

JustHouHS

Experiences of Injustice:
Community and Police Interactions

Community Report
February 2021

About JustHouHS

The Justice, Housing, and Health Study (JustHouHS) is a research project investigating how mass incarceration, housing stability, and housing policies are related to health and sexual risk. New Haven is the site of the case study to better understand these issues. We conducted a survey of 400, and interviews with 54, low income New Haven residents, half of whom were released from prison or jail within a year of study enrollment. Between 2017 and 2020, participants came in every six months to give us their input.

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Research Team

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New Survey

In our efforts to better understand the experiences of JustHouHS participants, we have received funding to conduct another survey. In this next round, we hope to capture the unique experiences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic and other recent events, including the Black Lives Matter movement and subsequent policy responses. The survey is now available. Please contact us if you have participated in our surveys in the past and are interested in taking this new survey. Please contact us at (475) 209-3506 or at JustHouHS@gmail.com. If you still have your red payment card, please hold onto it for payment. If you have lost it - we can mail you a new one.

JustHouHS

This Community Report

Recent events have shined a spotlight on America's deeply rooted history of system racism, as demonstrated in policing practices. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd set in motion more than 4,700 demonstrations across the nation to date, the largest movement in US history calling for reform of the criminal legal system. While these murders may have ignited the spark for change, they are not exceptional: Every year, Africa American and LatinX communities disproportionately experience the threat or use of police force. Black, brown and poor people are also more likely to be stopped and arrested, largely due to historic residential segregation and hyper-surveillance of their communities. This, in turn, contributes not only to mass incarceration, but to its disproportionate impacts.

As this community report highlights, Connecticut residents experience these impacts too. In the last five years, 21 people have been lost to police violence in Connecticut (1). This report summarizes findings from surveys and interviews with New Haven residents participating in JustHouHS about their experiences with policing and the criminal legal system. Findings explore: police violence and accountability, mistrust of the police, the impact of criminalizing substance use and mental health problems, and inequities in the use of police tools such as stops, searches, and warrants. All names in this report are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

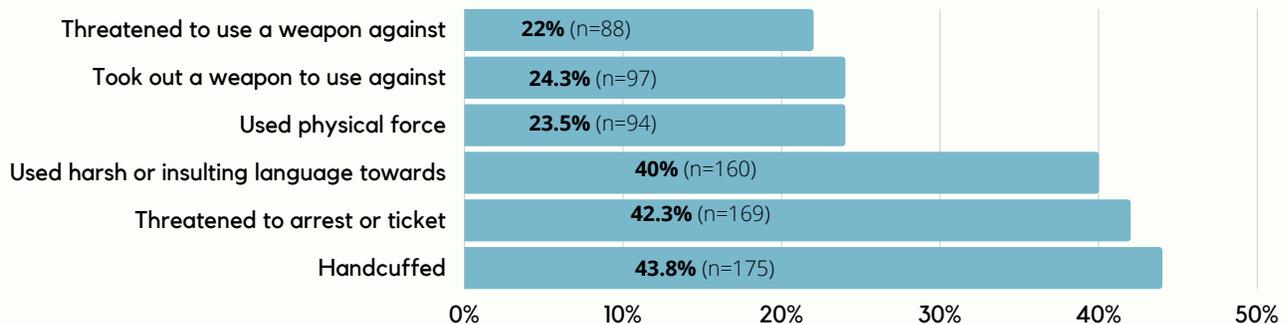
With this report, we aim to center the experience and perspectives of JustHouHS participants, bring attention to local problems in law enforcement, and contribute to a conversation on transforming the criminal legal system. The state of Connecticut has made efforts to address police violence and respond to national outcries for reform. Examples include Second Chance legislation that emphasizes treatment and rehabilitation as well as the 2020 police accountability bill. This report suggests a need for listening to residents and implementing additional major legislative changes to transform law enforcement in Connecticut.

"They get away with whatever they want"

Police violence and lack of accountability

JustHouHS participants have experienced and witnessed police violence in New Haven and other towns in Connecticut. At each study wave, participants were asked about their police interactions during the last six months: nearly half (196) had been stopped by the police. These interactions were rife with violence.

Percent of participants that reported the following forms of police violence towards them or someone they were with during the study period (N=400):



Brooklyn, an African American woman, described a long-lasting aversion to the police after her son was treated violently by a police officer during his arrest.

“One, the cops – when my older – my oldest son and my baby son stole the car – I'm not prejudice, but a white cop put his foot in my son's back to arrest him. That's why I don't like them. To this day that's why I don't like them.”

Cora, a Latinx woman, while traveling outside of New Haven, was beaten by a police officer after expressing incredulity at his questions.

“He said he was following us and all these things, but he punched me. Um, 'cause I said this shit is ridiculous. I-I didn't even get that word out and I guess that's what triggered him. That's all I can say because next thing you know when I started getting upset about it and I started to cuss, he seen my face getting upset, he just straight up decked me in my eye ... he kept tasing me, tasing me, and I landed from one side of the gas station all the way on that side...I kept asking him, 'Why are you doing this to me?' And he was on top of me. He was about 320 pounds.”

Jackson, a mixed race man, finds it difficult to rectify the violence he is accustomed to with media images of white perpetrators of serious crimes who are treated respectfully by the police.

“Yeah, that's one thing that messes me up too. You ever see somebody get arrested for a school shooting and they don't get beat up or anything by the police?”



75% of participants stated that the police are too quick to use deadly force in the United States



59% of participants believed that the police are not held accountable for their use of excessive/deadly force

"I just avoid them at all expenses"

Mistrust of police among participants



In 2018, according to the DataHaven Community Wellbeing Survey, opinion and experience of the local police varied by race. Roughly 60% of Black and Latinx individuals said the local police are doing a good or excellent job, compared to 83% of White individuals. Additionally, 20% of Latinos, 23% of Blacks, but only 8% of Whites reported they experienced unfair or abusive treatment by the police multiple times in the past 3 years (2).

JustHouHS participants felt threatened rather than protected by the police, and expressed deep mistrust. During the study period, more than half (218) did not report a crime against them in order to avoid interacting with the police.

Police Avoidance

Tom, an African-American man said, "I don't think I could do that. I lived in the streets too long. I-I lived a life too long for me to now turn around and call the – be the one to call the police. I don't think I can. I'm not saying that I wouldn't. I don't think I can though... [Calling the police] wouldn't be my first – that would not – that's definitely not my first reaction."

Rayna, an African-American woman, shared "They bring you in for the domestic, violation of domestics, but then they open up the file from the time you were born. They open up the time from the time you were born and... They brought up every kind of domestic that didn't even have nothing to do with [the current one], and they said that you're this kind of person and so that you – this is how they deem you..This is why women go through domestics and being abused because they're afraid to call police in housing and this is why; because they will be homeless."

Fear of Consequence of Police Assistance

Fear of Police

Isaiah, an African-American man, explained "Even when a police car drives by I'm like, you know, I'm on point, I'm – you understand what I'm saying? I notice them, you understand, and that shouldn't be, you know, 24/7. I shouldn't be afraid of the police."

"I ended up going to jail instead of going into the psych wards"

Policing and the criminalization of drug use and mental illness

Drug Use

Criminalizing drug use often leads to cycles of supervision and incarceration that don't help a person with substance use issues. African Americans are more likely to be caught in such cycles of criminalization than Whites. Communities of color are the focus of law enforcement resulting in higher arrest and incarceration rates for drug possession and sales, despite similar rates of drug use and sales among African Americans and Whites.(3)

Lily, an African American woman, described her son's recent arrest. He uses substances and was recently charged for assault. The police **"jumped on him when he wasn't doing anything...and he retaliated."**

After viewing the recording of the incident, the police acknowledged that he hadn't been in the wrong. Lily said the lieutenant said,

"We see that he ain't do nothing wrong and everything but, we feel that he needs some help.'...they was charging him because she feels that he needs some help."

Sammy, a White man, shares how his interaction with police during years of dual mental health and substance use issues contrasts sharply with that of African American participants. Sammy was never arrested, which he attributes to his whiteness.

"Being caught maybe once or twice buying drugs on the street, I mean I think because I was White it was different. It's just like, you know, 'Get some help, go to a meeting or something like that.' That's the way they treated with me."

Sammy was placed in inpatient mental health treatment that he found therapeutic rather than punitive, which helped him begin his road to recovery.

Mental Illness

African Americans are less likely to be properly diagnosed and treated for mental health problems, but face disproportionate exposure to the criminal legal system (4).

Isaiah, an African American homeless man, was criminalized for his manic episodes at the hospital where he sought treatment. He had gone to the hospital several times trying to get admitted, unsuccessfully. He was finally arrested.

"They just kept kicking me out into the elements and outside, which is not a good thing."

Eventually, he was evaluated in prison and finally placed on medications to treat his bipolar disorder.

"What led me in prison was my manic issues. I was trying to get into Yale Hospital and one of the guards put their hands on me...We got into it. So they called the police and I ended up going to jail instead of going into the psych ward, which I was trying to do for my mental illness."

"They wouldn't let us see the warrant."

Biased use of police tools: warrants, searches, and stops

Participants described unlawful use of searches and warrants by police. During the 2.5 years we followed them:



Roughly half, or 196, were stopped by the police. Of those, 53 or 26.5% reported that the police conducted a vehicle search without permission.



Of those stopped by the police, 89, or 45.4% reported that the police searched, patted, or frisked them without permission.



41%
of African American JustHouHS participants stated that they had been unfairly stopped by police due to their race/ethnicity.

These reports by JustHouHS participants are in keeping with 2018 findings from the State of Connecticut's Racial Profiling Prohibition Project (5). In 2018 in New Haven:

Black or Latinx drivers were stopped **558 times**, and searched without permission **363 times (65%)**.



White drivers were stopped **60 times**, and searched without permission **0 times (0%)**.

"They accused me of stealing at [store], and they-they didn't know I was friends with the person that worked there. They were like – they just walked on in. 'Oh, I see you stole this, this and that.'" - Jackson, a mixed race man

Racial profiling by police

"The lady told them it was a light-skinned guy. I said I'm not light-skinned. I got three jackets on. They didn't want to hear this. They said, 'Well you fit the description.'" - Brandon, an African-American man

Johnny, an African-American man, was stopped by the police while riding a bicycle with his son. He had a water bottle in his hoodie and a charger in his pocket. The police asked for permission to search his body, and he said no. They searched him anyway.

Unconsented searches during vehicle and non-vehicle stops

Johnny filed an official complaint, but "didn't want to keep continue wasting time in court."

Addison, an African-American woman, complained that the police came to her house with a warrant for her brother, who did not live with her. He was suspected of having guns.

Unlawful and improper use of warrants

Addison said, "They came in the house with the ram, and our dog, Junior, started barking, and they shot our dog, and they said, 'Where's the guns?' 'What guns?', and they had – They wouldn't even – I said, 'Can I see the warrant?' They wouldn't let us, either one of us, see the warrant."

Conclusion

JustHouHS participants have shared, both through surveys and interviews, a deep and well-founded mistrust of the police in their communities, rooted in a lack of accountability, biased and unlawful use of police tools, and the criminalization of mental health and substance use issues. These stories and statistics echo the national problem of systemic racism in law enforcement and our criminal justice system, and drive home the need for change in New Haven, in Connecticut, and the nation. They also demonstrate the critical importance of listening to residents' experiences of police interactions, recognizing the disconnect between low income communities of color and police, and defining and working towards safety in a way that helps everyone.

Thank You

The research team would like to thank the JustHouHS participants who have been so generous in sharing their experiences throughout the project, as well as our Community Advisory Board. We are grateful for their input.

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