



REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY:

Community Listening Sessions
with Black Communities and Public Defenders

Collaborators:



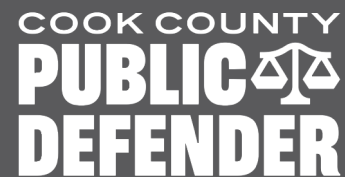
The Black Public Defender Association (BPDA) aims to improve the quality of defense provided to low-income communities across the United States by creating and maintaining a national network of skilled Black public defenders who identify with and are committed to the populations they serve. BPDA is a section of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. The BPDA was represented by Alaina Bloodworth, Jasmine Cole, and Tinsae Gebriel.

Northwestern University

Northwestern University is committed to excellent teaching, innovative research, and the personal and intellectual growth of its students in a diverse academic community. Northwestern researchers served as consultants and were represented by Mary Pattillo, Karlia Brown, Durrell Washington, and Rose Werth.



Blackroots Alliance (BA) is a coalition of organizations committed to the safety and liberation of all Black people, promoting Black leadership and Black-centered community transformation as we work collectively to build socioeconomic power, heal our communities, and fundamentally transform our society. BA was represented by Katelyn Johnson, Delisa Perry, Gabby Green, Lorne Runnels, and Matthew Swalek, with early-stage contributions from DeJaun Jackson.



The Cook County Public Defenders (CCPD) protect the fundamental rights, liberties, and dignity of each person whose case has been entrusted to us by providing the finest legal representation. The CCPD was represented by Doris Funches, Maurice Holman, Rachele Hatcher, Emmanuel Andre, and Takenya Nixon.

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Summary of Insights

The people who participated in these conversations generously shared their attitudes, experiences, ideologies, and advice. They are the experts, and their thoughts generated several insights. We highlight these insights in bold gold throughout the report, and they are listed here in the order they appear in the report.

- Safety consists of the spaces and times where Black Chicagoans feel free to live their lives. Safety was defined not only as the absence of something – no harm, no worry, no caution – but also the presence of something – freedom, comfort, and peace.
- Black Chicagoans feel most safe when they are with their families, in their homes, or with trusted friends and neighbors. Black Chicagoans' spirituality and faith provide an important foundation for feeling safe.
- Many Black Chicagoans stated that they felt most unsafe when they were outside of their homes. Encounters with police were another area in which Black Chicagoans often experienced a heightened sense of unsafety, and many respondents' felt that being Black is what made them feel unsafe around the police.
- The most prevalent personal responses to unsafety were hypervigilance and avoidance. Many Black Chicagoans stayed home, restricted their travels to familiar or necessary places, and were always aware of their surroundings when they ventured out.
- Strengthening the interactional bonds of the Black community was seen as crucial for improving Black safety.
- Attending to Black people's general well-being through resources and investments would strengthen community and improve safety.
- Overall, Black Chicagoans see the police as playing a role in improving safety, but not the kind of policing that they currently receive. Instead, the policing they want is less aggressive, more responsive, better trained, and more fair.
- Despite some positive attitudes toward public defenders, three main critiques and stereotypes characterized participants' responses: 1) public defenders do not put enough care and investment into their cases, 2) public defenders are complicit in a system that just wants to lock up Black people, and 3) public defenders encourage their clients to take unwanted plea deals.
- Advice for improving community-defender relations included increasing familiarity and interaction across the two groups; improving case investigations and knowledge of clients' specific case; and improving communications so that clients better understand their legal options.
- Black Chicagoans' daily reality would seem to leave little room for hope. And yet hopefulness permeated the dispositions of the people we interviewed, despite the difficult things that confronted them.
- When Black Chicagoans envisioned the future they wanted to see, it was filled with help-giving, selflessness, sharing, caring, and building. Most people used the rhetorical magic wand to make other people happier and healthier.
- This project was creating the solution to the problems Black Chicagoans identified. As one respondent concluded, "We need more unity. We need more of this happening. The forums where you're sitting down here talking to people to find out what they want in their communities to make it better."

Introduction

When people feel safe, they have more space in their minds, bodies, and spirits to create, to plan, to commune, to labor, to love, and to dream. Safety is a basic human need that is the foundation for individual and collective achievements. Yet, many Black people in the U.S. and in specifically Chicago do not feel safe. This project focuses on Black Chicagoans' sense of safety and how to improve it.

The predominant approach to safety in the United States centers on surveillance and security, policing, the courts, and jails and prisons. The agencies that are responsible for public safety use punishment as a way to prevent or respond to harm. Yet those same systems can also cause harm. While phrases like "mass incarceration" and "over-policing" have entered the mainstream national lexicon, it's crucial to always call attention to who is being policed, criminalized, and incarcerated. At each stage of the criminal legal system, people of color are disadvantaged and overrepresented. Black people, specifically, are surveilled, detained, charged, and punished at rates that dwarf similarly situated white people. The problem of anti-Black racism in the public safety apparatus is well-documented.

This is a moment to chart a path toward achieving true public safety. Historically, public safety has been defined for impacted Black communities instead of with them, and that has led to the current realities of oversurveillance and harassment facing many Black communities. This project aimed to go in a new direction that builds on a new wave of energy so that Black folks are involved in the creation of their own definition of safety.

This is the final report of a one-year project funded by the Joyce Foundation entitled "Reimagining Public Safety: Community Listening Sessions with Black Communities and Black Defenders." The National Black Public Defender Association (BPDA) partnered with the Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender, the community-based organization Blackroots Alliance (BA), and a consultant team of researchers from Northwestern University to undertake a public safety assessment in Chicago. The project asked Black Chicagoans: "What does safety mean to you?"

The project has engaged impacted individuals around the issue of public safety and invited community members to redefine the term "safety" holistically, beyond the narrow focus on the absence of harm. The project aimed to both answer the critical question of what impacted Black communities need to feel safe and thrive and to build relationships between community residents, advocates, organizers, and Black public defenders.

We are at a critical juncture in America in attempting to address racism and inequities in policing and legal processing, and we must use this moment to do things radically differently. We risk repeating the failures of the past by allowing "experts" to define what the future of public safety should look like in the Black community without the voices of Black community members. The findings from this project can help policymakers, funders, activists, and community groups build sustainable public safety reforms built on principles of justice and responsiveness to Black community needs.

Methods, Participants, Stories

COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston defines research as “formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.” Although Black people have considerable reason to be skeptical of research, research has the potential to build community and a collective understanding of community needs. That was the approach we took in this project. Our core framework was collaboration. This meant building relationships among the collaborators, and between the collaborators and community members. We did that by working toward maximum participation in developing the questions to be asked of community members, in partnering to execute community listening sessions, and in developing the lessons and insights that came from our conversations.

The project began in July 2022. Most meetings were held on zoom both for public health reasons and because of the size and geographic dispersion of the project team. We spent the first two months establishing the vision of the project, clarifying roles, and getting to know one another. The core activity of the collaboration was to host conversations with at least 100 Black Chicagoland residents (i.e., inclusive of the nearby suburban areas) on what

safety meant to them. The mandate was broad, and the first team meeting was a listening session to identify the collaborators’ particular interests and goals, which could be shaped into a guide for the conversations.

The role of the consultant team was to produce the interview guide and provide training in qualitative interviewing. A qualitative interview mimics a conversation, but one in which one person talks more than the other. A qualitative interview has some structure, but allows respondents to go in directions not initially anticipated by the person asking questions. A qualitative interview is very different from a survey. There are no Yes or No answers, or short answers, in a qualitative interview. Instead, the questions are meant to elicit people’s stories, emotions, descriptions, reflections, and their own analysis of their lives. The longer the answers the better the insights. The consultants held the initial listening session and then two training sessions in August and September of 2022 with the collaborators to build on their already existing interviewing and organizing skills. These trainings covered qualitative interviewing techniques, consent, role playing exercises, the drafting and revisions of the interview guide, and the eventual process for analysis.



Although Black people have considerable reason to be skeptical of research, research has the potential to build community and a collective understanding of community needs.

The interview guide was developed collaboratively out of the listening session. It began with a Consent process which was recorded as part of the interview. Each participant was given a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and wisdom. The interview began with a set of simple demographic questions about how the person identified by race and use of gender pronouns, where they lived, and their educational, parental, employment, and housing status. The conversations then proceeded through the following sections: Getting to Know You; Safety; Crime; Criminal Legal System; Black Futures. The final section about Black Futures was crucial to the task of Black safety. While the first sections allowed community members to talk about their lives as they are now, the last section prompted them to talk about what kind of life they personally aspire to live and what kind of lives they want Black people to live. The full interview guide can be found in the Appendix.

Community conversations began in October 2022 and ran through March of 2023. BA scheduled community events and recruited community participants, with the goal of talking to 100 Black Chicagoans across age, gender identity, social class, and political persuasion. BA's messaging identified the benefits of participating in a study on safety in the Black community and also communicated their mission of fighting for the safety and liberation of Black people. This messaging strategy

boosted interest because community members felt that the project was genuine and supportive toward their experience. BA canvassed door-to-door, networked with organizational partners, attended other community events, generated word-of-mouth, used their online platforms (website, social media, and email blasts) and other forms of relational outreach to recruit participants.

BA hosted Town Hall events in collaboration with churches and hosted meet and greets throughout city libraries to provide opportunities to reach recruits and spread the word. The community conversations in which interviews were conducted were held mainly at churches and public library spaces. These were spaces that Black folks frequent and were neutral spaces for interviewees. BA did street outreach outside libraries to recruit more respondents as well. Finally, individuals who participated in the conversations recruited their family, friends, and neighbors to offer their opinions on safety in Chicago and their neighborhoods.

A community listening session was an open-door event where people showed up in response to the various recruitment strategies discussed above. A session might last 4 to 8 hours, over which time community participants would sit for an interview with the project collaborators. The goal was to pair a Cook County Public Defender with a Blackroots Alliance

representative for each interview. This was not always possible either for scheduling or logistical reasons. Occasionally, teams needed to split up to handle the volume of potential participants and not keep people waiting too long. Nonetheless, over the course of the 6-month period of hosting community conversations, BA and the CCPD built strong collaborative relationships with each other.

The interviews lasted an average of 38 minutes, and ranged from 14 to 90 minutes long. All interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and qualitatively coded (described in the next section). In order to protect people's private information, we do not use any real names in this report. The collaborative process deepened and expanded BA's relationships in the community, introduced community members to Cook County public defenders, and offered a safe space for participants to share their powerful lived experiences.



PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR STORIES

We interviewed 103 Black people in Chicago and the nearby suburbs. Table 1 presents general information about these participants.

Table 1. Reimagining Public Safety Participants (N=103)

Race	
Black or African American	91%
Other	9%
Average Age	48 years old
Gender Pronouns	
She/her	52%
He/him	19%
They/them	7%
No answer	7%
Other	15%
Housing tenure	
Renter	65%
Owner	21%
Other	13%
Has children	70%
Employment	
Employed	34%
Informal work	10%
Retired	18%
Disability/Caregiving	9%
Unemployed	20%
Other	9%
Education	
Less than HS degree	16%
HS/GED	30%
Some college	32%
College degree	16%
Graduate or prof. degree	7%

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents self-identified as Black or African American. In this category are also included people who used other related terms like African, Colored, Mixed, Biracial, and even one person who identified as “pro-Black.” Most of the 9% of respondents who fall into the Other category had a different understanding of our question. When we asked: “How would you describe your race?” they answered with a word that would describe Black people. They answered “resilient,” “proud,” “fair,” and “moderate,” among other terms.

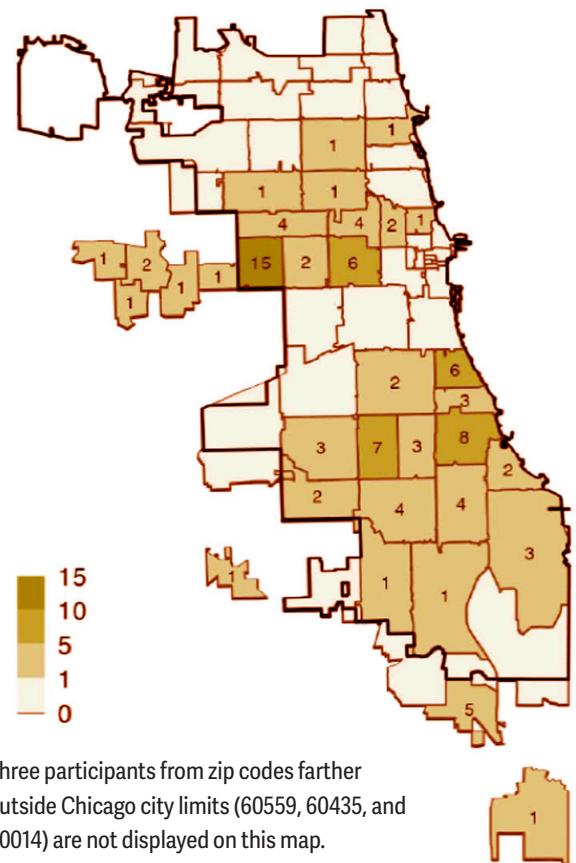


Many respondents were not familiar with the question about preferred gender pronouns, which is still not a widespread approach to introducing oneself. Instead of giving a set of pronouns, some respondents said they used Mr. or Mrs., or that they used their first name, or that they were just “me.” While the role of gender and gender identity in feeling safe was not a focus of this project, it is an important note that asking for gender pronouns among Black respondents could require some additional guidance.

The participants in the conversations were diverse on all other measures: by age, gender identity, housing situation, parental status, employment, and education. Table 1 illustrates that we were successful in recruiting a broad spectrum of Black Chicagoans.

Similarly, Figure 1 shows that we talked to Black Chicagoans from many different neighborhoods and communities in Chicago and its suburbs. This map reflects the geographic distribution of Black people in Chicago, with Black neighborhoods concentrated on the South and West sides, but we also spoke to Black people who lived in predominantly non-Black neighborhoods on the North and Northwest sides of the city, and distant suburbs.

Figure 1: Community Participants Across Chicagoland Zip Codes



Three participants from zip codes farther outside Chicago city limits (60559, 60435, and 60014) are not displayed on this map.



“

I learned Black people are different, we're not the same. We have different backgrounds and upbringing so that we have different needs and perceptions of what we need. We don't fit in a box.”

The stories collected in these community listening sessions are the basis for this report. The stories are rich, personal, impassioned, painful, and uplifting. The participants were generous in sharing their experiences. The conversations were often cathartic for participants. Many people thanked BA for creating a space for these dialogues. BA and CCPD collaborators were also transformed by listening to these stories. As one public defender said, “I learned Black people are different, we're not the same. We have different backgrounds and upbringing so that we have different needs and perceptions of what we need. We don't fit in a box.” Echoing that sentiment, a BA collaborator said, “Content wise, you could NOT predict what you were going to hear from any one person.”

We processed the abundance of information garnered in these conversations through qualitative coding. Coding is the organization of information into coherent and cohesive themes and topics. We used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to code the interview transcripts. The consultant team reviewed the transcripts in order to develop a first draft of a codebook, which was presented to the project team for multiple rounds of

feedback and revision. The final codebook consisted of 75 main codes. Some examples of main codes include Housing, Police, Justice, Help Seeking, Unsafety Definitions, Public Defenders, etc. Many of these main codes covered such a diverse set of responses that we needed to subcode. For example, the main code Police included subcodes to capture when people mentioned having family members who were officers, or when they reported police misconduct. Coding makes the information easily accessible and retrievable. It also allows for the identification of main themes and insights. The consultant team took notes, wrote memos, and had discussions about emerging findings, all building from the words of Black folks in Chicago.

The consultants shared some preliminary ideas from the coding with the collaborators to get feedback and more direction about their interests. This feedback guided the consultant team in writing a draft report, which again received feedback and direction from the collaborators. This report is a result of this participatory, collaborative, and iterative process. Next, we turn to the insights gleaned from listening to Black Chicagoans talk about safety.

Insights

THE MEANING OF SAFETY

Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal...

– W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Feeling safe is one of our basic needs as human beings, yet for many of the Black Chicagoans who sat down with us for interviews, their safety feels constantly threatened. It is threatened by economic deprivation, violence, racism, and uncertainty. Although many people shared those experiences with us, the goal of these interviews was to find out what safety means to Black folks in Chicago and what it could look like. In many ways, the questions of safety and unsafety are tied together, in that creating safety in Black communities means addressing the things that make Black people unsafe. However, before we get to unsafety, we must first answer how Black people in Chicago define safety and what creates feelings of safety in their lives. The W.E.B. Du Bois quote opening this section on freedom reflects the overall message that Black Chicagoans conveyed, that **safety is the spaces and times which they feel free to live their lives.**

Safety is one of those ambiguous concepts that can be difficult to put into words. You know it when you feel it. Black Chicagoans' sense of safety meant the absence of fear and worry and the ability to live freely. A 27-year-old woman in Bronzeville captured it as "I feel like [safety] really

has to do with how freely I can move through my space." That freedom meant the absence of worry. The phrase "not having to look over my shoulder" came up again and again. One 47-year-old woman in Bellwood explained, "[Safety means] not having to worry about coming and going out of the house and if something's going to happen. It's just peace of mind." Similarly, a 25-year-old woman in Westmont told us, "For me, to feel safe is to feel comfortable, to feel relaxed in a sense. To be able to let your guard down is how I feel safe, no matter where you are, who you are with." **Safety was defined not only as the absence of something – no harm, no worry, no caution – but also the presence of something – freedom, comfort, and peace.**

For some Black folks, this description of care-free security was aspirational, not something they currently experienced. A large portion of the people we talked to defined safety as what they felt when they were on guard and alert to keep themselves safe. In some ways, this is the opposite of the freedom of movement and mind that they desired. These definitions of safety exist as two reflections in a mirror. On one side of the mirror is the ideal of what safety could look like, and on the other side is the practical reality of how people feel safe day-to-day. The practical side of what safety means can be seen in the following response from a 22-year-old woman from Chatham to the question of what it means to her to feel safe: "Depending on the setting—if I'm at home I have to have my doors locked. And if I'm away from my windows I need them to be closed to a certain point, and I put a log or something, a stick or something, so it don't open too far. I don't need nobody getting in on me. If I'm outside, me being safe is turning around every five seconds, making sure ain't nobody running up on me."



Most participants focused on safety coming specifically from how secure they feel walking and traveling around the city. Black Chicagoans talked about the desire to have a walkable life. Walkability meant being able to take their dog out without fear, walk to get food, wear headphones while walking outside, take their garbage out to the alley at night, bring their family to the park, or even just walk from their front door to their car.

A 55-year-old man from Englewood explained in his interview how his sense of awareness is what safety looks like for him and summed up his perspective in the following piece of wisdom: “To be aware is to be alive.”

Later in this report, we will discuss hypervigilance as a strategy that many Black people use to stay safe in Chicagoland. For now, these quotes illustrate two core sources of safety: 1) the social and physical environment and 2) individual agency. For the respondents who described safety as a lack of worry, their vision of safety is an ideal environment that allows them not to have to be on guard. For the respondents who described safety as precisely coming from their own state of preparedness, there seemed to be an implied understanding that the world around them is dangerous, so to live their lives they must do what they can to create a sense of personal safety. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Some people described safety both as a situation where they would not have to worry about being hurt and described their lives as requiring them to be on guard for bad things to happen.

Within these definitions, Black Chicagoans talked about wanting to feel secure in their homes, at work, and at school. Most participants focused on safety coming specifically from how secure they feel walking and traveling around the city. Black Chicagoans talked about the desire to have a walkable life. Walkability meant being able to take their dog out without fear, walk to get food, wear headphones while walking outside, take their garbage out to the alley at night, bring their family to the park, or even just walk from their front door to their car.

Safety is not having to worry while engaging in the routine travel of daily life.

This was true across the lifespan. A 71-year-old senior in Englewood just wanted to be able to traverse her neighborhood:

[Safety means] to be able to venture out on my own without thinking, ‘Am I going to make it back home or not?’ No matter where I go, if I just go to the neighborhood store or a distance from home, am I going to make it back?

A 27-year-old woman in Bronzeville identified her college campus as the place in her life she felt the most safe and comfortable because of how walkable it was:

It was well lit, so when I was an undergrad, I would walk home all the time from parties, the club—it didn’t really matter. I didn’t even take a second thought...I knew businesses would be open, so if I walked home from the library late, I knew I would pass by several pizza places, the Jimmy Johns, other libraries, other dormitories. People were constantly bustling around. That made me feel safe. I knew I could call Safe Walks, and they would send me a buddy, so that was great. I knew that my building had a front desk, so if I came in and someone was following me, they would notice it. And then, I genuinely, I pretty much felt like everyone on the campus had my best interests in mind or at least were neutral to it. Because they would speak, they would say hey when they saw you. My campus was—it was really small, the amount of Black students there, so we were pretty much on a first-name basis with most people that we saw every day.

In this excerpt, the participant points to the many different features of campus that made her feel safe enough to walk around, including the lighting, security measures, and trust in the people around her, particularly other Black students. Many of these factors will come up again when we discuss what makes Black Chicagoans feel safe. Here, they came together to give this participant a sense of freedom on her college campus.

The specter behind the talk of worries, preparedness, and walkability is crime and violence. Black Chicagoans want their bodies, their homes, their families, and their neighborhoods to be safe from harm, so definitions of safety naturally included talk of avoiding or getting rid of crime. A 53-year-old man from Lansing shared the following general definition of safety that brings together many of the themes discussed so far, referencing the crimes he worries about the most:

Okay, safe means that you can put your key in your door, go in your house, condo, or room, and lay your head down and not worry about somebody kicking in the door; you're going to walk your dog if you got one and they jump you from behind a car; you in the same area walking the dog and they doing a shootout drive-by in the block as you walk your dog; or you're taking your kids to school, they're doing a drive-by at 8:00am in the morning. So safety's about eliminating and eradicating that type of situation. Where you can be free, you can feel at peace in a any neighborhood.

The acts of harm most often mentioned by participants included break-ins, mugging, being attacked, rape, car-jackings, and especially, gun violence. Some participants extended the idea of safety to also include the absence of other signs of disorder that are not necessarily criminal or harmful. They discussed safe neighborhoods as being free from people doing or selling drugs, from too many liquor stores or people drinking out in public, from people hanging out on street corners, from public arguments and panhandling.

The most present fear across interviews by far was gun violence. Over two-thirds of the Black folks we spoke to brought up guns or gun violence at some point during their

interviews. Like the Lansing man, people often talked about their fear of being hit by a stray bullet and other forms of street-level gun violence. For a small but present minority of Black Chicagoans interviewed, the idea of carrying a gun brought them a sense of safety. They felt that carrying increased their odds of surviving a dangerous encounter. However, for most Black Chicagoans, being shot or having a loved one shot was a very real fear. A 59-year-old person from Austin reflected this reality in their definition of safety. They said:

To me, to feel safe is not having to worry about nobody harming you or do nothing to you. I'll be walking down the street, people just shoot. They don't care who they shooting at. They just crazy.

Another participant, an 18-year-old woman from Bronzeville, shared an experience of moving her nephew into the bathroom to duck down while a shooting was happening a block away. Participants shared harrowing stories of losing loved ones, witnessing violence, or having their homes and cars broken into that inform their perspectives on safety.



Putting all these themes together, safety for Black Chicagoans meant being free from the threat or experiences of harm. Most people just wanted to be able to walk down the street without worrying about being hurt or know that when they go out to their car it would still be there. They wanted the conditions that would allow them to live their lives more fully, or as one participant put it simply: "Safety is about being able to be free."

While participants discussed what safety meant to them, a similar narrative about safety being something that existed in the past came up for many of the Black folks interviewed. This raises the question: Is safety a thing of people's past? Around a quarter of participants referenced their childhoods as the safest time in their life. These participants often repeated the idea that "times have changed," and that neighborhoods in Chicago are more violent or unsafe now than they were then. The interviewees who shared this sense of longing for a safer past ranged in age, meaning the actual time periods they think about as being safer than today range anywhere from the 1950s to the early 2000s. This indicates that their nostalgia is likely not a function of changes in actual crime rates – which have risen and fallen many times over that long period – but is instead rooted in their perception of their childhoods. This nostalgia can reveal different dimensions of what safety means to Black Chicagoans.

Participants' nostalgia often took the form of imagery of childhood play and carefree summer days. Here is how one 53-year-old from Garfield Park described her early experiences:

I'm actually on the same block that I grew up on as a kid, and I just sit sometimes and just remember that it was the safest

place. My childhood, I felt so safe, and it has changed so much. Where we were able to run and play, go to a friend's house a block away, sit out, walk as teenagers, and you can't do any of that around there anymore. So my younger years were the safest times for me.

Another woman, age 59 from Englewood, described her childhood in similar terms, referencing potential sources of danger as factors that just did not touch her during that time:

We can stay outside until 11 o'clock at night on our block, on our porch. Long as our parents knew where we was, it was okay. Yes, we had gang bangers, we had drug dealers, but they wasn't on the block; maybe at the end of the block or down another street. It wasn't like the kids was in danger. It wasn't like the senior was in danger. We had block club parties, we had sack races and, sometimes, we put the wood and fire, and if they had the water sprinkling up, we played Jack's piggy one, piggy two, strike them out. We did things as kids would do as kids. Today society, I feel sorry for my grandkids.

Both women would have been children and teenagers in the 1970s and 80s, when violent crime rates were rising to their peak in the early 1990s. That again points to this theme of nostalgia being about more than changing rates of crime. Participants of various ages described the safety of their childhood in terms that referenced the lack of adult responsibilities like paying bills or having to put food on the table. It follows that if people

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Safety is about being able to be free.”

define safety as a lack of worry, childhood would be a time for many people when they did not have the worries they faced as adults.

Beyond descriptions of carefree play, many different folks spoke of their childhoods as a time when they knew they had people taking care of them. A portion of participants focused on the collective sense of care they felt from all the adults and older children on their block growing up. A 48-year-old from Chatham provides a good example of this perspective:

All the big kids would look out for the little kids. We knew the older children would make sure that the younger children were okay. That was a priority. Having that awareness so young, you felt invincible. I realized that was like, 'Wow.' Because of the fact you knew that there were older children and adults that would address anything that appeared to be harmful.

Parents often came up specifically when people talked about the safety of their childhood, one person describing a memory of their mother warming up soup for her when she was sick. These memories evoked the feeling of safety that comes from being loved. Even for a couple of the folks who described an unstable childhood or difficult relationships with their parents, a specific friend or relative came up as a source of childhood security.

Many Black Chicagoans referenced a specific turning point when their safe childhood gave way to pain and trauma. For some, this loss of innocence took place as they became an adult with responsibilities, for others it was as early as 5 or 6 years old. For one participant that



turning point was when they developed a drug addiction in their teens. For several people, the safety of childhood meant the time before they experienced abuse, violence, or the death of loved ones. One 70-year-old man who lived in Bucktown provided this poignant and heartbreaking perspective on why safety felt out of his reach:

I haven't felt safe since 1967, okay? My father was abusive to my mom and when I tried to help her, he tried to kill me. So I haven't felt safe from that point on, but that's what safety is. Having the assurance that the comfort you feel is real and not manufactured... So for me, safety is a buried treasure. It's a treasure, but it's buried somewhere and it's deep inside to the point where I can't even pull it out.

Is safety always going to be a thing of the past for Black Chicagoans? The experiences shared in the rest of this report indicate that it is not. However, the stories also show that for portions of Black people in the city, safety no longer feels possible. Even though violence in the city is lower than in past years and decades, violence, trauma, and instability are very real experiences for many Black Chicagoans, and they linger as deep internal wounds. Full safety requires healing those wounds first. In the nearer term, there are some places and people that create a sense of safety for Black people in Chicagoland despite life's harsh realities.

These memories evoked the feeling of safety that comes from being loved.

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Having the assurance that the comfort you feel is real and not manufactured... So for me, safety is a buried treasure.”

Even though violence in the city is lower than in past years and decades, violence, trauma, and instability are very real experiences for many Black Chicagoans, and they linger as deep internal wounds.

WHAT MAKES BLACK CHICAGOANS FEEL SAFE?

Table 2 lists, in decreasing frequency, some of the common themes that came up when participants talked about what made them feel safe. Black Chicagoans feel most safe when they are with their families, in their homes, or with trusted friends and neighbors. Also, their spirituality and faith provide an important foundation for feeling safe. This section will focus on the common themes of family, familiarity and trust, and spirituality. We discuss the emphasis on the home in later sections.

THEME	EXAMPLE
Family	"My grandma, she always used to call me and check up on me unexpected. She always used to check up on me. I call my grandma but I probably don't every day check up on her, but she always check up on me, type stuff. So it's like she make me feel safe. When I'm somewhere I know I'm not supposed to be, my grandma called me and then it'll stop me from doing anything I know I don't supposed to be doing."
Being at home	"I'm always safe and secure when I'm in my bubble, but it's the risk that some people take leaving home every day or going out partying or just even handling your business. Just anything can happen."
Spirituality	"If it's your time, you going to go regardless. So I don't walk in constant fear like, 'Well I can't go this way or this is going to happen.' I'm in constant prayer. I ask God to protect me in my coming and going so that makes me feel safe."
Familiar and trusting environments	"A time where I felt really safe and comfortable? Let's see. When I was over there taking care of my granddad at his house. It's really safe over there because it's a residential block and neighbors over there, they've been on the block for a long time, and they all look out for one another."
Police	"It means to me to feel safe that if I have, well we going to go with the street, if there are policemen or security that's around at all times or at various times. But I must say I want policemen around that are real policemen. Not one that's going to make me even more afraid or kill me or do anything dangerous to me."
Home security	"When I was a child at my home that I grew up in on [street name], I had my big rottweiler and my father. We had big doors and gates on the doors and stuff like that. When you got defenses and offenses, that's when you feel safe. Because it's crazy out here."
Money	"I mean having a nice gainfully employed income coming in, you can pay your bills. That's good because now you can socialize. You got resources, you can put your kids into daycare, other activities. You can go on vacations. Of course. That's why again, the more money people have, the more things they do. It isn't just the money for money's sake, the more money you get, the higher the money, the scale goes up. What happens with money is now you have control of time. The more time I control, the more things I can do in life and I'm not just stuck on

THEME

EXAMPLE

the 9:00 to 5:00... Some people are in the hood that have never went no place outside of Illinois. They've been in Englewood, they've been in Woodlawn, and they've never left the state. That's crazy. That doesn't make sense. That's not living life. That's existing in life."

Moving out of Chicago

"Well, as a young man coming up in Chicago, in my teens, I was confronted by gangs because I wasn't a member. Threatened, beat up as a young man, which was one of the reasons why my mother moved us out of Chicago for a few years, to get away from the gang violence... Didn't want to go, but after having been down there for a little bit, I realized that my mother was doing something that was wise and for our own safety, me and my brothers."

Basic needs (housing, food, etc.)

"To me, safety is having that security of knowing your basic needs are met, you know where you're going to stay, and you can have that comfort. Okay, now I can live."

Built environment

"Make the streets brighter than what they are, as far as the lights. We can't see. Clean up some of the mess on the streets."

Many respondents talked about being around family members as one of the biggest sources of comfort and safety. Like the nostalgia for childhood, these discussions often came back to the idea that someone familiar was watching out for them. Every type of family member appeared at some point across interviews: parents, children, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Sometimes simply being in the presence of trusted family members provided the participant a sense of calm and security. A 25-year-old woman from Auburn Gresham explained:

The most time where I felt very safe and comfortable would be probably around my family members, my cousins and my great-grandmother's house. So I think that was more so everybody's safe place. It was just where everybody would meet up at, everybody would

smile, laugh. So that was probably my biggest safety area.

Other times, participants talked about their family members doing something practical to help them feel safe: intervening with strangers approaching them in public, driving them places, providing a place to live, calling to see if they needed anything, or helping with finances. A 26-year-old nonbinary person from Jeffrey Manor stressed the importance of intergenerational connections in creating safety for Black people. Their example was their grandmother, whom they described as a trusted elder in their neighborhood, calming people down when they started fighting and even using gunshot first aid to save the lives of two different family friends. The repeated references to family drive home just how critical of a role family plays in the safety and lives

of Black Chicagoans.

Related to the theme of family, people felt safest around those that they trusted to have their best interests in mind and watch their back. In contrast to those nostalgic participants who discussed a close-knit neighborhood as a thing of the past, around a quarter of respondents talked about relying on their neighbors in the present to help keep them safe. A 57-year-old man from Chatham explained:

I know my neighbors. You know what I'm saying? I get out there and I try to get the neighbors to know each other. You know what I'm saying? So we secure each other. Something happened on the block, we call each other. You know what I'm saying? We keep each other informed.

Several participants referenced feeling more comfortable the more people around them they knew. Even if people did not know their neighbors well, just being friendly with neighbors brought some people more comfort in their environment and allowed them to stay informed about happenings in their neighborhood. Some participants also talked about feeling safest on the blocks and in the neighborhoods that they knew best, where they understood how to navigate the streets and, of course, knew more people. While trust is often about a feeling of safety, it was also described as very practical. When you are around people you know, you know what to expect or how to identify what is out of the ordinary and therefore, potentially dangerous.

Another important feature of many Black peoples' lives was spirituality and their personal relationship with God. Spirituality came up in over two-thirds of interviews, and for many of these individuals, God played a big role in their sense of safety. Sometimes God and Jesus were just mentioned in passing as people listed what kept them safe, as in "my daughter helps me stay safe and my God." Other participants provided a deeper explanation about the relationship between their faith and safety, explaining that they believed true safety and peace were only possible through God. For many of these Black Chicagoans, their trust in God helped them cope with fear and uncertainty that would otherwise feel overwhelming to them. A 54-year-old man from West Englewood explained, "I mean, people getting killed on the Gold Coast, Michigan Avenue, downtown. It's not too safe many places. You just got to give it to God, ask for His help and safety and getting back and forth with what you got to do." Faith can be a practical tool that helps people cope with the lack of control that they feel in being able to keep themselves safe. A 44-year-old woman from Austin shared how she uses her faith to feel safe day-to-day:



I have to work and I know I have to do different things, you know what I'm saying? So as I'm walking, I'm praying. As I'm going here, I'm praying. I'm on the bus, I'm praying. I get off the bus, I'm praying. You know what I'm saying? I just pray.

Although we do not discuss the rest of the themes in Table 2 in full, we provide excerpts for each of the themes that come up to a lesser extent as sources of safety for Black Chicagoans. Not only were the other topics mentioned less frequently as sources of safety, the role of things such as money, guns, and police yielded conflicting views as to how they impacted safety. For some Black people, money, carrying a gun, or having police around brought a sense of safety. For other Black people, money meant courting trouble, gun violence was a strong fear, and police meant the potential for police brutality. Black Chicagoans are much more unified on the idea that family, faith, friends, and their homes are important sources of safety. Next we turn to the sources of unsafety.

WHAT MAKES BLACK

CHICAGOANS FEEL UNSAFE?

When asked about their recent experiences of feeling unsafe, **many Black Chicagoans stated that they felt most unsafe when they were outside**, especially when they were walking, when it was dark, or when they were on public transportation. These feelings of outside unsafety were often exacerbated by experiencing or witnessing something specific that made them feel unsafe, whether that be witnessing a shooting or getting their car windows busted in. Importantly, while some Black Chicagoans attempted to decrease their feelings of unsafety by staying inside their homes, many also stated that staying inside could not totally ensure their safety. Respondents worried about outside violence infiltrating their home in the form of stray bullets, break-ins, and more. **Finally, encounters with police, whether inside or outside of one's home, were another area in which Black Chicagoans often experienced a heightened sense of unsafety. Many respondents felt that being Black is what made them feel unsafe around the police.** Whether this was because of police officers' seeming ambivalence to their needs or their experiences of violence, stereotyping, or mistreatment at the hands of police officers because of being Black, these respondents suggested that they could not rely on police for safety and that, often, police interaction led to heightened feelings of unsafety. We discuss each of these below.

Feeling Unsafe When Outside

A majority of Black Chicagoans stated that being outside of their homes caused them to feel unsafe. This included walking on the street, being on public transportation, being in unfamiliar areas, and, in some cases, even being in their



car. As one 60-year-old respondent stated of the experience of stepping outside of one's home, "You can't really relax. You always on point. It's like you're in the military, you on a battlefield." Some respondents linked feelings of unsafety to the current state of affairs in their neighborhood and/or the city, stating that the reason they feel unsafe leaving their homes every day was that "there's so much stuff going on right now." One 88-year-old respondent stated, "The weird time that we are living at now, it's very sad because you nervous by going out. You don't know whether you going to make it back home or not..." A 45-year-old mirrored this sentiment, saying "Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I'll be like, 'I know I got to go outside, but do I really need to go outside?'...it's not that I live my life in fear or anything, but it is just so much that's going on, and it's just, I guess got me extra cautious..."



Respondents who expressed feeling unsafe on public transportation often highlighted that their fear was due to recent changes in the quality of public transportation. Many people shared that they used to be able to take the bus or train without feeling unsafe but that an increase in violence in these spaces have turned them into sites of unsafety.

These feelings of unsafety when outside were not confined to one block, neighborhood, or community. One respondent stated, "It's pretty rough out there, man...It's a few halfway decent areas but pretty much wherever you go, you going to find...I mean people getting killed on the Gold Coast, Michigan Avenue, downtown. It's not too many safe places." Another participant concurred with this sentiment saying, "Nowadays, I don't be feeling safe nowhere 'cause there ain't nowhere you can go safe." However, feelings of unsafety did tend to grow when individuals were in neighborhoods with which they were unfamiliar. When asked about the last time they felt unsafe, numerous participants responded with a time when they were in an area with which they were not comfortable or familiar. "When I'm familiar with the area, if I know how to get home, then I'm good. But if I'm not familiar with the area..." a 23-year-old respondent from the Austin neighborhood said. She continued, "I definitely don't feel safe on the South Side because it's not where I grew up at."

Respondents who expressed feeling unsafe on public transportation often highlighted that their fear was due to recent changes in the quality of public transportation. Many people shared that they used to be able to take the bus or train without feeling unsafe but that an increase in violence in these spaces have turned them into sites of unsafety. "These are the times I would never teach my kids to ride public transportation because it's too dangerous," one older respondent stated. "Now you get to watch yourself. You get on the train, they're hurting

people for no reason, they're robbing people for no reason." "The buses got really, really bad," another participant noted. "They killing people on the buses now."

Other respondents suggested that their feelings of unsafety when outside primarily arose at nightfall. One 22-year-old participant noted that she felt unsafe "whenever I'm traveling at night to go home. When it's dark, even if it's not 9:00pm." When asked what could help combat feelings of unsafety, a 47-year-old respondent suggested that Black communities needed more funding for lighting infrastructure. "They need to be lit up because it's too dark in some areas," the respondent stated. "Things like that contribute to an area not feeling safe or a person not feeling safe in an area."

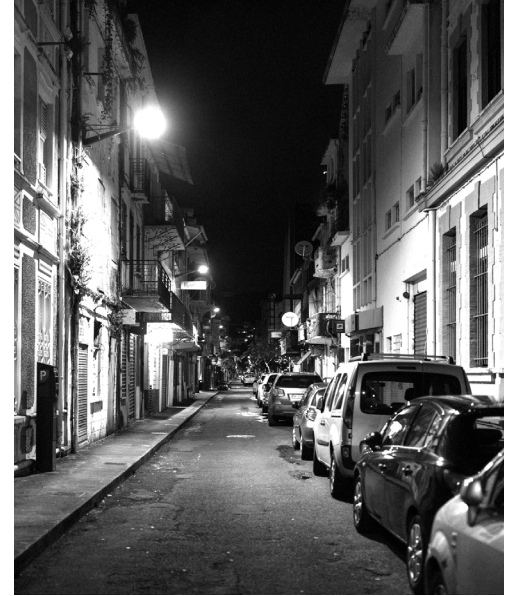
Notably, individuals' feelings of unsafety when being outside of their home were often exacerbated by personal experiences of crime and violence. For example, multiple respondents had stories of being robbed or mugged when walking down the street alone and pointed to these experiences as examples of the inherent unsafety of being outside. Oftentimes this sentiment extended beyond experiences where the respondents themselves were harmed to include witnessing violence or suffering loss. As one respondent noted: *We've had someone get shot up right outside my window and died out there, and there's been two deaths in that area right there in front of the building since I've been living there. So, just seeing that, it causes a lot of anxiety for me and to feel unsafe.*

Another participant told a similar story of witnessing a man die from gunshots right in front of her. This experience led her to both avoid the area in which the shooting occurred and motivated her to adjust her habits by being more conscientious of being outside at night.

Interestingly, this sentiment was also common among individuals who were victims of crimes against their property but not their person. One participant stated that he last felt unsafe when his car was broken into, while a 61-year-old respondent stated that he no longer feels safe outside in his community because his catalytic converter was taken and his backseat windows were shattered. Similarly, many individuals expressed an increased feeling of unsafety even when the experience they encountered did not result in violence or crime. One 71-year-old respondent, for example, stated that the last time she felt unsafe was when she left the “bubble” that consisted of her building, the parking lot, and the security and saw a car sitting across the street from the parking lot. “I thought, ‘What’s going on?’” the respondent said. “And as I got into my car, that car did a U-turn. And all I could think of was, ‘Ok, you got your mace, but what else do you have?’ And it just so happened it was an innocent person who was probably doing the same thing I was doing, was going to work, but it’s just a fear of the unknown.” As we see in this example, the participant did not face any actual violence, but the perceived danger she experienced nonetheless led her to feeling unsafe outside of the bubble of her home.

Another respondent similarly noted feeling unsafe because of the possibility of experiencing danger or violence outside, even if it did not come to pass. On her way to the interview, a vehicle cut her off and slowed down, leading her to worry about their motives. “When a person cut you off, you don’t know if they cutting you off, they try to set you up, cause a accident, and try to kill or rob you,” she noted. “So that mean you got to slow down because you don’t know what this person in front of you is going to do and that was feeling unsafe.”

Many participants also reported feeling unsafe outside even when they were in a vehicle, specifically mentioning frequent carjackings in their community as one source of this unsafety. One respondent told the story of witnessing a shooting in the park while in his vehicle and realizing that his car did not offer him safety from the violence. “I’m just sitting in my car looking at them,” he noted. “And then it struck me that I could get shot.” That said, other participants did state that, if they had to leave the house, they felt less unsafe when they were in a car rather than walking. “If it’s late at night,” one 27-year-old respondent stated, “I might want to drive so I can avoid walking in the dark streets.” Another participant, a 65-year-old Black Chicagoan, expressed a similar belief in the ability of cars to decrease one’s feelings of unsafety. “I only drive so I don’t walk,” she said. “I don’t walk the neighborhood because, I mean, it’s kind of scary.”



One participant stated that he last felt unsafe when his car was broken into, while a 61-year-old respondent stated that he no longer feels safe outside in his community because his catalytic converter was taken and his backseat windows were shattered.

WHEN UNSAFETY EXTENDS INTO THE HOME



“

They keep breaking the gates. The realtor people keep fixing the gate. They keep breaking the locks...they've been breaking in people apartments lately, so I be hoping that they don't break into mines.”

Despite the fact that some participants turned to their homes as a reprieve from the unsafety of outside, many Black Chicagoans recounted experiences where they felt unsafe inside of their homes. Oftentimes this was the result of violence or other unsafe activity that took place outside of their home but somehow infiltrated their space. “I really don't feel safe at home because, New Year's Eve, they were shooting so much, a bullet hit the wall up there by my window and I stay on the 10th floor,” one 58-year-old Bronzeville resident recounted. Others expressed that, while they did not have a personal experience of unsafety infiltrating their home, they still felt unsafe because of other stories they had heard or witnessed. “Few days ago,” a 61-year-old participant said, “a young baby, seven years old, in his kitchen washing his hands getting ready to eat dinner, end up getting shot. I could imagine...you send your kid to wash his hand to eat dinner, then go to bed, and he's shot.”

Some respondents did not reference instances wherein violence or other unsafe activity infiltrated the home and instead suggested that they felt unsafe due to their proximity to such activity. For example, one 55-year-old respondent told the story of feeling unsafe when her next-door neighbor died:

The last time I really felt unsafe was when the elderly lady died next door and then the gangbangers took over her apartment. They were living in that apartment and in the yard. It was so bad that they put a couch in the gangway and pulled it out at night and they would just sleep and lay on that. It was terrible. I had to get permission from them to get in my

own yard — that's how bad it was. I really didn't feel safe that way.

In this example, nothing occurred in the respondent's own home that made her feel unsafe. However, she began feeling unsafe when accessing her home, which ultimately led her to feel an ongoing sense of unsafety. When asked about the last time she felt unsafe, another respondent told of an occasion when refrigerators and stoves were stolen out of the basement and empty units in her apartment building. When asked why this situation made her feel unsafe despite her own unit not being impacted by the theft, the respondent suggested that the event demonstrated how poorly secured her apartment building was, thus putting her in danger for future victimization. She said, “They keep breaking the gates. The realtor people keep fixing the gate. They keep breaking the locks...they've been breaking in people apartments lately, so I be hoping that they don't break into mines.”

Occasionally this sentiment of feeling unsafe inside of one's home was shared by a participant who had previously expressed the contradictory sentiment of finding safety inside of their home. A 25-year-old South Shore resident expressed the contradictory feeling of being both safe and unsafe inside of her home: “I feel safe when I'm at home, but I've heard two, three, four o'clock in the morning when somebody's literally trying to break into our building, kicking the door down and I have a door stopper under my door and I have an axe at home and I have num-chuks and I have knives but what if they got a gun...then what?”

For some respondents it seemed that feeling unsafe in their home was more difficult to accept than feeling unsafe outside because they believed homes were supposed to be safe spaces. A 25-year-old Auburn Gresham resident expressed this sentiment as she told the story of when her home was broken into during her youth:

When my house got broken into when I was younger, that was harmful because I never thought I would experience something like that. And it was life-traumatic to know that a place where you call your safety or where you look at to as a shelter can get disturbed by others.

Another participant similarly lamented what they saw as a community-wide loss of the home as a place of safety, saying, “You can be in your house sleep, kids getting shot in their sleep, kids getting shot in their house. So it’s like there’s not a safe place.” Grieving over children’s loss of safety in their homes was a common theme with many of the respondents who bemoaned this loss of a safe place. A 47-year-old Ashburn resident stated:

It’s a shame you can’t feel safe in your own home. People are getting shot sitting in their living room, or kids playing in a house and there may be a gun or something in the house...I won’t say all of us, but some of us have been in situations where you probably felt like you weren’t safe and you were in your own house, and that shouldn’t be.

Ultimately, many Black Chicagoans concluded that, with the loss of safety in their homes, they had become unsafe

everywhere, every day, always. As one participant said, “You’re not safe in your home, you’re not safe in your car, you’re not safe in the grocery store, you’re not safe at your job, you’re not safe at your school...I don’t know the answer.”

Unsafe Encounters with Police

Transcending the boundaries that many respondents erected between the home and the outside were Black Chicagoans’ unsafe encounters with the police. While most participants spoke of interactions they had with police while outside of their homes, police presence, or lack thereof, in the home was often also a source of feelings of unsafety for respondents for a multitude of reasons. First, many Black Chicagoans viewed some police as being the source of violence and thus felt unsafe around all police as a result. As one respondent stated:

You supposed to feel safety in the police. You don’t supposed to feel like, ‘Oh man, what they going to do to me?’ or ‘Is they going to assault me?’...It should be a comfort. It’s no comfort no more. Even the kids scared. Like, what? Why a little kid should be scared whether the police going to shoot them?

Despite his belief that good police officers do exist, a 19-year-old Woodlawn resident echoed this sentiment of fear, stating, “I feel unsafe when there’s a lot of cops around because all the cops don’t think the same as the good cops.” This participant also suggested that some of the not-so-good cops can abuse their power, which exacerbated his feelings of unsafety.



Ultimately, many Black Chicagoans concluded that, with the loss of safety in their homes, they had become unsafe everywhere, every day, always.

Many respondents cited specific interactions with police that led them to feel unsafe because the police were not willing to help or protect them or their loved ones. One 56-year-old respondent told the heartbreaking story of the recent passing of her stepson and the ways in which the police failed to demonstrate support or care:

He was 16 years old, and he was there and didn't have to be. It was a shootout. You talking about the police? The police just let him lay there on the ground. They wouldn't even do nothing. They wouldn't even let me or his mother go over there to touch him... The police is not doing their job. I don't know what they doing. They're not doing what they supposed to do.

As we see, the lack of timely or sufficient police response (discussed later in the report) led this respondent to question the dedication of police to their job duties. Another respondent told the story of calling the police after being robbed by someone in their community.

We called the police. They say they can't find him. I say he went into that building right there. They look at it like, 'Man, I ain't fixing to go in that building.' And they say, 'When you see him again give us a call.' I felt unsafe there...because they didn't try to protect us... they didn't do anything for us.

In this instance, the respondent felt unsafe after being robbed and that feeling was exacerbated by the presence of police who did nothing to make the respondent feel safe, protected, or heard.

Blackness Exacerbates Feelings of Unsafety

Importantly, many respondents felt that being Black is what made them feel unsafe around the police. One respondent expressed the following about police interactions with the Black community:

The police, what are they doing? They not doing nothing for us. Talking about serve the people, how are they serving us? Instead they're killing us. That's not good. I don't feel safe with them at all. They're not doing their job, period. They're not doing nothing.

A 29-year-old Austin resident similarly highlighted the ways in which her Blackness affected her ability to trust police officers to make her feel safe. When asked if being Black affects her feelings of unsafety she responded, "I think it affects it a lot...I mean, even calling the police, I feel like it can go either way. It can go left or right. Either they're going to come and help me feel safe, or they're going to come and they're going to make me feel even less safe."

Many participants noted that, because they are Black, they are stereotyped by the police and are often considered suspects simply because of their Black identity. A 41-year old man in Englewood commented:

Being Black is a dangerous thing in America... It's not designed for us. The laws, the regulations, everything is not designed for us...Look at the laws. The laws is different. If a person of a different race did the same crime as a Black person, the Black person going to give more time. They convicted same date, same time, same charge. They going to get a slap on the wrist. We going to the big house. That's why I said it's not designed for us.



Being Black is a dangerous thing in America...It's not designed for us. The laws, the regulations, everything is not designed for us..."

Participants emphasized the persistent systemic inequalities and racial bias within the legal system, highlighting the disparities in sentencing between Black people and different races for the same crime. This racial bias is rooted in historical discrimination faced by Black individuals in various aspects of society, including the criminal legal system. Black people make up only 30% of the population in Chicago, however according to one report they represent 75% of those who are incarcerated daily in Cook County jail. Black Chicagoans said that their Blackness is often seen as a “threat,” or “dangerous,” making it hard for them to feel safe due to having to worry about these misperceptions and stereotypes others may have about them simply based on their presence and/or the neighborhood they come from. A 33-year-old woman from Garfield Park elaborated on these stereotypes:

And I think we just targeted, just as a whole race. No matter what your background is. “Okay, they Black. Okay, I’m going to stereotype them,” this and that. Most Black people that don’t feel wanted, don’t feel safe, as opposed to, hey, if you get stopped by the police, “Oh, let me throw my hands because they think I got something,” or this, or it’s because I’m Black. So that, right there, is crazy.

This participant highlights the pervasive racial profiling and discrimination faced by Black individuals, emphasizing the feeling of being singled out and treated as a monolithic group solely based on race. This generalization perpetuates harmful assumptions and biases, and pervasive feelings of unsafety. The example of “throwing hands” – or instinctively putting one’s hands in the air for police inspection – reflects a coping mechanism employed by some Black individuals in order to feel safe and warn police that they are not an immediate threat.

These stereotypes can have such a negative impact that there is even a concern from participants to seek help from police. The fear of unequal treatment and the potential harm resulting from being Black in such situations can lead to stress and feelings of anxiety. A 23-year-old woman on the West Side said:

I get that on my own from just seeing my friends, people around me being locked up or treated a certain way. I’ve been around people who got shot and then they died in front

of me and just seeing how [the police] handled the body, leaving the body out for everybody to see, where I feel like if it was somebody else that ain’t Black, they probably would’ve covered it up, made it a little bit more private.

This lack of care with victims is emblematic of a disregard for Black life. It teaches Black Chicagoans that police do not provide the kind of protection for Black people that promotes safety.

Participants also suggested that when it comes to the policing of their neighborhoods, because they are predominantly Black, the way the police perform their jobs is different, leaving them feeling unsafe and neglected. As we discuss further below, participants point out that police take longer to respond to calls in their neighborhoods compared to more affluent and white neighborhoods, and they perform their duties with less care. A 66-year-old woman in Forest Park offered her blunt characterization: “It’s bitterness, because I just feel like that no police officer, not just Chicago police officers, but any, they’re not supportive of the Black community.”

Other respondents echoed this belief. A 33-year-old in Auburn Gresham stated, “Everything about being Black is the reason you can feel unsafe. Because whether you a male or a female, just the color of your skin make the police look at you different. Even though you could be doing nothing...” In a similar vein, a 52-year-old participant stated that she feared that her sons would be stereotyped and targeted because they were of the age group that she felt was particularly targeted by police. “I feel that being Black...for my sons, I feel that it’s a problem, that I don’t think that they’re safe out here in the streets because they’re categorized with all Black males,” she noted. If the police make many Black Chicagoans feel unsafe, can they be a part of productive efforts to improve safety? In the next section we turn to how Black Chicagoans work to combat unsafety and achieve safety.

SOLUTIONS AND RESPONSES TO UNSAFETY

Black Chicagoans have developed practical and strategic approaches to managing their safety. The core personal strategies consisted of avoidance and hypervigilance. These strategies represent a retreatist mode that does not, however, fully characterize Black Chicagoans' approach to combatting unsafety. Instead, and more proactively, respondents identified community engagement, social investments, and the police as all playing an integral role in reducing harm and improving safety.

Personal Responses to Unsafety: Avoidance and Hypervigilance

The most prevalent personal responses to unsafety were hypervigilance and avoidance. Many Black Chicagoans stayed home, restricted their travels to familiar or necessary places, and were always aware of their surroundings when they ventured out. For example, a 45-year-old man from Austin stated repeatedly that he avoided trouble by keeping to himself.

Interviewer: What are your strategies to keep yourself safe? How do you keep yourself safe?

Respondent: Well, I don't carry a weapon, so I just try to stay in the house.

Interviewer: Do you have certain walking routes, or how you protect yourself?

Respondent: Just stay to myself.

Interviewer: And who else helps you to stay safe?

Respondent: Just me.

Interviewer: Just you?

Respondent: Yeah... As long as I stay to myself and not... Like I said, I'm going to be 45, so I am not out here in these streets like these young guys. So I just stay to myself, that's what keep me safe.

Interviewer: And could you tell me about any efforts you may be involved in, now or in the past, that are working to improve safety for yourself?

Respondent: Nah, nothing. I stay to myself.

Despite his isolation, this respondent still felt moderately stressed and unsafe. On a scale from 1 to 10 for stress and unsafety he reported being at a 5.

The idea of staying to oneself reverberated throughout the interviews. A 53-year-old resident of Bronzeville echoed, "For me to feel safe? Not being with a lot of people because a lot of people just tend to get into a lot of trouble and I don't want to be in a lot of trouble with nobody. So that's why I stick to myself." And a 27-year-old man from Chatham offered: "I just stay to myself. I stay to myself so I ain't got to be around people. I try to limit being around people."

These sentiments are expressed across age, gender, and place of residence. A 66-year-old woman in suburban Forest Park reported, "I've gotten to a point in my life, I won't venture out too far in the city. In fact, when I go to my sister's house, I take one direct route." A 23-year-old woman on the West Side said: "I try to be aware of my surroundings, make sure I put myself in the best spaces possible. Stay in the house. Don't really go too many places where I don't know where I'm at." A 26-year-old person in Jeffrey Manor echoed, "I generally don't go places that I don't know. I don't go to unfamiliar neighborhoods. I tend to be out when the sun is out because I'm on public transportation, so I don't like to be out after dark. If I am out after dark, then I am on main streets. I walk against traffic. I walk closer to the sidewalk side." And a 70-year-old man in Bucktown asks and answers the question together: "So where do you feel safe at? At home. That's a place you can feel safe. Walk out in the street, it's a whole ballgame."

If people are hesitant to move freely themselves, they are even more protective of their children. A 53-year-old grandmother of a 14-year-old on Chicago's West Side talked about exerting control over her grandson's whereabouts.

That's my biggest concern right now. He's a great kid, but it puts you in fear because he's bigger than his age. He looks bigger, so I'm afraid to drive him around with me. But going to the stores, I don't take him as much as I would like to because when he's in the car with me, and we have so many shootings on the West Side, I don't want anyone to mistake him for being bigger than

what he is. And it has really kind of stopped his livelihood. We don't let him go anywhere. He can't catch the bus with his friends. We don't let him go to the mall. So it kind of makes me upset that he can't be the kid he should be...We take him far out. We'll get him and two or three of his friends and we'll drive them out to maybe Lombard or something to let them walk around the mall. Go to the show. He don't go anywhere without us.

This is the childhood that is created by conditions of unsafety. If these are the parental practices of protection that create the sense of safety that people fondly remember from their childhoods, what are the costs? Children are unable to explore the world around them. Unable to benefit from the geometry of a bus map, the arithmetic of grocery shopping, the history of the city's museums, the plant and animal biology in the parks, or the physical development of the neighborhood basketball court or pool. A 14-year-old is unable to practice independence. Families avoid places – “I don't go to restaurants where a lot of Black people's at. I go far out in the suburb where the White people's at” – and neighborhoods – “I definitely will not go to Englewood for any reason.” Or they avoid all of it and stay in their home. “Feeling safe and secure is a feeling, that's a good feeling that I feel in my home when I'm behind locked doors, but not outside,” said a 59-year-old woman in Englewood.

Of course, no one can stay in their house without coming out. Children go to school, adults go to work, people go to church, the doctor's office, to stores, and to visit with family and friends. While many people claimed they stayed in their homes with a kind of finality that seemed improbable, they clarified their approach when probed, as in this exchange with a 61-year-old woman on the West Side.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. What strategies do you engage in to keep yourself safe on the day-to-day?

Respondent: Keep my butt in the house.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you only-

Respondent: And don't be around too many violent people.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you only leave the house certain times of day?

Respondent: No, I leave the house all the time.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: I leave the house all time, but I put it in God's hands.

Hence, there is some exaggeration in the frequent refrain that people stay to themselves, stay in their homes, or stay in a limited set of places. Still, they experience venturing out as a leap of faith. And alongside their faith is a constant vigilance about their surroundings.

We use the term “hypervigilance” to describe respondents' keen and constant observation of the people, buildings, cars, landmarks, and activities around them whenever they left the house. We heard recurrently, across interviewees and during a single interview, how respondents were always assessing their surroundings. “I'm always constantly paying attention to my surroundings,” said a 47-year-old man from Ashburn, and then just a few seconds later he repeated, “I'm very much aware of my surroundings.” An 18-year-old young lady in Bronzeville answered similarly to the interviewer's question about how she stays safe. She answered: “Watch my surroundings and watch how everybody moves.” Then, when the interviewer asked specifically about riding public transportation, the respondent repeated “Yeah. Watch my surroundings.”

Residents go beyond watching to reacting and acting. A 54-year-old woman living in downtown Chicago remembered the actions she took to avoid what she sensed was an unsafe situation.

Well, in fact it was downtown, it was right there. I can remember thoroughly. I was on Michigan Avenue and I felt this guy. Even though it's that busy downtown, I felt I was being followed. I had that feeling. What I did was... I stepped in...and pretend like I was writing something, then when they passed, then I just came back out. This is, again, downtown in broad daylight. If a person's having intentions of doing negative, they're going to do it no matter what it is...They ended up walking away, and then as I left, I just went around the corner and kind of zig-zagged just to throw them off, so nothing happened.

What we see in these reports of avoidance and hypervigilance is a stressful individualism that can have all kinds of ramifications for health, getting to and from work and school, political and civic participation, and more.

As a 53-year-old Austin woman summed it up: "It's all of it. All of it. Courts, the police, the judge, attorneys, your clergymen, your alderman. Everybody. Actually, all of us."

Some hypervigilance is the street smartness of living in a big city. Urbanites must be more aware than people who live in less densely populated areas. On the other hand, some of these skills are ones that people should not have to develop, but in situations of acute unsafety they are taught to children from an early age because they can prove effective and even lifesaving. A 41-year-old man from Englewood narrated how he avoided being shot:

It was actually my friend saved my life. Because I looked at his face, and he said a word that I know he going to say. So my instinct was just duck. Because I seen it in his face. I'm from the ghetto, so I could read eyes. And I knew something was behind me wasn't right. So I ducked. As soon as I ducked the gun went off, the bullet came right past my head and hit the gate.

The ability to read danger and react instantly comes from lessons shared across generations, and repeated experiences of such danger. Respondents told stories of their sharpened vision, hearing, foresight, intuition, preparedness, alertness, perception, and attention. These extra senses are trauma responses that they'd be happy not to have to use.

Hypervigilance is an energetic undertaking that takes its toll. A 48-year-old resident of Chatham detailed many of the things on her mind as she traverses her neighborhood and the city:

I'm always observing body language and people... I do my best to stay aware of the world, but that can be overwhelming too, because it's just a lot to always be paranoid... It's just like, how I stay safe is on a practical level. I make sure I look at people in the face and stuff when I'm walking down the street... Also, I'm mindful of certain streets that I drive down when it's late. I also pay attention to making sure of how I'm presenting myself, not leaving the store, counting my money and simple things, watching where I park if it's late. Even if it's daytime, just being conscious, listening, paying

attention to my surroundings. It doesn't always guarantee that, but you just do your best to still be present in the world without feeling like you got to be paranoid. That's a fine line for that.

What we see in these reports of avoidance and hypervigilance is a stressful individualism that can have all kinds of ramifications for health, getting to and from work and school, political and civic participation, and more. As discussed in previous sections, Black people in Chicago carve out oases of safety and mutual care in their homes and among family members, and sometimes in their neighborhoods among long-time and trusted neighbors. Yet we heard too often among respondents that the public sphere – “outside” as we discussed above – is a place of danger, a place to be avoided, and a place in which to be highly guarded. Avoidance and hypervigilance may ensure safe passage for the individual, but it does not provide a community sense of safety. How do we get to that more enduring and complete sense of safety?

Most Black Chicagoans had a comprehensive view of the necessary components and actors involved in achieving safety in their lives. As a 53-year-old Austin woman summed it up: “It’s all of it. All of it. Courts, the police, the judge, attorneys, your clergymen, your alderman. Everybody. Actually, all of us.” In other words, the traditional criminal legal system, plus the political system, plus religious leaders, plus the individual. “All of us” might also include – as it did for many respondents – teachers and social workers and employers. The people we talked to were not strongly wedded to an established doctrine about how to improve safety. There were very few strong expressions of abolitionism or being “tough on crime.” Most people blended very general ideas of increasing unity within the (Black) community with concrete prescriptions for parenting, policing, education, rehabilitation, governing, or other interventions directed at every level of society. Amidst a considerable breadth of

ideas and named stakeholders, three primary domains emerged as playing a role in getting to safety: community members, the public sector through investments and resources, and the police.

THE BLACK COMMUNITY: A CALL FOR GREATER UNITY

The term “The Black Community” is frequently deployed but rarely defined. How do Black Chicagoans define community? We learned that Black Chicagoans used the word community not in some abstract sense of simple shared racial identity or living near one another, but rather they emphasized the importance of positive interactions. Being in community meant being “together”; it meant “people looking out for each other;” it meant that “everybody just care about everybody”; it meant that “I’m supposed to check out for your family like you check for mine.” A 27-year-old in Bronzeville shared, “And now, that looks like knowing my neighbors, trying to be in spaces people are aligned with my same beliefs. So I think it’s similar beliefs, being able to depend upon each other, and being able to give and take.” And a 59-year-old in Park Manor concurred, saying: “The word community. Well, when I was growing up it was like a community. Everybody looked after everybody. Everybody, if you did something, your neighbor saw you doing it, they were going to tell on them. They were going to say something to you and tell on you.” These participants illustrate that the idea of community moves past just familiarity and extends to people taking responsibility for each other’s well-being. **Strengthening the interactional bonds of the Black community was seen as crucial for improving Black safety.**

Black Chicagoans emphasized that community was beyond just being proximate

to other people in neighborhoods. Being neighbors without interaction was still an anonymous existence that was not community. Being part of someone’s community meant that you had a shared responsibility for the welfare of other community members. Participants shared stories of “being walked to school” by older kids in the neighborhoods as examples of community. Or how “you couldn’t walk by without saying hello” to the older matriarchs and grandmothers in a neighborhood. Social ties across generations are key to socializing younger people into community norms and building on the wisdom and experience of older people. Older youth, parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and even great (great) grandparents provide the watchful eyes that foster a sense of safety. Participants described how older women would not only look after people’s children who needed it, but they opened their homes to feed those who needed food and shelter. Respondents talked about the benefits of showing someone care, and how someone offering a listening ear could change someone’s mood. This was especially relevant to relationships between elders and young people. A 54-year-old woman living downtown shared:

When it’s all said and done, we have to look out for one another’s safety. Food, clothing, and shelter, that’s the main basic things of everybody. I feel that we have to let people know, like if I see some young people coming in or that’s a young person getting upset or whatever, when I see a young person, just sometimes things can get overwhelming. You ask them what’s going on, talk to them, that way somebody cares, if they know somebody cares they’ll be like, You know what? I was going to maybe get an extra drink or something, but because that person spoke to me, I don’t need that. I can channel that anger or anything else away.

“

Being in community meant being ‘together’; it meant ‘people looking out for each other’; it meant that ‘everybody just care about everybody’; it meant that ‘I’m supposed to check out for your family like you check for mine.’”



One thing is Black is, I don't know where it come from, because I knew when we were younger we was a community and we stuck together. Now we don't stick together as much as we should. We don't value ourself as a community."

A community is about how people interact with one another, how they care for one another, and how they show support for those who are in need. These principles not only enhance the cohesion of the community, but close ties also lead to feelings of safety. A 38-year-old man in Hyde Park thought:

If you have healthy people in your community that all align with the same goals, the same wants, probably housing, employment, you know what I'm saying, a place for the kids. These people can align to have the same goal. You can be safe in the fact that your goals are positive and healthy.

This participant speaks about safety as not simply being safe from harm, but also safety of expression and engagement. He continued:

Now, once you have a collective thought, you can feel safe in that around the other people that, you know what I'm saying, this is a safe place to speak, this is a safe place to act, because these people also share my values. If they don't share my values, I won't feel as safe around this community because who knows what they're doing, who knows, you know what I'm saying, where we're going as a community.

The practice of being in community – of acting together or mutually sharing ideas – is what generates greater community feelings.

However, Black Chicagoans lament what they perceive to be a loss of a sense of community at the level of the neighborhood, in social interactions, and among Black people more generally. Sometimes residents used the language of wanting more “togetherness,” as in, “Hopefully, we can come together and start getting it together.” Sometimes respondents talked about love, as in, “Black people need to just love up on each other more. Black people need to just come together more because we

as Black people seem to hate on each other more than congratulate on each other.” And other times it was about getting along, as in “Some of us Black people, we don't like to get along. Well, some of us don't like to see other people get ahead and that's not right.” This lack of unity seemed to characterize the essence of contemporary Blackness for some respondents. A 67-year-old woman in Dolton said:

One thing is Black is, I don't know where it come from, because I knew when we were younger we was a community and we stuck together. Now we don't stick together as much as we should. We don't value ourself as a community.

This quote reflects on the changing dynamics within the Black community. Many participants express a sense of nostalgia and concern about the community's present state compared to the past. They reminisced about the times when Black individuals used to be more united and supportive of one another and worried that this sense of unity has diminished significantly over time. There was a widespread sense of a lack of cohesion, an absence of mutual care, and the constant presence of animosities, mistrust, and disregard.

Respondents had more complaints than they had solutions to this disunity. As one respondent sighed: “I don't know the solution, but I know it got to be one.” Other respondents were more optimistic and thought Black people held the strength to be able to reconstitute frayed ties. They argued that in struggle, Black people have a history of overcoming many challenges and possess an unyielding and unbreakable spirit that allows them to withstand and overcome obstacles. A 22-year-old woman in Chatham celebrated: “I know we as African Americans are very

powerful. When we stick together, put our minds to it, put all our knowledge together and do what we got to do, we are powerful... If we stick to it, we can get any and every job done." But the unanswered question remained how to help Black people stick together more.

While some respondents were already involved in working toward more safety through mechanisms like community watch groups, block clubs, city-wide safety campaigns, working with elected officials, and individual interventions, these people were in the minority. The critique of a fragmented community created a kind of chicken and egg scenario. A sense of shared community is an important precursor to enacting the kinds of community-based activities that would improve safety. On the other hand, improving safety would make people more willing to leave their homes, speak to their neighbors, and interact in ways that create the sense of unity that people so desired. This conundrum of disunity leading to unsafety and unsafety leading to disunity made it hard for residents to offer broad and practical ways that community members could intervene. But it did not stop respondents from taking a "should" approach. That is, what the community should do, even if the conditions aren't perfect for such efforts right now.

A 68-year-old woman in Maywood proposed that community residents should be more informed about the details of harm in order to prevent harm going forward. She remarked:

I think when somebody in my community is harmed, that the community need to get together, try and find out. Not nosy, but out of caring find out what happened. Maybe

we could put brighter lights in that area or maybe you wouldn't be in that area at a certain time. But most of all are trying to find out what happened so we can prevent it from happening again or something to that nature happening again. In other words, community working together, looking out for each other. I'll sum it up like that.

If residents aren't aware of what's going on in their communities, then they are unable to respond through mutual care. They cannot share information about unsafe corners or businesses. They cannot pool resources to improve lighting or organize neighborhood watch patrols. They cannot care for the person who was hurt. Information is a key element for community members to be able to participate in bringing about safety.

A 26-year-old in Jeffery Manor expressed a more specific plan for a restorative justice approach. While this kind of detail was rare among interviews, this respondent put some specificity to more vague sentiments about resolving issues collaboratively amongst the involved parties, thereby building systems of trust overtime. They explained:

I think justice is small. I think it's on a smaller scale. I think that it is led by the person or people who are harmed. I think it's an ongoing commitment to righting that harm. I think it looks like a lot of different things depending on what is needed and what harm was done, but I think of it like acknowledging that was wrong, it shouldn't have happened. How do we make it right? A group of people who are invested in each other have been invested in each other since before the wrong happened and will be after the wrong has been corrected and the person that was harmed is at the center of that.

A sense of shared community is an important precursor to enacting the kinds of community-based activities that would improve safety. On the other hand, improving safety would make people more willing to leave their homes, speak to their neighbors, and interact in ways that create the sense of unity that people so desired. This conundrum of disunity leading to unsafety and unsafety leading to disunity made it hard for residents to offer broad and practical ways that community members could intervene.



I think as Black people, we need more... They need jobs, they need a trade, they need skills, they need after school activities for the younger African Americans."

Here we see the emphasis is on building relationships to solve problems and eventually stop harm before it happens. This is hard work. And not everyone is committed. "The community should be involved, but everybody don't want to be involved," said a 59-year-old man from Austin. Yet consider the fact that residents are already doing hard work, are already involved through their practices of avoidance and hypervigilance, while also trying to pay their bills and thrive. Redirecting the currently retreatist energies in a restorative and constructive manner would reduce the need for such personal safety strategies in the first place.

Respondents saw community cohesion and care as a major part of what was necessary to achieve safety. Yet while the most common solution to the problem of unsafety was to look inward for repair rather than outward to government or outside stakeholders, many respondents also recognized that **attending to Black people's general well-being through resources and investments would strengthen community and improve safety.**

Investments in Well-Being and Opportunity

Black Chicagoans, for the most part, did not spontaneously connect safety to issues of housing, health care, education, food security, the labor market and the other facets necessary to live a thriving life. In one of the less common cases when it came up spontaneously, the interviewer asked a 44-year-old woman in Humboldt Park, "So, are there things we need as Black people to feel safe?" Her response did not go to repairing community divisions or saving incorrigible youth. Instead, she went to programs and resources. She answered:

Yeah, they need to bring mental health programs back for the Black communities, because there's not a lot of mental health programs for the Black community and they need to really have a support system... All these homeless peoples, if you go right down Chicago Avenue by Kinsey, you see nothing but tents lined up. Where you go downtown, you see nothing but tents. Have anybody took time out to think of the majority of the peoples is Black? And that's sad that we all just out here, but they could bring other peoples from different countries and give them a place to lay they head. What about the Black community? What about the ones that's out here homeless? Nowhere to go. No family.

This respondent connects safety to social needs, and names two common topics on residents' minds – mental health and housing. Education, health, and employment were other important supports that people highlighted. A 52-year-old woman from Maywood also spontaneously mentioned these things in response to the question: "So what do we need as Black people to feel safe?" She answered:

I think as Black people, we need more... They need jobs, they need a trade, they need skills, they need after school activities for the younger African Americans. They need things to keep them busy, things that they're interested in. I was talking about scholarships and things earlier, but all students aren't college material. All students aren't going to college. So they need trades, they need to learn a trade. They need to have all of these maybe, after school activities or social centers or just some things to keep them involved.

Mentions of the importance of these kinds of social needs came up throughout the interviews. In response to a question about how to achieve justice in Chicago and for Black people, a 36-year-old woman in Englewood had the idea that “You know what, we going to go over here on this block, this the worst block, and we finna go over here and we going to do something nice, like, hey, pass out jobs.” Her vision of justice would be to focus on the “worst” blocks of a neighborhood, places where disorder, crime, hunger, and unsafety are common. Jobs, she proposed, were the solution to unsafety and a step toward justice.

We also asked specifically about how social supports affected respondents’ sense of safety, and in those moments many people agreed that they were important. The exchange below with a 65-year-old South Shore resident illustrates how suggesting these investments got respondents to elaborate on what improves safety.

- Interviewer: So we’re also interested generally in other things that might affect how safe you feel, things like being healthy, going to more school, leaning into your faith, working more, having more money. How do you think about these things and the idea of feeling safe?
- Respondent: Well, if these things was added into the neighborhoods like you’re supposed to, safety wouldn’t be no issue because I’m getting what I’m supposed to get. I don’t have to take from you because I see you with more. If I see you with more of this than me not having that, I want some of what you got. But if it was divided up equally like it’s supposed to be, we wouldn’t have these problems because what a person don’t have, they do to whatever means is necessary to get what they need.
- Interviewer: Survival mode.
- Respondent: Yep.

When people are socioeconomically insecure everyone is unsafe. It does not matter that this respondent was a homeowner and comfortably retired. If their neighbors are without a job, without secure housing, without after school programming, without health care, then everyone in the neighborhood is more unsafe.

Getting to a state where resources are “divided up equally” is not something the community itself can solve with more unity. Indeed, this respondent, later in the interview, names the whole ladder of public and private officials who are implicated in this task. He said:

[It would take] our aldermans, our committeemans, our state representatives, our senator, our president, our community leaders...our nonprofit organizations who funds are being given to by the government, by the city of Chicago, by the state of Illinois. If those sources that they go out and lobby for, if they come back and pour it into the neighborhoods, everything would be fine.

Conspicuously absent from this comprehensive list is the police or any other actor in the criminal legal system. They emphasized resources and inputs as a way to prevent harm from happening, rather than police and the courts who come in after the fact. This omission exemplifies the heterogeneity in Black Chicagoans’ views about the police and their role in achieving safety, to which we turn in the next section.

LESS AGGRESSIVE, MORE RESPONSIVE, BETTER TRAINED, MORE FAIR POLICING

The police were by far the most common topic discussed in the interviews. This is partially to be expected. We asked specifically about residents' experiences with and attitudes about the police. Yet the police came up even when we did not ask about them. The level of detail, range of emotions, and number of encounters with the police is indicative of how Black neighborhoods are saturated with police, and how even Black people who do not live in Black neighborhoods have first-hand and vicarious experiences to share. **Overall, Black Chicagoans see the police as playing a role in improving safety, but not the kind of policing that they currently receive. Instead, the policing they want is less aggressive, more responsive, better trained, and more fair.**

A non-trivial minority (roughly 30%) of the Black Chicagoans interviewed shared some positive attitudes about or experience with the police that contributed to their opinion that police promoted community safety. A 24-year-old woman in Garfield included the police in her definition of "community." She listed "the library, basically the doctor, the police station, stuff like that." She later commented "I call the police about everything." A 50-year-old woman on the West Side said about the police, "But I love to see them, to be honest with you. I love to see them come my way. You all want a cup of coffee. I love to see them." This kind of exuberance was not the norm, but it anchored a pole of a spectrum that ranged from very positive to very negative.

Most positive sentiments fell into the more restrained idea that that most police officers were good, and they outweighed the influence of the bad ones. A 75-year-old woman in Lawndale commented, "And with the police, they, we got good, we got bad. More good than bad." And a

32-year-old also in Lawndale said it similarly: "I'm not against the police at all because they do help safety." Adding these types of statements to an even greater number of people who expressed neutral attitudes, or ones that balanced the good and bad, or said they hadn't had much interaction with the police at all illustrates that the relationship between Black Chicagoans and the police cannot be broadly or uniformly characterized as negative. A 64-year-old woman in North Kenwood characterizes this complexity. She said that her relationship with the police was mostly "good." Then she elaborated:

For the most part, I think that there are more good cops than there are bad. You have some apples in there that are rotten, but for the most part I think you have more good cops than bad. Because the bad cops...I don't know why they do what they do. They might be racist, they might be biased, they might not have any families to go home to. And then some of them might just say, "Hey, I'm going to make it bad for you this day." And I'm not biased because I have policemen in my family. I'm just saying that for the most part, I really do depend on them. If something were to happen to me, I would depend on them.

This respondent expressed one of the common threads in the positive or neutral sentiments, that police officers have families, and that fact should generate some compassion. Other respondents noted that police officers have fears for their own safety, that they need paychecks, and that they have a stressful job. In other words, there was a considerable awareness of police officers' humanity. The problem was that the favor was not repaid. Many people shared evidence that police officers did not recognize the humanity of Black people.



You have some apples in there that are rotten, but for the most part I think you have more good cops than bad. Because the bad cops...I don't know why they do what they do. They might be racist, they might be biased, they might not have any families to go home to."

More than half of respondents held negative attitudes about the police, and nearly half shared experiences of police violence and misconduct. As discussed earlier, contrary to the idea that police promote safety, many interviewees expressed being fearful of the police. “The three times where I feel like I’ve had to call the police,” said a 27-year-old woman in the Bronzeville neighborhood, “I always wonder how is it going to go. Is me calling the police going to make the situation worse or better? I imagine that people who are not Black don’t feel that same kind of stress.” A 28-year-old man in Washington Park said that his encounters with the police make him feel unsafe:

The last time I felt unsafe is when I was standing with a friend of mine just talking to him. We wasn’t doing nothing, and the police just rolled up on us and checked him, checked us. I don’t know what happened, but they took him away. That’s when I felt unsafe, when the police was rolling up on me.

In this report, we have decided to focus on solutions, and thus are not presenting the many more statements that express negative attitudes toward and interactions with the police. It is nonetheless important to note that the stories of police abuses were harrowing. They ranged from unjustified and heavy-handed traffic stops to rape. Police aggression sours the relationships with the police well beyond the person who is directly harmed since their families, neighbors, and loved ones witness or learn of these encounters. Black Chicagoans want this police aggression to stop. As a 25-year-old woman in Auburn Gresham said: “Police should always just take into consideration that that’s family, friend, child, son, daughter, and it could be yours. So take that into consideration and before just being the first person to pull a trigger or to harm someone.”

Another component of the negative assessment of current policing was a critique of police response

time and investigations. Many respondents shared stories of waiting hours for police to respond to their calls. They believed that long wait times only plagued Black people in Chicago, and that White people and communities received better treatment. A 44-year-old in Humboldt Park told a tragic story about police non-response. He shared:

When my brother, my twin got killed, the police showed up a hour and a half later. He literally could have been saved if they was right there. We blew the police phone up. We had people going to the police station to get help. Nothing. My sister-in-law was performing C-P-R when the police finally came and just grabbed her off him and just let him bleed out. So, me, with the criminal system, it is not really good for me.

This story shows a desperation for police involvement in an incident that should have occasioned the highest and fastest level of response. Yet the police failed this man and his family.

Just as frequently as respondents critiqued police response time, they also found lacking police investigations. They cited poor treatment of victims and family members during investigations, insufficient (or non-existent) follow-up and communication, and low likelihood that crimes were solved, for everything from a stolen car to homicide. A 19-year-old young lady in Englewood conveyed how she has felt in the face of lackadaisical police investigations.

When [the police] get there it is... I don’t want to say they’re kind of biased towards it or they have a attitude towards the problem because it’s like they don’t really want to be there to do the job...The type of emotions that come to mind is, 'Really, am I worth it that you have such an attitude or you don’t want to be here right now?' It makes me feel some type of way. "Do I matter?"



Police should always just take into consideration that that’s family, friend, child, son, daughter, and it could be yours. So take that into consideration and before just being the first person to pull a trigger or to harm someone.”

While Black residents in Chicago are cognizant of the full humanity of police officers, this respondent asks if the same is true in the reverse. Poor response time and half-hearted investigations of harms against Black people make residents wonder if police see Black people as fully human and deserving of protection.

Despite frequent negative sentiments, respondents still saw policing as a central part of the journey toward safety. We asked respondents to share their ideas about policing with a question that attempted not to lead them in any one direction. The exact question was: “There have been various ideas about changing how the police operate. What are your ideas and thoughts on this topic?” In order to get even more details and specificity, we followed up with the question: “What do you want police to do and not to do?” Sometimes these questions got blended together, although the intent was always to avoid suggesting any possible reforms or interventions, and let respondents lead the conversation.

Several respondents offered general desires for more police training without much detail as to what that training would entail. As an 18-year-old in Bronzeville said: “I feel like they should train the police more better than what they doing now.” This sentiment was echoed by a 47-year-old in Ashburn who said, “And I think the training, they need to do something else with the training of the police because something is, it’s a disconnect in that training somewhere.”

Respondents who were more specific identified de-escalation as the most important area in which police needed more training, although they did not use that specific word. The exchange with a 65-year-old man in Wicker Park exemplifies the expectation that police should be trained to minimize violent interactions, not exacerbate them:

- Interviewer: Okay. My last question on this topic is about police operation. There’s a lot of ideas about changing how the police should operate. Do you have any ideas about things the police should or should not be doing?...
- Respondent: Process all the information in the situation. Don’t agitate it, or getting more higher. What’s the word I’m looking for? Control over the power. Because you got a gun, so you think you right. But you don’t process all the information what’s going on right now. Get all the information, process it and then if you confused, call your supervisor... But don’t beat nobody. I can’t say the word I’m looking for. Because I see on the news so much people are just going into depression. Kicking people. “I don’t have no gun.” “Well, you look like you had a gun. You got a gun.” “Okay, I’ll give you one, I’m going to beat you.” No, just call to the supervisor... Or get more...to learn better they job.
- Interviewer: Like training. Better training.
- Respondent: More training, yes. I would say that...I mean more training. That’s what I would say. They need more training mentally and physically. Because they do need that. Because in too many situations, they agitate it. Because they get protection of they ownelves. “I don’t know what they doing to be on drugs. I don’t know what they going to do.” I understand that. But you have one person there, now you have six or seven police there. One person and you feeling like you in a threat? I don’t think so.

This respondent was concerned that too often police officers made a situation worse than it needed to be. He offered that more training would teach officers to be more deliberate, to recognize the imbalance of numbers, power and potential lethal force – the police officer with a gun and the supposed suspect without one. Echoing the positive perspective on police, he recognized that police officers needed to protect themselves, but he felt that they often misperceived the level of threat and danger. Instead, he proposed slowing things down, even to the point of an officer being able to consult a supervisor on the best course of action.

The call for training to handle people experiencing a mental health crisis was also very common. Again, many respondents still saw a role for police in these moments. In the interview with a 55-year-old woman from Auburn Gresham, the interviewer offered the question in a more leading way, saying there were ideas that “police shouldn’t be involved in situations where people are having a mental health breakdown. What are your thoughts on those types of ideas?” Instead of agreeing with the question’s premise, the respondent answered only that police needed more training. She said:

Well, I think the police need to get, what you call it? They need to learn if it’s someone having a mental health crisis or a mental health problem and they got called to the scene, and you as a family member or whatever, I feel like they should be able to talk that person down or have someone come in to take precautions where they don’t have to shoot that person. You know what I’m saying? Or just kill that person. Just do it another way because they sick. They sick. It is a mental thing. It’s not like they know what they really doing. You know what I’m saying?

Similarly, a conversation with a 23-year-old from Austin illustrates Black Chicagoans’ desire for better training, not necessarily that police withdraw from mental health cases:

- Respondent: I definitely feel...having a special training for mental health cases. So I think a lot of the time – I watch obviously a lot of TV – so just seeing how they interact with people who are mentally ill and being able to navigate: Are you being harmed or do they need help? Then a different help than you’re able to provide. So just educating them more on the different things. No one’s just cookie cutter in those situations just like, “Okay, this person is this. So this is this.” No. So just giving them more resources and more knowledge of the type of people that’s actually out here in the world.
- Interviewer: Now I know you want the police to do certain things when it comes down to mental health. So if you don’t want the police dealing with the mental health issues, who should?
- Respondent: No, they should. I just feel like they should be trained on it. It should be a level of qualifications. These are things that they need to incorporate in their training.

Perhaps part of the certainty that this respondent relays about wanting police to be involved in situations where someone is having mental health challenges is simply because there are no other models. In another exchange, when the interviewer asked a 41-year-old woman from Englewood if she believed that the police “should be involved in mental illness issues, domestic violence issues and traffic issues,” the woman responded, “Yeah. Aren’t they already?” The power of current practice is hard to push against. While she did not think beyond police involvement, she did recognize room for improvement, however. She added:

[They police should act] with the assistance of somebody that specialize in it. If they got the training for it. You know what I’m saying? I would hope that they did. If they have to deal with them type of people, like your on-boarding should be that. You know what I’m saying? The police academy stuff should be that. I would hope so. Since you putting them in that position to have to deal with that stuff.

Respondents understood the range of situations that police were asked to deal with and thought that better preparation and training would yield better outcomes than the current situation. In addition to ideas about de-escalation and mental health training, other respondents mentioned training around reducing officers' fear of and increasing their understanding of Black people and communities; using non-lethal force; administering psychological tests to officers to make sure they are mentally fit to serve; improving listening skills; and increasing officers' sensitivity to the uniqueness and details of each encounter. Some respondents wanted more police and others just wanted more Black officers. Overall, their preferences suggest a much different model of policing than currently exists.



I want them to be held accountable for some things that they do that they know they're wrong about. There's no accountability when it comes to the things that they do."

At the core of this different model of policing that Black Chicagoans put forth are the ideals of fairness, equality, and justice. This sentiment reached the level of being a refrain in the interviews. "I want them to do their job fairly. I know they dealing with a lot, but do it fairly," said a 23-year-old in Garfield Park. "That's all I want. Just to be treated justly, be fairly. We all be treated equal. If you going to stop a Black man, stop the White man," said a 88-year-old in Noble Square. And a 29-year-old in Wicker Park concurred: "Well, I think they should be more of equal opportunity and more by the book. I don't think they should be picking and choosing how they go about things based off a person's race."

Beyond the use of the word "fair" or "equal," what might this look like in practice? A 75-year-old woman in Lawndale added specificity to the idea. She explained:

Number one, they should just be fair with the person. When you get out there, you stopping everything, don't cut your body cam off, do what you got to do, then cut it back on. Just be fair. You out there doing the job like we do, like I used to do a job. Just be fair with people. Just don't get out

there and just brutalize a person just because I got power over you. Be fair... You see a white boy doing something, oh, you going to beat the Black boy down and the white boy you going to turn your head, that's not fair.

Her repetition of the phrase "just be fair" transforms her words from a demand to a statement of the obvious. Obviously, the police who are charged with ensuring compliance with the law should be fair. Obviously, the police who are charged with keeping peace should not enact brutality. That's not fair. Obviously, the police should not engage in the unfairness of racial discrimination. Yet these things that are obvious for respondents as necessary ingredients for effective policing are not so obviously put into practice.

Another component of fairness was accountability. A 53-year-old woman from the Garfield neighborhood said: "I want them to be held accountable for some things that they do that they know they're wrong about. There's no accountability when it comes to the things that they do." A 68-year-old man in Auburn Gresham had an even more concrete proposal for reducing police misconduct, stating: "Well, again, they would have to tighten up the surveillance of the activities. I think that would be one of the main deterrents of helping to stop some of this unnecessary brutality against black and poor people and other minorities.... Making their corruption be hit by hurting their pockets financially... Well, make it easier for cops to be sued. Make it easier." The need for accountability highlights the irony in the unfair policing that Black Chicagoans received. The police are supposed to prevent and resolve harm, not cause it. But because many respondents saw police as the instigators of harm, there was the need for responses to that harm to hold them accountable, which would hopefully decrease their wrongdoing going forward.

Few respondents voiced ideas around eliminating the police altogether or drastically curtailing their purview, ideas that are in line with an abolitionist perspective. Many of these participants saw the road to a future without police as a gradual process. "So overall, I wish to see the police, their scope of influence just really, really made smaller. I think that they're used for too many issues in Chicago," said a 27-year-old woman in Bronzeville. A man of the same age in Irving Park thought similarly:

I think they can start to slowly be defunded until they're dismantled and just be abolished would be ideal. For the time being, I think they need to operate in a manner of, you ask questions first and pull the trigger later. I know they do the whole fear for my life thing, but I think if you sign up for that role and you decide yourself to be a public defender and protector, as they call themselves, then you understand that risk and your goal is to keep people alive, not go in guns and blazing. I think better protocol around how they approach any situation they're involved in.

This respondent had a long-term view of abolition and in the meantime relied more heavily on police training (i.e. "protocol") for improving police behavior and ultimately safety. Even when respondents did not think that policing actually improved safety, they were hesitant to call for abolition. In response to a question about getting rid of the police, a 48-year-old in West Chatham answered:

Get rid of it? I mean, I think that's a broad sweep, and I think it's unrealistic to... I think that the funds, that the billions of dollars is being spent could be spent in a better places in terms of really building the communities, because I don't think that the idea of policing communities has helped. There is nothing statistically that has been able to identify more policing with better outcomes for communities, Black community specifically.



Despite their skepticism about policing, this respondent stopped short of endorsing abolition, thinking it not realistic, or perhaps wondering, as a 33-year-old man in Kenwood did, "If you decide to take off the police department everywhere, how you going to control crime? There will be crime everywhere." Yet, the recognition that police funding dwarfs the investments in well-being and opportunity that many more respondents said were needed shows an important relationship between abolitionist approaches to the police and the ideas of Black community members who want supportive and enhancing resources.

In general, Black Chicagoans saw a role for a kind of policing that they did not currently experience but thought was possible. The policing they desired was more responsive, better trained and more fair, and it was not aggressive or abusive. A minority of respondents seemed to experience moments of this more welcome or acceptable policing already, while others experienced brutality and misconduct. The gulf between the policing that Black people witnessed in neighborhoods across Chicago today and the ideal they imagined is large.

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So overall, I wish to see the police, their scope of influence just really, really made smaller. I think that they're used for too many issues in Chicago..."

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DEFENDERS?

One of the goals of this project is to strengthen relationships between Black public defenders and Black Chicagoans. To that end, we asked respondents about their views on public defenders and what public defenders could do to improve relationships with Black communities outside the courtroom. Roughly three-fourths of the participants had enough experience with public defenders to feel comfortable offering some thoughts. Of those, around 40% had personal experience with a public defender either representing them or a close family member or friend. The remainder discussed public defenders solely based on their perceptions and word of mouth.

First, we will discuss participants' general thoughts on public defenders, positive and negative.

Despite some positive attitudes toward public defenders, three main critiques and stereotypes characterized participants' responses: 1) public defenders do not put enough care and investment into their cases, 2) public defenders are complicit in a system that just wants to lock up Black people, and 3) public defenders encourage their clients to take unwanted plea deals. We will then discuss the ideas that Black Chicagoans had for improving community-defender relationships, including doing work in low-income Black neighborhoods, conducting more investigatory work into their clients' circumstances, and improving communication and understanding with clients.

Positive Experiences with Public Defenders

It is clear from Black Chicagoans' responses that there are a lot of negative opinions about the work and role of public defenders. However, the news is not all bad. While there were a lot of critiques, almost half of the people who had personal experiences with public defenders mentioned having some sort of positive experience with an assigned public defender. Even if that person's global opinion about public defenders was negative, they would mention a specific public defender whom they felt had their back.

Several people expressed sympathy for public defenders having to deal with a lack of resources and large caseloads. A 27-year-old woman from Bronzeville who had personal experiences with public defenders felt some sympathy for their situation, stating: "I feel like I only have met people who are doing their best. So maybe they could pressure the systems above to give them more resources. I think they're all doing the best they can." Similarly, a 38-year-old man from Hyde Park expressed similar positive opinions:

They've been very friendly to me. Communicative, since day one, you walk in there, they take your case. They have so many cases, you know what I'm saying? I've watched them deal with me on a very positive level. You dealing with so much nonsense and you still to be positive to me, I understand that. Like I said, they've communicated very well with me. They've always showed up. You know what I'm saying? They've taken my case seriously. If you got a whole bunch of cases, like private defender, probably got three, four cases. Public defender probably got 30 cases. You know what I'm saying? You're still attentive to my case. So I don't think public defenders are necessarily the issue. But then again, I'm only speaking from my own experiences.

With some respondents, their positive opinions seemed very tied to the outcome of their cases and how much time they received. However, the majority of people's positive or negative opinions focused on how much they felt public defenders cared about them or their clients in general. This was the case even when those individuals ended up receiving prison time. Wanting to feel seen and fought for by public defenders is the underlying theme of how Black Chicagoans want public defenders to contribute to their safety.

Negative Perceptions of Public Defenders

Theme 1: *Public defenders do not put enough care and investment into their cases.*

One of the strongest negative sentiments about public defenders that Black Chicagoans shared was that public defenders do not put enough effort into their cases. In several interviews, people tied this perception to the idea that public defenders get paid whether they win their cases or not. The logic went that because clients are not paying personally for legal services, the defender does not have an incentive to work hard on the case. These negative opinions from people who had worked with public defenders took the form of statements like:

- "I think that they can help more with cases. I just think that they don't."
- "They don't come in well-prepared."
- "Most public defenders don't even care about you. [They act like] 'Who cares? Whatever. Just take this time,' and 'It's better than going to trial.'"
- "Some of them, most of the public defenders I had, they didn't want to fight, didn't want to fight for you. But I did run across one or two that did."



As did the last speaker above, a few people added caveats to these opinions, noting that they understood that public defenders are overworked, or a few had worked successfully on their behalf. However, a lot of Black people with court experiences clearly felt burned by the public defenders they had been assigned in the past.

This perception of public defenders as uncaring or unwilling to help has colored the views even of people who have no personal experiences with the courts. One 27-year-old man from Irving Park explained:

Like I said, I'm not too familiar with it, but from what I understand, public defenders just get thrown a bunch of cases and they don't really look into them very much. Or maybe they do, and I'm just hearing bad things about the role, but it seems like they're not truly invested in the people they're representing.



Well, the state owe me a favor so you going to take the 61 days and go down or what? So I take the little 61 days and go on down when I did take the time or whatever. But yeah, it was like some public defenders would just make deals with the State.”

Theme 2: *Public defenders are complicit in a system that just wants to lock up Black people.*

A subset of people who had negative experiences with the courts or with public defenders expressed in very sharp terms how they felt public defenders were complicit in a larger system that was designed to be against defendants. When the interviewer asked a 43-year-old person from the Austin neighborhood, “What was your experience with your public defender?” They answered: “Zero. What I mean about that is because he didn’t help me in any possible way. It was me versus the court system. So I don’t think a public defender should be for nobody.”

Other people shared that they believed merely because public defenders are part of the court system, they are more aligned with judges and state attorneys than their clients. A 38-year-old man from Hyde Park, quoted earlier saying that most of his experiences with public defenders had been positive, nonetheless had this view. He argued:

The only problem with that is they’re in bed with the court. You know what I’m saying? So, the less people that comes through there, it’s like they’re all kind of depending on each other. So, they need kind of bodies, as messed up as that sounds.

For these folks, merely being a part of the court system created distrust. A 54-year-old from Englewood put it simply, “I didn’t trust them anyway because they eating lunch with the state’s attorney.” Some participants reported seeing interactions between state

attorneys and their defenders that shocked or upset them. A 51-year-old woman shared her experience seeing what she interpreted as back-room deals between the state, judges, and public defenders:

I heard the public defender say, “Well I gave you one, that you give me this one, you owe me for this one.” You know what I’m saying? They doing one case, the man said, “Okay, I’m going to get her, she going to take the three years, but the next time you going to have to get me a break, it’s going to be my time and I get a year.” You know what I’m saying? They make deals. I have seen it with my own eyes. So, I was like, huh, what the hell? And then the public defender was like, “Well, the state owe me a favor so you going to take the 61 days and go down or what?” So I take the little 61 days and go on down when I did take the time or whatever. But yeah, it was like some public defenders would just make deals with the State.

Again, these sentiments also popped up amongst people who had not had direct experiences with public defenders. Several people reported hearing rumors and stories about the complicity of public defenders: that attorneys go back and forth from being a state’s attorney to being a public defender, that they are making deals with the State or the judge, or that they sell out their clients to get cases resolved faster.

Theme 3: *Public defenders encourage their clients to take unwanted plea deals.*

Along the same lines as the previous theme, around a fifth of participants who talked about public defenders spoke about them counseling their clients to take plea deals. Participants whose opinions were based on their own personal experiences often described being given no other option than to take the State's offer. The following exchange with a 59-year-old from Austin is one example of this perspective:

- Respondent: Yeah, they work for the system. Their thing is—
- Interviewer: Why do you say that?
- Respondent: Because their thing is, as soon as you come in, they don't ask you what happened. They ask you what "You plead this right here, and you'll get this much time." They ain't ask me what happened or the details of the case. They said, "If you plead guilty, this is how much time you'll get." And that was a lie. They told me I'd get a 10, 25, but I'd do 7. I wound up doing the whole 25 [years].
- Interviewer: And are there things you think public defenders could or should do outside of the courtroom to help people?
- Respondent: They should do they job to defend me, not work for the system to get you to cop out so they can get paid.

More than one person shared their deep regret in taking plea deals, sometimes for crimes they said they did not commit. They wished they had gone against the advice of their public defender or asked them to fight for them and take the case to trial. Again, underlying these opinions was the belief that the court system has it out for Black people and that many Black people are getting locked up for crimes they did not commit. A 27-year-old man from Chatham had this to say:

Some public defenders they'll like, "Oh you could just take this time or no," but when you know, "Nah, I know in my mind I didn't do this. I'm not [guilty]," why would I take this time? Why would you be trying to make me take this time? You not even worried about trying to win the case. You are basically telling me already that I lost.

For some Black Chicagoans, this sentiment went so deep that they equated having a public defender with getting prison time. A 50-year-old man from the South Shore shared the warnings he had been given:

- Respondent: I had a paid attorney, so never really dealt with them, the public defender, because they always told me that they was penitentiary deliverers.
- Interviewer: Who's they?
- Respondent: The gang bangers, the "do wrongers," the people who into going to jail. They always told me, don't mess with them. They ain't going to do nothing but give you some time. All they do is make you cop out and all that. I ain't have to use them.

Feedback for Improving Community-Public Defender Relations

Many participants offered their perspectives on public defenders without providing many concrete ideas for how to improve relationships with Black people in Chicago. However, a set of participants did offer their feedback, and here we lift up their ideas on what public defenders could do better and how they could strengthen their relationship with Black communities.

Advice for improving community-defender relations included increasing familiarity and interaction across the two groups; improving case investigations and knowledge of clients' specific case; and improving communications so that clients better understand their legal options.

Theme 1: *Get to know the Black communities they serve better and hold community events.*

Several people stressed the importance of public defenders understanding the culture and circumstances of the low-income Black communities where their clients live. A 60-year-old man from Hyde Park shared an idea he had been thinking about on this front:

Me and one of my alumni brothers wanted to educate soon-to-be law enforcement officers and also soon-to-be public defenders, you know, just talking about the culture. They don't have no idea of the culture of the people they be defending. And they should have a culture class to understand the culture, that everybody coming from in their youth, whether they got some issues. They're not bad people. They're just sick people. You know what I mean? To understand that this is an environment where a lot of dynamics go on because of poverty, multiple other issues that affect behaviors and the racial—there's so many issues that bring one person to the stairs of justice.

Another person suggested that public defenders host a type of safety or charity event where public defenders could pass on their knowledge of the criminal legal system to people in the community, their ideas for how the systems can be improved, and explanations of the role of a public defender and what they do. A few participants expressed gratitude to the Black public defenders conducting these interviews and for the goals of this project. They said that it was a great step in getting to know the needs of the communities that they serve and getting feedback from Black people.

Another approach on this front that a couple of people shared was having public defenders make themselves personally more known in the communities they serve. A 53-year-old man in Lansing shared his idea for how public



defenders could start building relationships before people get into jails and courtrooms: *[Public defenders should] interact with the communities that they serve, get among the people. "Hey, I'm George, public defender." Again, do a campaign so they know who you are. They know what your heart is. As a public defender, how do I meet you? What's your office? The courtroom, right? I don't meet you particularly in the community. You're not part of my community. If I live in Englewood or any other hood, you don't particularly live there with me, so why not go out there? Because remember, who are you serving, the underserved for the most part? You're defending, right, the underserved, so why not know the underserved. So if they went out there and did a campaign, "Hey, I'm George, public defender." "Hey, I'm Janine." That becomes a relationship. Remember, I don't want to meet you under the pressure, just go out there, maybe do a barbecue, do some community events so they can know you're public defenders because they're supposed to be serving the public.*

Another person with ideas along this line suggested putting pictures of public defenders on billboards in the city or on CTA buses and trains.

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If I live in Englewood or any other hood, you don't particularly live there with me, so why not go out there? Because remember, who are you serving, the underserved for the most part? You're defending, right, the underserved, so why not know the underserved.”



Theme 2: Investigate and understand the circumstances of a client's case.

This piece of feedback often stemmed from the perception discussed before that public defenders do not invest enough time to individual cases. A number of participants called for public defenders to do more investigatory work for clients. This suggestion often came from a very critical place and the sense of injustice that they or others in their community are getting locked up unfairly. The following two exchanges illustrate how participants expressed these sentiments. The first exchange is from an interview with a 44-year-old woman in Austin. She offered these thoughts after sharing her experience of being falsely arrested for drug possession when she was 19 years old, and having her case ultimately thrown out:

- Interviewer: Okay. And are there things you think the public defenders could or should do outside of the courtroom to help people?
- Respondent: Listen.
- Interviewer: Just listen.
- Respondent: Investigate. You know what I'm saying? Let me get this information. Let me check into this. Let me check into that. You know what I'm saying? Because half of these people in jail for no reason. They done did 20, 30 years. They got to be letting these people out of jail. They just did 20, 25 years. Ain't no amount of money that can make up for that, for them years.

The second excerpt was shared by a 51-year-old woman from the South Side who had mixed experiences with public defenders, some she felt did well by her, and many she felt did not fight for her at all. When asked the same question about what public defenders could do outside the courtroom, she had this to say:

I feel like [public defenders] should investigate the crimes more and find out what really happened and don't just assume that it's always that person's fault because they caught that case. Because sometimes it don't even be their fault, they was just in the wrong place at the wrong time or with a person and they got locked up for the other person doing some stupid shit and they didn't even know the person was going to do something stupid. You feel me?

Theme 3: *Improve communications with clients and educate them about the court process.*

A lot of the criticism shared about public defenders seemed to come from what appears in participant descriptions as large gaps in communication between public defenders and their clients. Many of the participants who had worked with public defenders talked about experiences of callousness or hurried communication from their assigned attorney. A 45-year-old person from Austin described having one such experience:

Interviewer: Now and I know when you had the public defender, what was the outcome of that case when you had—
 Respondent: Shit
 Interviewer: —the public defender? What was the outcome when you had the public defender?
 Respondent: Nothing. He came in there talking about “State’s offer.” I told him, “Get the fuck out of my face. You going do it?”
 Interviewer: You fired him?
 Respondent: Yeah, he ain’t come to say why, he saying what the state’s trying to give you because of your background. I’m like damn bruh, you ain’t even say hi.
 Interviewer: He ain’t even say hi?
 Respondent: No, he say what the state say.

Several exchanges across different interviews also highlighted the different perspectives and levels of knowledge about the criminal legal system that defendants and their families have compared to public defenders. In the following exchange with one of our public defender interviewers, a 57-year-old mother in Pullman describes her lack of knowledge and frustrations with the public defender assigned to her son’s case:

Interviewer: So throughout your experiences with your son, with the criminal justice system, did he ever have a public defender?
 Respondent: He did.
 Interviewer: What was that experience?
 Respondent: Slow. My cousin’s friend acted quicker, like boom, boom, boom. This one, I would have to call and call and call just to say, “I want a status of what’s going on. What should we expect?” No, that took too long. Yeah, that took too long. If you’re paying for something, somebody going to give you your money’s worth. When you’re not, it’s like... I didn’t see the same quickness, but hopefully that’s changed, because that was 10 years ago.
 Interviewer: So when you say quickness, is that quickness with the resolution of the case or quickness with responding quick to you?
 Respondent: Quickness with responding, the resolution, keeping me informed, letting me know what to expect. I didn’t know anything. I’ve never been to jail, and I’ve never known anyone who’s been to jail. My son is the first one in our family that has gone to jail.
 Interviewer: Well, when it comes to a criminal case and what attorneys can disclose, they have to be given permission to tell you certain things.
 Respondent: Who gives them that permission?
 Interviewer: In your son’s situation, it would be your son. So, if your son did not give permission—
 Respondent: I don’t even think he knew, to be honest with you. I don’t think he knew that his butt was going get it this time. It wasn’t going to be no slap on the wrist. Mommy and daddy pays your bail and you’re out, and then you have to do whatever service or whatever.

In this exchange, the participant clearly had different communication expectations about the case compared to the public defender, did not know what to expect, and did not know anything about restrictions that the public defender may have been under. Her son also appeared to have lacked knowledge about his own circumstances and what was coming in the criminal proceedings.

Many of the participants with complaints along these lines suggested that public defenders should spend more time with their clients, get to know who their clients are on a personal level, and educate their clients and clients' families on court processes. A 48-year-old woman in Austin offered this insight for public defenders:

Some of the people obviously you're dealing with don't trust the system, period. So, with you as their attorney, they're not as forthcoming as they should be. How can you help them if you don't really understand who they are as a person?

In many of the anecdotes people gave when sharing positive experiences with public defenders, they stressed how those defenders' communication styles conveyed a feeling of personal investment that went a long way. The following excerpts illustrate the lasting impact public defenders had on two different participants. The first is a 50-year-old woman from the West Side:

Some of the public defenders, they go off what they want, proper cause and all that. But she gave me an hour. Some won't talk to you that long. They talk to you for 30 minutes. She was there talking to me for an hour. Telling me, "You're a good kid. I'm going to keep you. I'm going to tell you this, though, please don't come back here." And she was telling me, "I can see in your face that you're not a bad kid. You look really smart." And I told her, "I am. I never thought I'd be here." I just was hanging out with the wrong people at the wrong time. She's like, "Yeah, that's where it start, but just stay out of here. Just take care of yourself." She said, "I don't want to see you back here." I said, "You won't." And, ever since I left, I never went back.

The second is from a 60-year-old man from Hyde Park:

Respondent: Yeah, I went to trial and the judge found me guilty.

Interviewer: But you were still happy with the public defender?

Respondent: Yeah. Because afterwards, he was still there. Because remember, look, they found me guilty, and I still went to court for a year and a half. I'm supposed to go to prison but [the judge] would not let the state take me to prison. That public defender was cool. I ended up going to his office all the time. Go up to public defender's office. We sat and we talked.

Addressing the Community-Public Defender Gap

This project itself proves that many public defenders care quite deeply about their cases, the Black community, and the clients they work with. The findings from interviews highlight how Black clients and their families come into their cases with their own understandings of why they were arrested; fears and hopes about what will happen to them; expectations of the criminal legal system informed by prior experience, rumor, and popular culture; and thoughts about how Black people have been treated by the courts and the state. These understandings and experiences leave them with many criticisms about public defenders.

An analogy to the medical field may offer some insights into why there appears to be such a disconnect between community members and public defenders. In medical practice, there is often a cultural gap between patients' and physicians' understanding of illnesses. The physician's model of what is happening to the patient is clinical, informed by biomedical training and culture, and tends to focus narrowly on a diagnosis/treatment plan that analyzes the body like a machine. The patients' model of what is happening to them is personal, informed by their own cultural beliefs, their fears, and their social and economic circumstances. The distance between those two ways of understanding illness was driving high levels of patient dissatisfaction and poor treatment compliance. From this research, medical schools began teaching physicians how to elicit their patients' understanding of their illness and educate patients in areas where differences in understanding would impact care, giving the patient the opportunity to ask questions. This approach positions the physician as a therapeutic ally, helping the patient negotiate their understanding of a situation and the medical understanding, prioritizing trust between the physician and patient.

Similarly, legal clients and their families come into cases with culturally informed understandings of the justice system, which may differ greatly from public defenders. Public defenders' understanding of the case is informed by their legal training, experiences in the court system, hopes and fears for clients, and workplace dynamics. Those gaps in legal explanatory frameworks between community members and public defenders may explain some of the dissatisfaction and criticism that participants expressed across interviews. Take the following story shared by a 45-year-old woman from Joliet:

So last year, 2021, I dropped my cousin off at home. He was arrested, got to the police station. So, since I was the last person to see him, his mom wanted me to come to court. I think it was still COVID restrictions or whatever so for whatever reason, it was video court. And so, we went up to the public defender and we got to the table and the guy was like, "I already told you guys a hundred times already. Y'all called." And he was just like, "This is how we do things." Just it was like, "We don't really want your input right now because he's not going to have a court date." And we were just really trying to beg him, "Listen, he had one to two weeks before he was done with probation for real." Of course. It's always the worst-case thing or scenario. And they're like, "Yeah, but it's just not looking good for him."

So yeah, now he's in Lincoln, so he immediately got all that time. But it was unfortunate because we really thought if we could get a few letters, a few things, they would just let him out. It happened Thanksgiving a year ago. And so, we definitely thought that we could help him, but they were just like, "No, it's going to go straight to the PO." Well, it already did, immediately once he's arrested. And they even put him on a psych ward. Because of his history, they did try to put him there. So, we thought we had some time to buy. So yeah, it wasn't like a personal relationship or a friendship could be made or his mom giving some information about her health. We tried everything. We said he just had a baby. We told them all of these things and they were just like, "It doesn't matter right now. It's out of my control."



In this anecdote, the participant did not know the legal process that was set into motion when her cousin violated parole and the limited ability of the public defender to intervene. The family wanted a much different path to be possible, and that difference in understanding caused tension between family members and the public defender. While the outcome of the case may have been the same, an approach by the public defender that was attuned to these differences in understanding may have left the family with the feeling that they had at least been seen and heard by someone who had their cousin's best interests in mind.

Public defenders are only one piece of Black Chicagoans' experience of the criminal legal system, and some of the views expressed by participants are certainly informed by their interactions with other criminal legal actors. As one participant put it, people do not want to become "another statistic" of a Black person incarcerated. However, the following quote from an Austin woman sums up concisely what many participants seemed to want most from public defenders: "Give them a sense that you actually care about the outcome."

HOPE, DESPITE

The Black people in Chicago who sat down to talk with us have had considerable hardship, loss, and trauma in their lives. They have witnessed violence, been victims, gone without shelter, lost loved ones to illness, experienced police abuses, endured prison and jail, and seen their neighborhoods deteriorate. They feel unsafe nearly every time they leave the confines of their homes, and even at home. Black folks in Chicago exert considerable mental and physical energy in trying to stay safe, which causes significant stress. They maintain a tight inner circle of support and lament a perceived disunity among neighbors, within communities, and across Black people as a whole.

Black Chicagoans' daily reality would seem to leave little room for hope. And yet hopefulness permeated the dispositions of the people we interviewed, despite the difficult things that confronted them. Hopefulness far outweighed hopelessness in what people had to say about their lives and futures. People were hopeful because they had family that they wanted to support, because they were optimistic about Black resilience and leadership, and because they had a deep faith in God or a higher power. But mostly, people were hopeful because they willed themselves to be.

Staying positive for family was important for many respondents. One 27-year-old man from Chicago Ridge commented:

I take it day-by-day, not think about three weeks or three months ahead. I can't control that. That's not here yet. So if I take it day-by-day, if I can be happy today and keep my family whole and happy and fed today, then I'll lead for a better tomorrow.

Evident in his statement is the financial necessity to focus on what is right in front of him. He did not have excess money to make long-term plans. Nonetheless, the rewards of taking care of his family responsibilities today made him hopeful for tomorrow.

A 60-year-old Black man in Hyde Park illustrates the hope

that comes from believing in Black people's resilience, despite a harrowing history and contemporary situation. He shared:

Poverty is a crime because it causes you to suspend your humanity to make ends meet, and then when your heart is hard and you don't care about the community, you don't care about nobody. You're just trying to come up. Politically wise, I don't see no hope with none of that. I'm just being realistic with you. But that's just my personal point of view. But I believe this too will pass. I believe that the future, long term, is right for Black people because what was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end. If Black people was up at one time, I believe we'll be up again.

There is literally a shift as he speaks from hopelessness to hope. He lays out all the reasons not to be hopeful, and even claims that he himself is not hopeful, and yet he pivots. He cannot give up on Black people, which would be giving up on himself. And he ends seeing Black people being better off.

Another respondent—a 56-year-old man from Humboldt Park—had a similar faith in Black resilience, observing:

I am a black man and I'm proud. I am so proud. I don't care how they tried to put us on TV, how they always show us with this bullshit. But what about all the other 2, 3000, million things we do every day? You know what I mean? You could break somebody. Yeah, you can break them, but you can't break all of us. You can't.

These sentiments have echoes of Maya Angelou's famous poem "Still I Rise." One stanza reads:

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

Black Chicagoans embodied this fortitude. There was no succumbing to poverty or caricature. Temptations toward hopelessness were countered with visions of Black resurgence, a confidence in Black strength, and certainty about the foundations of Black well-being.



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Other respondents discussed how Black folks would achieve this individual and collective resurgence. A 61-year-old woman in South Shore said it would be the youth to ensure a positive future. “I’m hopeful,” she responded to a question about Black people’s future. “There’s going to be a change. It has to be. I see a lot of the youth rising up, making some changes... And then I see my son in the future.” Another respondent had hope because of seeing more “Black folks in a position of power.” For others, the simple fact of having secured a job gave them personal hope. “I am hopeful because I am working,” said a 57-year-old woman from Pullman after she had lost her previous job and struggled with anxiety. Finally, for many respondents, a deep faith bolstered their hope. Sometimes the faith was clearly religious. “I’m optimistic because my faith in God,” proclaimed a 48-year-old from West Chatham. “Even with the narrative that is being painted in this abyss of hopelessness, it’s not, because I see so much beauty.” A 57-year-old Chatham man also talked about faith, but in less overtly religious terms:

I’m hopeful, man. I ain’t got nothing but faith. You know what I’m saying? ‘Cause I’m built of faith. I’m my foundation, man. My foundation’s built upon my faith. You know what I’m saying? That’s what sustained me for those 23 years of being incarcerated, and came out here and do what I done right now to this day. You know what I’m saying? I’m in a better position than most men who’s been out here free all their lives. You know what I’m saying?

So yeah, I’m hopeful, man. You know what I’m saying? Even though, you

know what I’m saying? We all have our little rocky places, you know what I’m saying? But I don’t let that there give me a spiral of depression. You know what I’m saying? I build on that. You know what I’m saying? Challenges are the gatekeepers to success. You know what I’m saying? We don’t get past that challenge, you know what I’m saying, the gate going to get locked on us.

A person who spent 23 years in prison had to have a strong core sense of positivity to maintain their hope. This man’s internal faith – whether it referred to faith in a higher spiritual power or to faith in his own humanity goes unsaid – was the foundation for his personal freedom, even before he was released from prison. It is also the source of his continued sense of optimism, facing each new challenge as a door to something even better than what came before it.

Oftentimes, respondents shared being constitutionally hopeful. A 65-year-old North Side man said, “I get away from the negative. I get more to the positive.” A 65-year-old woman answered the question “How would someone else describe you?” with one word: “Joyful!” A 59-year-old woman in Englewood said she was hopeful because “I’m just a hopeful-type person.” A 41-year-old man from Englewood always stayed positive. “I don’t really take the negativity too easy,” he said. “So, if you approach me with the negative vibes, I’m going to block you out basically.” In other words, he lived his life with a hopeful force field to protect his positive and forward-thinking personality type from negative energy.

Even respondents whose loss was beyond comprehension found a way to be hopeful despite their circumstances. A 70-year-old man in Bucktown talked about the tragic murder of his grandson, and his daughter's struggles with that loss. Yet, he explained, how with faith in God, he found a way to find purpose in his family's trials and in his life:

My middle daughter, unfortunately, she's not doing well and that's because police shot her kid in the back and killed him unjustifiably. And although the OIG [Office of Inspector General] said it was murder, they said it was justified in the court. But anyway, as far as I'm concerned now, all those were awareness exercises, teaching tools to help me help kids. So I'm grateful that Jehovah God has allowed me to spread what I know as good news. To many, it would be bad news, but anytime you can use these things to reinvent yourself to make someone else successful, it's a good thing. So that's where I am.

This grandfather insisted on turning a heart-wrenching negative into positive motivating energy. He refused to be defeated. Other respondents used these powers of positivity and possibility to achieve a sense of safety. A 38-year-old Hyde Parker thought that at one level being Black constituted a condition of unsafety, but he refused to let that interpretation dominate his thoughts. He, instead, turned it around:

Like I said, I do understand the risk of being Black as far as safety concerned, as far as, you know what I'm saying,

certain rules not applying to us or us being disadvantaged by certain things. But I don't want to make it seem like being Black is some disservice. You know what I mean? It's like it's a death sentence. It's not. If anything, it's a compliment. You know what I'm saying? It's an accomplishment. So I don't want to make it feel like, oh well because I'm Black, I'm not safe. No, because I'm Black, I'm extraordinary.

So I do kind of understand the dangers of me being Black, you know what I'm saying, as far as safety is concerned, but I'm kind of past the point of being in fear... I'm just not going to feel like I'm some type of lesser citizen or lower-class citizen or I deserve less safety because anybody else. I'm going to, you know what I'm saying, if it's not safe enough to be Black, then I'm going to make it till it is. I'm going to make it till it is okay to be Black and feel safe.

These words acknowledge how society sees Black people—as outside of the law, disadvantaged, damaged, incomplete as citizens, and in danger. Yet he refuses this narrative and instead insists on extraordinary Blackness. He arrives at this state not through magic, or through a submissive faith that was common among interviewees, but instead through his own efforts and contributions. If being Black is not safe now, he is going to make it so. That is the root of his hopefulness, despite the obstacles, that allowed Black folks to dream about their futures.



No, because I'm Black, I'm extraordinary."

BLACK FUTURES

A central goal of this project was to get beyond the concrete reality of what Black Chicagoans know and experience today in order to understand what they expect and desire for the future. To that end, we asked people a series of questions about what they expected and what they wanted in the best possible future world for themselves and for Black people generally. Specifically, we asked:

- How do you feel about your future? Tell me what you see.
- Now going beyond yourself, tell me about Black people in the future?
- Now I want you to dream beyond what you think will happen to what could happen. If you could wave a magic wand and make your future into whatever you wanted it to be, what would it look like?
- And what about Black people? What is the future you want for Black people?

Each of these questions had their own following up probes to capture how hopeful respondents were – VERY, was the answer, as discussed previously – and detailed descriptions of the futures they saw and what was needed to achieve them. **When Black Chicagoans envisioned the future they wanted to see, it was filled with help-giving, selflessness, sharing, caring, and building. Most people used the rhetorical magic wand to make other people happier and healthier.**

The futures that emerged from these conversations were ones that included personal success and stability but put much more emphasis on community and relationships. For example, 19 respondents made mention of being rich or wanting other material possessions in their desired future, and 22 talked about meeting personal financial or career goals. But more respondents were thinking collectively: 26 respondents focused on family and relationships in

their future, and 42 expressed desires for a strong and health community. Socioeconomic security was more salient when we asked about the desired future for Black people; 44 respondents mentioned it. But, again, even more were thinking beyond monetary resources to the quality of Black people's relationships; 48 people envisioned a future with more unity and stronger community care. We elaborate on these findings below.

Black Future Selves

Although money and personal success were never the predominant response to questions about the future, they definitely came up. A 76-year-old woman from Dolton said her future "would look like me be in The Bahamas, sitting on the beach. Sitting up on the armrest... drinking Mai Tais." A 61-year-old woman from South Shore had a similar vision. "I'm living on an island somewhere," she pictured in her desired future. Both women said that what they needed to get there was money. A 57-year-old man in Chatham was more explicit. "But in my imagined future, man, I'm looking at, you know what I'm saying, being successful with a million dollars in my bank account or more."

But these dreams of personal luxury and escape were very much the exceptions, not the rule. Even when people mentioned money or personal goals, they nearly always wanted it for family or community reasons. A 23-year-old woman from Austin was very specific about her personal goals, but they were not for personal ends. She said:

My future, I would be the president of Delta Sigma Theta. We living in Washington, DC. [My partner] will be some type of politician somewhere and we'll be able to influence policy change and different things for the community and be able to have a just direct impact on different Black people lives. I just want to make sure that if I could just help one person, then it'll be an impact.

While these aspirations begin with personal achievements, the purpose of her achievement is not for personal power or accolades but rather for community impact.

Respondents were the same way when they imagined a future with more money. “Just in a better spot financially, a better spot financially for me and my kid. That’s what I would want if I had a magic wand,” said a 30-year-old mother in Austin. Again, her wishes for financial security were not for her own pocket, but to best support her children. Then she broadened even beyond her nuclear family to “putting each person in my circle in their spots that they want to be in when they see themselves in the future with that.” This response is simple and powerful. She is the one gifted with the magic wand in this hypothetical world, and she uses it to allow the people in her circle to dream and to bring their dreams to fruition. This is the kind of selfless, generous, and collective-minded framework that we saw repeatedly in the interviews.

Sometimes, when it seemed like the respondent was focused on their own personal gain, their answer took a turn toward the collective. A 61-year-old in Dolton said he would use the magic wand to make himself a billionaire. “Why a billionaire?” asked the interviewer. And the response was:

Why billionaire? Because I want a house the way I want it, the friends I wanted, buying kind of car I want, buy my son and daughter the kind of car they want, the kind of house they want. But my main goal is to build a big old center. I’ll roughly put maybe about six floors to it. What it would do... I’m going to try to not make it too long... the first floor would be our offices where you come in and sign up or reapply. You will have six months to a year to get yourself together. We provide you with public transportation, whether it be bus, cars, but going to be no cash or I might have a bus, a van, or mini van take you where you need to go for a job interview.



I’ll have the next floor be for schooling. You got to go to school, get your GED, you some kind of training. Have a little bank in there where you can save your money because I don’t want your money because you’re working. But you got to keep in mind, you got six months to get yourself together.

The next floor will be for single women with kids, battered women with kids. The next floor will be for single young ladies, second floor. Next floor, single young men, and so forth, a laundry, a recreation room where they could feel safe, where they could feel the big family. And maybe down in the lower level, a big old cafeteria, and have some of the best cooks I could find to cook for them.

The respondent carries on with his description. The center built with their billion dollars generated by their magic wand includes free clothes – name brand if people want them – a barber and beauty shop, a daycare, everything secure, and “everybody will be welcomed to that building.” The question that motivated that answer was “If you could wave a magic wand and make your future into whatever you desire it to be, what does it look like?” The question was about the individual, but the answer was about creating a community asset to uplift others.

Respondents in the examples above mentioned relationships or community and money. More often, however, respondents skipped the personal financial part and went straight to the resources needed to help the community. Despite interviewers' clarity that the question was about the future the respondent would make for themselves as an individual, people continuously answered in a selfless way. The exchange below offers an example:

Interviewer: What would you make happen for yourself?

Respondent: For myself or just people?

Interviewer: For yourself.

Respondent: If I had a magic wand, let's see what I would do. I think I would probably would have some scholarship type program that benefits the community. What I really would want to do is have the gardening, because in my mind, I swear the food pantries need fresh produce, and all them canned goods is just killing me. So if I ever came into some money, I always said I would have an urban farm and try to produce enough fruits and veg tables to be sent to the food pantries.

It was nearly impossible to get people to focus on themselves. Help-giving, other-orientation, and a commitment to making a difference were core to people's answers.

The primacy of relationships and the human necessity of being in community was perhaps most poignantly represented by a 46-year-old woman in Englewood. She answered what she would do with her magic wand in what seemed like a reflex action. "First, I'd be rich," she asserted. The interviewer paused. And she paused. "Then I probably would [pause]. A magic wand? Bring my mother back. And my siblings. Yep, I would do that." When she really thought of the power of the magic wand, money lost its value and deceased loved ones moved top of mind. What was abundantly clear from these interviewees is that **a future is not a future worth living without family and community. The most important role of the magic was to make other people happier and healthier.**

BLACK FUTURE COMMUNITIES

Because it was so difficult to get respondents to focus on themselves in their imagined future, the distinction between Black future selves and Black future communities is not so stark. Black future selves are always in community. The two questions compliment one another rather than offer new or competing insights. As with Black future selves, the predominant answers revolved around socioeconomic resources and community well-being. For Black future communities, the socioeconomic emphasis was stronger than it was for individuals, and almost equally as common a part of people's answers as desires for unity and cohesion. For many respondents these two were intertwined. Strengthening relationships within the Black community would make Black people more likely to go to school and work, be healthier in mind and body, and earn more money. So unity would yield socioeconomic benefits. The reverse was also true in the connections people made. Respondents witnessed daily suffering and lack in their communities and wanted to ameliorate it, as well as offer resources to not just get by but get ahead. Satisfying basic needs and providing opportunities would hence fortify community ties.

Black future selves are always in community.

Working in the first direction – from unity to socioeconomic stability – a 66-year-old woman in suburban Forest Park was asked, "What about Black people with that magic wand? What is the future you would want for them?" She answered:

I just think we need to unite more. We need to stop fighting. We need to stop killing each other. This fighting and this shooting and this violence has just got to stop. We've got to stop. I truly think we'd be a lot stronger if we can get past that. Progress, go to school, get smart, be ambitious, be a go-getter, but we've got to unite. We have to work together as a culture to reinforce ourselves, to move ahead. That would be my magic wand wish right there, definitely.

Her first pillar is unity, which will decrease violence. From that flows progress, upward mobility, and ambition. Community and socioeconomic stability are linked, and both are part of the future for Black people that she envisions.

Some respondents saw the relationship working in the other direction. Satisfying people's basic needs would promote more unity and community. A 50-year-old man in Auburn Gresham began his answer about the future he wanted to see for the Black community with stories about the past, when there were "Black mom-and-pop stores." These kinds of institutions provided jobs and anchored the community. "And it's not that no more," he lamented. "It's the community parts you brought up. There's no community." But how to get back there? His vision emerged as he conversed with the interviewer.

Respondent: When nobody know what to do, I guess they do the next best thing, just not to go hungry. You know what I'm saying? Is that right? No, because somebody else is going hungry because you don't want to go hungry because you done did something wrong. You know what I'm saying?

Interviewer: In the best future for Black people, nobody's going hungry?

Respondent: Right.

Interviewer: Nobody's abusing other people to get what they need?

Respondent: Right. Because like I say, even when the stimulus checks or the COVID checks was coming out, people wasn't that angry. People was not that angry, for real. You know what I'm saying? Now, is it right that we just get money, get money, get money? It may not be right, but it's a lot of states that has stipends, that has government funding for people that's in need of government funding. You know what I'm saying? Sometimes that be the root of all of it, you know what I'm saying.

Hunger makes people harm others. Hunger makes people angry. Hungry undermines community cohesion. That's the root of it. And, so, policies that reduce hunger and other wants should revive community. A 27-year-old man in Irving Park made this point even more explicitly in his vision for the Black community, asserting:

I think I said this a lot. I think everyone's basic necessities would be met and that would be the start. Then everyone can imagine, okay, what's my life going to be like? Who do I want to be? How do I want to be freely and not have the worries of what am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep? Having everyone's basic material needs met, whether it be through work or whatever is fulfilling to them. They have sustained income, a sustained way of your basic level of life living, and then able to go from there and be whatever they may want to be and how they want it to be. But I think in my mind, that natural start. Starting there would really make us be able to go and make anything possible. But just everyone having their basic needs met really is crucial, I think.

Housing, employment, food, childcare, transportation, counseling, education, health care. The list of unmet basic needs in Black Chicago is long and many respondents saw meeting them as a "natural start" for a Black Chicago of the future. These supports might be provided through the public sector, but most people did not specify where the resources would come from, just that they would flow. "Man, all these homeless people standing out here in the world, all of them [would] have their own crib. All of them, every last one of them," exclaimed a 58-year-old in Bronzeville about what he would put his wand to work for. A 61-year-old woman from South Shore similarly talked about the woes she would eradicate. She would "make it to where we we're not suffering financially. I can bless people. No homelessness. No mental health...And I want to be where our communities are thriving." Alongside this thriving community, then, was also a united community. She spoke almost prophetically for "Black people to rise up, wake up, like the unity, the love."

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Black people to rise up, wake up, like the unity, the love.”



Realistically, however, there is no magic wand. The future that Black Chicagoans desire requires collective work. As a 47-year-old resident of Bellwood noted, this project served as a step in that effort.

Interviewer: Okay. Now going beyond yourself, tell me about Black people in the future. Are you hopeful about us as a people?

Respondent: I hope that we can mend together, stop fighting against each other. I think that's the only way we're going to make our future better. We have to come together as one.

Interviewer: What do we need to do that? And what would it look like if we did it?

Respondent: *We need unity. We need more of this happening.*

Interviewer: *When you say this, what are you referring to?*

Respondent: *The forums where you're sitting down here talking to people to find out what they want in their communities to make it better.*

Interviewer: Has anyone ever sat you down and asked you questions like these directly?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Do you find that odd?

Respondent: No. I think it's about time.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The goal of this project was to reimagine public safety from the perspective of Black people who experience frequent unsafety but build families, friendships, communities, organizations, and institutions nonetheless. We highlighted the insights at the beginning of the report, and here we conclude with recommendations that flow from the insights and their elaborations in the report.

1. Strengthen Black community relationships.

There is a widely shared opinion that the bonds within neighborhoods and within Chicago's Black community are frayed, and that distrust and disregard are prevalent instead. Residents expressed that safety requires people to feel familiar with one another, to know their neighbors and community leaders, and to interact with each other. The absence of community bonds causes people to enact strategies of withdrawal and hyperawareness. Redirecting the retreatist energies in a restorative and constructive manner might include working together on a shared campaign of community improvement or empowerment, or more community events where people get a chance to get to know each other in an authentic way. Neighbors and residents must know each other in order to want each other's safety. A community is about how people interact with one another, how they care for one another, and how they show support for those who are in need. This is already the work of several community organizations in Chicago, but they often do it on shoestring budgets. We need to build the capacity and reach of these existing organizations and foster others. A commitment to community is also already present in people's visions of their desired Black futures. They are selfless, generous, and collective-minded. These are assets upon which to build stronger community relationships.

2. Invest in well-being and opportunity.

When people are socioeconomically insecure everyone is unsafe. When folks are hungry, sick, without housing, in tough schools, and without jobs, then they cannot foster the kind of community bonds that most people desire. Satisfying people's basic needs would promote more unity and community. Going beyond basic needs to include enhanced opportunities through educational and jobs programs offers alternative routes to respect and stability. Particular attention should focus on healing trauma. So many of the community residents had been a victim, saw a crime, or had family members or friends who were victims, especially of gun violence. Respondents who had done harm had also been harmed. The healing begins with listening. Many participants described these community conversations as therapeutic. But it also requires significant investments in professional mental health and trauma-informed care. People who have significant reasons not to feel safe will find it difficult to foster safety in the world around them. Here, again, there are strong assets to build on. Black Chicagoans' spirituality was a major source of peace, and could be a route for further healing. And participants' unyielding hope, despite the difficulties, begs the question of how much more resilient, optimistic, and successful Black folks could be with investments that support a hopeful future?

3. Improve public defender visibility and interaction with community.

Given the strong presence of the criminal legal system in the lives of Black people, public defenders should be seen as resources and advocates, but this was not the predominant sentiment among the community members we talked to. Public defenders have valuable information to share. They can develop Know Your Rights community events in which they discuss how to handle police stops, searches, interrogations, and arrests, and how to be helpful as bystanders. They can offer general information about the criminal legal system, and their role in it, including how they are funded and how they work (or not) with

other players in the system. Public defenders can also listen in these interactions. The frequent notion that public defenders are on the same side as prosecutors and judges should be a sobering insight, and requires public defenders to question and change their actions that foster this perception. Public defenders can also better do their jobs if they know the communities they serve, if they understand the choices and challenges, the hardships and victories, and the exposures and assumptions that guide the behaviors that may land someone in a courtroom.

4. Decrease public defenders' caseloads.

Many Black Chicagoans who have had exposure to the courts wonder if public defenders actually care about their clients. They want to feel seen and fought for by public defenders. Yet the structure of the public defender workload makes this difficult. Many of the critiques voiced by community members are a direct effect of public defenders having little time to invest in each case because of crushing caseloads. The perceived lack of preparation, lack of care, minimal investigation, brief communication, limited availability, and speedy recommendation of a plea deal are the consequence of too many cases for too few people. Given the modest pay and difficult working conditions, many public defenders are driven by their mission of protecting the rights of accused individuals and mitigating the harms of a harsh criminal legal system. But this commitment is difficult to achieve without sufficient staff and resources.

CONCLUSION





To conclude, we keep us safe, and public policies that ensure everyone has the socioeconomic support they need help us to better keep each other safe. The police may offer some a perception of safety, but for a majority of Black folks in Chicago, modern policing is rife with contradictions that destabilize and threaten feelings of safety. The work of community safety is shared between individual, collective, and systemic responsibility.

This project highlighted the connections between the subjective, individual experience of safety and the collective witness of what safety looks like in practice. It also presents us with several questions and answers. First, if Black Chicagoans feel the safest with people they trust, how can the broader social system create the conditions to build community trust? Our answer is community organizing as many people said they felt better, safer, and more connected after engaging with this relational and community-organizing-driven process. Second, how can we reconnect the social threads that are necessary to build power and attain the necessary ingredients for community safety? The answer lies in continuing to reach out to people, meeting them where they are, and listening to their experiences. Third, if Black Chicagoans need more funding for infrastructure, quality public transportation, mental health support, education, and gainful employment opportunities, who can deliver those social needs so that we can all be safer? While not a primary focus of this project, the answer is that our elected officials and community decision-makers bear some level of responsibility for enacting public policies and community investments that will help make us safe.





Alongside the systemic supports that come from public policies and programs, the wisdom of the solution lies within the hearts and minds of people with direct experience of danger. The Black Chicagoans we talked with balance fear with hope and are willing to show up, have tough conversations, and learn more about themselves and each other as part of a process toward more safety. We must continue and deepen these conversations in order to unpack, heal, and redirect our energies toward social solutions to community safety.









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