



DEMOCRACY REMIXED:

BLACK YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

A Series on Black and Latino Youth Political Engagement

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The Policing of Black Communities and Young People of Color

Eighteen-year-old Michael Brown's murder by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri has focused the nation's attention on racial disparities in the law enforcement system. Brown's case is not an isolated incident. Along with Brown, the cases of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis in Florida and, more recently, Eric Garner in New York and Ezell Ford in Los Angeles, all tell stories of how unarmed Black men became victims of police forces charged with serving and protecting their communities and are then denied justice by the legal system.

Since Michael Brown's death, the media have focused on racial tensions among residents of Ferguson. It is important, however, to note that the tension between police forces and Black communities is nothing new, nor is it confined to Ferguson, Missouri. Instead, the Michael Brown tragedy and those like it are indicators of systemic injustices that have resulted in long-standing tensions between law enforcement and the Black community.

In this report, we use data from several national public opinion surveys to show that Black communities—especially Black youth under 30 years of age—across the country hold considerably more negative views toward the legal system and the police compared with other groups and they have done so for many years. This is not a new phenomenon. Our main findings are as follows:

- Black youth report the highest rate of harassment by the police (54.4%), nearly twice the rates of other young people.
- Less than half of Black youth (44.2 percent) trust the police, compared with 71.5 percent of white youth, 59.6 percent of Latino youth, and 76.1 percent of Asian American youth.

- Substantially fewer Black youth believe the police in their neighborhood are there to protect them (66.1 percent) compared to young people from other racial and ethnic groups.
- Fewer Black youth believe the legal system treats all groups equally (26.8 percent) than young people in other racial and ethnic groups.
- Fewer Black youth feel that they are full and equal citizens under the law (60.2 percent) compared with white (72.9 percent) and Latino (64.1 percent) youth.

Perceptions of the Police

Sadly, long before the killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, Black Americans, especially young Blacks, registered significant distrust of the police. In Tables 1 and 2, we report the results of a national survey conducted in 2009 that included people of all age groups. We asked them several questions about their evaluations of and experiences with the police. Table 1 reports the results of all respondents, while Table 2 shows the results for young people between the ages of 18 and 29.

As Table 1 makes clear, experiences with the police differ across racial and ethnic groups. More than half of Black respondents (50.3 percent) reported that either they or someone they know had been the victim of police harassment or violence, compared with a quarter of white (26.3 percent) and Latino (27.5 percent) adults, and 19.4 percent of Asian American adults. Moreover, mistrust of the police is widespread among Black adults. Fewer than half of Black respondents (49.4 percent) replied that they trust the police, compared with two-thirds (66.6 percent) of Latino adults and more than three-quarters of white (77.0 percent) and Asian American (76.7 percent) adults. Black adults are also more ambivalent about their neighborhood police than adults from other groups; 70.7 percent of Blacks believe the police in their neighborhood are there to protect them, compared with 76.0 percent of Latino adults, 85.0 percent of white adults, and 88.8 percent of Asian American adults.

Table 1: Assessments of the Police (all ages)

	Black (% yes)	White (% yes)	Latino (% yes)	Asian American (% yes)
Have you or anyone you know experienced harassment or violence at the hands of the police?	50.3	26.3	27.5	19.4
Do you trust the police?	49.4	77.0	66.6	76.7
Do you believe the police in your neighborhood are there to protect you?	70.7	85.0	76.0	88.8

Sources: 2009 Mobilization and Change survey.

As Table 2 shows, Black youth reported even higher rates of harassment or violence from the police, and experienced it at nearly twice the rate of other young people. More than half—54.4 percent—of Black youth said that either they or someone they know was harassed or experienced violence from the police, compared with 32.8 percent of white youth, 24.8 percent of Latino youth, and 28.1 percent of Asian American youth. Clearly, *any* harassment or violence from police is too much. But the data indicate that Black youth experienced it at disproportionately high rates compared to young people from other groups.

The differences across racial and ethnic groups in how young people view the police are similarly dramatic. Only 44.2 percent of Black adults under the age of 30 have trust in the police, compared with 59.6 percent of Latino youth, 71.5 percent of white youth, and 76.1 percent of Asian American youth. Only about two-thirds (66.1 percent) of Black youth believe the police in their neighborhood are there to protect them, compared with 74.4 percent of Latino youth, 80.3 percent of white youth, and 90.1 percent of Asian American youth. In their everyday lives, Black youth are deeply ambivalent—if not outright cynical—about the police who patrol their communities. These attitudes are widespread among Black youth even when the national news is not dominated by events like those in Ferguson.

Table 2: Assessments of the Police (ages 18-29)

	Black (% yes)	White (% yes)	Latino (% yes)	Asian American (% yes)
Have you or anyone you know experienced harassment or violence at the hands of the police?	54.4	32.8	24.8	28.1
Do you trust the police?	44.2	71.5	59.6	76.1
Do you believe the police in your neighborhood are there to protect you?	66.1	80.3	74.4	90.1

Sources: 2009 Mobilization and Change survey.

Young People’s Evaluations of the Legal System

Equal protection under the law is a key component of political equality and human rights, especially for historically marginalized groups. Jury verdicts in the Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases, in particular, have once again raised questions about whether all citizens are treated equally under the law. In January 2014, we asked young people to indicate whether they believe the U.S. legal system treats all groups equally, and whether they themselves feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Though young people in general do not believe that the legal system treats all groups fairly, there are clear differences by race. Across both questions, Black youth consistently report the least support for the idea that equal protection currently exists in the United States. Only about a quarter (26.8 percent) of Black youth believe that the American legal system treats all groups fairly. A substantially larger percentage of Latino youth (36.7) believe that the American legal system treats all groups fairly, compared with 41.0 percent of white youth.

In addition, Black and Latino youth reported feeling like a full and equal citizen at considerably lower rates than white youth. Nearly three-quarters (72.9 percent) of white youth reported that they felt they had all the rights and protections of a full and equal citizen, compared with just 60.2 percent of Black youth and 64.1 percent of Latino youth.

As the data in this table indicate, young people nationwide view the legal system quite differently across racial groups. Young people’s lived experiences inform their views of the legal system, and Black youth disproportionately appear to reject the notion that justice is blind.

Table 3: Young People’s Assessments of the Legal System

	Black (% agree)	White (% agree)	Latino (% agree)	All (% agree)
The American legal system treats all groups equally.	26.8	41.0	36.7	38.1
I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have.	60.2	72.9	64.1	69.2

Sources: 2014 Black Youth Project survey.

Moving Forward

The Michael Brown case again brings to the fore questions about whether our country’s law enforcement system affords equal protections to all its people. Events like those in Ferguson, Missouri suggest that the answer, clearly, is no. Contrary to claims about having entered an era of post-racialism, race continues to matter in how people experience and perceive the law enforcement system. Our data show that nationwide, young people’s evaluations of the police and the legal system vary in important ways across racial and ethnic groups. Young people’s experiences as members of our country and with law enforcement are importantly structured by race, and in turn these experiences shape their attitudes and evaluations.

In recent days, we have heard from Black residents in Ferguson, Missouri, and many other communities across the nation, who reported that their communities need to be protected *from* the police, instead of being protected *by* the police. Our data show that these attitudes are pervasive. The tragic stories of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and the many other Black young people who have been denied justice by the law enforcement system show that injustices are deeply engrained into our country’s structures, institutions, and history.

Michael Brown was not simply the victim of a rogue police officer. Instead, though details are still emerging, it appears that a white cop from an overwhelmingly white police force operating in a mostly Black community stopped a young Black man—Michael Brown—for walking in the street, perhaps under the presumption that Brown was up to no good. Would the officer have made the same presumption if Brown were a young white man? We cannot know the answer to that question for certain. What we *do* know is that Black youth across the country perceive and experience the police and legal system in very different ways from young people of other racial groups. Brown’s tragic murder provides further support for these perceptions. Sadly, these differences in experience and perception are not just results for academics to write about; they are lived realities that literally cost too many young Black people their lives. There is much work to do.

Methodology

Two data sources were used to prepare this report: the 2009 Mobilization and Change Survey, and the 2014 Black Youth Project survey. The data for both projects were collected by GfK Knowledge Networks. The surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. Both surveys included oversamples of people of color to allow clear comparisons across racial and ethnic groups.

The Mobilization and Change survey was a three-wave panel study conducted between 2008 and 2010. The 2009 wave was fielded between May and July 2009. The target population consisted of non-institutionalized African American, Latino, Asian American, and white adults residing in the U.S. The sample included 3,202 respondents with a margin of error of +/- 1.7 percentage points, which included 2,397 respondents who also participated in the 2008 survey, and 805 new respondents. The sample sizes by racial and ethnic group were as follows: 801 Black (MOE=3.5 percentage points), 1,021 Latino (MOE=3.1 percentage points), 463 Asian American (MOE=4.6 percentage points), and 817 white (MOE=3.4 percentage points). The sample of young people under 30 years of age included 566 respondents (MOE=4.1 percentage points), with 157 Black (MOE=7.8 percentage points), 180 Latino (MOE=7.3 percentage points), 58 Asian American (MOE=12.9 percentage points), and 164 white respondents (MOE=7.7 percentage points).

The 2014 Black Youth Project study was conducted in December 2013 and January 2014. The target population consisted of non-institutionalized African American, Latino, and White adults residing in the U.S. and between the ages of 18 and 29. The sample size was 1,527 with a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, with 500 Black respondents (MOE=4.4 percentage points), 527 Latino respondents (MOE=4.3 percentage points), and 500 white respondents (MOE=4.4 percentage points).

Households in both projects were sampled using KnowledgePanel, a probability-based web panel that is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Surveys were completed online. Households selected for the survey initially received an email announcing the availability of a new survey for them to take. After several days, email reminders were sent to those panel members that had not responded. Several days after that, panel members yet to respond were contacted by phone. Modest incentives were also offered to encourage participation. These procedures were followed until the desired sample sizes were achieved.