

# POLICING, COMMUNITY FRAGMENTATION, AND PUBLIC HEALTH: BALTIMORE CITY

During the month before and after the death of Freddie Gray on April 19 2015, Social Health Concepts and Practice Inc. conducted a listening project about community fragmentation, policing and public health with residents in parts of East and West Baltimore. Neighborhoods involved included Clifton/Berea, Madison/East End, Oldtown/Middle East, Sandtown/Winchester, Southern Park Heights, and Pimlico. Summary of the information gathered from this listening project:

- All 21 residents relayed some personal or observed occurrence of police violence in their respective community. Of the 21 key informants, 18 reported they had personally been stopped and harassed verbally or physically. The youngest age of reported violence was 12 years, 10 of those who reported violence reported multiple episodes of violence: "Been harassed... first time 12 yrs....walking across the bridge on Fulton Av to the house, not even 9pm yet; I got stopped because I "fit a description". That's what they told me. Asked for my school ID. Then they searched me for drugs and held me in the back of the car for 3 hrs. Didn't read me my rights, didn't ask me permission to search me. I was wearing an NBA jersey so I "fit a description". Arrested unlawfully twice. One time I was kept in central booking for a couple months-cops didn't show up at the hearing so they dismissed the case. I fit another description".
- Community residents perceived high rates of fragmentation, resulting from long term disinvestment: "They [kids] don't have nothing to do, just riding up and down the street. They close all the recs, basket ball no longer; used to play ball and go from one neighborhood to the other playing ball, block to block rivalry. Kids don't have nothing to do... they hear the shots, it has a domino effect. Dance for girls, pool tables and social clubs. camp concern in the city, used to shut off blocks for parties. Don't do that because nobody here. no jobs, people gone".
- Residents reported that policing contributed to greater fragmentation: "[Police harassment] breaks community down; people stick to themselves. middle age kind of stick to themselves...everybody in their own area".
- Residents felt community cohesion was necessary but difficult with the present conditions: "How can we come together and do... not like we can come up to jail and say our point of view and they let them go...no use. So will the community come together?-no. I wish this place was better... maybe people would start getting along with each other. A lot of fighting...way too much

All six neighborhoods studied ranked in the worst 20% on four of five socioeconomic indicators of deprivation (households earning less than \$25,000; population over 25 with less than a high school diploma; gun-related homicides-rate per 1000; percent of adult population on parole or probation). Five of the six neighborhoods ranked in the worst 20% for infant mortality, and life expectancy.

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- beef, attitude, anger, hatred, jealousy”.
- Residents perceived the government and corporations to be negligent of their needs: “Government gonna do what they want to do not mater what. If they did wanna change, they would be done help people. Look at JHU (Johns Hopkins University), buy up houses and kick them people all out” . Residents consistently confirmed the sense that the police were policing the people of the neighborhood, rather than protecting the neighborhood from crime.... [Government] turn their backs on this community. If they decide that it has to change, from the top, it will change”.
- The majority of residents felt that racial profiling played a role in policing in their neighborhoods: “It’s a hate crime thing, a racial type thing. When they harass black men and women for no apparent reason, to see it is different. has a lot to do with the color of your skin. back in the day, like slavery. “you niggas” all cops say it”.
- Residents reported feeling stressed from current policing: Yes, got stress... but stress from living here with everything going on is normal for us. Get use to it. Stay close to God, and keep to self ....” My blood pressure goes up since we been standing here, when we talk about this, cause it make me angry. See that police

car, roll by one time since we been standing here. You don’t see it b/c your back to it ”.

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- Residents felt that fundamental resources for community life were needed if things were to change: “We have to get teachers in the school, train the teachers... we need rec centers, youth centers. Some types of activities for the kids to do. You see them now. Their only activity is walking up and down the block, selling drugs”.... “Need housing, look at all these houses, vacant for so long. Got so many homeless people, no place to live, sleeping in vacant house”... “Need to train police. People have mental health needs...people need attention, not enough counselors, not being fair to the people... Need money for schools. they lock people up instead of educating them...they come back and don’t want to go to school for sure”.

### Conclusion

Correlation exists between neighborhoods of depravation and experience of police violence; and between neighborhoods of high vacancy rates, community fragmentation, and experience of police violence. Results of this action research project suggest that Baltimore’s poor, African-American neighborhoods, which have been disinvested and fragmented, are prime targets for the “War on Drugs” policies. This hyper-targeting of neighborhoods increases the risk of police violence. Police violence was enacted through racial profiling, corruption, and insufficient training. Residents felt that police violence increased fragmentation and decreased cohesion and healthy social networks. Stress and worry, resulting from fear of police harassment and a sense of disempowerment, were reported as contributors to community fragmentation and poor health. Residents felt that the criminal justice system lacked transparency and accurate data collection. They felt it needed accountability to acknowledge the history of police violence and identify ways to remedy and prevent its continuation. Residents also recognized that the systems that maintain disinvestment in education, employment, housing, recreation, criminal justice, and segregation needed to be changed.



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This study confirms previous studies reporting police violence in communities and places of high drug use and drug markets, poverty, and predominantly African American and confirms that community fragmentation and stress is a result of police violence.. The results suggest that police violence increases the risk of negative health outcomes from chronic exposure to stressful environments and therefore is a public health threat, supporting previous studies on violence and public health threat.

## Discussion

The World Health Organization defines violence as it relates to the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Violence perpetuated by the police can be understood as collective violence as police individuals represent police departments, part of law enforcement agencies empowered by government and political bodies to act for the safety and security of all individuals and institutions. This type of structural violence is affected by and affect social, political, and economic states, which in turn affect health. Police violence impacts community cohesion, the ability of a community to stand together—contributing to population health by giving members of the community a sense of control and the power to affect what occurs in the community. This lack of cohesion or fragmentation is

affected by violent policing and therefore a risk factor for poor health outcomes. Community fragmentation resulting from a history of disinvestment and segregation in communities of low income and of color are at risk for further fragmentation due to police violence.

The results suggest that police violence increases the risk of negative health outcomes from chronic exposure to stressful environments and therefore is a public health threat, supporting previous studies on violence and public health threat.

## Next steps

### *Short term approach*

- Mandatory data collection of injuries reported by those affected.
- Increasing funding for evaluation and training for culturally competent/anti-racism/anti-oppression policing.
- Non-police intake personnel.
- Investigating all policing enacted through the “war on drugs” in distressed communities by community and law enforcement engagement to improve community policing and community engagement and community advisement of criminal justice policies and practices.

- Adequate funding and implementation/ institutionalization of existing citizen review boards
- Transparency to the public in all matters pertaining to law enforcement.

### *Long term approach*

- Collaboration of community, planners, policy makers, and advocates of law enforcement, public health, economic and community development, schools, recreation, and housing to identify how each impact and is impacted by crime, policing and police violence; ie. what is the impact of policing on housing, on education, on health?
- Address the gap between legal conduct and moral conduct currently present in policing through a criminal justice and resident committee.
- Acknowledge and repair the sequela of segregation and disinvestment of communities and its role in affecting the existing fragmentation and vulnerability to drug markets and hyper-policing ie. analysis and policy and funding to systematically desegregate and equalize communities like those described in East and West Baltimore.
- Transparency to the public in all matters pertaining to law enforcement.



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## Residents' perceptions of solutions

- Need to scan these people better, and evaluate them better, give them lie detectors before they hire them on the police force. Rotate the police from east to west, west to east. the violence would change...the politicians need to change, they corrupt and don't care what happen here. Their eyes closed so we have to keep them on the agenda (50 yo female)
- as for the police, do your job, but do it right....do something and try to lie to cover yourself and you know that person innocent. people locked up over police lying (22 yo female)
- We have to keep trying...pray and act. Not enough praying so we have to act. If more people were praying, we wouldn't have to act so much. We have to sit down and talk about this thing. Been going on for too long. (55 yo male)
- They need to have civilian intake personnel so they can see what the kids look like when they get there. would cut down on beating/brutality as they not in cohorts with the cops (52 yo male)
- Get the old politicians out of government. They need to retire. They got their money already. They need to go and let the young ones get the jobs. Go home and put their foot up. (68 yo male)
- It's not the money, it's who the money is going to. If the money goes to the same three benefactors, who do the same thing every year, nothing is gonna change. I call it a "pipeline"... We need more community oversight. More than that, we need community based organizations in the community doing the work, not outside the community. The money need to come to the community and stay in the community. Right now we got money coming into Baltimore after the Freddie Gray stuff. But that money going to the same people, the same pipeline. (38 yo male)
- Absolutely [too much money for policing] 30 million for a new juvenile jail system. shut down 3 schools in the past 1 1/2 month. People... feel like this is crazy. Been going on before Freddie Gray, so now build more pressure and get more funding. (26 yo male)
- They giving the police so much money but they not doing their job. Need money to clean up the streets. I love Baltimore, don't want to go anywhere else. start with this house, they need to fix it. I rent, he's a slumlord. but I have to try and fix it myself. (65 yo female)
- ...places for the kids to play...so they don't keep doing the same things. see those kids over there? they bored on a Saturday afternoon...when I was a kid we use to play over there, now there's Johns Hopkins...now the kids they make up their own games, like "steal the smart phone game"...So they get creative, make up games like that, and other ones (32 yo male)
- Took a riot for city hall/state to wake up... (35yo male)
- Hold the police accountable for what wrong b/c they not right. Get a voice and let your voice be heard. get out and explore, find out why they treating you the way they treat you and let your voice be heard. (50 yo female)

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