



**College of Education**  
**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

**Brief from Deep Center's Youth Summit:**

**Focus Groups on Police Training**

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In Partnership with:

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## **Summary**

On Saturday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, roughly 30 youth (aged 14-19) gathered at the United Way of the Coastal Empire as part of a continuing series of summits committed to youth-led research aimed at addressing systemic change in Chatham County. These youth—the vast majority of whom come from minoritized communities and identify variously as Black, African-American, and Latinx—were led through a series of research tasks by peer-research mentors and adult facilitators from the Deep Center and the University of Georgia. As part of the work on the 18<sup>th</sup>, youth were divided into focus groups of roughly 3-5 people and asked about policing in and around the city of Savannah with a particular focus on potential best practices in future training. Broadly conceived, in their interview responses, the youth focused heavily on issues of bias, power differentials, and relationship-building. Those three categories, however, are sanitized in some ways and it is important to note at the outset that it is evident from these interviews that young people, and particularly young black men, operate out of a framework that is characterized by a deep fear of being shot by police. We can blame this on the concatenation of media representations over the last five years or so without obviating the reality that disproportionality in the use of lethal force on black and brown bodies is an ongoing concern for youth in their day-to-day interactions with police. Or, as the youth reiterated over and over: ‘Don’t shoot us,’ which, in the larger context of the interviews is linked with a plea that police treat youth of color ‘like human being[s]’ and ‘not...rabid animal[s].’

## **Questions**

The interviews were semi-structured and rooted in the following questions:

- If you could build training for police officers, what would you want them to know or do when they encounter someone your age?
- What’s not working now?
- What do you hope could work better?
- How do you want them to treat you? What does that look like?

## **Responses**

When characterizing positive interactions with police, youth often—though not universally—cited experiences with school resource officers. Though there were concerns about confiscatory practices in schools, generally youth focused on the ways in which resource officers often manifested care for and interest in youth lives in schools. The will to build relationships that were lasting, rooted in mutual respect, and linked to something other than the primary role of policing emerged as important. That is: officers who knew kids, knew their interests, and humanized themselves through shared interests in, for instance poetry, were able to build rapport and trust. They served, in some cases, as well-respected warm-demanders in school spaces. From a training standpoint, this would suggest, work in the area of sociological and child psychological study: officers who understand the developmental and sociocultural needs of kids

might better build relationships of trust rooted in respect for youth as autonomous, complex, and intriguing human beings.

Youth saw the mode of approach of police, outside of a school context, as vital. In various forms police were urged to slow down, to manage tone of voice, to take care of body stance, and to remove their hands from weapons on initiation of contact. They were urged to remain calm and to maintain respectful contact with youth. This latter piece is important because the mode of address which may seem respectful for an adult who is not necessarily a member of a community might not be read as respectful by an in-group member. To the above bullet point: police need ways to build relationships in communities such that a) initial contact isn't read as a threat from an outsider and b) they can know norms and expectations tied to respectful address in a community. This takes time and it takes research. In some ways, police might be trained as social science researchers of the communities in which they work: how do people here demonstrate respect? How do youth interact with those they admire? How does trust get built? In what ways to people speak with each other when they are family? When they speak to strangers with whom they wish to build relationships?

Youth consistently expressed a desire to be treated as fully humanized. This reflects a sense that police ought to be trained in thinking about youth as rational, thoughtful, generous citizens rather than as problems to be solved through correction or containment. This would probably mean ongoing implicit bias training around issues of race/gender/age/mental health as well as immersive practices where police spend time with youth in situations where power dynamics are equalized—to the degree possible—for the sake of fostering not only an exchange of ideas, but also to push a more complex understanding of youth of color as emergent intellectuals, activists, and beings coming into presence.

## **Design and Data**

### **Questions asked:**

- If you could build training for police officers, what would you want them to know or do when they encounter someone your age?
  - What's not working now?
  - What do you hope could work better?
- How do you want them to treat you? What does that look like?

### **SUMMARY of themes in responses (in words of young people):**

1. Don't shoot us. Train police to WAIT and stay calm. Slow down. Use non-lethal force if force is necessary (not a gun.) Wait. Wait. Wait. Slow down. Stay calm.
2. I want to be safe. Treat me like I'm a human.

- a. Be VERY friendly. Ask after my wellbeing. Don't presume. Tell me why you're approaching me. Be clear about what you think I've done wrong, and then LISTEN to me explain myself. Make sure I am safe.
3. Balance power dynamics on purpose. I want to be understood.
  - a. Kindly and patiently ask me why I'm doing \_\_\_\_, and listen to/believe my reasons.
4. Police need ongoing implicit bias training, esp. for race, gender, age, mental health.
  - a. Police should also undergo psych eval themselves, [regularly].
5. Police physical stance: kind, patient, be aware of your movements, do not hold hand on your gun or belt, calm tone/volume of voice