"Their help is not helping": Policing as a Tool of Structural Violence against Black Communities

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Abstract

Objective: To illustrate Black youth's perceptions of police violence in West Louisville, Kentucky, how they make sense of it, and their responses to it.

Method: The study used qualitative interviews with youth ages 10 to 24 residing in West Louisville. The interviews did not specifically inquire about experiences with police, but the theme emerged so strongly from the overall analysis that the current study was warranted. The research team employed a constructivist analytic approach.

Results: The analysis yielded two overarching themes, each with several subthemes. The first theme was Black youth experience profiling and harassment by police, with subthemes focused on youth feeling targeted, youth recognizing policing as a tactic to remove them from their community, and youth being acutely aware of police-involved violence. The second theme was Black youth's experiences with the police cultivates mistrust and unsafety, with subthemes including police seen as more likely to harm than help, police not resolving injustices against Black people, and police presence escalating conflict in Black communities.

Conclusions: Youth's narratives regarding their experiences with police highlight the physical and psychological violence enacted by police who come into their community, supported by the law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Youth recognize systemic racism in these systems and how it affects officers' perceptions of them. The long-term implications of persistent structural violence these youth endure has implications on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Solutions must focus on transforming structures and systems.

On September 23, 2020, the world watched as the Kentucky Attorney General announced that the police officers responsible for killing Breonna Taylor in her home would not be

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indicted on any charges related to her death (Cameron, 2020). For the Black community in Louisville and across the United States (US), this case was another of many examples of the death of an unarmed Black person at the hands of police. Names like Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland are all too familiar reminders of the inherent danger of police interaction for Black Americans (Poon & Patino, 2020). This imminent danger forces parents of Black youth to engage in specific education and preparation of their children for any encounter with law enforcement (Badolato, Boyle, McCarter, Zeoli, Terrill & Goyal, 2020). Many Black youth know the names and stories of Tamir Rice, Stephon Clark, and Antwon Rose—unarmed Black *children* shot and killed by police within minutes of initial contact. The motto of law enforcement across the country is "to protect and serve." Many white residents' experiences with law enforcement are consistent with that narrative. Their children are taught that police officers, although strangers, are safe people who can be trusted for help in any situation. This highlights the drastically different experiences of Black compared to white communities in the US, particularly in racially segregated cities such as Louisville, Kentucky (DeSoto, 2018). As civil unrest following the killing of Breonna Taylor alerted the world, Black Louisvillians— like Black Americans nationwide—are disproportionately impacted by both interpersonal violence and the structural violence that drives it (Boyd, 2018).

Drawing from the work of Max Weber, the state and violence are theoretically and historically connected (Weber, 1918). The very definition of the state as a sociopolitical agent centers on the legitimization of its ability to utilize violence (or the threat of violence) to protect its interests, thus employing a narrative of "security" or "national defense" rather than violence (Greenberg, 2019). In the US, the interests of the state are focused on political economy—how to leverage power and resources to gain more power and resources. This begs the question: for whom? Since the Europeans colonized North America, the answer has been white people; white supremacy has governed US national interests from its inception (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Thus, the violence of genocide and chattel slavery passed under the guise of security, civilization, and progress. Over time, the mechanisms of force to protect the state's interest have evolved (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Phelan & Link, 2015). One structure that emerged is policing; law enforcement officers represent the state and thus enforce structural racism (Boyd, 2018). Violence enacted by police officers, then, embodies both direct as well as structural violence.

A term credited to Johan Galtung (1969), structural violence is framed in terms of inhibiting human beings' full actualization of their potential, and is defined as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual" (p.168). Farmer and colleagues (2004) further explain structural violence as "social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way. The arrangements are *structural* because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are *violent* because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities)" (p. 1686). The kinds of injury inflicted can take many forms, from physical to psychological, social to political—all of which inhibit the realization of the full potential of whole communities of people. This article explores the lived experiences of Black youth in Louisville, Kentucky, and the impact of police violence on their lives. Considering the current calls to abolish the police (Kaba, 2020), understanding the lived experience of Black

youth is critical in helping us collectively reimagine public safety that works for all people. Specifically, we seek to answer three research questions: 1) How do Black youth in West Louisville perceive policing and police violence? 2) How do these youth make sense of police violence? And 3) How do these youth respond to police violence?

Background & Context

Historically, the concept of policing has often been rooted in the oppression of Black communities to maintain a social hierarchy (Durr, 2015; Spruill, 2016). American policing in the South originated with slave patrols—groups of armed, white men tasked with maintaining order and disciplining enslaved populations, returning runaway slaves, and investigating unlawful gatherings to prevent insurgencies (Hadden, 2001; Miller, 2012). Throughout slave-holding states, some governments began to legitimize slave patrols through legislation, while others gave jurisdiction to county governments to form militias to protect their territories. After the passage of the *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*, "federal commissioners were appointed for every county in the country, charged with responsibility for enforcing the law" (Stolberg, 2012, p. 1680). Although slave patrols ended following the Civil War, the foundations they laid led to the emergence of law enforcement throughout the Reconstruction period, Jim Crow era, and modern-day policing (Stolberg, 2012).

Since even before the US came to exist, Black Americans were placed in stratified systems of social control. Although some argue that we are living in a post-racial America, these systems still exist and are more covert (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The foundation of the criminal justice system and subsequent mass incarceration of Black bodies was embedded in the US Constitution. A long-standing myth in American history is that the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequently the 13th Amendment granted Black Americans freedom and equality. Section One of the 13th Amendment contains a clause that has irrevocably shaped the landscape of the US penal system: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for a crime* whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States…" (U.S. Constitution. amend. XIII; emphasis added). The function of slavery was thus preserved and constitutionally permitted through the criminalization of Blackness and the evolution of convict leasing and prison labor (Browne, 2007).

In the 1980s, the country saw an escalation of the War on Drugs, which was initiated after the influx of crack cocaine in minority communities (Grogger & Willis, 1998). During this period, the federal government strongly incentivized police departments with monetary and in-kind incentives to make drug policing a priority (Alexander, 2010). This increased the incidences of racial profiling, surveillance, and overpolicing in minority communities, which violates the individual rights and equal protections clause provided in the US Constitution (Alexander, 2010).

In the midst of the War on Drugs, President Bill Clinton took a "tough on crime" stance by signing the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994* into law. The act, arguably the most comprehensive crime bill in US history, provided funding for community police officers, drug courts, billions of dollars for prison construction, and instituted the "three strikes" statute, which handed mandatory life sentences to individuals

convicted of a felony after two or more previous convictions (Greene, 2002). This legislation followed the 1986 law that introduced mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses and judges handing out harsh sentencing in the wake of the crack cocaine epidemic. Sentencing was more severe for crack cocaine, which was primarily found in Black and Latinx communities, than powdered cocaine, which was more frequently used in white communities. This legislation filled prisons disproportionately with Black and Latinx men (Alexander, 2010). Once individuals enter the carceral system, they are denied the rights of citizenship guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. Mass incarceration of Black and brown people and their subsequent exclusion from full participation in citizenship reinforces white supremacy.

Contemporary trends in policing highlight three strategies that affect Black communities and youth disproportionately. Disorder-focused policing grew out of the broken windows theory (Harcourt, 1998), which posits that higher level crime can be reduced or prevented by aggressively policing lower level physical and social incivilities such as loitering, littering, and other disorderly behaviors. It gained notoriety when New York City utilized this approach to justify hardline policing practices such as stop and frisk in the late 1980s and 1990s, ostensibly to reduce homicides and violent crime. While there were dramatic reductions in violent crime, questions remain regarding contributions of this approach in achieving those reductions (Simmons, 2014). Further, the policing strategies raised questions about the use of police surveillance in Black neighborhoods and the violations of residents' civil liberties. Similarly, an emphasis in the 1990s and 2000s on using data to improve the effectiveness of policing led to hot-spotting—dispatching police proactively to patrol areas where crimes were occurring (Rosenbaum, 2006). Some evaluations of this approach suggest modestly positive effects on crime (Meijer & Wessels, 2019); however, the practice has raised concerns about the differential surveillance and aggressive policing in Black communities. Further, this strategy may exacerbate racial inequities in arrest since the increased police presence will result in more arrests in Black communities for crimes that would go undetected and unpunished in communities with lower levels of police surveillance (Richardson, Schultz & Crawford, 2019). A third strategy, community policing, focuses on embedding police in communities using tactics designed to build relationships between community members and the police officer assigned to patrol the community (Greene & Mastrofski, 1988; Mastrofski, Willis & Kochel, 2007). A large national evaluation conducted in 2002 did not indicate a relationship between community policing and reduction of violence in urban areas, but added evidence to the "importance of structural indicators of disadvantage" as "powerful predictors of urban violence" (MacDonald, 2002, p. 611).

Policing impacts Black youth in a multitude of ways, especially within the context of schools, neighborhoods, and recreational spaces, yet policing strategies were not developed with a sensitivity to the lived experience of Black communities nor the youth who reside within them. The education system has a long history of working closely with police using district-run police forces, school resource officers, and other partnerships. As early as the 1950s, school districts created their own district-run security units to patrol integrated schools, later evolving to full-scale police forces like the Los Angeles School Police Department and Indianapolis Public School Police (Brown, 2006). Over the next three

decades, structural racism prevented many Black families from gaining access to quality housing, education, and jobs (Bailey et al., 2017). Public officials failed to address the inequities Black families experienced in housing, employment, and education; instead, they labeled Black youth as delinquent, at-risk, violent, and criminal (Hinton, 2016). During this time, schools enforced the use of metal detectors, security cameras, locker searchers, and zero tolerance policies imposed on mostly Black and Latinx students (Heitzeg, 2009). Zero tolerance policies were paired with mandates for schools to refer students to local law enforcement (Wald & Losen, 2003). These factors, along with many others (i.e., racially inequitable discipline practices) led to the creation of a new mechanism of structural violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, pushing Black youth out of the education system and into the criminal justice system, exacerbating educational inequities (Mallett, 2016).

Overpolicing occurs in neighborhoods where Black youth reside as well as recreational spaces frequently used by this group. Policing practices such as stop-and-frisk disproportionately impact Black youth, which strain a sense of belonging to their neighborhood and social world (Stoudt et al., 2011; Wallace, 2018). The War on Drugs fueled higher rates of policing in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country, leading to an increase in Black youth experiencing interactions and discriminatory encounters with police (Alexander, 2010; Stewart et al., 2009). Toro and colleagues (2019) found the psychological well-being of Black youth decreased each time a Black youth was stopped by police. This holds critical implications for the mental and psychological health of Black youth who live in overpoliced neighborhoods. Spaces like public parks, community centers, and even shopping malls where youth socially gather become sites of discriminatory policies and practices enforced by police. The US has a long history of using police to enforce rules and regulations regarding the use of shared public space that disproportionately penalize Black youth. The Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) "separate but equal" ruling focused on establishing policies and regulations for shared public space, including recreational spaces (Pinckney, Mowatt, et al., 2018; Wiltse, 2007), that are still enforced in present day. For youth like Tamir Rice, who was killed by police playing with a toy gun in a park located next to his local community center, Jordan Davis, who was shot dead while listening to music in a friend's car, and Rekia Boyd, who was shot by an off-duty police officer while in a public park with friends, playing while Black has proven deadly (Mowatt, 2018; Pinckney, Outley, et al., 2018). Black youth experience the structural violence of policing within their schools, neighborhoods, and even while engaging in recreation. Few studies have examined policing through the lived experience of Black communities and Black youth. This study addresses that gap by examining youth's narratives regarding the police as they reflect on violence and other experiences in their neighborhood and its impact on them and their community.

Method

This study is part of the Youth Violence Prevention Research Center (YVPRC) at the University of Louisville, one of five centers nationally designated and funded by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Established in 2015, YVPRC is focused on changing the narrative about violence affecting Black youth, bringing structural violence to the foreground rather than

problematizing youth who have little control over their contexts. This racial justice approach to preventing violence among youth is grounded in the understanding that "a research emphasis on the reduction of personal violence at the expense of a tacit or open neglect of research on structural violence leads, very easily, to acceptance of 'law and order' societies," as well as the fact that interpersonal violence is often a reaction to the effects of structural violence (Galtung, 1969, p. 184). Grounded in Paulo Freire's pursuit of liberation through critical consciousness and praxis (Freire, 2018), YVPRC initiated and facilitated public dialogue about structural violence and systemic racism through a three-year media campaign entitled "Power by Practicing Pride, Peace & Prevention." Details of the campaign are available at pridepeaceprevention.org.

Participants

The data for this study emerge from YVPRC's *Changing the Narrative* study, in which the research team conducted annual interviews with Black youth ages 10 to 24 residing in West Louisville—a community in the urban core of the city shaped by historic and contemporary racism—about their experiences and perceptions regarding their community, their identity, violence, and the campaign. In addition to YVPRC faculty and graduate students, the research team included the Louisville Youth Voices against Violence (LYVV) Fellows, a cohort of youth from West Louisville hired by the university to participate in development activities and to work with the research team on the campaign. The specific interviews included in the present study were conducted in 2017 and 2018, prior to Breonna Taylor's death in 2020. Interviews from these two years were selected because the topic of policing was unsolicited yet prominent in the data. In both years, the interview guide did not explicitly ask participants about their perceptions of nor interactions with the police. Youth were asked questions including: "What is your neighborhood like?" "What is it like to be a young [self-identified race/ethnicity and gender] living in your community?" "How would you define violence?" and "What behaviors make you feel cautious or afraid you or someone else might get hurt?" Participants' unsolicited discussion of police was so pervasive throughout the interviews as to warrant the current study (and added questions about police in 2019 and 2020).

The sample size for the overarching study targeted 40 youth per year, stratified by age group (15 participants in middle or high school—ages 11–18; 25 participants post high school—ages 19–24). Unlike quantitative studies, standardized sample size calculations do not exist for qualitative research; instead, sample size is contingent on various considerations (Baker & Edwards, 2012) and should aim to achieve saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Bowen, 2008). The sample was included more post-high school age youth because we were able to collect quantitative surveys through the schools for the school age youth, but were relying solely on interview data for the older group; Green & Thorogood (2004) suggest that thematic saturation is typically reached by 20 participants. Eligibility criteria included: residing in one of the nine neighborhoods of West Louisville, being 10 to 24 years of age, ability to converse in English, and willing to consent to audio recording of the interview. From 74 individual youth interviews, 53 participants discussed experiences with police, and are thus the sample for the current study. All research protocols were reviewed and approved by the University of Louisville Institutional Review Board prior to recruiting participants.

Procedure

Local organizations providing various services and safe spaces for young people used their face-to-face and social media contact with youth to help YVPRC recruit a purposive sample to include adequate representation across age and gender (Palinkas, Horowitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015). The youth interviews were conducted by staff, students, and LYVV Fellows who had similar lived experiences to the participant sample. Interviews took place in the YVPRC offices and other public spaces (i.e., library, community center). The research team met weekly during data collection to reflect on their interviews, what they were hearing, and to adapt and align on probing questions as necessary for subsequent interviews. Interviewers obtained active signed consent from participants ages 18 to 24, and both parental consent and youth assent for youth ages 10 to 17. Interviews ranged from 20 to 95 minutes (mean: 45) and were audio recorded for transcription. Participants were provided $50 in compensation for their time. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by Rev.com, a professional transcription service. Following transcription, each transcript was validated for accuracy against the original recording by the team member who conducted the interview.

A constructivist analytic approach guided data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). For each year's data, a subgroup of the research team with training and experience in qualitative analysis, including several individuals who had conducted interviews, conducted open (line by line) coding independently on 12 interview transcripts (Glaser, 1992). The research team grouped initial codes by topic and convened to discuss coding, identify and resolve discrepancies, and develop a list of focused codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The team utilized the most frequently recurring and substantive focused codes to develop a codebook consisting of codes and definitions from the iterative discussions of interview transcripts. The codebook was uploaded to Dedoose (2018); the interrater reliability yielded a Cohen's Kappa statistic of .92, which is universally regarded as acceptable (Neuendorf, 2002). Next, the research team reconvened to discuss and resolve excerpts where there was discrepancy in the codes assigned by different coders. When consensus was reached, the final codebook was used to code all remaining transcripts. After focused coding was complete, the coders met to discuss relationships among the codes and reach consensus on initial themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Re-reading the data segments and comparing the themes back to the data and the overall dataset was used to refine the themes and analytic concepts.

Results

Sample Characteristics

A sample of 74 participants met eligibility criteria and agreed to participate in the overall study. The sub-sample for the current study (n=53) includes only those from the larger study who discussed police in their interview. Table 1 provides demographic data for both samples.

Findings

The qualitative analysis focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of young people in their communities, including what they like and dislike about

their neighborhoods, norms, and attitudes towards violence. Exploration of community experiences revealed police-community relationships and police violence as key concerns and sources of social tension for participants. Two overarching themes emerged from participant narratives: 1) Black youth experience profiling and harassment by police; and 2) Black youth's experiences with police in their community cultivates mistrust and a perception of unsafety. Table 2 summarizes the key themes, including frequencies of endorsement of each sub-theme by participants.

Our findings indicate experiencing racial profiling and harassment and having knowledge of/ exposure to police-involved violence fosters feelings of mistrust and unsafety in the presence of law enforcement. Feelings of mistrust and unsafety increase community-police tension as data indicate the presence of police officers leads to conflict escalation. While further exploring the experiences of racial profiling, police-involved violence, community mistrust of police officers, and escalation of conflict, participants reported that experiences of racism and racial bias undergird law enforcement's treatment of community members. Participants expressed a lack of accountability for police officers who break the law and inadequate resources to protect against police misconduct aggravates the harm police inflict upon the community and creates community mistrust of law enforcement.

Black Youth Experience Profiling and Harassment by Police—When describing life in their communities, participants recounted experiencing racial profiling and harassment from police officers. Profiling and harassment narratives highlighted two parallel experiences: police specifically targeting Black youth and their communities, and police harassment as a method of control or removal of participants and their peers from their communities.

Black youth feel targeted by law enforcement.: When recounting experiences in their community, participants described feeling targeted or pursued by police officers. This feeling of being targeted was characterized by a male participant, age 20, who explained what he disliked about his neighborhood: "The harassment that we get from police. You feel like you can't even come out your own house without being harassed by police and...sometimes just feeling like we're targeted." Another participant, age 17, described what life was like in his community as a Black male: "Oh, we targeted." He continued, clarifying by whom he and his peers were targeted:

> Police. Like right now, just 'cause I got these shoes on, police are gonna be like it's gang-related. Like sometimes I basically just be chilling outside with my big cousin and stuff, police just gonna pull up, search us, think we got a gun. Think we selling dope. Think we're gonna break into someone's car. So it's basically, people judge what you got on or by your skin color.

Participants indicated they were stereotyped based upon false narratives held by police officers who were unfamiliar with their community. One 17-year-old male participant explained that he and his peers were harassed "[b]ecause they was just judging us because of what they heard or something like that. They never actually came there to talk to us. They probably don't know our names." A 22-year-old Black male participant described police perceptions of him and his peers that contributed to the harassment they experienced this

way: "Very stereotypical. Very profiled, in a way. I guess, if you want to look at...I guess, the eyes of a officer or somebody who works with law, they would think, they always have that thought that someone of our race could be up to something." Another male youth, age 20, echoed this sentiment with his own experience:

> It feels like police are more prone to pull you over or suspect you of doing something just because I live in this neighborhood, I'm young, and I'm Black… I've been walkin' out my house … outside my house and not made it outside my parking lot and got stopped by a police. And I've seen it done plenty of times where they just sit and they harass people.

In participant narratives, descriptions of harassment included frequent unwarranted questioning by law enforcement, traffic stops, body and property searches, and excessive neighborhood patrolling. A related subtheme emerging from the data is Black youth's perception that the purpose of the police targeting them is to remove them from the community.

Black youth recognize overpolicing as a removal tactic.: Participants contextualized harassment as a component of a broader criminal justice system that sought to remove them from the communities in which they lived. Based on their interaction, participant narratives described scenarios in which law enforcement officers sought to imprison or harm community members regardless of their innocence or guilt, a 23-year-old male participant stated, "They killing us off for no reason, locking people up for no reason." The same participant described instances of officers conducting traffic stops on members of the community with no explanation:

> It's happened to me a couple times. I mainly see it happen very often, so it's just basically like, it's like they're just trying like … I feel like they're trying to put us in jail, you know what I'm saying? Especially nowadays, it's like, it's getting real hard and rough out here for black people. The police is like, it's like [they] trying to kill us off, they're trying to put us behind a cage, they're just trying to have the whites just running America now, so, but yeah. They mainly just trying to do everything they can like, you know, to put a dude in jail.

Multiple participants articulated lengthy discussions regarding police intentionally removing Black people from the community, with an emphasis on friend and family members who are or have been incarcerated and the subsequent impact of their absence on the community. A 21-year-old male participant expressed that overpolicing in his neighborhood made him feel like his community resembled a police department. The participant explained that he disapproved of the police presence because they were harmful to the community:

> Because their help is not helping. Their only help is to help if you're on probation, they help your probation officer lock you up, to put you in jail. It's basically like cops and robbers and you don't even have to be a robber. You just be Black. You know what I'm saying? So why would you put a police department in the Black neighborhood to lock more people up?

The lack of trust in law enforcement and their motives creates an environment wherein police presence is categorically unwanted in the community.

<u>Black youth are acutely aware of police-involved violence.:</u> As discussed, personal experiences of racial profiling and harassment shape the community context for participants. In addition, broader social awareness of examples of police violence in Louisville and throughout the US further diminished community trust in police officers, as well as in the legal system holding officers accountable for violence. After suggesting a need for policing and criminal justice reform, a 17-year-old male participant cited the 2014 killing of Eric Garner by law enforcement, juxtaposing Mr. Garner's treatment with that of the 2015 Charleston church shooter, Dylann Roof: "Just like this one Black man, he was just trying to make a little money for his family. What the police did? They choke him to death, right? But the one white boy that went in the church, killed like nine people, what'd they do? Took him to Burger King after that." Another male participant, age 22, described the lack of progress in police behavior and accountability over time:

> I think racism and everything is still out there probably just as strong as it was back then… Now, it's killing. Back in the day, they [police] used to smack us or spray us with fire hose or whatever, but now it's like, "Okay, if we don't like you, we can kill you now. If we think you pulling for weapon, we can kill you now. If we think you reaching for the bag … You getting your license, we can still kill you.

A 24-year-old male participant shared a similar perspective while describing how the 2014 police killing of Tamir Rice made him feel uncomfortable and fearful for his own family's safety: "That made me instantly go into defense mode over my brother, 'cause it's just like, he be out here playing. Police be just riding by out of nowhere, and oh … boom, boom, boom. They didn't think to think, 'Oh, well he's just a little kid.'" Police violence contributed to participants feeling as though their rights and liberties were not recognized or honored, and thus they were unable to legally protect themselves. A male participant, age 21, described his feelings on owning a firearm:

> I feel guns are your right, I feel like you should have a right to a gun but at times I feel like Black people are subject to more criticism and more scrutiny when they got a gun or what they're using their gun for or just that it's more of a harassment situation when a Black man has a gun. It's more of a scarier situation when a Black man has a gun. If a Black man was to get pulled over and give an officer his carry concealed license, I bet that officer would immediately ask that Black man to get out the car for his safety. But would he do the same for a white man?

Black Youth's Experiences with Police in the Their Community Cultivates Mistrust and Unsafety—Experiences with law enforcement create substantial distrust for participants, who believe law enforcement would likely harm rather than protect them, and that police do not resolve wrongdoings against Black people in the community. In addition, the youth interviewed were adamant that police presence actually escalated trouble in their community rather than ameliorating it.

Police are more likely to harm Black youth than protect them.: Participants discussed distrust in the role of police officers as protectors; a 22-year-old female participant questioned, "Is your life in good hands with the actual person that's supposed to protect you, as in the police?" A 24-year-old male participant described a similar perspective, stating, "I feel like if you call the police or something, it's not really…I feel like there's not a lot of confidence in that, trying to help violence." For most participants, the presence of law enforcement in their community represented a threat to their safety and wellbeing. A male participant, age 17, described his experience with police officers: "I've seen it with my own two eyes. Police are dirty. They ain't protecting us. They're really not."

While participants wanted to move forward and see improvements in the relationship between law enforcement and the community, negative experiences with law enforcement exacerbated distrust as a 24-year-old male participant described: "I guess, growing up, just the view my community had on the police and stuff like that … It's just hard to get away from it. Even still, you still see a lot of bad things. Even though everyone doesn't have bad intentions, it's just hard to sweep that feeling under the rug, I guess." Numerous negative experiences caused participants to avoid interaction with law enforcement and distrust their intentions when they offer assistance.

Police do not resolve wrongdoings against Black people in the community.: Participants stated that engaging with police officers often did not result in conflict resolution or justice for crimes in the community. Rather, participants described avoiding law enforcement to protect themselves; a 21-year-old male explained: "We don't speak to police in our neighborhood. No, no. Know what I'm saying, 'cause a lotta police ain't right. Not saying all, but most." A male participant, age 17, described his frustration with law enforcement's lack of effort in solving crime in his neighborhood: "It's like they don't care. We can find it out [solve a crime] without everything they have. I know they can find it. We know they can find it out for a fact. It took us less than two days to figure it out."

Participants' mistrust of law enforcement was also apparent in their recognition of instances of police bias. One 18-year-old male described biases held by police officers in his community, saying, "I feel like if you just young and Black in the projects, they feel like you sell drugs or somethin'. You know what I'm sayin'? They might wanna run down on you, check you out, see what's up." A Black female participant, age 24, described how a local police official in Georgia encouraged recruits to kill Black youth in 2017 (Grinberg & Jones, 2017), drawing particular attention to the lack of legal punishment for officers who hurt or kill community members, "What about the video of the cop that now is terminated for saying, 'We only kill Black people?' Oh, they get fired for saying it, but they don't get fired for doing it, 'cause that's in their agenda. It's always been in their agenda."

Police presence escalates problems in Black communities.: Participants described a desire to see a reduction in violence. Yet, they were clear that police presence only increased tension and violence. One male participant, age 23, gave this example:

> I've seen this dude accidentally run a stop sign, and a police pulled him over.
> He took him out the car, had him in handcuffs, and he was asking him all these

questions. Next thing you know, it went from one police to nine police cars just pulled up, I mean like why do you need nine police cars for one dude for just accidentally running a stop sign? It's just a stop sign, you know, just give him a ticket, you know what I'm saying, or you know, just let him go.

In various local initiatives to address violence, the city has focused on policing. Discussing a local government plan to reduce violence, a 24-year-old female participant stated:

I think back a couple months ago, the mayor said that he was gonna increase law enforcement to fight against violence dealing with the youth. I don't really think that's a good idea, 'cause that's gonna create more tension, and have a reverse effect, which will make many youth go into defense mode and automatically think, "Okay, they're gunning after me."

Police presence was associated with heightened awareness to danger and loss of freedom for an 18-year-old female participant who stated, "Nobody wants to be somewhere where there's police on your back, and you feel like you're watched or you don't have freedom." Another participant, a 22-year-old male, recalled how police mistreatment affected him when the police were called to his home:

They just was very rude. They kept telling me to shut up and sit down, and I can't answer my phone and like…I don't know, they put me in handcuffs…I think they put me in handcuffs just because, just because. I've seen them treat other Black males like animals. I've actually seen that in person. They've never done it to me, but I've seen them just slam people for nothing, for nothing… putting their knees and elbows all into their backs and like really for nothing.

Many participants explicitly discussed the influence of racism on police interactions. Participants often described aggressive police tactics that increased tension and escalated community-police interactions. A 16-year-old male participant described the tense community dynamic resulting from a primarily white police force policing a predominantly Black neighborhood:

The African American [community] and mostly Caucasian, white cops, [is] the battle right now. They know the tension between that, they want to get to you and know how scared we are. You're [the police] doing that and you're just causing a big up stir and now you're the face of this or the face of that. You [the police] could have easily prevented that by being polite and coming at them in a different way besides attacking.

Discussion

This study explored Black youth's perspectives on policing in their community of West Louisville, Kentucky, how they make sense of it, and their response to it. Youth reported heightened mistrust of law enforcement owing to negative personal experiences with police and witnessing mistreatment of Black Americans in media and in their communities. This study contributes to an emerging literature highlighting systemic racism in the criminal justice system, subsequent unfavorable consequences to police-community relations, as well as immeasurable harm to Black communities. It is critical to reiterate here that the

interview data collected were not intended to focus on policing; this further emphasizes the importance of police violence as an issue. As individuals employed by the state to protect the interests of the state, police are experienced by young people as the face of the state—or what Greenberg calls "policy in person" (Greenberg, 2019, p.23). As the acting force of the state, youth's experiences also underscore the extent to which their interactions with police emerge from the violent structures of the state—founded, with the country, in white supremacy.

Much contention in the conversation regarding police reform is couched in arguments that law enforcement is being wholly condemned based on the highly visible behavior of a few bad actors, but that many (if not most) individual officers have good intentions (Illing, 2020). In her book on systems thinking, Donella Meadows (2008) reminds us that system purposes "are not necessarily those intended by any single actor within the system" (p. 15). She discusses the three dimensions of any human system: the system components, the interrelationships among them, and the system's purpose. She argues that the components are concrete and thus more visible, the interrelationships less so, and the purpose even less. However, she instructs us on how to determine the actual purpose of a system:

> A system's function or purpose is not necessarily spoken, written, or expressed explicitly, except through the operation of the system. The best way to deduce the system's purpose is to watch for a while to see how the system behaves…Purposes are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals…the least obvious part of the system, its function or purpose, is often the most crucial determinant of the system's behavior. (Meadows, 2008, pp. 14, 15, 17)

The Black youth in our study have observed the police system's behavior. Their observations recounted multiple incidents of Louisville Metro police dehumanizing community members, including the participants themselves. Younger respondents referred to police interactions in more general terms (i.e., "I heard sirens," "I saw a lot of officers in my neighborhood"); older respondents described more specific engagement. In the context of young people's experiences and interactions with police in their community, their mistrust of and response to police officers is understandable. While the widely known "protect and serve" policing mission was acknowledged at the outset of this paper, Black youth participants have not widely experienced or benefited from police protection and service; instead, their lived experiences led them to identify the purpose of the police system in *their* lives: to victimize and control Black communities.

Clearly, local and nationally recognized incidents of police violence resonated with participants. However, personal experiences further incited distrust and diminishing confidence in police. Some of this was based on what participants reported as bias-fueled inappropriate policing. Moreover, participants described police actions ranging from ambivalent, despite apparent danger, to overtly hostile. Study participants also reported frustration owing to undue questioning and frequent stops by police. Contemporary policing models often borrow from strategies predicated upon increasing patrols and patrol activity (i.e. escalating traffic stops, car checks, and pedestrian checks) in "hot spots" for crime (Gladwell, 2019; Sherman, Shaw, & Rogan, 1995). Participants reported being stereotyped as criminals by law enforcement. They attributed this to officers' lack of familiarity

with the communities they police. Community policing may be a useful component of a comprehensive criminal justice reform scheme to help address this challenge. This approach is designed to enhance social cohesion, foster collaboration between community and police, and provide linkage to services for vulnerable individuals (Rukus, Warner, & Zhang, 2018). Despite greater interest in community policing approaches in recent years, implementation is challenging as it is at odds with department cultures emphasizing aggressive, reactive approaches (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Community policing will unlikely address long-standing citizen disillusionment with a perceived lack of accountability for police violence. Despite its increasing popularity among some decision-makers, its success is doubtful without the justice system enacting significant efforts to repair mistrust with racialized communities.

Limitations

As with any study, the current study has several limitations that warrant noting. First, the data analyzed were not collected to address the specific research goals of this study. The current analysis was catalyzed in response to a key theme in the parent study results and are thus primarily descriptive. In addition, the study utilized a purposive sample, limited to youth ages 10 to 24. For the study, the age range aligns with the CDC's definition of youth; in reality, these ages are somewhat arbitrary and may exclude important experiences of those just younger or just older. Further, this is a wide age range spanning several developmental stages, influencing participants' experience, sense-making, and response to police violence. In addition, based on the sample, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to youth of other ages or in other community contexts. However, in qualitative research, generalizability is not the primary aim; the aim is deep understanding. In addition, participants' narratives affirm others' experiences that describe law enforcement as suspicious agents of brutality (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). In addition to the limitations related to the sample, the specific topic of this study was not the focus of the interviews conducted, as they were part of a broader study. Because the research team did not explicitly ask about police, the narratives provided may not be representative. Different themes may have emerged in response to focused questions. This is one reason we decided to limit this study to the two years in which questions about experiences with the police were not asked, so as to not combine the data as if they were directly comparable.

Future Research Directions

In spite of the limitations, this article makes an important contribution to the existing literature and highlights several directions for future research. Specifically, inquiry regarding the perspectives and experiences of Black youth in other cities across the country would aid in understanding the commonality or uniqueness of these experiences and perceptions, as well as how Black youth interpret and respond to structural violence. The present research team intends to conduct parallel analysis on the youth interview data from 2019 and 2020, which did specifically ask about policing, both for additional insight and to compare to the findings from the data that were offered unsolicited. Finally, community action research would be useful in determining the best strategies specific to a community context for ensuring public safety for all residents.

In addition, we know that direct and vicarious experiences with police violence have concerning mental health implications for individuals and communities. Future research should explore these effects more specifically. Nationally representative data indicate that local (statewide) killings of unarmed Black Americans led to 55 million excess poor mental health days among Black Americans (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, & Tsai, 2018). Viewing, reading about, or hearing about police shootings of unarmed Black American men has led to post-traumatic stress symptoms among other Black American men (Lipscomb et al., 2019). Individuals who have experienced more police stops are more likely to report anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms even after controlling for criminal activity (Geller, Fagan, Tyler, & Link, 2014). Exposure to viral videos of Black Americans being shot has been associated with depressive and PTSD symptoms among adolescents (Tynes, Willis, Stewart, & Hamilton, 2019). Further, for youth whose brains are still developing, these experiences contribute to cumulative trauma, toxic stress, and adverse childhood experiences that ultimately harm their health over the life course (Bernard et al., 2020).

Policy Implications

Interests in police violence have risen in social zeitgeist given the high-profile deaths of unarmed Black Americans and increasing global attention of protest movements against police violence. However, participants in this study provide a more granular perspective on these concerns that extend to commonplace interactions with law enforcement personnel. These challenges have policy implications for the operations of policing and its impact on Black American communities.

In local policy responses, some police departments have adopted implicit bias training. Although bias and diversity training demonstrates effectiveness in altering personal beliefs, its benefits are unlikely to accumulate to systemic change or inequity reduction because the system is working as it was designed (Illing, 2020; Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn, 2016; Girod et al., 2016; Pritlove, Juando-Prats, Ala-Leppilampi, & Parsons, 2019). Strategies focused on individual officers do not address how larger structures frame cultures within systems or the policies and practices these structures develop and enact (Pritlove et al., 2019). Thus, policy change should focus on how officers are recruited and trained overall, as well as the intended role of policing in the community.

Study participants reported that the presence of law enforcement reduced the community's safety. This is a paradoxical but not unexpected finding. The presence of uniformed police do not improve feelings of safety in scenarios without perceived threats (Doyle, Frogner, Andershed, & Andershed, 2016). Further, Black Americans report greater anxiety in police interactions, regardless of innocence, than whites (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Participants reported negative experiences with police despite engaging in anodyne activity preceding these interactions. This fostered mistrust of police by the community, representing an inherent failure of the state to execute the stated purpose of policing. Such mistrust can prevent help-seeking activity which leads to heightened social isolation (Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016). When will this context change for Black communities in general, and Black youth, specifically? Policy responses being enacted in several cities across the country

are largely outside of policing, such as expansion of social and mental health services, alternative responders to people in crisis, and civilian review boards. Directly related to policing, policy responses should focus on intentionally building safety and establishing trust. Different approaches are likely to fit different communities based on history, context, and sociopolitical dynamics. However, it is clear that change must occur to protect and serve all communities equitably.

Research on youth violence prevention has traditionally focused on youth themselves and interpersonal violence in which they are involved with virtually no attention to the structural violence waged against them. Galtung (1969) warned against this, and further pointed out that interpersonal violence is often a response to structural violence. This suggests that both must be addressed in order to achieve justice and peace. Given the historical and contemporary harms of policing as a form of structural violence against Black communities in the US, any real transformation *requires* the participation not only of those communities harmed directly, but of all of us.

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Table 1.

Demographics of YVPRC Interview Participants, 2017 & 2018

	Original Sample (n=74)	Sub-Study Sample (n=53)
Demographic Variable	N (%)	N (%)
Age (in years) [*]		
10 – 14	12 (16.6%)	6 (11.3%)
15 – 17	14 (18.9%)	12 (22.6%)
18 – 20	19 (35.8%)	11 (20.8%)
21 – 24	28 (37.8%)	23 (43.4%)
Gender Identity		
Male	40 (54.1%)	26 (49.1%)
Female	34 (45.9%)	27 (50.9%)
Racial Identity		
Black/African American	64 (86.5%)	46 (86.8%)
Mixed Race (Black + 1 or more other races)	8 (10.8%)	6(11.3%)
Other	2 (2.7%)	1 (1.9%)

[*] age of one participant is unknown

Table 2.

Summary of Themes Regarding Police from Youth Interviews, 2017 & 2018

Theme	Frequency n (%)
Black Youth Experience Profiling and Harassment by Police	
Black youth feel targeted by law enforcement.	24 (45.3%)
Black youth recognize overpolicing as a removal tactic	12 (22.6%)
Black youth are acutely aware of police-involved violence	10 (18.9%)
Black Youth's Experiences with Police in the Their Community Cultivates Mistrust and Unsafety	
Police are more likely to harm Black youth than protect them.	9 (17.0%)
Police do not resolve wrongdoings against Black people in the community	19 (35.8%)
Police presence escalates problems in Black communities	16 (30.2%)