



# Major Themes Report:

February/March 2021 Youth Listening Sessions

*This report is prepared for the Connecticut Police Transparency & Accountability Task Force*

*By The IMRP & TYJI Research Team*

April 30, 2021

## **Report Contributors:**

The data and findings presented in this report were a combined effort of The IMRP and the University of New Haven Tow Youth Justice Institute, making up the following individuals:

Makenzie Ozycz

*The Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy – Central Connecticut State University*

Henri Alphonse Mendoza

*The Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy – Central Connecticut State University*

Dr. Danielle T. Cooper

*Tow Youth Justice Institute – University of New Haven*

Samantha A. Tosto

*Tow Youth Justice Institute – University of New Haven*

Paul Klee

*Tow Youth Justice Institute – University of New Haven*

***Support by:*** Andrew Clark (The IMRP)

***Special thanks to:*** The NAACP Youth & College Division, CT Kids as Self Advocates (KASA), The Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity, The Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA), the University of Connecticut (UConn), and all those who shared testimony with the Task Force.

## **Introduction:**

The Connecticut Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force held four Listening Sessions in February/March of 2021. The Task Force had determined that the voices of youth were missing from the previous Listening Sessions held in September 2020, and November 2020. As a result, four Listening Sessions were conducted with youth and young adults, ranging in age from 12 to 25 years old.

The Task Force collaborated with four local advocacy organizations, which operated as cohosts for the sessions. These organizations included: The NAACP Youth & College Division, CT Kids as Self Advocates (KASA) and The Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity, The Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA), and the University of Connecticut (UConn). The sessions were held, in order of the above mentioned cohosting units, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, February 9<sup>th</sup>, February 16<sup>th</sup>, and March 3<sup>rd</sup>.

On behalf of the Governor, legislative leaders, and the Attorney General, the passage of Public Act 20-1 made modifications to the Task Force. One of these modifications was the remaining charge of the Task Force to form recommendations on “any other police transparency and accountability issue that they deemed appropriate.” This wide-open charge allowed for a broad public input into the process of the Task Force, and allowed for the conception of the listening sessions. The Task Force hosted the Listening Sessions with the goal of gathering public input around special topics to focus on. Each participant was given a set amount of time to discuss testimonies, which then was followed by a brief Q&A by the Task Force panelists. Some of the Youth Listening sessions also opted for a round table format with guiding questions, which the Task Force panelists were also allowed to listen, and weigh in on. Due to COVID-19 and social distancing measures, all Listening Sessions were conducted virtually on the Zoom platform, generously provided by the University of New Haven.

This report provides a summarization of the thematic recommendations that were identified from the Listening Sessions’ data. These findings are organized by 3 sections:

- Issues on Youth Interaction with Police Officers
- Issues on SROs / SRO Interaction with youth
- Issues on Race and Disability Regarding Youth and Police Officers

These findings will conclude with clear recommendations presented by participants, and lastly, a discussion on key findings and concluding remarks.

## **Method:**

The Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force of Connecticut held four general listening sessions in September for members of the public, these sessions were open to anyone regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity. From the collected data of the September sessions a call for young adult voices was missing, which resulted in the second set of listening sessions cohosted by University partners held in November. The collected data was looked at once more after the November sessions, and a call for youth voices, 12 & older, were identified as the last missing component. With help from the IMRP and other partners assisting the Task Force the four February/March listening sessions were held which featured the missing youth voices.

The Institute of Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) at CCSU transcribed the four listening sessions. Two individuals from IMRP, and two individuals from the University of New Haven, working as a team, then coded the transcriptions. This team met to discuss the codes and findings of the transcripts, and to discuss commonalities within the sessions. The themes presented in this report reflect those findings and commonalities.

Between all four listening sessions, a combined 23 individuals gave testimony, or took place in a round table discussion, some doing both within an individual listening session. These listening sessions were intended for individuals ages 18 & younger, but there were individuals as old as 25 who gave testimony. For the purposes of this report, the testimonies will be discussed by theme, not by age group. And although it was not required to give your age before your testimony, most individuals did provide this information. The data amongst testifiers holds a majority of NAACP Youth & College division participants, at 10 individuals, followed closely by CT KASA and the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities at 7 individuals, then closing with CTJA & UCONN who each had 3 individuals participating.

## *Themes:*

### **Issues on Youth Interaction with Police Officers:**

Across all four listening sessions, there were present examples of either a positive interaction with police officers and youth, or little interaction between the two groups. There also existed several important negative interactions noted within youth testimony, which demonstrates a fear of police officers.

Some comments are presented below:

*“My interactions with officers have been pretty great....officers have been willing to answer questions about procedures within the police department, such as how many body cameras they use, excessive use of force, duty to intervene, and they've all been willing to sit down and answer questions from youth.”*

*“I myself have had only positive experiences with police, however that doesn’t outweigh, or cancel out, all the negative experiences that other people have experienced in terms of the improvement on policing.”*

*“I had guns drawn at me. All I could think to do is put my hands out the window and shout, “please don't shoot me. Please don't shoot me.” As I was first out of my car, my car started rolling by herself because I couldn't place my car in park in fear that if I put my hands back in the vehicle, I will be shot.”*

*“I try to avoid them. Therefore I have not have any interactions with them. I see them pass, but I never talked to them. They never talked to me and yeah, but there's no interaction whatsoever.”*

### **Issues on SROs / SRO Interaction with youth:**

The issue of SROs in school settings was discussed mutually across 3 out of 4 of the youth listening sessions, with opinions running down the middle of in favor or against. The February 16<sup>th</sup> session with the CTJA had a strict opposition across the board in the matter of SRO involvement in schools, whereas the March 3<sup>rd</sup> session with UCONN had the opposite, with an overall favorability of SROs. The February 2<sup>nd</sup> session with the NAACP Youth was divided on the subject, and the February 9<sup>th</sup> session with CT KASA and the Commission did not discuss the topic.

Some comments are presented below:

*“I see SRO’s kind like picking at small offenses and putting a lot of people in like in jail for like something like talking back to a teacher. It’s obviously disrespectful and understandable, but putting out someone for that is kind of harsh in a way.”*

*“And the student would definitely be better off if the money paying that officer was instead being used for something or someone that might actually benefit the child in that situation, such as a counselor, a social worker.”*

*“I do believe that police should be in school. I personally was not very comfortable in school. I was bullied. I was made fun of a bunch of times and having a police officer there I think would have made me feel better.”*

*“I think it would be a good idea if police officers were mimicking the community that school was in. So again, going back to having them relearn not fearing the police, it would be cool to have a police officer that looks like them, that they know.”*

## **Issues on Race and Disability Regarding Youth and Police Officers:**

All four listening sessions shared thematic findings on race and disability regarding the interactions between youth and police officers. The responses to these issues were varied, with individuals sharing both good and bad experiences. The responses demonstrated fear, police brutality in BIPOC communities, and EMS/Officer response to the disability community. Overall, these helpful insights lead to furthering discussions and the formation of recommendations to the Task Force.

Some comments are presented below:

*“I have fear for the men in my life due to things I see on the news that have happened all over the world, to unarmed men of color. It's heartbreaking because I don't want to see one of my brothers on the news for that reason, because they are killed by police officers.”*

*“I think first responders can have a large impact on youth based on how they treat them as a disabled person. I think police officers and first responders should interact with disabled people just as they would interact with an able-bodied person. I believe that they should talk to disabled people just as they would if they were talking to a non-disabled person, even if the person has a cognitive disability.”*

*“The general police brutality we witnessed just in this last year is proof that minorities and those in lower social classes suffer a great deal of exaggerated punishment and discipline post to their counterparts.”*

*“And I don't really know the reason behind me being avoidance avoiding them, but I just, I just tried to do it for some reason. It's like, I'm pre-programmed to do that already.”*

## *Recommendations:*

### **Recommendations / NAACP Youth & College Division:**

#### Diversity in hiring

A recommendation that came from the February 2<sup>nd</sup> session, cohosted by the NAACP Youth & College Division, referred to the hiring of the Attorney General, and external police accountability. This recommendation influenced discussion from the Task Force. The recommendation is stated below:

*“The Inspector General should be an independent attorney, not promoted from within the divisions of criminal justice. The hiring of Inspector General must ensure that there is no bias. Consider candidates of color, and ensure that all investigations will be conducted fairly and independently. The inspector general should be granted investigative subpoena power from local governments and police departments to obtain testimonies.”*

Key phrases important in this recommendation: *independent attorney, fairly and independently, candidates of color, investigative subpoena power.*

### **Recommendations / CT KASA & The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities:**

#### Community Policing, Training, Disability Services

The top recommendations that came from the February 9<sup>th</sup> session, cohosted by CT KASA and the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities surrounded the following ideas: training, community policing, and disability services. These recommendations service not only the communities, but also the officers within those communities that are trying to make a positive difference within the communities that they work in. These recommendations were well received from the Task Force, and considered for further evaluation. The recommendations are stated below:

*“I personally believe that some things that can help, some resources and opportunities that could help alleviate all these problems are maybe more community policing.”*

*“If we can get our officers out in the community that they are defending and get to know where it is that they're defending, then there'll be less trouble out there because then the community itself will feel safe with that officer or the officer's assigned.”*

Key phrases important in these recommendations: *resources, opportunities, alleviate, community policing, defending, less trouble, feel safe*

*“I really do think that more trainings that are comprehensive could be implemented. Things like culture and disability competency should be taken into consideration.”*

*“I believe that also the trainings that they go through. They should be given more time and more training and excessive amount of, um, accountability and structure.”*

Key phrases important in these recommendations: *comprehensive, implemented, culture and disability competency, consideration, trainings, more time, accountability and structure*

*“A fire Marshall will also come to your house and look at the layout and are able to discover where the disabled person mostly resides. This makes it easier in case of an emergency because that information will be in the computer system”*

*“I think having an identification card would be very helpful for me and my friends who have disabilities. It can help the police know you have a disability.”*

Key phrases important in these recommendations: *Fire Marshall, disabled person, emergency, information, computer system, identification card, police, disability.*

## **Recommendations / the Connecticut Justice Alliance:**

### **Training**

The top priority for recommendations that came from the February 16<sup>th</sup> session, cohosted by the Connecticut Justice Alliance, referred again, to training. These recommendations directly connected with the BIPOC experience, as well as SRO involvement in schools. These recommendations were clear, concise and represented many of the larger themes present across all four of the listening sessions. The recommendations are stated below:



*“A lot of the situations where SROs are called into classrooms and things like that to handle students aren't necessary and they should be handled by social workers and other adults in the building that are actually trained to do these things, SROs don't even get proper training before being brought into the school system. So, it definitely is just a replacement of other people.”*

*“I think officers should remember their training and all remember people are innocent until proven guilty. I think police should understand how traumatic unnecessary, forceful encounters can be. And there should be accountability and responsibility, or at least an apology when they are in the wrong.”*

Key phrases important in these recommendations: *aren't necessary, social workers, proper training, remember their training, innocent until proven guilty, traumatic, accountability, responsibility*

### **Recommendation / UCONN:**

Community Engagement, Police Interaction

The recommendations that came from the March 3<sup>rd</sup> listening session, cohosted by UCONN, were relevant to issues surrounding community engagement and police interaction. This was one of the smaller sessions, but these recommendations still satisfied the larger themes present across all of the listening sessions. These recommendations provided the Task Force with their own questions and comments, and sparked discussion amongst the round table discussion format of the session. The recommendations are stated below:

*“I think it would be even more helpful if we were in person and with police officers like us, not just the three of us, but more students having conversations with the police and yeah. In a round table. I think that would be really helpful for us to start trusting.”*

*“It was just nice to see a young person, a young police officer. And I wasn't expecting her to be so nice, but also in those moments because of the media and because of what's been going on the news before, I think like, do I need to put my hands up or anything?”*

Key phrases important in these recommendations: *conversations, officers like us, students, round table, helpful, start trusting, young police officer.*

### *Review of Recommendations:*

Overall, all four listening sessions shared some common thematic findings. The participants in these sessions varied in age, race, and gender. Participants who testified recommended the above to the Task Force in hopes of further consideration. They were met with questions, comments, and concerns from the Task Force members present at each of the sessions, which also varied from session to session. These recommendations reflected the day-to-day lives of the youth in Connecticut.

### *Key Findings & Concluding Remarks:*

The February/March 2021 Youth Listening Sessions were a targeted approach to make sure that youth voice was brought to the table on issues of police transparency and accountability. The youth that gave testimony in these sessions brought research, personal statements, and thought provoking questions to the table for the Task Force to act on and consider in their future work.

An important finding within these sessions marked an immediate need for the Task Force to continue addressing the issue of SROs in school systems, with work towards improving hiring and training practices, and engaging officers in community-policing models.

The distinct effort made by the Task Force and its assisting members to seek the youth voice and perspective on these issues should not go unnoticed. This unique perspective allows an invaluable insight into the future of policing, community relations, and how to field issues on transparency and accountability. Future considerations of the task force and CT legislature at large should include youth and young adult perspectives.

Suggested Citation (APA 7th)- I provided several options depending on how you want authors represented:

#### 1. All Contributors as Authors:

Ozycz, M., Alphonse Mendoza, H., Cooper, D.T., Tosto, S.A., Klee, P. (2021). Major themes report: February/March 2021 youth listening sessions. Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force.

## Appendix A

### Police Transparency & Accountability Task Force

#### February/March 2021 Youth Listening Sessions

#### February 2, 2021 NAACP Youth & College Division Bill Recommendations

May 2021 (Updated)

### Introduction

During the first of the four youth listening sessions held throughout the months of February and March, which was hosted by the NAACP Youth & College Division, several youth speakers shared testimony with the Task Force which included recommendations on amendments directed towards bill #6004. These recommended amendments we're provided given research and examples by the testifying speaker.

Examples of these amendments are stated below:

*“I'll be speaking in support of amending section 33 and Section 41. The Inspector General must be an independent prosecutor who will investigate police officers for misconduct, deadly use of force, and malicious or hurtful acts under Section 41e.*

*The Inspector General should be an independent attorney, not promoted from within the divisions of criminal justice. The hiring of Inspector General must ensure that there is no bias. Consider candidates of color, and ensure that all investigations will be conducted fairly and independently. The inspector general should be granted investigative subpoena power from local governments and police departments to obtain testimonies.*

*Eliminating Qualified Immunity protects the rights of citizens harmed by police officers who used excessive force and committed violent misconduct, allowing citizens to bring legal action against police departments, officers, and towns for civil rights violations. However, qualified immunity allows officers to be immune from prosecution if they have objectively good faith and believe that they did not break the law under Section 41c.*

*The police accountability bill should be amended to allow citizens to hold officers accountable for constitutional rights violations without past precedent. Qualified immunity perpetuates a cycle of malicious police violence, no accountability or liability, and no justice for families of victims.”*

Key Phrases important in this recommended amendment: *Section 33, Section 41, The Inspector General, independent attorney, independent prosecutor, eliminated qualified immunity, excessive force, accountability, liability.*

*“I will be speaking today in support of amending Section 29 of the bill.*

*Based on the language of the bill, the use of chokeholds and restraints applied to the neck are still permitted and justified accordingly to the danger the officer’s face between them and the aggressor. The continuation of permitting chokeholds will impose danger to the lives of the people encountering police officers. Due to the permission of utilizing different forms of chokeholds, there is a possibility that a poorly trained officer will not be able to distinguish at that moment whether they are enacting the chokehold that temporarily stops blood flow from the brain and renders a person on conscious for some time, but doesn’t cut off their breathing.*

*I support amending bill #6004 Section 29 to remove the permission for officers to utilize chokeholds, or other methods of restraint to the neck. As it is left to an officer’s open interpretation on the type of restraint they can utilize. The section must refer back to an officer’s self-defense training. There must be a removal of the permission to continue with chokeholds, and include safer alternatives or specific language on techniques that are allowed to prevent any officer to feel that this policy is left open to their interpretation in times of quick action.”*

Key phrases important in this recommended amendment: *Section 29, chokeholds, permitted, training, alternatives, techniques, language,*

*“Section 7 of the bill focuses on implementing an explicit guide for the basic interview training that officers must complete. Tactical training regarding the use of physical force, the use of body-worn recording equipment, and even implicit bias training are named in the section.*

*What is not made clear in this definition are examples of the segments of our population that are oftentimes subjects of such bias. Race is one segment that immediately comes to mind, as is sexual orientation.*

*This section of the bill needs to be more specific in calling out the lack of training many departments have in adjusting and approaching those members of the public who, like Mubarak, are suffering. We can eliminate gray areas of uncertainty during de-escalation if we show officers how to deal with the mentally unstable, and disabled, and explicitly state what courses of actions can be taken to respectfully handle unique situations.”*

Key phrases important in this recommended amendment: *Section 7, bias, race, sexual orientation, specific, training, de-escalation.*

*“Another section of the bill, section 18, can be amended to eliminate tragic errors due to uncertainty. The language here is too positive, adding that after each evaluation, individual departments can consider whether responses to certain calls would benefit from having a social worker present.*

*This section should be rewritten to require all departments to engage a team of social workers to assist officers on calls where psychological distress may be evidence. Evaluation and consideration will prompt a little to no change.*

*In conclusion, I urge you to support amending bill number 6004 with the understanding that these changes and those brought to you by my peers must be implemented. We are here representing our communities and fighting for the lives of our friends and families.”*

Key phrases important in this recommended amendment: *Section 18, too positive, social worker, rewritten, psychological distress, evaluation, consideration.*

### Conclusion

The youth voice, a missing component thus far in the PTATF listening sessions, proves its unique importance with these recommended amendments to bill #6004. As this bill continues to be approached by the Task Force and legislative leaders a reminder of the impacted parties must be considered, here the youth testifiers prove that they are and will continue to be directly impacted by this work.