



black youth project

# **Gun Violence, Policing, and Young Communities of Color**

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The recent police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile and the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando have received international attention and prompted national discussion on the issue of gun violence. Young people – and particularly young people of color – have been at the center of this conversation. Most of the Pulse victims were Latino/a, and #BlackLivesMatter activists have organized around the country in response to police killings of people of color with Sterling and Castile as only the most recent examples in a long list that includes Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown.

It should come as no surprise that young people of color are leading the response to recent instances of gun violence. Young people do not all experience gun violence at the same rate nor do they feel its consequences evenly. **Our research on young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 years old highlights the very different experiences young people have with guns, gun violence, and policing across racial and ethnic groups.**<sup>1</sup>

As Table 1 shows, young Black adults were considerably more likely than white and Latino young adults to report having experienced gun violence. Nearly a quarter of Black youth reported that either they or someone they knew experienced gun violence (for instance, being threatened with a gun or being the victim of a shooting) in the last year, compared with 15 percent of Latino/a young adults and 8 percent of young white adults

**Table 1: Personal Experiences with Gun Violence**

|   | Blacks<br>(%) | Whites<br>(%) | Latino/as<br>(%) |
|---|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| You or someone you know experienced gun violence in the last year | 23            | 8             | 15               |

Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

These differences were further magnified when we asked young adults whether they were concerned about being a victim of gun violence. We asked respondents to indicate whether they are afraid that themselves, a member of their family, or a close friend might

<sup>1</sup> These data come from a nationally representative survey of young adults 18 to 29 years old that was administered between April 25 and May 13, 2013 and included 1,513 respondents with oversamples of Black and Latino/as.

be the victim of gun violence in the coming year. Table 2 displays the results. **More than 40 percent of Blacks and Latino/as said they were “very” or “somewhat” afraid of gun violence, compared with 16 percent of whites.** Moreover, only 29 percent each of Blacks and Latino/as said that they were “not afraid,” compared with more than half of whites.

**Table 2: Fear of Victimization from Gun Violence**

| <b>How afraid are you that a member of your family, or a close friend, or you yourself might be the victim of gun violence during the coming year?</b> | <b>Blacks (%)</b> | <b>Whites (%)</b> | <b>Latino/as (%)</b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Very afraid  | 17                | 2                 | 22                   |
| Somewhat afraid  | 25                | 14                | 21                   |
| A little afraid  | 29                | 32                | 29                   |
| Not afraid   | 29                | 53                | 29                   |

Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

As Table 3 shows, young adults of color were much more likely than white young adults to report that gun violence is a problem in the neighborhood where they live. **More than 30 percent of young Black adults said that gun violence is either a “big problem” or “somewhat of a problem,” and nearly a quarter (24 percent) of Latino/a young adults reported the same. In contrast, considerably fewer white young adults (8 percent) indicated that gun violence is either a “big problem” or “somewhat of a problem” in their neighborhood.** These data indicate quite strikingly that young adults of color, and especially Black young adults, have far more concern about, and fear of, guns and gun violence compared with whites.

**Table 3: Threat of Neighborhood Gun Violence**

| <b>In your neighborhood, how much of a problem is gun violence?</b> | <b>Blacks (%)</b> | <b>Whites (%)</b> | <b>Latino/as (%)</b> |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Big problem   | 10                | 1                 | 6                    |
| Somewhat of a problem   | 20                | 7                 | 18                   |
| Not much of a problem   | 30                | 28                | 37                   |
| Not a problem   | 39                | 65                | 39                   |

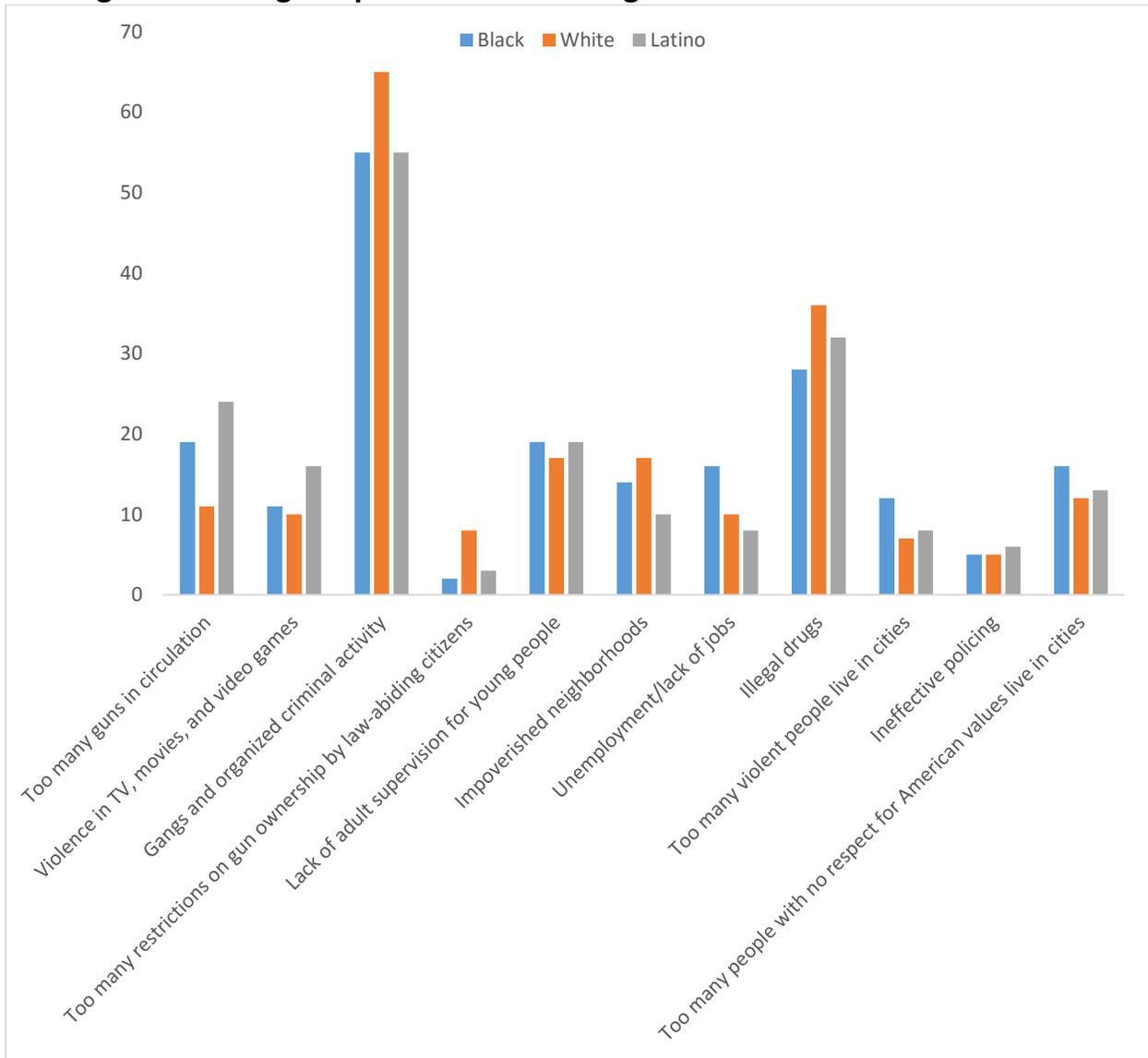
Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

Young Blacks and Latino/as are more likely than young whites to report experiencing gun violence first-hand or second-hand and in their neighborhoods. These lived experiences likely contribute to distinct perspectives on the causes of and solutions to gun violence.

Figure 1 below shows how young adults attribute the causes of gun violence. We asked young people to choose the two factors they believed were most responsible for gun violence in urban areas. While the figure generally reveals widespread agreement among young adults about the causes of gun violence, we do find some important differences. Young Black (19 percent) and Latino/a adults (24 percent) believed that gun violence was caused by too many guns in circulation at higher rates than young white adults (11 percent). While a majority of all groups believed that urban gun violence was caused by gangs and criminal activity, young white adults (65 percent) believed this to be the cause at higher rates than both Black and Latino/a young adults (55 percent for both).

Young people also believe illegal drugs are an important contributing factor, with 28 percent of Blacks, 36 percent of whites, and 32 percent of Latino/as prioritizing this factor as a cause of gun violence. We find little evidence, however, that young adults believe gun violence is caused by restrictions on gun ownership, with fewer than 10 percent of all groups reporting this belief. Interestingly, young people do not rate economic circumstances as an especially important contributor to gun violence, with fewer than 20 percent of young adults in all groups rating poverty or unemployment as key factors affecting gun violence.

**Figure 1: Young People’s Understandings of the Causes of Gun Violence**



Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

Despite some general agreement in the causes of gun violence, however, Table 4 shows that young adults differ considerably in how they prioritize gun ownership rights versus gun control. Large majorities of Blacks (76 percent) and Latino/as (70 percent) believe it is more important to control gun ownership rather than protect the rights of gun owners. A majority (57 percent) of young white adults, however, believe it is more important to protect the rights of gun owners. Young people of color’s emphasis on controlling gun

ownership contrasts with the priorities expressed by the general population, a majority of whom prioritize gun ownership rights over gun control.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 4: Priorities for Gun Rights versus Gun Control**

| <b>What do you think is more important – to protect the right of Americans to own guns, OR to control gun ownership?</b> | <b>Blacks (%)</b> | <b>Whites (%)</b> | <b>Latino/as (%)</b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Protect rights of gun owners   | 24                | 57                | 30                   |
| Control gun ownership  | 76                | 43                | 70                   |

Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

Table 5 reports on how young people evaluate the potential effects of gun control. The top row shows that white young adults (57 percent) believe that stricter gun ownership laws would reduce their ability to protect their homes and families at higher rates than Black young adults (45 percent), with Latino/as falling in between (50 percent). Majorities of young Black (54 percent) and white (58 percent) adults also report that gun ownership makes them feel safer in their communities, compared with somewhat smaller percentages of Latino/as (47 percent). The data here indicate that many young people across all racial groups connect their personal safety with access to guns, though these data may obscure differences in the contexts in which young people may use guns for protection.

**Table 5: How Young People Evaluate the Effects of Gun Control and Gun Ownership**

|   | <b>Blacks (% agree)</b> | <b>Whites (% agree)</b> | <b>Latino/as (% agree)</b> |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Stricter gun laws would make it more difficult for people to protect their homes and families | 45                      | 57                      | 50                         |
| Owning a gun makes me feel safer in my community  | 54                      | 58                      | 47                         |

Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/09/a-public-opinion-trend-that-matters-priorities-for-gun-policy/>.

Over the last several years, policymakers have discussed a variety of proposals aimed at reducing gun violence. In examining the views of young adults toward gun control, we find several important differences across racial groups. Table 6 displays these data. Young people of color are substantially more supportive of restrictions on gun ownership than white young adults, with Blacks generally providing the highest rates of support. About two-thirds of Black and Latino/a young adults support a ban on semi-automatic weapons, compared with a bare majority of white young adults. Furthermore, while 70 percent or more of both Blacks and Latino/as support a ban on high-capacity magazines, only 52 percent of white young adults agree. We also find that white youth are considerably less supportive of increasing the number of police and armed guards in public places (65 percent) than either Black (76 percent) or Latino/a young adults (75 percent). While activists rail against the increasing militarization of our schools, especially in urban areas, young Blacks and Latinos support such measures to help ensure students’ safety.

We find smaller differences across groups for several other proposals. For instance, large majorities of Black, white and Latino young adults support criminal background checks for gun sales as well as improving mental health services to address a root cause of gun violence. Young people of all groups also overwhelmingly supported more punitive measures for people convicted of violating gun laws, with more than 80 percent of young adults in each racial group supporting harsher penalties for people convicted of gun-related offenses.

**Table 6: Support for Measures to Reduce Gun Violence**

| <b>Proposal</b>  | <b>Blacks (%)</b> | <b>Whites (%)</b> | <b>Latino/as (%)</b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Nationwide ban on semi-automatic weapons                         | 68                | 51                | 65                   |
| More police/armed guards in public places like schools and malls | 76                | 65                | 75                   |
| Criminal background checks for all gun sales                     | 90                | 89                | 89                   |
| Better mental health screening and treatment                     | 89                | 91                | 93                   |
| Nationwide ban on high-capacity magazines                        | 74                | 52                | 70                   |
| Stiffer penalties for gun law convictions                        | 86                | 89                | 87                   |

Source: Black Youth Project Survey, April/May 2013.

Based on a national survey we conducted in 2009 – long before the killings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and others called national attention to police violence – we also find that young Black adults have a distinct set of experiences with the police. We asked young people several questions about their evaluations of and experiences with the police. As Table 7 shows, young Black adults reported the highest rates of harassment or violence from the police, and experienced it at nearly twice the rate of other young people. More than half of Blacks (54 percent) said that either they or someone they know was harassed or experienced violence from the police, compared with 33 percent whites and 25 percent of Latino/as. Clearly, *any* harassment or violence from police is too much. But the data indicate that young Blacks experience it at disproportionately high rates compared to young people from other groups.

The differences across racial and ethnic groups in how young people view the police are similarly dramatic. Compared with white and Latino/a young adults, Black young adults are far less trusting of the police and less likely to view the police as a resource for protection. Fewer than half of young Blacks (44 percent) reported trusting the police, compared with 60 percent of young Latino/as and 72 percent of young whites. About two-thirds of Black young adults (66 percent) believe the police in their neighborhood are there to protect them, compared to 74 percent of young Latino/as and 80 percent of young whites.

**Table 7: Experiences with and Assessments of the Police**

|  | <b>Black<br/>(% yes)</b> | <b>White<br/>(% yes)</b> | <b>Latino/as<br/>(% yes)</b> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Have you or anyone you know experienced harassment or violence at the hands of the police? | 54                       | 33                       | 25                           |
| Do you trust the police?   | 44                       | 72                       | 60                           |
| Do you believe the police in your neighborhood are there to protect you?                   | 66                       | 80                       | 74                           |

Source: 2009 Mobilization and Change survey.

In their everyday lives, young people of color, and especially young Black adults, are deeply ambivalent about the police who patrol their communities. These attitudes are widespread among Black youth and were present even before the national news was dominated by events like those in Ferguson, Baton Rouge, and St. Paul.

More generally, the data contained in this report show that young people have very different experiences with guns, gun violence, and policing and that these experiences vary across racial and ethnic groups. These experiences subsequently inform young people's views about possible solutions to gun violence. Recent events in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas make clear that gun violence and policing are inextricably linked – particularly when it comes to young communities of color.

The data in this report also demonstrate that the national conversation around gun violence can be informed by considering how gun violence disproportionately affects the lives of people of color. Any solutions to the epidemic of gun violence and eroded relations between police and local communities need to consider their voices and perspectives.

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