POWER IN OUR TRUTHS:
GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR ENVISIONING FUTURES FREE FROM POLICE VIOLENCE

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LEAVE SPACE AT THE TABLE FOR THE PEOPLE WHO ARE EXPERIENCING THESE INJUSTICES. CHANGE CANNOT HAPPEN WITHOUT HEARING US OUT AND GIVING US THE SPACE TO BE IN THE DISCUSSION AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS.

- 21 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (NEW YORK)
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IMPORTANT NOTE

This is a time of tremendous transformation during which we acknowledge that gender norms are a social construct built on a false binary. We recognize that gender and how we claim our identities is evolving across the spectrum. In response, the language we use to describe ourselves continues to transform and grow.

Some of the content in this report may be triggering. We urge readers to prioritize their wellness and self-care while engaging with the text.

SUGGESTED CITATION


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Decades of research show that young people of color have less positive attitudes toward police and the broader criminal legal system. These studies suggest that race is a strong predictor of young people’s attitudes toward police. While much of this research typically examines the attitudes and experiences of boys of color, a small but growing cadre of researchers have called attention to the racial-gendered dimensions of police violence among girls and gender-expansive young people of color. Indeed, girls and gender-expansive young people of color contend with police violence in many forms, including physical assault, verbal harassment, and sexual violence, in various settings – their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. However, in mainstream discourse and research, little consideration is given to girls and gender-expansive young people of color.

The data presented in this report is part of a broader survey in which we asked girls and gender-expansive young people of color about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heightened visibility of systemic racism on their mental health. Here, we highlight our findings on participants’ feelings about police and police violence. We also offer insights into their ideas for how decision-makers can address police violence and advance safety in their communities.
POLICE “MAKE ME FEEL FRIGHTENED”

As a society, young children of color are socialized to take additional precautions when interacting with the police. The “police talk” is considered a rite of passage within communities of color, in which parents teach their children, mainly their young boys of color, how to manage their tone of voice and body movements when interacting with police in an attempt to avoid police violence. From a young age, this socialization frames police violence as an issue that marginalizes girls and gender-expansive young people of color by subtly conveying that they are not likely victims of police violence due to the “protections” of their gender identity. However, studies have found that race significantly impacts the extent to which girls and women feel safe during police interactions.

Aligned with previous research findings, our study showed that 53.6% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am afraid of police officers” (Figure 1). Furthermore, when asked about their sense of safety in encounters with police, 63.2% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I feel safe in encounters with police officers” (Figure 2). Moreover, 54.3% of girls and gender-expansive young people of color either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I fear I may be a victim of police brutality” (Figure 3).

**Figures:**

- **Figure 1:** “I am afraid of police officers”
  - Strongly Agree: 21.1%
  - Agree: 32.5%
  - Neither: 34.2%
  - Disagree: 7.9%
  - Strongly Disagree: 4.4%

- **Figure 2:** “I feel safe in encounters with police officers”
  - Neither: 28.1%
  - Agree: 7.3%
  - Disagree: 31.6%
  - Strongly Disagree: 6.1%

- **Figure 3:** “I fear I may be a victim of police brutality”
  - Neither: 29.8%
  - Agree: 36.8%
  - Strongly Agree: 17.5%
  - Disagree: 9.6%
  - Strongly Disagree: 0.9%
“AS A YOUNG BLACK WOMAN, I’M IN A CONSTANT STATE OF FEAR.”

While police violence negatively impacted all young people, the impact of witnessing police violence was especially harmful to Black girls and gender-expansive young people. A disaggregated data analysis showed that 75.4% of Black girls and gender-expansive young people either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement “I fear I may be a victim of police brutality” (Figure 4). This percentage was over 20% higher than the rate for all girls and gender-expansive young people of color.

It is perhaps not surprising that Black girls and gender-expansive young people report feeling the most likely to be a victim of police brutality, given their lived reality in the United States. Studies have found that Black girls, in particular, report more frequent police stops, arrests, and violent encounters with police than non-Black girls of color. Yolander, et al. found that Black girls’ attitudes toward police were significantly more negative than white girls. This study cites personal and vicarious experiences of police misconduct (e.g., witnessing or hearing about police misconduct aimed at a family member, friend, or in the media) as a strong predictor of Black girls’ negative perceptions towards police.

In our survey, clear patterns emerged in how Black girls and gender-expansive young people described their feelings toward police officers and police violence as connected to the intersection of their race and gender. Here are some open-ended responses we heard from Black girls and gender-expansive young people:
“As a Black woman I’ve consumed so many of these videos over a lifetime that, depending on my headspace of the day it can range from numb to grief to anger.”

-24 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (NEW YORK)

“As a young Black woman, I’m in a constant state of fear which causes a heightened sense of awareness. I truly don’t feel safe anywhere. I also have younger siblings who I worry about constantly.”

-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

“Being a Black individual during the pandemic, losing family income, not getting to experience most of my teens, and then constantly witnessing police brutality made me emotionally numb. I couldn’t watch it and didn’t understand how others could continue to. It felt disgusting to me because at some point I felt like people were just seeing Black pain as entertainment.”

-20 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OREGON)

POLICE VIOLENCE “MAKES ME LOSE FAITH.”

Consistent with the literature on youth attitudes toward the police, findings in this study suggest a lack of widespread trust in the police among girls and gender-expansive young people of color. Nearly 70% of survey participants (67.6%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I trust police officers in general” (Figure 5). In open-ended survey responses, several participants echoed these sentiments when describing how watching videos of police violence makes them feel. One participant expressed,

“"I TRUST POLICE OFFICERS IN GENERAL"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**FIGURE 5**

67.6% of girls and gender-expansive young people of color said they do not trust police officers in general.

ALL PARTICIPANTS (N=114)

*Percentage of participants who strongly disagreed or disagreed.
“It makes me lose faith in people knowing that this level of state-sanctioned violence is still allowed to happen without solid repercussions for those committing these acts of violence.”
-22 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (HAWAII)

Another young person remarked,

“I feel very frustrated that most of the cops I see in the “justice” system abuse their authority as an officer, but not much can be done despite the efforts of BIPOC individuals fighting for their rights. I also feel nauseous knowing that police brutality can even happen to a close friend of mine in my own community.”
-18 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

“WE NEED NEW STRUCTURES”: ENVISIONING A WORLD BEYOND POLICE VIOLENCE

Amid pervasive distrust in police and the broader criminal legal system, girls and gender-expansive young people of color proposed actions and systemic solutions toward advancing justice and safety within their communities. In the open-ended survey questions, we wanted to know young people’s thoughts about how to address police violence. These survey responses included a diverse array of suggestions. For example, several participants suggested deeper accountability through the legal system and reform initiatives, including cultural competency training.

As one participant states,

“I believe that those police officers should be fired and prosecuted legally. I believe extensive hiring should occur for police officers that include research on racist histories. As well as they need to live in the communities they patrol. Once in the workforce, they should be required to attend at least some form of therapy while they are active. In addition, more community-based teams should be composed that work alongside the police.”
-28 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (COLORADO)

Several participants discussed addressing police violence as a systemic issue that could not be remedied through reform initiatives. In the words of one participant, “Systemic issues require systemic solutions. Reform does not always equate to harm reduction” (23 years old, Hispanic/Latinx/e, they/them, Idaho). Another participant described the need for deeper learning about
the historical legacy of policing as an extension of chattel slavery and how this racist history persists:

“I think people need to learn the history behind the police. Their purpose was to hunt down run-away enslaved people and keep them in check. They are built on racism just like this country. Police need to be reevaluated and regulated for them to actually “serve and protect.”

-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

Among the most common responses we heard from young people was the call to defund the police. These responses were often accompanied by suggestions to redirect funding towards community-based safety infrastructures and resources. One participant declared, “we need new structures that do not involve the police at all, are community-led and community-driven, and are decentralized from the state” (23 years old, Hispanic/Latinx/e, they/ them, Idaho). Another participant offered the following suggestion,

“The FIRST step should be to defund the police and reallocate the funds into community resources. No amount of de-escalation or cultural awareness training will change that police are meant to uphold white supremacy and will always be violent. We need to get the police off the streets altogether.”

-22 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (CALIFORNIA)

These sentiments were echoed by another participant who shared detailed insights for how funds could be invested to promote safety and healing:

“I think we need to defund the police and invest in better social infrastructure. We should have universal healthcare, easy access to mental health services and medication, stronger mental health interventions in schools, better funding for schools and harm reduction programs as well as safe and free housing. I also believe that there needs to be a cultural shift of what justice and accountability means where it isn’t punitive.”

-28 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (MINNESOTA)
Across responses, girls and gender-expansive young people of color were clear that police violence is an issue of deep concern and that the culture of policing in the U.S. requires significant change. As young people expressed their ideas and visions for how safety could be realized in their communities, what remained evident was their desire for their voices to be heard and centered in efforts to seek solutions:

“Police brutality is not a one size fits all solution type of problem. There needs to be a community-based approach in reimagining policing and abolishing the current police system since it’s causing more harm than good. In order to keep a community safe and thriving there needs to be dialogue on reframing what safety and care means.”

- 19 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OREGON)
The deaths of Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, and George Floyd at the hands of police officers catalyzed civil unrest and focused the collective consciousness on the epidemic of police violence in the United States. While awareness about the pervasiveness of police violence has expanded in public discourses, the lived experiences and narratives of girls and gender-expansive young people of color remain largely invisible. The dominant perception of police violence victims and survivors often does not include the actual reality of girls and gender-expansive young people of color who are also severely harmed by police violence. This report offers a step in understanding the impact of police violence on girls and gender-expansive young people of color and, most importantly, their visions for how we can collectively move toward a future free from police violence.

Across this nation, girls and gender-expansive young people of color continue to lead the fight to end police violence and other oppressive power structures that cause harm and disruption in their communities. As a team of Women of Color researchers and scholar-activists, who have our personal connections to issues of over-policing, we write this report with the intent that it be used as an advocacy tool in this broader movement. We hope this report underscores the urgent need for further initiatives that amplify the leadership of girls and gender-expansive young people of color. We must work alongside them and honor their expertise as thought partners as we collectively reimagine new structures that will genuinely produce safety for all of us.
THE NEW GENERATION IS STEPPING UP AND MAKING CHANGE WITH OR WITHOUT DECISION MAKERS.

- 17 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OHIO)
ENDNOTES


