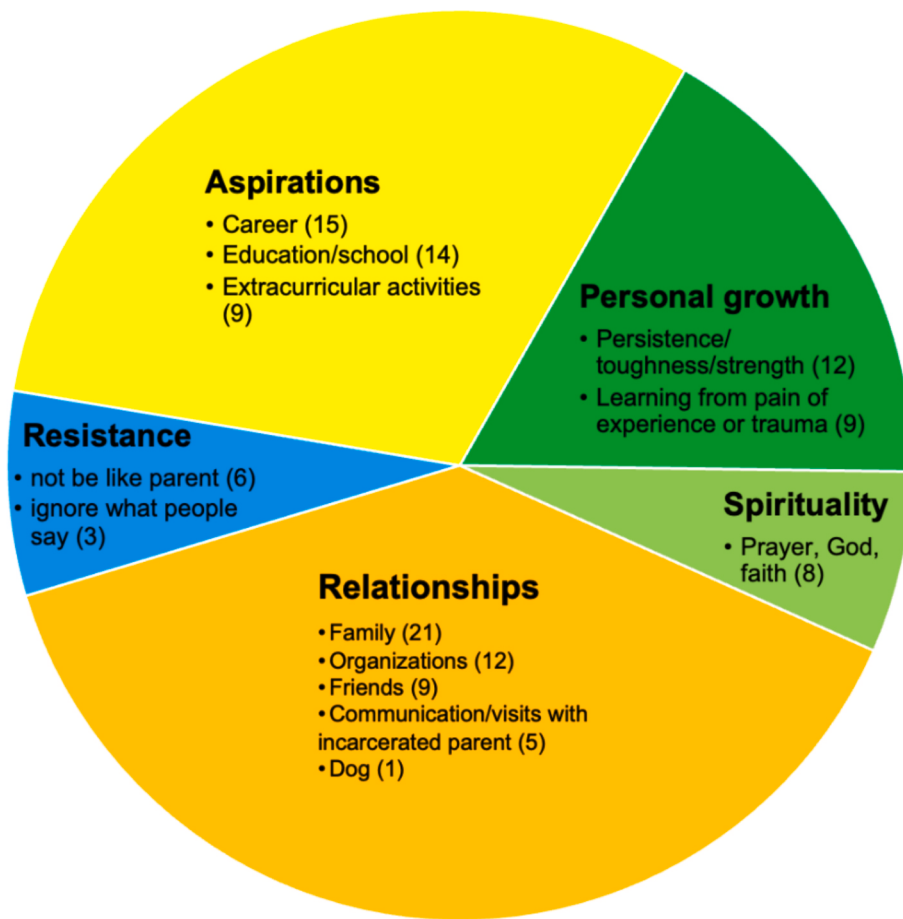


Fig. 1. Proportion of youth who discussed themes related to coping and strengths (with number of youth who discussed each code in parentheses).

something off my chest was when I started high school, cause I was doing bad in school and I had to go to this counselor. I never tell anyone that I've had a parent that's been in jail but then ...there was this one day at school and we were saying what parents we have around and don't-home questions--and some of me mates didn't have they dads around, so I'm going to put my hand up because I don't have my dad around, so I did and ... that was the first day that anyone found out that I didn't have two parents in my home, I went to this counselor and told, and I feel like it helped." One youth reported on the importance of support from their pet.

Connections with incarcerated parents were deeply important to many children, especially when the communication was supportive and when they wanted visits. For instance, a 17 year old from South Korea said that "Mom sent us letters twice a week... and we video chatted and Mom still sends letters all the time. I think I have received about a thousand letters from her. She wrote a lot.... We write to each other all the time and when I am having difficulty with a career path, my dad gives me a lot of advice through letters and phone calls. He advises me to do things this or that way. He sends his advice for me to read all the time. Mom and Dad were the ones who applied to [organization] ...so here we are now."

The family, friend, and organizational support discussed by youth seemed most effective when it was internalized and accompanied by a deep sense of trust. The type of support that was most helpful occurred when youth felt safe, not judged or stigmatized, and understood. Also important in the area of support was communicating with--and especially visiting-- their incarcerated parents when this was possible and desired by the youth. Some youth felt that their continued connection with their incarcerated parents helped them stay strong.

About half of youth expressed pride in their aspirations as a source of

strength, including goals related to their careers, education, school activities, and extracurricular activities. For example, a 12 year old from England indicated that "I feel confident about me own future; me dad helps cause like he was a joiner ... and I want to be a joiner with him, make a business, that's what I want to achieve and be a joiner, work with wood." A 14 year old from Spain reported that "I'll wait a little bit, I'm going to finish high school, take some courses. I want to have a job, a future, you know? A nice house, a family-- but first I'll focus on my studies and then we'll see."

Some youth indicated that the experience of having an incarcerated parent drove them to try to be a good person and make a contribution to society. For instance, a 20 year old from Uganda said "When I grow up, I want to be helpful to other people as I wouldn't want anyone to suffer. We have been helped so it's our duty to also support and advocate for other children." Similarly, a 17 year old from New Zealand stated that "I want to be better than my dad. I'm doing that by going into the army and serving my country. I'll have a bigger purpose, helping other people, and have good people around me." A 20 year old from Uganda reported that "As a child with a father in prison it drives me to study hard and be an important person in future. I have confidence in my future and I know that I will be successful as long as I continue studying. I at one time thought of dropping out of school, but I made up my mind: I intend to complete my studies to have a better life and attain what I need. The fact that am still able to get an education keeps me strong, with strong faith in my future."

Many young people gave numerous examples of extracurricular activities that helped them cope, including attending after school clubs, engaging in sports such as basketball, football, and boxing, playing video games, and becoming involved with the arts, such as painting, drama, music, and dance. For example, a 13 year old from Spain

indicated that “I like playing basketball a lot, so when I felt bad I used to go play by myself. Also playing video games distracts me and I don't think about sad things.” Sometimes these activities were part of an organized program, such as a program for children affected by parental incarceration, but other hobbies or sports were something that youth did on their own.

More than one-third of youth referenced their own persistence, toughness, and strength that they felt was often a product of learning from experience, and especially growing through challenging or painful experiences, or healing from trauma. For example, an 18 year old from South Korea said: “But I do think that going through this has provided an opportunity for me to become more mature...I realize that the way I think about parents is a bit different from my friends. My friends, they just think, ‘why should I clean the dishes when mom can do that’ and seeing them think like that made me feel like I am a bit more mature or something.”

Perseverance through hard times was noted by multiple youth. For instance, a 13 year old from England stated “What makes me feel strong is just keep going and don't let anyone get in your way.” Similarly, a 12-year old from England said “You become used to it, and it becomes part of your life, and then it gets better.”

Some youth discussed how they resisted the expectations of others, either by trying not to be like their incarcerated parent (e.g., forging their own paths so that they would not follow in their incarcerated parent's footsteps) or by ignoring the negative things that people said about them (related to stigma). A 14 year old from Spain said “Look, I love my mother very much, but I don't want to be like her or my sister when I grow up. I'm not going to get married at thirteen years old as she did.” A 16 year old from New Zealand indicated “Don't go down the same path as them [your parent], whatever your mates say that is bringing you down.” An 18 year old from Uganda reported that “I don't take in what they say; I listen to it and only leave it there.” Another youth from Uganda (age 14) was struggling to resist the shame that came from stigma related to his incarcerated parent, saying “I feel this shame but I have nothing to do with it!”

Finally, several youth in Uganda and South Korea reported that they had developed a sense of spirituality that helped them cope, either through prayer, their belief in God, or faith in a higher power that they could turn to in times of stress. A 12 year old from Uganda stated “As children with parents in prison we should often pray to God for our parents to be released. Let us also take courage and remain hopeful that at one time our parents will be released and will leave prison when they are alive.” A 14 year old from Uganda indicated that “Praying really makes me strong because I often spare some time to pray to God, and I know with God everything is possible because he changes our destiny and rewards those who trust in him.” Similarly, an 18 year old from

Uganda said “Praying and trusting God make me spiritually strong and see all things as being possible.”

Fig. 2 presents an integration of the themes coded, based on the connections and patterns that arose from the youths' narratives about strengths and coping. The base of the model represents the most common responses of young people (i.e., the importance of relationships as a foundation) and the sense of internalized relationships and faith in trusted others that many youth described as foundational, whereas the top of the model represents their forward-looking sense of hope for the future. The middle of the figure represents different paths that youth described in coping with the challenges of having an incarcerated parent. Taken together, the model represents ways that youth describe resilience processes and what fostered their coping and ability to flourish despite the challenges related to having an incarcerated parent.

### 3.2. Themes that differed based on parental gender

**Father-only incarceration.** Across each country, the largest group of youth experienced the incarceration of their father only ( $n = 41$ ). Themes in this group were identical to the themes that emerged in the larger group.

**Mother-only incarceration.** Eight youth, at least one youth from each country, experienced the incarceration of their mother only, with proportions ranging from 9 to 20% of youth interviewed in each country. In this group, key themes about challenges were similar to the larger group, with discussion of intense initial emotional distress, physical and mental health impacts (especially depression), family stress and role changes, school and social impacts, and high levels of stigma and shame. Youth highlighted the need for accelerated maturation after their mothers left (for prison or what led to their prison sentence), including youth taking on adult responsibilities, which typically led to increased awareness of the impact of a person's life choices on others and greater reflection on their own values, behaviors, and decision-making.

Youth with an incarcerated mother also reported similar areas of strength as the larger group, including the importance of support from relationships, pride in developing aspirations, recognition of personal growth, and resistance to negative expectations. One unique area that emerged was that youth in this group explicitly discussed the need for safe spaces to connect with peers so that they could have opportunities to engage with people in similar situations and share their experiences without judgment. They talked about how these opportunities for connection helped reduce their feelings of isolation and normalized their experiences. Another nuance was that a youth in the mother incarcerated group referred to having a dog as a way to help them cope, and none of the youth in this group referred to spirituality in their coping. Additionally, youth in this group discussed how they wrestled with



Fig. 2. Conceptual model of youth narratives of strengths, coping, and flourishing in five countries.

internal conflicts that arose between parental expectations of them and their own personal goals as they sought to develop more autonomy following their mother's incarceration. Youth in this group indicated that they experienced personal growth from navigating how to "honor" their mothers while pursuing their own paths, emphasizing the roles of communication and compromise in this process. They maintained strong connections with their mothers and their continuing attachments were clear (e.g., "I love my mother very much"). Hope for reunification was a powerful motivator for youth in this group. A strong thread of optimism and perseverance was apparent in these youth voices, as they used phrases such as "Stay strong" and "You've got it," and they expressed a strong belief in the possibility of a better future despite experiencing adversity related to maternal incarceration.

**Mother and father incarceration.** Across the five countries, eight youth experienced the incarceration of both their mother and father. Of the youth interviewed, incarceration of both parents occurred for 9% in Uganda, 10% in Spain, 18% in New Zealand, and 40% in South Korea. None of the English youth were in this group.

In this group, the main themes about challenges were similar to the larger group, with discussion of emotional distress, physical and mental health impacts, family stress and role changes, school and social impacts, and intense experiences of stigma and shame. Experiences related to stigma were particularly prominent in the narratives of these youth. Youth reported feeling labeled as "bad kids" and noticing how others changed their behavior towards them after learning about their parents' incarceration. Youth described how these experiences of feeling judged led to either selective disclosure of information related to the incarceration or silence (e.g., "there are things that we can't talk about"). Youth in South Korea highlighted their experiences of intense stigma and social judgement when both parents were incarcerated. They were sometimes puzzled as to why the stigma and shame should extend to themselves, saying "It's not like we did something wrong."

Youth with both parents incarcerated reported similar areas of strength as the larger group, including the importance of support from relationships, pride in developing aspirations, recognition of personal growth, resistance to negative expectations, and spirituality. Two youths discussed spirituality, one mentioning prayer as a way to cope and another referring to a sense of "karma" or wondering if their experiences of broader life inequalities was possibly related to their parents' actions. One area of difference from the larger group in discussion of strengths was the way that youth referred to connection with their families. They discussed staying in touch with their parents in more ambiguous terms than the larger group, and especially compared to the mother-only incarceration group. While some youth recognized how sustained communication could preserve closeness despite distance, youth in this group also discussed how long-term separation could lead to awkwardness or unfamiliarity upon reunification, as well as instability. Some youth in this group reported longing for family reunification and parental presence at key milestones in their lives (e.g., graduating from a university), and feeling a sense of loss about missing this. Moreover, youth in this group seemed more uncertain about their futures than the larger group, discussing anxiety about their life trajectories, especially when their parents had long prison sentences. However, some of the uncertainty coexisted with determination and some degree of hope. For example, one youth stated that they "might be able to overcome" the challenges that they faced. Endurance over time appeared to be one of the primary ways of coping in this group (e.g., "time will do its thing"; "already 10 years have passed"), but additional ways of coping included distraction (e.g., sports, video games) and cognitive reframing (e.g., acceptance, positive thinking). Youth also highlighted the key role of extended family members (e.g., grandparents, uncles) as caregivers and how community or program support provided additional stability in their lives.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study documented the voices of youth who had experienced parental incarceration in five countries in which there has been limited research on this population. Analysis of youth narratives revealed a range of challenging experiences related to initial distress and longer-lasting impacts of parental incarceration. Common themes were identified across countries, with some country-specific nuances. Importantly, analysis of youth narratives revealed a range of positive coping strategies, especially in the areas of relationships with family members, friends, and youth organizations, pride in achieving goals, resistance in the face of negative expectations, and recognition of personal growth through hardship.

Risks associated with parental incarceration are well-documented, especially in the U.S., where parental incarceration is associated, on average, with increased risk for youth behavior problems, health concerns, and academic issues (e.g., [Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021](#)). An international literature has also emerged in this area, especially studies documenting risks associated with ACEs. For example, in a recent *meta-analysis* of 20 studies, with a total of 1,196,631 children and adolescents from Australia, China, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., one or more ACEs were associated with less optimal academic outcomes, including academic achievement, repeating a grade, and higher receipt of special education services ([Qu et al., 2024](#)). Each ACE, including what was termed "criminal history of a family member" (a proxy for "incarceration of a parent or household member") was associated with less optimal academic achievement. Moreover, a recent review highlighted youth voices from the U.S., Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa in the context of parental incarceration, indicating concerns about secrecy, parentification, communicating with the incarcerated parent, stigma, and feelings of powerlessness ([Zhang & Flynn, 2025](#)). However, the current literature does not address cross-cultural experiences of children's coping when a parent is incarcerated. The present study adds to the emerging international literature by documenting youth reports of challenges following parental incarceration, including initial intense emotional distress, impacts on health and mental health, experiencing increased family stress and role changes, negative impacts on school and social functioning, and multiple experiences of stigma and shame. Themes about challenges were identified across countries, with especially intense experiences of stigma and shaming reported in Uganda and South Korea than the other countries. Additional research is needed to examine the experiences of children with incarcerated parents in countries that have more collectivist cultures, in contrast to the individualistic countries that most commonly use incarceration as a method of social control (e.g., the U.S.). Youth in Uganda and South Korea reported feeling that, in their communities, their parent's criminal justice involvement cast a shadow on their own lives. Specifically, they felt that they were held responsible for their parent's actions, even though the youth had not engaged in law-breaking activities.

More importantly, however, are the themes that emerged about youth strengths, coping, resilience, and flourishing. The vast majority of youth in the study reported relying on support from family members, friends, and organizations, similar to several studies conducted in the U.S. ([Corcoran et al., 2025](#); [Jackson et al., 2025](#)). Across the five countries, youth discussed how immediate family members, including (incarcerated and non-incarcerated) parents and both older and younger siblings, as well as extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, helped provide them with a foundation of trust, empathy, deep understanding, and instrumental support that allowed them to positively cope, or at the very least, endure. Strong parent-child and family relationships have been cited as key factors that can promote resilience processes in children affected by parental incarceration in the U.S. (e.g., [Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021](#); [Berkel et al., 2023](#); [Muentner et al., 2025](#)). Further, studies conducted across cultures have documented the desire to maintain family connections during incarceration in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Romania, and the

United Kingdom (Sharrat, 2014; Scharff Smith, 2015). In the present study, youth also described how friends as well as peers and adults from charitable and youth organizations helped them cope with their emotions, health concerns, day-to-day challenges, and stigma, consistent with a study of Australian youth who were 11–15 years of age (Flynn & Gor, 2025). Similarly, Anandha Krishnan et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of peer connections for youth with incarcerated parents who attended a summer camp together in the U.S. Following the camp, children who were interviewed said that they felt more hopeful about their future after meeting other youth with incarcerated parents. Youth felt that the camp helped them reframe their understanding of parental incarceration, and meeting other youth with incarcerated parents helped reduce stigma and fostered empathy. However, it should be noted that participating in a summer camp for youth with incarcerated parents (or other organized peer activities) does not ensure personal growth or flourishing, because if a young person is not ready for such an experience, hearing other youth discuss parental incarceration may be distressing or even trigger a trauma reaction. Youth in the present study indicated that the type of support that was most helpful occurred when youth felt safe, not judged or stigmatized, which is part of trauma-informed approaches. In addition, youth who had experienced maternal incarceration especially emphasized the need for safe spaces to connect with peers, which they felt decreased their feelings of isolation and normalized their experiences.

Many youth in the present study reflected on their developing career and educational aspirations with pride and sense of meaning, indicating that they wanted to give back to society and that they were highly motivated to succeed. This finding echoes the results reported by Noel & Hoeben (2022) in their interviews with U.S. adults (aged 20–30 years) who had experienced the incarceration of a parent during their childhood or adolescence. In the present study, additional youth engaged in educational and extracurricular activities as a way to engage their attention and efforts toward positive activities, or even as a distraction from coping with parental incarceration. A recent study of youth living in Minnesota, U.S., found that 38% of adolescents who had experienced parental incarceration participated on a sports team, and that sports participation was associated with higher grades in school, fewer school absences, and lower symptoms of mental health concerns and use of certain substances (Kaja et al., 2025). A number of youth in the current study discussed a process of personal growth and maturation that had occurred through experiences of pain, especially related to their parent's incarceration. Some youth described actively resisting the negative expectations of others, either by consciously creating a path that was different from their incarcerated parent's path or by engaging in behaviors that broke stereotypes and challenged stigma. In a review comparing experiences of children in Scandinavian countries, Scharff Smith (2015) reported that children and families in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway all experience stigma when a parent is incarcerated. In the U.S., Luther (2016) interviewed college students who, as children, had experienced parental incarceration and found that they used a number of coping mechanisms to manage stigma related to the incarceration, ranging from separating themselves from the parent to viewing the parent as a role model. In studies applying multisystemic resilience models to children with incarcerated parents, coping with stigma is a central component (e.g., Hölte et al., 2026; Johnson & Arditti, 2023). In the present study, youth in Uganda and South Korea also discussed spirituality as a way to cope with having an incarcerated parent. Religious faith and identity were also discussed in focus groups by Czech youth attending a summer camp for children with incarcerated parents (Navrátilová et al., 2024). Each of these ways of coping led some of the young people to discuss their hopes for the future, despite challenges related to their experiences. Some of the youth who had experienced the incarceration of both parents were a bit more tentative in their discussion of hopefulness about the future and their own agency, however.

The model depicted in Fig. 2 represents the ways that youth coped with parental incarceration based on their interactions with various

contexts and systems over time. The model overlaps with flourishing and multisystemic resilience models as well as the needs identified in prior qualitative studies of youth with incarcerated parents. In their review, Zhang and Flynn (2025) highlighted needs for connecting and sharing with trusted others (instead of maintaining secrecy), having a childhood (instead of growing up too soon), maintaining meaningful contact with their incarcerated parents, resisting stigma and stereotyping, and the need for agency to combat a sense of powerlessness. One area that was not included in the Zhang and Flynn review was the need for hope, although it was discussed in the study analyzing Czech youth focus groups (e.g., hope for the incarcerated parent's return; the need for psychological support from family members, such as comfort, humor, and hopefulness; Navrátilová et al., 2024). Yet the need for hope could be linked with agency, which may be seen as a type of active hope that pushes against powerlessness.

Flourishing models focusing on adolescents often include the constructs of positive relationships, engagement, meaning, competence, positive emotions, and self-esteem (Agenor et al., 2017; Waigel & Lemos, 2023). Most youth in the present study discussed the importance of positive relationships, including connecting with trusted adults and peers, and it serves as the foundation of Fig. 2. The second most common area that youth discussed involved pride in developing aspirations, which may relate to positive emotions and self-esteem as well as meaning, especially regarding the wish to “give back” to society. Engagement in educational activities and youth organizations was also important for many youth. The role of spirituality in coping could also be considered a way that youth engaged in meaning-making in the face of adversity. Finally, recognition of personal growth could relate to increased feelings (and demonstrations) of competence over time. The area that appears to differ between many flourishing models and the present study is resistance to negative expectations; this area was born out of youth feeling stigmatized and shamed because of their parent's incarceration. Some youth coped with these challenging experiences and feelings by resisting the negative expectations of others psychologically and behaviorally. Flourishing research in the area of adult mental health has begun to include measurement of internalized stigma, as it may be important for mental health (e.g., Dimitriou et al., 2023).

Fig. 2 seems to mostly closely align with prior research that applies multisystemic models of resilience to youth with incarcerated parents and thus, it could be viewed as an initial international model of resilience processes in youth with incarcerated parents. The model has implications for addressing gaps in the literature as well as guiding policy and practice, highlighting the importance of listening to youth voices, especially in recommending the types of relationships and organizations that can help mitigate risk and encourage resilience processes and flourishing at multiple contextual levels—from the individual to family to school to community—in the context of parental incarceration. It is critical to recognize the strengths and incredible persistence and fortitude that these young people have shown following challenges associated with parental incarceration. It is striking that despite the many cultural, language, and structural differences that are present across the five countries studied, most youth reported similar experiences and needs. This finding is similar to the conclusion offered by Zhang and Flynn (2025), in that young people across the world have basic needs that should be fulfilled following parental incarceration. Given these findings, programs and advocacy efforts should aim to provide connections with other children with similar experiences—providing youth with opportunities to engage with each other and supportive adults to help resist stigma—in addition to seeking change in attitudes and discriminatory behaviors that are unfortunately too common and that promote stigma in society, and decrease agency (Phillips & Gates, 2011).

In addition, care should be taken in engaging young people in research on sensitive topics such as parental incarceration, especially in interviews that involve difficult life experiences. Research designs should be sensitive to the varying needs of children, youth, and young adults regarding the contexts in which qualitative data are collected,

cognitive and self-regulation skills that are needed to participate in interviews, the types of questions asked and how the questions are asked, and the time it takes to develop rapport prior to starting an interview (Siegel & Luther, 2019). A recent scoping review integrated the results of qualitative studies focusing on adolescent perspectives on their research participation related to sensitive topics (Neelakantan et al., 2023). The review documented challenges and benefits of such research participation, including the experience of both positive and negative emotions, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, inconveniences related to participation, skill acquisition, and improved self-efficacy and relationships. To mitigate the challenges, researchers can design studies that minimize youth negative emotions, transparently and proactively address youth concerns about confidentiality and privacy, and ensure adequate and ongoing education and training in ethics and child development.

#### 4.1. Limitations

The current study has a number of limitations, including the small sample size from each country, which limits generalizability. While this report focused only on youth responses to two sets of questions asked in the interviews, their responses to the other questions are included in another report. The transcripts were not analyzed in the original languages for the South Korean and Spanish samples, which could introduce bias or mask subtleties in the language used by youth. However, the researchers in each country reviewed the results and the text included in the tables and it matched with the original transcripts. Another limitation is that the US-based team took responsibility for conducting data analysis. Although they sought feedback from the teams within each country, the INCCIP Board of Directors, and international conference attendees, it is possible that different themes might have emerged if the analysis had been conducted within each country or in a different country. Finally, most youth were enrolled into the study through NGOs in their countries, suggesting that many of the youth interviewed had the opportunity to connect with a potentially supportive organization. Many youth affected by parental incarceration may not be connected to such organizations and may have answered questions about challenges and flourishing differently. Future research should tie youth responses to participation in such organizations as well as their age, gender, the gender of the incarcerated parent, and other key personal, familial, community, and cultural characteristics.

#### 4.2. Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings of the present study support INCCIP's mission of being guided by youth voices as it works with diverse organisations and individuals to promote the well-being of children with incarcerated parents around the world. Organizations led by individuals with lived experience often advocate for policies and practices that center the voices of children and families impacted by parental incarceration, allowing a previously overlooked population to be heard. Listening to youth voices can help adults more deeply understand youth experiences and challenges, including the specific needs that they prioritize, leading to improved policies and outcomes. It can also inform intervention efforts, as youth can offer recommendations for directing resources, improving services, and focusing on specific challenges associated with having an incarcerated parent, thus promoting child well-being and flourishing. Creating a space for children's voices in research is key for understanding their experiences, especially using methods like Youth Participatory Action Research, allowing youth to become co-creators of the research, promoting a sense of purpose and agency over their lives (e.g., Benninger et al., 2023). In addition, sharing youth narratives can raise awareness and help efforts to decrease stigma by revealing strengths and coping mechanisms, and highlighting resilience and positive functioning in the context of adversity.

Listening to youth voices in inclusive, ethical, and trauma-informed

ways is a critical step in fulfilling INCCIP's vision to ensure that children's well-being is addressed in all countries, including meeting needs for supportive relationships and opportunities for growth at multiple contextual levels. It is essential to recognize youth strengths and efforts at coping following parental incarceration, in addition to acknowledging the challenges and risks that are often experienced. Key areas for support identified in this study include helping address initial distress following parental incarceration as well as the longer-term impacts on mental health, physical health, and social isolation and developing tools to help children cope with stigma while working to decrease stigma in society. In this work, it is important to partner with families and schools in addition to youth organizations and NGOs.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Acknowledgement of funding

University of Wisconsin-Madison Global Health Institute funded data collection in 4 countries. The data collected in Spain were supported by 2 research grants funded by the State Research Agency under the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain (PID2019-110006RB-I00; PID2023-149397OB-I00).

#### Appendix A

##### Interview Questions (in English)

1. Do you remember your parent being arrested? (Prompt if yes – were you there? Tell me about it? What else do you know about the arrest? Confirm from question above “so you were x years old?”)
2. What happened after that? (Prompt – did the family stay together? did you have to move? did you all cope? did you get to see your parent? how did you feel?)
3. Tell me about the trial and sentence (Prompt: Did you attend the trial? How did you hear about the sentence? Did you get a chance to say goodbye? Was it reported in newspapers, social media or TV? Did you have anyone to talk to about it?);
4. What changed in your life as a result of your parent going to prison? (housing, making ends meet, effect on other family members, better? worse?)
5. Many children and young people report feeling very sad, angry, upset or anxious as a result of parental imprisonment, or their health getting worse. Did that happen to you? Did it affect how you felt about yourself?;
6. Did you visit your parent in prison (if still there, do you visit)? How often? What is it like? Is it a good place for young people to be? Do you get to cuddle your parent? Do you get to play games? (If the answer is not, or not often, check why not: distance, parents not wanting children to attend, no longer have relationship etc) (If no, would they like to attend?);
7. What do you want the police and prison staff to know or do differently?;
8. Will you be living with a parent who is/was in prison in the future? How would you describe your relationship with that parent?;
9. Is there anything else you would like to say about being the child of a parent in prison? What has it all meant for you? Do you feel confident about your own future? What helps make you strong?

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

## References

- Agenor, C., Conner, N., & Aroian, K. (2017). Flourishing: An evolutionary concept analysis. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 38(11), 915–923. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2017.1355945>
- Anandha Krishnan, C., Pritzl, K., Kahya, O., Luo, J., Fanning, K., & Poehlmann, J. (2026). Child-friendly visits with incarcerated mothers. Paper submitted for publication.
- Arditti, J. A., & Johnson, E. I. (2022). A family resilience agenda for understanding and responding to parental incarceration. *American Psychologist*, 77(1), 56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000687>
- Benninger, E., Schmidt-Sane, M., Massey, S., & Athreya, B. (2023). Youth for youth: Raising the voices of children of incarcerated parents and implications for policy and practice. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(5), 2133–2162. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.23014>
- Berkel, C., O'Hara, K., Eddy, J. M., Rhodes, C. A., Blake, A., Thomas, N., & Wolchik, S. A. (2023). The prospective effects of caregiver parenting on behavioral health outcomes for children with incarcerated parents: A family resilience perspective. *Prevention Science*, 24(6), 1198–1208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1121-023-01571-9>
- Boch, S. J., & Ford, J. L. (2021). Protective factors to promote health and flourishing in Black youth exposed to parental incarceration. *Nursing Research*, 70(5S), S63–S72. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNR.0000000000000522>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
- Broesch, T., Crittenden, A. N., Beheim, B. A., Blackwell, A. D., Bunce, J. A., Collier, H., & Mulder, M. B. (2020). Navigating cross-cultural research: Methodological and ethical considerations. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 287 (1935). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2020.1245>
- Corcoran, F., Bell, A. N., Shaver, E. L., Stone, K. J., Hindt, L. A., & Shlafer, R. J. (2025). Parental incarceration, youth mental health, and resilience: Relationships at home and beyond. *Family Relations*, 74(5), 2720–2737. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.70047>
- Dimitriou, L., Chiu, M., & Carson, J. (2023). Flourishing, psychological distress and internalized stigma among parents of an adult son or daughter with schizophrenia. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 69(6), 1481–1489. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640231166630>
- Flynn, C., & Gor, K. (2025). Supporting children living with a parent in prison: Learning from young people. *The British Journal of Social Work*. , Article bcdf241. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf241>
- Gatewood, B. J., Muhammad, B. M., & Turner, S. (2025). Breaking generational curses: Success and opportunity among Black children of incarcerated parents. *Social Problems*, 72(1), 74–92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spad026>
- Gvirtz, A., & Sabherwal, A. (2024). The limits of doing global, cross-cultural behavioral science research. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(36), Article e2316690121.
- Höltge, J., Poehlmann, J., Fahie, A., Theron, L., & Ungar, M. (2026). Exploring patterns of resilience among adolescents with experiences of parental incarceration: Insights from South Africa and Canada. Paper submitted for publication.
- Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., & Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8), e356–e366. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4)
- Hughes, K., Ford, K., Bellis, M. A., Glendinning, F., Harrison, E., & Passmore, J. (2021). Health and financial costs of adverse childhood experiences in 28 European countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 6(11), e848–e857. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00232-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00232-2)
- International Coalition on Children with Incarcerated Parents. (2019). Retrieved from <https://inccip.org/statistics/> on 11-29-25.
- Jackson, D. B., Fix, R. L., Testa, A., Karbeah, J., Singh, P., Johnson, E. I., & Shlafer, R. J. (2025). Parental incarceration and mental health among black youth: Do neighborhood and school assets mitigate harms? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 34(12), 3228–3241. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-025-03213-w>
- Jefferies, P., Hölte, J., Fritz, J., & Ungar, M. (2023). A cross-country network analysis of resilience systems in young adults. *Emerging Adulthood*, 11(2), 415–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968221090039>
- Johnson, E. I., & Arditti, J. A. (2023). Risk and resilience among children with incarcerated parents: A review and critical reframing. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 19, 437–460.
- Kaja, S., Gower, A. L., Corcoran, F., Osman, I., Shaver, E., Adler, S. J., & Shlafer, R. (2025). Sport participation, academic engagement, and well-being among adolescents impacted by parental incarceration. *Journal of Youth Development*, 20(4), 5. <https://open.clemson.edu/jyd/vol20/iss4/5>.
- Liamputtong, P. (Ed.). (2022). *Handbook of qualitative cross-cultural research methods: A social science perspective*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Luther, K. (2016). Stigma management among children of incarcerated parents. *Deviant Behavior*, 37(11), 1264–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1170551>
- Massetti, G. M., Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., & Mercy, J. (2020). Global perspective on ACEs. In G. J. G. Asmundson, & T. O. Afifi (Eds.), *Adverse childhood experiences: Using evidence to advance research, practice, policy, and prevention* (pp. 209–231). Academic Press.
- Masten, A. S. (2014). Global perspectives on resilience in children and youth. *Child Development*, 85(1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12205>
- Masten, A. S. (2025). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Morgan, A. A., Arditti, J. A., Dennison, S., & Frederiksen, S. (2021). Against the odds: A structural equation analysis of family resilience processes during paternal incarceration. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (21), 11592. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111592>
- Muentner, L., Fanning, K., Pritzl, K., Kapoor, A., Weymouth, L., Krishnan, C. A., & Poehlmann, J. (2025). Parental incarceration, attachment to caregivers, and young children's physiological stress. *Developmental Psychobiology*, 67(5), Article e70076. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.70076>
- Navrátilová, J., Navrátil, P., Punová, M., & Smutná, V. (2024). Needs of children with incarcerated parents in their own voice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 23(1), 11–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221151030>
- Neelakantan, L., Fry, D., Florian, L., & Meinck, F. (2023). Adolescents' experiences of participating in sensitive research: A scoping review of qualitative studies. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(3), 1405–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211069072>
- Noel, M. E., & Hoebe, E. M. (2022). The Glass is Half Full: Narratives from Young Adults on Parental Incarceration and Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of child and family studies*, 31(11), 3125–3139.
- Phillips, S. D., & Gates, T. (2011). A conceptual framework for understanding the stigmatization of children of incarcerated parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20(3), 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-010-9391-6>
- Poehlmann-Tynan, J., & Turney, K. (2021). A developmental perspective on children with incarcerated parents. *Child Development Perspectives*, 15(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12392>
- Qu, G., Shu, L., Liu, H., Ma, S., Han, T., Zhang, H., Huang, C., Wang, J., Yang, L., & Sun, Y. (2024). Association between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance among children and adolescents: A global meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 25(4), 3332–3345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241246758>
- Sahle, B. W., Reavley, N. J., Li, W., Morgan, A. J., Yap, M. B. H., Reupert, A., & Jorm, A. F. (2022). The association between adverse childhood experiences and common mental disorders and suicidality: An umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(10), 1489–1499. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01745-2>
- Scharff Smith, P. (2015). Children of imprisoned parents in Scandinavia: Their problems, treatment and the role of Scandinavian penal culture. *Law in Context: Socio-Legal Journal*, 32, 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.26826/law-in-context.v32i0.77>
- Siegel, J. A., & Luther, K. (2019). Qualitative research on children of incarcerated parents: Findings, challenges, and future directions. In J. M. Eddy, & J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds.), *Handbook on children with incarcerated parents: Research, policy, and practice* (pp. 149–163). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Tolliver, D. G., Hawks, L., Holaday, L., & Wang, E. (2022). Exploring the relationship between parental incarceration, government programs, and child health and flourishing. *Pediatrics*, 149(1 Meeting Abstracts February 2022), 620–620.
- Tolliver, D. G., Hawks, L. C., Holaday, L. W., & Wang, E. A. (2024). Exploring parental incarceration, US government support programs, and child health and well-being: a national cross-sectional study. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 264, 113764.
- Ungar, M., Theron, L., & Hölte, J. (2023). Multisystemic approaches to researching young people's resilience: Discovering culturally and contextually sensitive accounts of thriving under adversity. *Development and Psychopathology*, 35(5), 2199–2213. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423000469>
- Waigel, N., & Lemos, V. (2023). A systematic review of adolescent flourishing. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 19, 79–99. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.6831>
- Zhang, J., & Flynn, C. (2025). How do children describe their experiences of parental imprisonment: A qualitative scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 169, Article 108085. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.108085>