POWER IN OUR TRUTHS:

GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR SPEAK TRUTH ABOUT HOW VIDEOS OF POLICE BRUTALITY DETRIMENTALLY AFFECT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

AUTHORS
Amina Patricia Anekwe
Lauren C. Mims, Ph.D.
Jamelia N. Harris, Ph.D.
K. Shakira Washington, Ph.D.
Erykah Weems, M.A.Ed.
“IT HAS TAKEN A HUGE TOLL ON MY MENTAL HEALTH AND I HAVE BECOME A SHADOW OF MYSELF.”

- 26 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER, (NEW YORK)
ABOUT JUSTICE + JOY NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE

At Justice + Joy National Collaborative, our goals are to achieve collective power to advance justice, establish affirming social narratives, and build ecosystems of support with and for girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color. We envision a world in which all cis and trans girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color can achieve their potential and live unapologetic, liberated lives without fear of violence or injustice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We send a special heartfelt thank you to the 121 girls and gender-expansive young people of color who took the time to thoughtfully complete our survey. Your dedication, wisdom, and willingness to share your lived experiences is invaluable.

This work is made possible with the support of:

This work would not be possible without the leadership of Fellows from across the country:

Genisus Holland, Virginia
Monique Kitnikone, Hawai‘i
Chloe Williams, California

We would also like to thank members of the Homeplace Research Collective at NYU for their valuable feedback on the draft.

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

When George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were murdered by the police, the videos were widely circulated on television and across various social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, TikTok). Previous research has found that viewing these murders, and other race-related traumatic experiences captured on video can negatively impact young people of color. For example, in a national sample of 302 African American and Latinx/e adolescents aged 11-19 years old, Tynes and her colleagues found that adolescents who reported frequent viewership of viral videos of police shootings and immigrant detainment experienced higher levels of depressive and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. In particular, Tynes reported that African American and Latinx/e adolescent girls in her study were more likely to have higher levels of depressive and PTSD symptoms than participants who identified as boys in the study.

While videos, such as those that document police violence, shed light on an important pattern, watching this type of media can cause distress. To learn more about how often girls and gender-expansive young people of color saw viral videos of police brutality, how viewing this type of media made them feel, and what strategies they used to cope with their emotions, we asked a series of questions as part of a broader survey in which we asked 121 participants of color about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heightened visibility of systemic racism on their mental health. Our findings detail how girls and gender-expansive young people of color felt about seeing and watching videos of police violence on social media. We also center their voices to spotlight their coping strategies. We encourage readers to listen, learn from, and take action with and for girls and gender-expansive young people of color because there is power in our truths.
When asked how often they saw videos of police brutality in the media, most (91%) of the girls and gender-expansive young people of color who completed our survey indicated that they saw videos of police brutality most days or sometimes (Figure 1). Just 1% indicated that they saw videos of police brutality every day, and only 8% indicated that they never saw videos of police brutality.

When asked whether they took breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including news reported on social media, because of seeing incidents of police brutality, more than three-quarters of girls and gender-expansive people of color (80%) endorsed that they had taken breaks (Figure 2). Twenty percent reported that they had not taken a break.

**Figure 1**
*How often do you see videos of police brutality in the media?*

- Never: 8%
- Sometimes: 13%
- Most Days: 78%
- Every Day: 1%

**Figure 2**
*“I took breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media, because of seeing incidents of police brutality.”*

Yes 80%
No 20%
To better understand participants’ initial reactions to seeing viral videos of police brutality, we provided three possible reactions (anger/frustration, fear, sadness/grief, no reaction) and an additional “other” write-in option. Participants were instructed to check all the initial reactions that applied (Figure 3).

Of the 121 girls and gender-expansive young people of color:

- 80.2% (n=97) reported that their initial reaction to viewing viral videos of police brutality was anger/frustration.
- 76.9% (n=93) reported sadness/grief as their initial reaction to viewing viral videos of police brutality.
- 59.5% (n=72) attested that their initial reaction to viewing viral videos of police brutality was fear.
- 9.1% (n=11) attested that their initial reaction to viewing viral videos of police brutality was no reaction.
- 8.3% (n=10) reported having a different initial reaction to viewing viral videos of police brutality that were not specified in the identified categories.

**Figure 3**

**What is your initial reaction to these videos? Check all that apply.**
To provide space for girls and gender-expansive young people of color to write about how they felt after viewing videos of police brutality, we asked an open-ended follow-up question: “In the space provided, please further explain how these videos make you feel.” Seventy-nine individuals answered the follow-up question. Using a basic thematic analysis, seven themes were identified from the data, with feeling angry being reported most often ($n = 15$), followed by feeling disappointed ($n = 14$), feeling vulnerable or worrying excessively about the dangers of the world ($n = 14$), and feeling multiple emotions ($n= 14$).

**FEELING ANGRY**  
Fifteen girls and gender-expansive young people of color described how the videos made them feel angry. They described feeling angry because they felt like Black and brown communities were constantly dehumanized by the police, and they felt like “there is so much work to be done.” They expressed feeling upset and angry that the police “that are supposed to protect our communities are the ones inflicting the most harm on it.”

“I get a knot in my stomach because there’s no reason police officers should lose humanity for people.”  
-24 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (NEW MEXICO)

“The videos make me feel anger towards the police because they are so violent. I feel there are other ways instead of violence.”  
-14 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (CALIFORNIA)

“Sometimes it’s an unexplainable anger and wave of adrenaline rushing through me because I wasn’t able to be there or couldn’t stop this from happening. These situations make me feel queasy and uneasy because in the blink of an eye things just go wrong without any remorse from the very people sworn in to serve and protect its citizens!”  
-23 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (MISSISSIPPI)

**FEELING DISAPPOINTED**  
Fourteen girls and gender-expansive young people of color described how the videos made them feel disappointed. They expressed sentiments that they felt like society was “worsening” or “regressing,” and that made them feel “disappointed,” “defeated,” “disgusted,” and “helpless.” Some wrote that they felt like there was nothing they could do.
“...it makes me feel like all the effort my ancestors and other historical figures have made towards gaining equity and human sympathy was pointless. It's like we're progressing back on the tracks of world peace and serenity.”

-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (CALIFORNIA)

“Makes me feel hopelessness, not being able to do anything to stop the lives lost and police brutality makes me feel fear for my life as a Black woman and fear for my parents, siblings, and Black friends.”

-21 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OHIO)

“They make me feel like there is no hope for peace in the world.”

-15 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (WASHINGTON)

FEELING VULNERABLE OR WORRYING GREATLY ABOUT THE DANGERS OF THE WORLD (N=14)

Fourteen girls and gender-expansive young people of color described how the videos made them feel vulnerable and worry greatly about the dangers of the world. Most expressed fear for their own safety as well as the safety of loved ones around them. They wrote that they thought about how the next murder could be “me,” “my mom or dad,” “my younger siblings,” “someone I am close to,” and/or “friends.” A few mentioned that they were worried to go outside because it felt so unsafe. One participant said it is particularly “scary” because “there is no accountability for officers who are haunting our communities.”

“I feel a sense of worry for my family and loved ones. It makes it difficult to trust the ones who are supposed to protect you.”

-17 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E, SHE/HER (CALIFORNIA)
“It’s frightening and yet it can be relatable, because I know I could be next, or another family member.”

-18 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, OTHER AND MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

“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, MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

“It makes me feel frightened because I think to myself ‘that could be my mom or dad right there’ and it is scary to see how police officers abuse people just because of their skin color. It makes me really scared that one day the police stop either of my parents and deport them since they have no license. It also makes me scared because neither of my parents talks English well and they can understand it but very little so what if the police who don’t know Spanish stop them and is asking them for information but since my parents don’t understand, they make a certain hand movement or something and the police attacks them because of a misunderstanding.”

-17 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX/E. SHE/HER (TEXAS)

FEELING MULTIPLE EMOTIONS

Fourteen girls and gender-expansive young people of color described feeling multiple emotions when seeing videos of police brutality. They often listed three to four different emotions they felt, writing that sometimes their emotions depended on the day or “the headspace” they were in when they saw the video. At times, they described the emotions as being “too much” and “overwhelming.”

“These videos reignite trauma that causes feelings of fear, grief, and anger. However, after seeing these videos many times, it feels like hopelessness.”

-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN SHE/HER (TENNESSEE)

“I feel extreme sadness to picture what the person and their loved ones are feeling during and after these incidents. Disgusted that police and humans can treat others like this, and fear that people in my family that are Black can experience these events.”

-28 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX, ANY PRONOUNS (COLORADO)

“These videos often leave a deep pit in my stomach. I think a lot about my brother who was beaten by a police officer and worry about him and my dad. I also worry about my other two brothers who have luckily not had interactions like that. I feel an urge to scream and I also feel an urge to do something. I just don’t always know what to do about it. I don’t like sharing them because they can be incredibly triggering to people.”

-28 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX, ANY PRONOUNS (MINNESOTA)
“Videos of violence in forms of police brutality just make me feel a mix of anger and grief. The reason I feel anger is because it’s so frustrating that graphic images of people being brutalized/harmed have to be seen for others to care about police brutality and that shouldn’t be the case. As well sadness/grief because police brutality is an ongoing cycle and it’s terrible how common it is.”

-19 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OREGON)

**FEELING SADNESS OR WEARINESS**

Ten girls and gender-expansive young people of color identified feeling sad or weary. Many simply wrote the word “sad.” Other words included “hurt,” “pained,” and “tearful.”

“The videos would bring tears to my eyes and pain... only because I think about my family and if they would’ve gotten an incident like that.”

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

“I become emotionally attached to the victims when I watch the brutality. I almost feel the pain.”

-19 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (NEW YORK)

“I felt very hurt to see this happening and even happening in the very neighborhood I live in.”

-19 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OREGON)

**FEELING EMOTIONALLY NUMB OR SHUT DOWN**

Seven girls and gender-expansive young people of color described feeling numb or shut down, primarily because they saw the videos so frequently in the media. Numbness was often a coping response to address the pain they felt after viewing the media.
“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)

“Desensitized and angry that these things have to be shared in order for people to consider empathizing with Black and brown people.”
-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER, (ALABAMA)

“They made me feel numb, especially in 2020. Just thinking about 2015-2017 when Mike Brown and Sandra Bland were trending topics... It became something I was use to seeing on the internet.”
-25 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, OTHER AND MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (OREGON)

**AVOIDANT (N=4)**

Four girls and gender-expansive young people of color described how they actively avoided watching the videos because they knew watching the videos would be distressing. One participant described how they avoided watching the videos “so it won’t weigh heavy on [their] spirit.”

“I avoid watching those videos. I try to scroll past them. If I do start watching them, I usually only watch the first few seconds. I don’t like seeing violence, even when it’s fake (i.e. in movies or shows).”
-23 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX, SHE/HER (ILLINOIS)

“I can never watch a full video or listen to the sounds.”
-18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (TENNESSEE)

“I don’t watch videos of people suffering, but it usually makes me very angry and sad when I hear about them. I try to desensitize myself so it won’t weigh so heavy on my spirit.”
-21 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (MISSISSIPPI)

“It seems pointless and cruel. I feel uncomfortable and try to avoid engaging in it because it only makes me upset.”
-24 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (NEW YORK)
“I was only 13 years old during the pandemic. What I would see on the news during quarantine scared me and made me think ‘is this what future generations will have to go through again and again and yet still have to fight for change?’ No person should have to go through that or lose their loved ones just because an officer thinks they are above the law.”

- 15 years old, Hispanic/Latinx/e. Other and multiple pronouns (Washington)
We asked girls and gender-expansive young people of color to answer: "What are some practices that have helped you cope (e.g., exercise, starting a hobby, meditation) in response to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic and viewing viral videos of police brutality? (Figure 4). We used thematic analysis to categorize the forms of self-care they reported. Of the 121 girls and gender-expansive young people of color, 32.2% (n=39) reported utilizing psychological self-care practices such as writing, reading, therapy, and intentional disconnect from social media to cope with the images of police brutality (Table 1). The second most reported coping strategy for participants was spiritual self-care. Within this coping strategy, 17.3% (n=21) reported meditation, music, and prayer as salient strategies to address their distress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of police brutality in the media. Next, 16.5% (n=20) reported relationship self-care, including talking to friends, family, community members and/or talking via social media. Physical self-care, such as exercise, walking, yoga, dancing, and hiking was reported by 15.7% (n=19). Last, 11 (9%) engaged in emotional self-care or preserving their happiness by watching television and movies, using social media, and completing various arts and crafts projects.

"CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION, AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE."

-AUDRE LORDE
### TABLE 1: COPING STRATEGIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COPING STRATEGIES</th>
<th>STRATEGIES LISTED BY PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>N = 121</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE</strong></td>
<td>Writing (3)</td>
<td>N = 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journaling (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Therapy (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disconnecting (16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPIRITUAL SELF-CARE</strong></td>
<td>Meditation (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Music (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prayer (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RELATIONSHIP SELF-CARE</strong></td>
<td>Family/Community (4)</td>
<td>N = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Media (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversations (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHYSICAL SELF-CARE</strong></td>
<td>Exercise (9)</td>
<td>N = 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yoga (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walks (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hiking (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMOTIONAL SELF-CARE</strong></td>
<td>Shows/Movies (4)</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tik-Toks (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hobbies (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts &amp; Crafts (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crocheting &amp; Beading (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following word chart (Figure 5) reflects the frequency of how many participants mentioned the previously listed coping strategies in their open-ended responses.
“KIDS NEED MENTAL BREAKS TOO.”

- 18 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER, (TENNESSEE)

“THE STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS TO BE WORKED ON & PRIORITIZED FOR EVERYONE”

- 25 YEARS OLD, AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE, SHE/HER, (IDAHO)
CONCLUSION

In our survey, girls and gender-expansive young people of color reported seeing videos of police brutality in the media on a frequent basis. The negative responses to seeing these videos highlight the detrimental impact of these videos on their mental health, which is consistent with recent research on vicarious trauma as a result of viewing race-related traumatic experiences captured on video.

Participants’ discussions of the emotional ramifications of viewing these videos should sound the alarm. Girls and gender-expansive young people of color also identified a myriad of adaptive coping strategies they utilized to cope with the stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and watching viral videos of police brutality in the media. Self-care activities are important, but they must also be accompanied by research, policies, and practices that listen to and take action with and for girls and gender-expansive young people of color.


