



Major Themes Report

November 2020 Young Adult Listening Sessions

This report is prepared for the Connecticut Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force

By the Evaluation, Research, and Learning Team

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Introduction:

The Connecticut Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force held Listening Sessions in November 2020. The Task Force determined that the voices of young adults were missing from the previous Listening Sessions held in September 2020. As a result, four Listening Sessions were conducted with young adults aged 18-25 during November 13th-20th.

The Task Force collaborated with three university partners: University of New Haven (UNH), University of Connecticut (UConn), and Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to host the Listening Sessions. UNH hosted the first session on November 13, 2020. UConn hosted the next two on November 17, 2020. CCSU hosted the fourth session on November 20, 2020.

After passage of Public Act 20-1, one of the remaining charges of the Task Force was to form recommendations on “any other police transparency and accountability issue that they deemed appropriate.” The Task Force hosted Listening Sessions with the goal of gathering public input around what topics to focus on for working towards police transparency and accountability. Each participant was given three minutes to share their testimonies, followed by a brief Q&A by the Task Force panelists. Due to COVID-19 and social distancing measures, all Listening Sessions were conducted virtually on the Zoom platform.

This report summarizes thematic recommendations that were identified from the Listening Sessions’ data. These findings are organized according to three questions:

1. What recommendations did participants suggest?
2. What were participants’ interaction with the police?
3. What were the impacts of these police interactions?

Following these findings, a section highlighting themes that panelists discussed and correspond to participant recommendations is included. Lastly, a discussion of the findings is presented.

Method:

The four listening sessions were transcribed by the Institute of Municipal Regional Policy (IMRP) at CCSU and sent to Everyday Democracy. Three individuals- two from Everyday Democracy and one from IMRP at CCSU coded the transcripts. The three individual coders met to discuss the codes and themes in order to establish inter-coder reliability. The themes presented in this report reflect the agreed upon conclusions of the coders of the data.

There were 25 testimonies in total from the four Listening Sessions.¹ Although these Listening Sessions were intended for participants between the ages of 18-25, there were some testifiers

¹ In this report, testimonies are defined as any person who shared their perspective during the Listening Session whether or not they formally registered prior to the Listening Session. Testifiers were also not Task Force members or panelists.

outside of that age group. For this report, all testimonies were themed, although not presented by age group. People who testified were not required to indicate their age as a condition of giving testimony which precluded the separation of testimonies by age groups. The majority, 14 of the 25 testimonies, were given by participants from UNH.

Recommendations:

Law Enforcement: Training

The recommendation that was suggested most often was increased and improved training for law enforcement. This recommendation applied to improving interactions and communication with people with disabilities, health needs, and the African American community. Some comments are presented below:

“We need to allow the law enforcement to understand the culture that they're working in. And the culture is more of how do you work with young Black Americans that are in a culture where they feel threatened soon as they are interacting with a police officer.”

“Educating police more thoroughly on privilege is a step towards healing the fear and distrust that many black and brown people feel towards law enforcement.”

“We need to start looking at different adequate de-escalation techniques and interventions to help these individuals that are part of the justice system that have mental illness.”

Law Enforcement: Accountability

Participants recommended reviewing current law enforcement procedures such as auditing current police training programs and reviewing traffic stops.

“I ask that a [comprehensive review of the basic training program] be done through a thorough evaluation of the course in its entirety by an outside party... I also ask that as part of that evaluation, a review of how subject hours are allocated be conducted to allow for more attention to social interaction, training and public health education.”

“I further call for an audit of the breakdown of the 900,000 however many hours that POST offers during the initial training period and a recommitment to including six hours of training on youth issues since this has already been passed into law several years ago.”

“[Traffic enforcement] is the premier reason for police community contact. So, I think by doing something in traffic enforcement and traffic enforcement stops, we can influence the behaviors of people outside of policing people in the community.”

Law Enforcement: Hiring

Participants also recommended improving hiring practices. This included hiring more police officers of color, who are from the communities they police and having Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) in law enforcement agencies.

"In Hartford, specifically 11% of the police department is Black. Well, the city is 36%. 35% of Danbury's population is Latino, but only 9% of that police department makes up of that ethnicity. 11.4% of Meriden's population is Black, but only 3% of those officers are African American, so obviously recruitment is still a problem in this state."

"I believe that there should be a great effort and push towards hiring within the communities and it's just start at a very young level of removing the stigmas of our Black and Brown people of not wanting to become police officer."

"Also, I'm very happy to let you know that our crisis department is hiring a CIT to actually be with the police department, because it's very important that you have someone that has a background in mental health services."

Community Partnership

Participants recommended that police partner with community organizations in mental health, behavioral health services and people with disabilities. In addition, two participants recommended investing funding into historically divested communities and two participants suggested implementing more preventative measures that police can take before an incident happens.

"So definitely working to try to figure out whether we need a partnership with social workers or... an intervening force to assist that's a little bit less militarized...in their approach to maybe really help cover the needs of those mental and physical health issues."

"I would be inclined to believe that a recovery coach would be, or a peer support specialist or recovery support specialist would be more suitable based on the fact that possibly the issue would be where people are being in need of assistance because of the substance use or alcohol use most of the time...to alleviate that person from going to prison or jail."

"CT needs to invest in public schools. We need to invest in mental health resources and others so our local communities and our Black and Brown communities can grow."

"If there was just some communication beforehand that we can reach out and talk to them before it happened, then it's different. Cause...once something happened, you don't want to hear anything. Cause then you already got your blinders up. Like something happened, we gotta take care of it, you know, but maybe we could have stopped it if we just talked to him before it happened."

Police Interactions:

Although there were positive police interactions shared in the testimonies, they were outnumbered by negative interactions that were shared. Negative police interactions were mostly characterized by disrespect, poor communication, escalation, and feelings of fear/anxiety. Despite the variety of contact points from people with different backgrounds and situations, participants expressed having negative experiences with the police. Please see below for some participant comments:

Positive Interactions:

“Once I was stopped by a police officer, he kind of went through what I did, told me what I needed to do to correct the action and was just positive about the whole experience.”

“When our family had to call 911 for a heart attack in the family and they showed up and handle that super well.”

Negative Interactions:

“I think police officers don't have respect...I think they look at especially people of color...on the lower level. And when you look at somebody differently and that's your approach, you don't look at them.”

[In response to whether there was any communication about being placed on the deadly weapon offender registry] *“Absolutely not. So I was convicted...I was told that I was going to be placed on this upon release from prison at parole. I was told I had to go down to Middletown and register at the place. So, I registered, and I was completely unaware of what they call address verifications or address checks.”*

“So, one time they just came in, bringing it at a level or intensity where the whole situation was not at... and it was nearly impossible to...bring the temperature down, or even have a... response or talk with a police officer to make them feel at least more comfortable or at least to treat us, like other human beings.”

“The first thing I saw was several male police officers, four standing up and, and there's probably two more in my house. And there were two EMT's working on my oxygen and blood pressure. But I remember kind of freaking out because that was the first time that 911 had been called for one of my seizures and for other reasons, I don't really like strangers surrounding me or touching me especially men... I just had six police officers loitering in my kitchen, making comments about my house and my pets, taking repeated information from my friend that they already had asked her hey are you using drugs, which is a whole different issue that I've had with officers when I have a seizure. They always think that it's an overdose even though I have a bracelet that says epilepsy.”

Impact

Fears of police

Participants expressed that they feared future police interactions because of the inconsistent interactions they have had with police. One participant noted the fear of retaliation if they reported an incident. Another expressed that they would not call on the police to respond to their situation in the future. These fears were more pronounced for participants who shared about their experience as African Americans and/or who have mental health needs and disabilities. One participant described the protocol they use and have taught their sons to use during a traffic stop. Some of their comments were:

“When the cops come to your door, how are they coming? Are they coming with respect? Or they come in hostile, you know, there's two ways.”

“There's also the implied not really implied chances of retaliation or whatever, it mostly pushes you towards let's just listen completely and not even talk back.”

“We have several clients that are in situations where they're not the perpetrator, but they wouldn't call the police because they're afraid of what the police don't do because of their experience with the police previously.”

“I really got stuck on the limits of consent searching based on the fact that, you know a lot of black, young American men, African-American men really experience fear when one gets pulled over...So I pulled into the parking lot... I rolled my window down like I told my two sons. I told them how to engage with police. I said, roll your window down, put your hands on...your steering wheel and be polite.”

Long Term Consequences

Participants also expressed the long-term impacts from one police interaction. These long-term consequences include feeling “targeted” and disrupting daily life.

“I also didn't know that when you receive employment in a different town, they send your paperwork over to that town's police. So immediately I was, you know, I was targeted and I didn't, and I didn't know this either.”

“Because once again, as everybody knows, once you get legally involved with the system that carries with you for a very long time, not only does it carry with you for a very long time, it also puts restrictions to you.”

UConn Evening Listening Session

There were no formal testimonies given during the UConn evening Listening Session. The Task Force members and panelists used that time to discuss a comment that an attendee submitted via Zoom Chat. The attendee was *“interested in learning more regarding recruitment of more diverse police officers, cultural sensitivity training, and citizen police oversight efforts.”*

This section includes three themes that describe the discussion among panelists, which included Task Force members, law enforcement and elected officials. These themes were identified because they respond to the recommendations made by participants who testified in the other listening sessions.

Law Enforcement Training and Education Requirements:

Increasing and improving law enforcement training was mentioned most often by participants who testified. One law enforcement officer stated that police would welcome more training. The challenge to receiving more training, however, is whether elected officials and the public decides to fund police training.

“And there's nobody that wants more training than police officers and police chiefs... We would love to go to school for two years. And if the elected officials in our towns and cities and the state decide to fund that, and our residents decide to fund that we would love to do that.”

The barriers and benefits for educational requirements for law enforcement were discussed extensively. One testifier shared that it was more important for law enforcement to come from the communities they police than to require higher education degrees. In addition, three challenges that panelists identified were a) Educational requirements becoming barriers for recruitment that limit the candidate pool b) Systemic racism within higher education institutions c) Debt accrued from higher education that disqualify candidates.

One testifier suggested mandating educational requirements and improving the quality of education as their top recommendation. Some of the panelists who discussed the importance of mandating educational requirement elaborated further, mentioning that a) Mental health professionals who work with people with disabilities, mental health or behavioral health needs are required to have higher educational degrees b) Higher educational degrees professionalize the force c) Higher education gives the opportunity for an individual to interact with people of diverse backgrounds d) Higher education provides opportunity to improve communication and leadership skills.

“When you look at the degrees that people need to pursue to work in the disability community social work and such, a lot of it is master's degree level... kind of education that's required.”

Hiring and Retention:

Participants who testified recommended hiring more police officers of color and officers who come from the communities they serve. Law enforcement described many efforts their agencies have made to attract a diverse pool of candidates. However, law enforcement cited that hiring, retaining law enforcement of color and replacing retired officers were challenges. Some of the reasons provided were losing candidates during the background check phase, improving the culture of law enforcement agencies, and inconsistent hiring standards across the state.

“And then there's a background phase, which is part of a polygraph and a psychological and other things...those are all required...We lose about 80% of men and women, not every agency, but many agencies lose about 80%.”

“The recruitment plan looked at the retention numbers and the retention numbers for minority officers, and I'm not talking terminations or retirements, just for people leaving on their own free-standing you know, in good standing. It was much higher for minority officers leaving. So, we've got to create the culture within departments where we're going to have all officers feel comfortable working there.”

“There is a lot of subjectivity, you know, among departments as to who they take or don't take. And that leads to some people that maybe would have been good officers being disqualified in one place and not another.”

Addressing bias in hiring standards

In response to the challenges law enforcement raised about hiring and retaining more officers of color, two panelists discussed how the subjectivity of law enforcement hiring standards are susceptible to societal and individual bias. One panelist shared that hiring standards do not account for the historic, economic divestment in the African American community, which prevent implementing equitable hiring practices and retention of minority officers.

“There's a high level of subjectivity to the standard. And I don't even know if I would call it a standard because it's not a standard that applies in every department...Because without a way of checking the standards and figuring out whether they are actually legitimate standards, if the level of subjectivity allows in individual biases or societal biases, then you're going to have built in these things that operate against your ability to recruit and therefore retain the populations you need.”

“And so how we looked at it was given the wealth gap that we have in this country, I don't know an African American who hasn't been behind on their bills or everything is all paid up. So just by that alone, if that's the standard we're using to eliminate, you know, qualified people, that pool is going to get smaller.”

Discussion and Conclusion:

Most of the testifiers recommended increasing and improving training and hiring officers of color, which panelists also discussed. Additional research and review of current studies, however, need to be considered to determine the efficacy of increasing training and hiring police officers of color. For example, one recent study conducted with the New York City Police Department concluded “insufficient” evidence of the effectiveness of implicit bias training in reducing racial disparities in police enforcement.² In addition, considering evidence that demonstrates whether increasing law enforcement training reduces violent or lethal encounters with people with disabilities would be beneficial.

As for the effectiveness of hiring more police officers of color in reducing racial discrimination in police enforcement, studies have shown conflicting results. One study suggested that hiring a “critical mass” of Black police officers may be needed to reduce police violence towards Black citizens.³ In addition, one panelist mentioned that retaining minority officers as a challenge and suggested re-examining the culture of law enforcement agencies to understand this challenge further. Therefore, additional research about the benefits and limits of investing in more training and hiring police officers of color would be important to consider in conjunction with the recommendations provided in these Listening Sessions.

In addition, supplemental recommendations beyond training may need to be considered. As mentioned in the testimonies, participants described feeling trauma, fear, and disrespect when engaging with police, which training or hiring more officers of color may not sufficiently address. One participant expressed,

“If police officers or the institution of police were... to explicitly acknowledge that they are working in an institution, which is deeply rooted in racism and discrimination that people of color perhaps would be more open to the career...Police brutality is like in the spotlight of everybody's minds right now. And I think a lot of the men and women, the Black men and women who are being murdered tend to be younger or middle aged. It's really something that my generation is not willing to let go of.”

Acknowledging the connection between the history of racism and dehumanizing policing practices in communities of color and people with disabilities could be a positive first step, especially for the young adult generation. Hearing from young adults in both university and non-university settings could continue the work started at these Listening Sessions.

² Worden Robert, et al. “The Impacts of Implicit Bias Training in the NYPD” July 2020 <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/NYPD%20Implicit%20Bias%20Report.pdf>. Accessed January 2021.

³ Sean Nicholson-Crotty, Jill Nicholson-Crotty, and Sergio Fernandez, “Will More Black Cops Matter? Officer Race and Police-Involved Homicides of Black Citizens,” *Public Administration Review* 77, no. 2 (2017): pp. 206-216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12734>.