



# Community Voices

## A Participatory Approach for Measuring Resident Perceptions of Police and Policing

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*"I believe there are crooked police officers and good officers. They're just like strangers to me. I can't trust you until I know you."*

*- Colony Park resident*

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In far too many jurisdictions, violent crime – and the intensive police presence that often accompanies it – is concentrated in a handful of under-resourced neighborhoods and experienced most acutely by a small share of disenfranchised residents. Yet the communities most likely to experience crime and to interact with police often lack a means to express their views on issues of public safety, policing, and equity in the criminal justice system. Moreover, police lack an ongoing metric of resident voices and perceptions that can help identify issues of bias and distrust and measure progress in addressing them. Existing polls and surveys have not sufficiently captured public perceptions of law enforcement in communities where police relations are most strained. The most common approach, police satisfaction surveys, are typically administered annually, yield low response rates, and result in biased samples that over represent the views of affluent, educated, white people and under represent the experiences of people of color, particularly those residing in impoverished communities.

*Community Voices*, a participatory research project at Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center (Urban), aims to change the ways residents are heard and police are held accountable. The central tenet of the project is that creating an authentic representation of community sentiment towards the police has the capacity to reshape power dynamics between law enforcement and marginalized communities. This is accomplished by:

- (1) working with residents to create a survey, in collaboration with law enforcement;

- (2) fielding the survey with locally recruited and trained interviewers, in partnership with community-based advocacy organization;
- (3) discussing the survey findings with community members and police officers;
- (4) using survey findings to identify changes in policy and practice and securing law enforcement commitment to making those changes; and
- (5) democratizing the survey data and community perspective via web-based public dissemination.

This brief provides an overview of the pilot of *Community Voices* in Austin, Texas, discusses its impact, and includes attachments that provide more extensive details about the findings and related products.

## Project Overview

Successful implementation of *Community Voices* rests on three essential preconditions: available data on police interactions with residents; a local partner with strong ties to the Austin communities most impacted by high crime and intensive police presence; and a police department willing to take part in the project. Urban had established groundwork through [analysis](#) of Austin Police Department's (APD) use of force and traffic stop data. Furthermore, forging a strong partnership with the Austin Justice Coalition (AJC) (see Box 1), which was already engaged in creating substantive change in the city's criminal justice and policing policies, was critical. Finally, the willingness of both former APD Chief Art Acevedo and Acting Chief Brian Manley to be measured and held accountable by a community survey that deliberately over-represents residents in areas with heavy police presence made Austin a suitable jurisdiction in which to pilot *Community Voices*.

The project involved the following steps:

- (1) Kick off meetings with community members and members of APD's leadership team, at which we developed shared goals for the pilot, discussed a map of police use of force, and identified criteria for selecting the neighborhood in which to conduct the survey;
- (2) Separate and joint workshops with residents and advocates to co-create the survey instrument (in English and Spanish), which required several iterations of review and refinement;
- (3) Survey administration in the Colony Park neighborhood of Austin; employing door-to-door, in-person canvassing conducted by locally training community residents in partnership with Urban and AJC staff;
- (4) Separate discussions of the survey findings with community members, advocates, and APD (see Attachments A & B);
- (5) A convening with local advocates, community members, and APD leadership to explore the survey data and its policy implications through a culminating "Data Walk" (see Attachment C). The Data Walk was an opportunity for community members from Colony Park to contribute their voices to the survey findings and to engage in a meaningful conversation with local advocates and APD officers about the data and recommended policy recommendations stemming from them; and

- (6) A list of recommendations for changes in policies and practices for APD that were derived from the Data Walk and designed to elevate the perspectives and experiences of heavily policed residents, minimize police bias and biased policing, engender mutual trust and respect between police and Austin community members, and enhance public safety (see Attachment D).

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### BOX 1

#### About the Austin Justice Coalition

Austin Justice Coalition (AJC) is a grassroots, activist-led organization addressing criminal justice reform at the local level.

AJC aims to meet local community needs, empower and enlighten community stakeholders, mentor youth and young adults, as well as increase political involvement in minority and underrepresented communities throughout Austin.

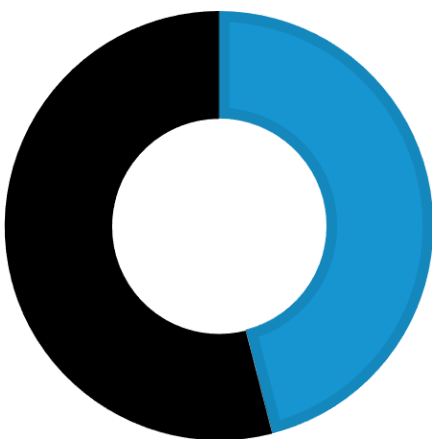
Led by founder Chas Moore and Director of Operations Sukyi McMahon, AJC is a direct and collaborative offspring of the Houston Justice Coalition, founded by Durrell Douglas and Shekira Dennis.

See [www.AustinJusticeCoalition.org](http://www.AustinJusticeCoalition.org) for more information.



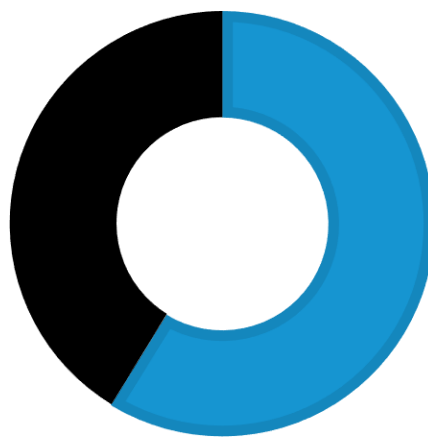
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## Selection of Findings & Recommendations



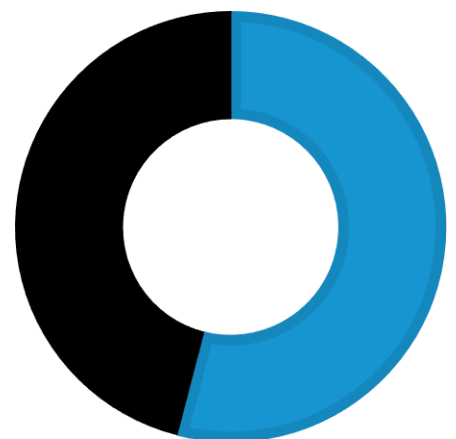
46%

of residents stated police respect people's rights



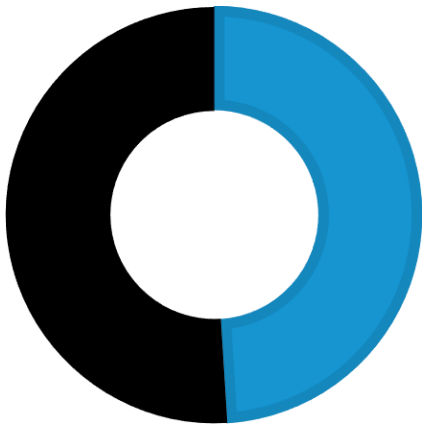
57%

of residents stated police treat them differently based on their race/ethnicity



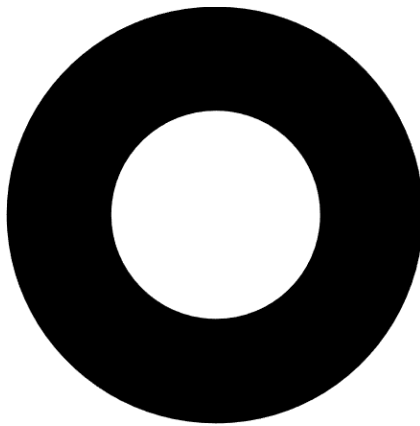
54%

of residents stated that police use too much force against people in their community



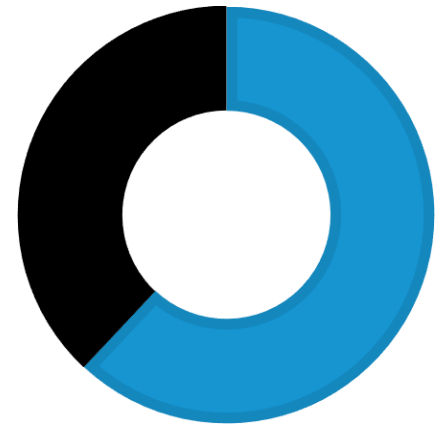
49%

of residents stated that they trust the police



0%

of residents knew the name of their District Representative



62%

of residents stated that they are comfortable approaching the police for help

#### Selection of Policy Recommendations:

1. Ensure that district representatives as well as patrol officers are actively engaged in outreach and partnership efforts with community members
2. Tailor programs to specific communities to increase community participation
3. Implement community or neighborhood “buddy walks” with District Representatives and/or patrol officers and community members
4. Mandate mental health awareness training and evaluations for officers
5. Create an anonymous survey for community members to take when they have an interaction with police
6. Offer Undoing Racism training to all officers
7. Reduce arrests for non-jailable/misdemeanor offenses
8. Implement civilian oversight
9. Provide public access to police data (e.g., online)
10. Publicly release information surrounding police misconduct investigations

# Impact

*Community Voices* produced powerful data representing the perceptions and experiences of people most affected by issues of high crime, intensive policing, and inequity in the criminal justice system in a manner that is valid to both community residents and law enforcement. With these data, community members and police officers collaboratively brainstormed policies to make communities safer and improve police-community relations. Aside from bringing police officers, AJC, and Austin residents together, the *Community Voices* Data Walk and resulting policy recommendations have yielded important impacts.

For example, AJC used the data in conjunction with their organizing skills to successfully challenge the renewal of APD's police union contract in December 2017. This renewal had been the focus of AJC's advocacy efforts due to the contract's power to shape data transparency and accountability measures, training requirements, and the city's budget priorities. AJC's presentation of *Community Voices* data played a vital role in persuading the city council to vote to send the police contract back to the negotiating table.

AJC is also currently informing the contract renegotiation by advocating for the following Data Walk recommendations: 1) provide public, online access to police data; 2) create an independent non-profit that works for civilian oversight of APD; and 3) publicly release information surrounding police misconduct investigations.

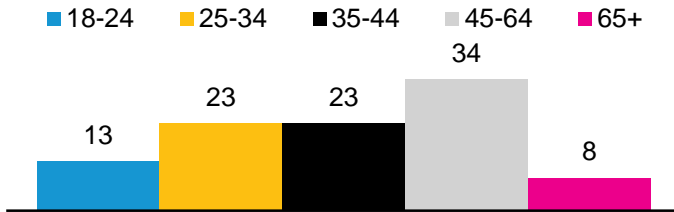
Additionally, AJC has enhanced its focus on mental health as part of its police reform agenda based on the following Data Walk recommendations: 1) mandate mental health awareness training for officers and 2) reduce arrests for non-jailable offenses. The 2017 legislature passed many opportunities to fund mental health assistance at the local level and AJC is working to incorporate these services to divert individuals with mental health issues from jail. They are working to get these policy recommendations passed through city council and APD, as it will require the city to contract with the service providers to assist the people the police bring them.

Urban is currently exploring ways to expand *Community Voices* to other communities. Ideally, survey administration and convenings to discuss findings would occur repeatedly over time, with survey findings publicly available and widely disseminated. Ultimately, the vision is that the *Community Voices* model will serve as a valid, objective, and going metric of – and accountability mechanism for – police performance, as well as a tool for continued engagement between residents and law enforcement.

## Attachment A: Select Community Voices Quantitative Findings

**Figure 1. Age Distribution**

Percent

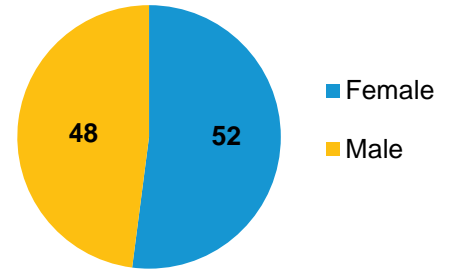


Source: Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

Note: Valid N = 71.

**Figure 2. Gender**

Percent

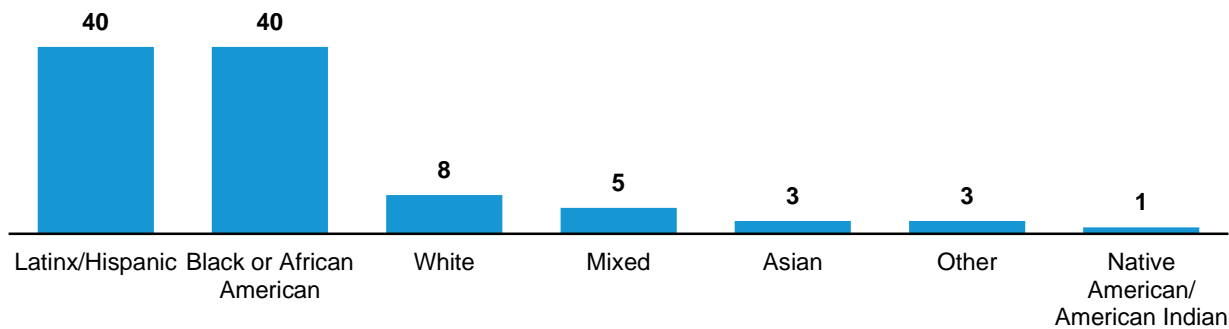


Source: Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

Note: Valid N = 73.

**Figure 3. Race/Ethnicity**

Percent



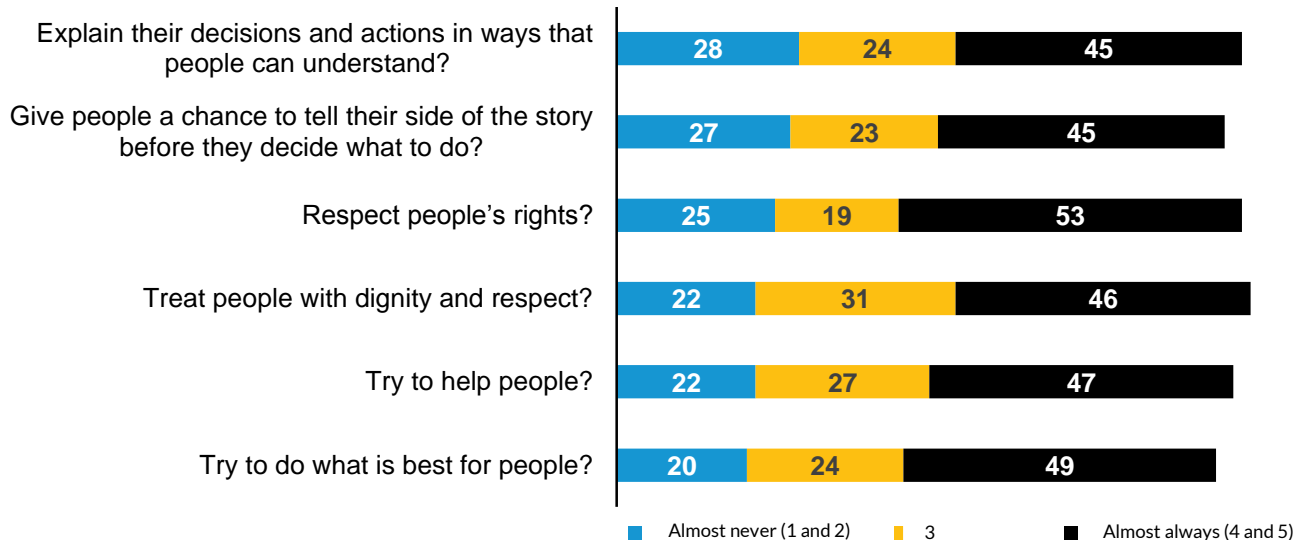
Source: Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

Note: Valid N = 73.

**Figure 4. Perceptions of Procedural Justice**

Percent

Thinking about what you know of police in your community, how often do they...

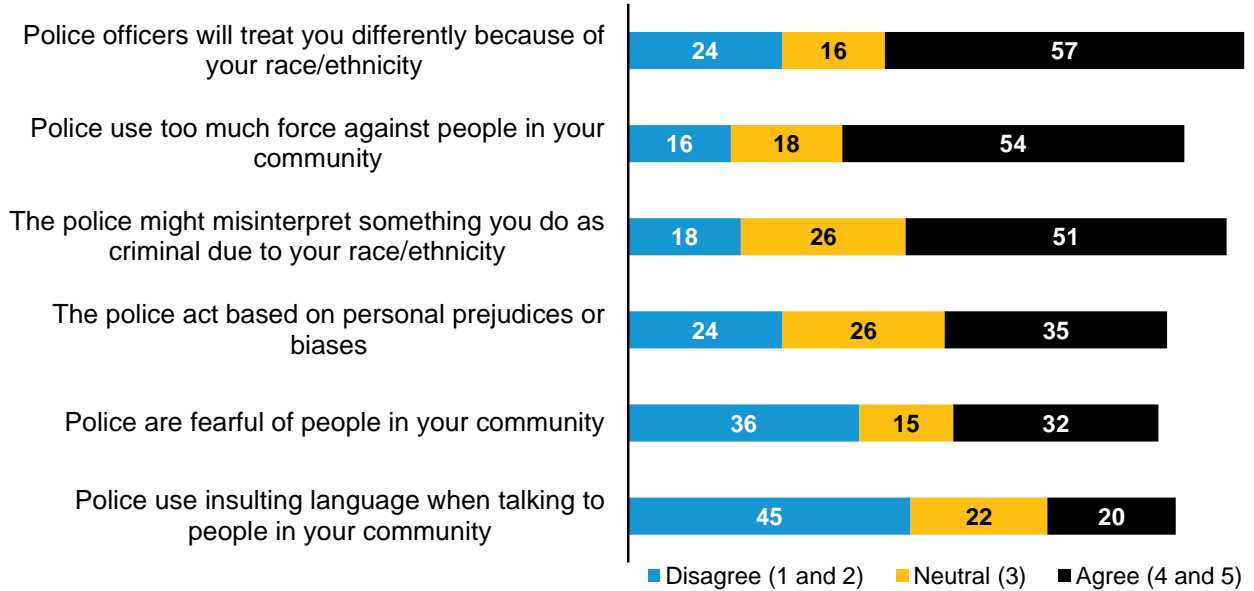


Source: Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

Note: Valid N = 74 for all questions but one. "Treat people with dignity and respect" had a valid N of 73. Responses ranged from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Not all percentages add up to 100 because "I Don't Know" and "Refusals" were left out. Cronbach's alpha = 0.87.

**Figure 5. Perceptions of Officer Fairness/Bias**  
Percent

Thinking about your experiences with police for the following statements, how much do you disagree or agree that

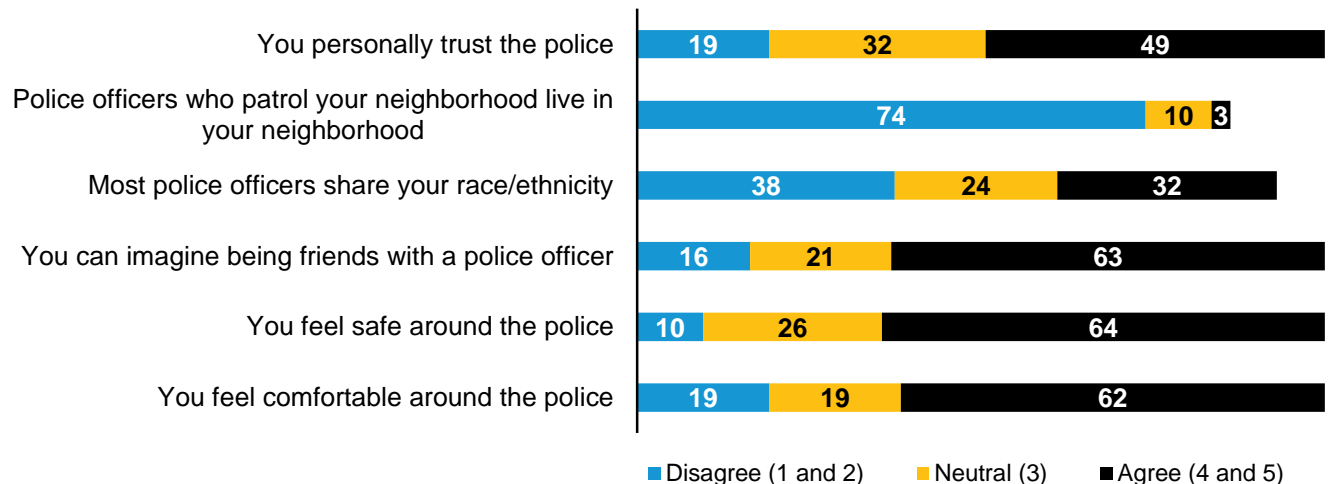


**Source:** Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

**Note:** Valid N = 74 for all questions but valid N = 73 for “police might misinterpret something you do as criminal due to your race/ethnicity.” Responses were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree), I don’t know, and refused. Not all percentages add up to 100 because “I Don’t Know” and “Refusals” were left out. Cronbach’s alpha = 0.824.

**Figure 6. Perceptions of Relatability to Officer**  
Percent

Thinking about the police in your community, how strongly do you disagree or agree with the following statements...



**Source:** Urban analysis of surveys of residents in Austin, TX.

**Note:** Valid N = 73 for all questions except Valid N = 72 for “Most police officers share your race/ethnicity.” Responses were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree), I don’t know, and refused. Not all percentages add up to 100 because “I Don’t Know” and “Refusals” were left out. Cronbach’s alpha = 0.7785.

## Attachment B: Select Community Voices Qualitative Data

### What is the first thing that comes to mind as the most important way for the police to address crime and disorder?

Key response themes included:

- Awareness
- Presence
- Community Participation/Involvement
- Unbiased Policing
- Keeping Order/Surveillance
- Public Communication
- Faster Response time

Sample responses:

- “Being proactive in the community”
- “Active communication with residents, community focus and mutual respect through their presence”
- “They need to respond when we call them as quickly as possible. Sometimes when you call them it takes 30 min or more.”
- “I think they should approach everyone the same and not draw guns first. Cops should give information you ask for. Cops should be more respectable.”
- “Basically, just being fair with the whole community. For a simple traffic stop they will bring 3 cars to intimidate. That's a more tactical enforcement in this certain community. I definitely feel like there is some kind of discrimination.”
- “Man, they don't really do stuff right. They slam people, taze people. You don't really call them unless I need to, unless something is out of control.”

### Why did you disagree or agree with the statement, “you personally trust the police?”

Key response themes included:

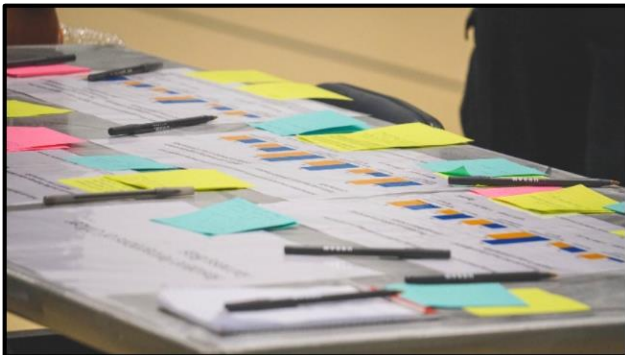
- Reliable
- Dependable
- Present
- Helpful
- Protectors
- Peacekeepers
- Dependable
- Fair
- Trustworthy
- Order
- Mixed experience
- Don't know them
- Helpful, but don't trust them
- Good for some depending on skin color
- No experience with police
- Good and bad apples
- Respect for the law
- Untrustworthy
- Violent/Brutality
- Abusive
- Racially disparate treatment
- Make mistakes
- Negative personal experience

Sample responses:

- “You always depend on them when you have trouble. They help”.
- “Everybody knows there some good ones and bad ones”
- “I believe there are crooked police officers and good officers. They're just like strangers to me. I can't trust you until I know you”
- “I have experienced 2 incidents that occurred one with a black person and one with a Hispanic. The Hispanic person was left to walk and the police was more critical with the black person. The incident was the same thing.”
- “I don't trust them because they take advantage of everybody”
- “Too many bad things have happened to me. I've seen them do bad things to others. The way they manage traffic stops and violent situations doesn't inspire trust”



Attachment C: Data Walk Photos



## Attachment D: Community Voices Data Walk Policy Recommendations

### Outreach/Community Engagement

1. Ensure that district representatives as well as patrol officers are actively engaged in outreach and partnership efforts with community members
2. Tailor programs to certain communities to increase community participation
3. Partner with AISD and the Parks and Recreation Department to ensure programs are offered at all recreation centers
4. Bring community members into conversation regarding what department is doing to reduce crime
5. Implement community or neighborhood “buddy walks” with District Representatives and/or patrol officers and community members
6. Rethink ways to reach out and engage members of the community who do not routinely attend outreach/APD events

### Accountability

1. Use body cameras to assess police-resident interactions to ensure best practices are being implemented. Use footage to train officers with a focus on language (both verbal and non-verbal body language). See [Police Officer Body-Worn Cameras: Assessing the Evidence](#) by Michael D. White
2. Ensure that officers who have received poor feedback or complaints from community members are not back in the field engaging with the same people
3. Utilize the Community Voices findings in trainings for new officers
4. Routinely update community members on new policies
5. Create an anonymous survey for community members to take when they have an interaction with police
6. Ensure that policies and procedures are consistent

### Mental Wellness

1. Mandate mental health awareness training and evaluations for officers
2. Reduce the stigma of seeking mental health and substance abuse services among officers (example jurisdiction: San Antonio)

### Procedural Justice

1. Mandate procedural justice training for all officers
2. Allow community members to explain their side of story before taking action
3. Prohibit the use of demeaning and insulting language and document when officers use such language. Take disciplinary action in those instances

### Youth and Young Adults

1. Engage in more intentional and targeted outreach to young people

### Relatability to Police

1. Offer Undoing Racism training to all officers
2. Require cultural competency training for all officers
3. Offer incentives for officers to live in communities they patrol

## **Enforcement**

1. Reduce arrests for non-jailable/misdemeanor offenses
2. Allocate police presence in various areas by severity of 911 calls rather than just the number of calls
3. Explore alternative policing options
4. Decriminalize marijuana (example jurisdiction: Houston)

## **Transparency**

1. Provide public access to police data (e.g., online)
2. Implement civilian oversight
3. Publicly release information surrounding police misconduct investigations

## **Use of Force**

1. Revise use of force policy
2. Involve community members in use of force and de-escalation trainings