

# **Notes on the Youth/Police Project**

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## Background

For the past four years, the Mandel Clinic and the Invisible Institute have been engaged in an inquiry into youth-police interactions on the South Side of Chicago. Initially, the aim of the project was to introduce high-school students to practical applications of civil rights law. Toward that end, we conducted workshops in a variety of venues - classrooms, after-school programs, anywhere that would have us.

Over time, it became apparent we had more to learn from the teenagers we were addressing than we had to teach them. The project's center of gravity shifted: our primary objective became building conversations with black teens about how their lives are affected by the character of the police presence in their neighborhoods.

We have focused this inquiry on everyday encounters rather than egregious instances of abuse. Avoiding conventional policy frames (e.g. "stop and frisk"), we ask teens to describe their interactions with police in their own words, to tell us how those encounters make them feel, and to reflect on how their experiences with the police shape their behavior.

It has been our good fortune to partner in this project with the Media Program at Hyde Park Academy, a public high school in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood. Under the leadership of instructor Keva McGee, the Media Program has become our base of operations, affording a classroom, a broadcast studio, and ongoing access to groups of students.

A team of a dozen adult collaborators – including attorneys, law students, journalists, and academics – works with two HPA classes on a weekly basis throughout the school year. Team members bring multiple perspectives and competencies to bear. Each week the team meets to debrief about their most recent sessions with students and to strategize about how best to create the conditions for robust, searching conversations.

For team members, the project is at heart an extended act of *listening*. Yet a great deal of work – and goodwill on all sides – is required for us to become fully audible to one another: to learn, as we say on the South Side, to conversate with each other.

When we first begin meeting with a new group of students, we take pains to convey to them that they know things other people need to know. They are, for the most part, *inside* a set of conditions they do not have much critical distance on. "It just is what it is." As the process advances, they come to see that what is commonplace to them is often remarkable and significant to others. Once they begin to entertain the possibility that we – and others beyond us – are genuinely interested in what they have to say, the conversations come alive.

The project has yielded a steady current of narrative and observation beyond our expectations, unsettling things we thought we understood and suggesting new areas to explore. Teens on the South Side are of necessity close observers of the police. And some have proved to be remarkable witnesses to their own experience, once they gain a foothold outside that experience.

Our process is immersive, organic, and intensely collaborative. We continually experiment with different techniques for eliciting students' stories, explore new lines of inquiry, and consider how best to engage particular students.

Team members interact with the students in various configurations: one-on-one, in small groups, and as a full class. Students interview other students and on occasion members of the team; and they facilitate discussions with their peers in other HPA classrooms.

Among the various techniques we employ, role-plays have proved especially effective, enabling students to share things they know but may not yet have the words to describe. Acting out various scenarios, they dramatize the ritualized choreography of youth-police interactions with precise nuances of body language, gesture, and tone. In the process, they generate rich material for further discussion.

Operating in the setting of the media program, we use production tools to extend and deepen our conversations. The process of videotaping and editing various interactions - class discussions, interviews, role plays - offers multiple occasions for revisiting stories, advancing inquiries, and renewing the essential challenge: how might you best communicate what you know about the world to others?

Our ongoing conversations stir a range of emotions in all involved. Among them: anger, frustration, and fear. There are intense arguments and occasional tears. There is also a good deal of laughter. This is not only an expression of adolescent high spirits. It is also, to our ears, the sound of possibility. When a story or role-play provokes laughter by bringing home some absurd aspect of the status quo, it nourishes the conviction that we can surely do better.

### **“What it’s like in my neighborhood”**

Many of the teens recall with a nostalgic glow what it was like to be small children in their neighborhoods. Although adults may have enforced boundaries – “Don’t go past the corner,” “Stay where I can see you” – the world seemed spacious then. Playing with their friends, they felt free and at home in the world.

Then at a certain point – 7th and 8th grade are often mentioned – “things got complicated.” A number of students have described how friends who had grown up together, in effect, chose up sides and went to war with each other.

The landscape changed. They found they could no longer cross certain boundaries – 71st Street in South Shore, say, or the train viaduct west of Normal in Englewood, or countless other arbitrary lines drawn in the sand – without exposing themselves to danger.

A handful of students over the years have openly acknowledged gang membership, and a few have described themselves as “affiliated but not banging.” Many more have made references to childhood friends who are now in gangs, in prison, or dead.

In describing the complex terrain they must navigate, the students consistently express doubts that the police will protect them. (“‘Serve and protect’? Not *us*.”) The attention they do receive from the police is almost always unwelcome. Most often, it takes the form of being stopped, searched, and having their names checked for outstanding warrants.

These stops range from low-key encounters to the aggressive performance art of the so-called “jump-out boys,” plainclothes officers for whom a routine street stop often takes the form of driving their car up on the sidewalk and jumping out with guns drawn.

For some, being stopped is “an everyday thing.” For others, it is a relatively infrequent occurrence. For all, it is an ever-present possibility. There is scarcely a moment they are out in the city when they are not alert to that possibility. It pervades their daily existence.

They deeply know what the rest of the society is beginning to comprehend in light of high-profile shooting cases: every routine encounter holds the potential to go very bad very fast – leading to an arrest, brutality, even being killed. They know this, above all, from direct experience – if not their own, then that of family members, friends, and neighbors. For them, stops are at once utterly prosaic – a fact of life “like the weather” – and fraught with danger.

We have repeatedly been moved by the deep sense of injury they voice. They speak with pained eloquence about what it feels like to be regarded as a suspect rather than a citizen by the officers who stop them:

It makes you feel less than a man.

It just make you feel down, like you ain’t nobody.

They’re over you and you’re under them. Therefore you don’t matter. Their word will prevail over yours.

Their sense of injury is exacerbated by knowledge they carry into every encounter with the police that, as one put it, “they have all the power.” The word “impunity”

may not be an active part of most of their vocabularies, but they have full command of the concept. It matters little that some officers in their neighborhood are friendly and treat them with respect, when those who are abusive are protected and allowed to operate as though they are above the law. The abusive officers become, in effect, the face of the police department – “the real police.”

This eviscerates any possibility of trust. It is hard to overstate the degree of distrust toward the police expressed by the teens. At one time or another, we have asked every student who has participated in the project whether they would call the police under particular circumstances: if they felt threatened? . . . if they witnessed a crime? . . . if they had information about a conflict brewing? And so on. To a degree that initially surprised us, they are all but unanimous in their disinclination to reach out to or cooperate with the police. One boy put it this way:

When I call what’s going to come? A good cop or a bad cop? Are they going to be effective, do their job, ask questions and investigate, or criminalize and penalize me before even knowing me?

When we press the teens to describe, in as much detail as possible, what their interactions with the police are like, they often recall particular micro –insults that have stayed with them and entered into the mix of ingredients – teachings of elders, experiences of friends, stories in the media, etc. – that combine to constitute their attitudes toward the police.

One example from among the many stories we have collected: a young man is stopped by the police on his way home from school. The officers do not get out of their vehicle. Through the window, one of them questions the boy about a recent homicide in the neighborhood. “What do you know about the murder?” he asks sharply. “What gang do you run with?” The boy is taken aback. He knows nothing about a murder and is not affiliated with a gang. Losing interest in him, the officer blows cigarette smoke in his face, then drives away.

From one perspective, this is a trivial incident that leaves little, if any, trace in the world. It would not rise to the attention of even the most rigorous police accountability regime. Yet from another perspective, such an incident can have an enduring impact on the attitude toward law enforcement of a teenager trying to make sense of the world and find his place in it.

This is not because the individual is unusually fragile or hypersensitive. On the contrary. The point is rather that the encounter does not occur in isolation. It takes its meaning from its context, and that context is decisively shaped by black teens’ knowledge that “they have all the power,” that “they’re over you and you’re under them.”

In a neighborhood where residents have a reasonable expectation that there are enforceable limits on the power of the police, the response of a teenager to a police

officer blowing smoke in his face might well be to think, “What a jerk.” In the neighborhood where this incident occurred, the young man’s response – this was his first direct contact with the police – was to think, “They’re capable of anything.”

We tend to think of police misconduct as a linear continuum with mild forms at one end and grievous human right violations at the opposite extreme, but that is not the way it is experienced on the ground. Under conditions of impunity, the worst-things-that-have-happened inform, at some level, routine day-to-day interactions.

### **Assessing the costs**

The teens we work with have helped us understand that concrete acts of abuse are not the only harms that flow from lack of accountability. The atmosphere of policing they describe and make visible inflicts serious harms on them and their communities, even if they themselves never suffer direct abuse at the hands of the police.

### *Self-policing*

A major theme running through our conversations is how to avoid being stopped by the police. A partial list of avoidance strategies culled from those conversations might have been composed by Samuel Beckett:

Don’t walk alone.

Don’t walk in groups.

Don’t make eye contact.

Don’t look away too quickly.

Don’t move too fast.

Don’t linger.

Don’t do anything.

Don’t do nothing.

It is as if they are trying to discern and decode a hidden set of rules, a secret etiquette, that would enable them to move freely through the city.

Their strategies also include various disguises. Wear a childish knapsack, for example. Or affect a “nerdy” appearance. And we repeatedly have heard about boys

who use girls as decoys – by appearing to be a couple – when the police come into view.

One young man spoke of feeling like “prey” when the police cruise past on the street. At such moments, he said, he tries to make himself “invisible.” Were one to follow the underlying logic of these stratagems where they lead, the ultimate disguise would be somehow not to be seen as black.

Beyond its impact on their emerging identities, the atmosphere of policing leads them to curtail their own freedom of movement. A number of boys have told us that they avoid contact with the police by staying home or only going out after dark in a car.

At a time in their lives when their growth and flourishing requires that they explore an expanding world, they pull their boundaries in around themselves and are denied what in another context has been called the right to the city.

#### *Non-cooperation with police*

As noted above, the degree of alienation from the police of teens who are otherwise deeply engaged in their communities and schools is a striking. And it has grave consequences. It is not often enough noted that law enforcement itself is among the major casualties of lack of accountability.

The resulting distrust of the police sets in motion a cycle with devastating effects. Because residents will not cooperate with the police, the police cannot solve and prevent crimes. Because the police cannot solve and prevent crimes, residents are yet less likely to go to the police and more likely to look for resolution or restitution outside the law. In the absence of meaningful accountability, the cycle goes on and on, reducing urban neighborhoods to something akin to failed states.

#### **Acknowledging the realities**

As the national discourse about police-community relations continues to unfold, our experiences in the microcosm of the Youth/Police Project give us reason for optimism. We have seen that the distrust of black teens toward the police is the direct result of refusal by the department to acknowledge their realities. While that distrust is clearly deeply felt, we have also seen that they very much want to be able to trust the police.

Critical to our work with South Side teens is, simply, being honest with them. Their attitudes about lack of accountability and unequal treatment are not mistaken; they have an empirical basis. If we do not acknowledge that, they will regard even well-conceived policy interventions with understandable suspicion. When it is acknowledged, judging by the experience of the Youth/Police Project,

young people will become enthusiastic partners in the essential work of diagnosis, problem-solving, and reform.

Among the causes of denial is lack of effective agency. It is difficult to hold grievous ongoing harms in focus, if you feel you have no way to address them. To see, you need to be able to act. Or to put the point another way, how do we operationalize acknowledgment of the realities? What might that agenda look like? Here are the priorities as we see them:

*Transparency.* Acknowledging the realities presupposes a common evidentiary basis for policy debate and problem-solving. It is essential that citizens have access to relevant information. Every law enforcement agency should collect and report in a standardized format information about police shootings, citizen complaints, and street and traffic stops, including demographic data about the subjects of those incidents.

*Accountability.* Our children need to see that police departments do not stand behind officers when they abuse their power. Every department must have a credible system for investigating and addressing complaints of police abuse that incorporates meaningful participation of the public. Credible regimes of accountability have the potential to change the way young people see the police. In the absence of such accountability mechanisms, other sensible policies will be undermined, if not altogether impeached.

*Investigate potential patterns of police abuse.* A small percentage of officers in most urban police forces is responsible for the majority of complaints of abuse. If allowed to operate with impunity, these officers undermine the good work done by the majority of their fellow officers. Just as law enforcement examines patterns to address crime, it must use those same tools to investigate and discipline officers who have committed crimes.

*Address the police code of silence.* More than anything, denial has prevented police from earning the trust of young people. Policies must be unambiguous that when an officer lies to protect a fellow officer charged with abuse, that officer will be fired. Officers who report abuses by fellow officers must be guaranteed protection and honored when they expose criminal activity within the department.

*Re-examine stop-and-frisk.* While working to change the dynamics of youth-police interactions (e.g., through trainings in de-escalation techniques, adolescents as a special population, implicit bias, procedural justice, ethics, etc.), we need to reduce the number of encounters and hence the probability of harms by rethinking our stop-and-frisk practices and the selective deployment of those practices in communities of color.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson we have learned in the course of the Youth/Police Project is that the young people most directly affected by systemic

injustices have a central role to play in their reform. Their experiences and perceptions constitute a *necessary* perspective. This is not to say it is the only perspective, but rather that in its absence, the public discourse about police accountability is skewed and distorted. Our work is perhaps best understood as a bridge between the experiences of our young colleagues and the larger discourse. It is our hope that a good deal of traffic will pass in both directions across that bridge in coming days.

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