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This brief is a summary of a research paper authored by Amanda King, a third-year CWRU law student, founder of "Shooting Without Bullets" and member of the Cleveland Community Police Commission. The paper was part of her "Shooting Without Bullets" Legal Policy research project, under the supervision of the Schubert Center for Child Studies. The views expressed and research conducted are solely those of Ms. King. Schubert Center Policy Research Assistant Keisha Matthews provided editing assistance. More information about Shooting Without Bullets can be found at: www.shootingwithoutbullets.org/

SHOOTING WITHOUT BULLETS: Using Photovoice to Capture Cleveland Youth Perspectives to Inform Police and Other Criminal Justice Related Reform in Cleveland and Beyond

We are CLE, a city of champions, and a city of immense adversity. Unemployment in Cleveland is 19.2%, and 1 in every 2 children in Cleveland live in poverty.¹ Moreover, black Clevelanders make up roughly 53% of the general population and roughly 72.5% of the prison population.² White officers account for 67% of the Cleveland Division of Police (CDP)³ and black juveniles make up 61% of the youth prison population in Cleveland.³

Black youth and the police have had an especially volatile relationship. Excessive use of force, killings of black youth nationwide, and other acts of police brutality including aggressive harassment and intimidation contribute to race-based traumatic stress in black youth, which, in turn, contributes to their distrust of the police and the criminal justice system.⁴

On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy was shot by a white Cleveland police officer in less than three seconds of the squad car's arrival. Tamir was playing with a toy pistol missing its safety cap under a gazebo at Cudell Recreation center when he was killed.

Though Tamir's death garnered national attention, there are many untold stories about police violence against black teens. Routine interactions between police and minority urban youth, like stop and frisk and over policing at public schools, have a tendency to leave black youth with lasting scars that make them feel like they do not matter.⁵ As a youth advocate appointed to the Cleveland Community Police Commission, this author heard numerous testimonies from young people who do not trust the police. Even law enforcement training dispels the sense of responsibility for protecting youth and giving them the benefit of the doubt.⁶ When the police,

through their actions, communicate to black youth that law enforcement does not value their lives or sympathize with their plight, police legitimacy falters.⁷

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) released its findings into the CDP. DOJ determined that the CDP engages in a pattern or practice of excessive use of force, specifically including the CDP's interactions with Cleveland's youth.⁸ In 2015, the City of Cleveland and the DOJ entered into a court-enforceable Settlement Agreement ("Agreement") to reform unconstitutional policing within the CDP. The Agreement calls for community engagement and trust-building to promote public confidence in the police.⁹ It also creates an opportunity for better youth-police interactions by giving young people a seat at the proverbial reform process decision-making table.⁶

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shooting without bullets continued >

“Shooting Without Bullets,” a youth advocacy and photography program, was developed to gain a deeper understanding of how black youth in Cleveland see and experience life. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the impact that excessive use of force by police officers, systemic racism, and poverty have on their daily lives. **Shooting Without Bullets operates on the belief that by creating meaningful opportunities for young people to express their opinions to law enforcement in informal social spaces, they will be more likely to want to participate in the formal police reform process.**

This brief discusses how understanding youth perspective expressed through the arts can inform and impact police reform and other criminal justice related reform. The real-life example of Shooting Without Bullets is presented as one approach to Cleveland youth sharing their stories.

ART AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Visual and performing arts are woven into the histories of many movements for social change.¹⁰ The arts allow people to see the world with spiritual eyes that are open and sensitive to the gentleness of human character. Art can open people’s eyes to see the beauty in other human experiences and allow them to connect with the brightness of the spirit in others. When people connect with the experiences of others, they become more empathetic and inspired to make social change.

The arts can also address the root causes of persistent societal problems including social injustice, inequities in civil and human rights, and social and economic disparities around race.¹⁰ Most importantly, the arts can advance social progress, propel social and political movements, and improve the lives of disadvantaged groups.

Art is a form of civil disobedience. It is a non-institutionalized practice through which citizens are empowered to challenge established and institutionalized forms of vertical authority.¹¹ Through art, communities can intertwine artistic and

“THE PROJECTS” by Jasmine, 16, SWB Photographer



community goals, build group identity, provoke civic engagement, and advance civil rights.¹¹ Ordinary people can make significant change by making art that questions public policy issues relevant to their community.¹²

SELF-EXPRESSION AND VOICE IN ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

In his article “Black Youth and Motivation,” Alvin Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School whose work focuses on the raising of African-American children, analyzes areas of internal motivation in black youth. He writes, “The looking-glass of black youth’s self reflects a shattered and defeated image,” and attributes the systemic oppression of black youth to their lack of motivation.¹³ Other theorists have stated that the black child’s self-image will be impaired as long as America remains racist.¹³

During adolescence, social norms and values, including beliefs about the law and legal institutions, are shaped. Personal experiences and the nature of an individual’s contact with police influence young people’s attitude toward police.¹⁴ U.S. citizens are systematically warned to be afraid of black youth, and mainstream media portrayals that characterize them as alien and dangerous serves to justify this fear.¹⁵ Attempts to demonize, criminalize,

and surveil black youth increase the likelihood that they will experience negative contact with law enforcement in their everyday lives.¹⁶

Adolescence is a unique developmental period of significant social, emotional, and physical growth; self-exploration; and transition. The process of articulating one’s identity is particularly important for at-risk youth. The arts provide an important space for individuals to explore and co-create both themselves and the world.¹⁷ Urban black youth need opportunities to amplify their voices and create counter-narratives to societal stereotypes about them.¹⁷

Youth development encourages young people to evolve their social identities. The term youth development is broadly defined as “interventions that systematically seek to identify and utilize youth capacities, meet youth needs and actively seek to involve youth as decision makers by tapping their creativity, energy and drive.”¹⁸ Youth development initiatives marshal resources to youth targeted at their well-being and at changing toxic and antithetical environmental circumstances.

In the context of police reform, we often forget that black youth have important viewpoints and ideas to offer during critical discussions about issues directly

affecting their lives. With a narrow focus on the perspectives of the “adults” in the situation, black youth voices are routinely rendered invisible.¹⁹ The opportunity for black youth to share experiences and assessments of police are vital to their development in a society where they feel voiceless, even though they are often screaming to be heard. Artistic youth interventions, not mediated by language alone, allow young people to shape their own messages and convey them in ways they deem meaningful.²⁰

PHOTOVOICE AS AN ART-BASED QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Photography is an ideal medium for tackling controversial social issues. Due to the medium’s versatility, it can function as both an expressive art form that facilitates self-discovery and a communicative tool that encourages social interactions between diverse groups of people.²¹ Through the advancement of camera phones and digital photography, photography has become more accessible for young people. Photography is considered an intuitive art form for youth to express themselves. They often use the medium to share vignettes of their lives with their peers and family members via social media platforms. Most importantly, through photography, young people can communicate their varied, multidimensional experiences in a way that they cannot through rhetoric.

Photovoice is a participatory research methodology first formally articulated by Caroline Wang and Mary Anne Burris 1997. It provides a process for people to “identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.”²² It entrusts the camera in the hands of people who have either been ignored or previously rejected by society and enables them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change within their community.¹⁸ The use of photography allows them to capture a visual image that transforms a single photograph into a vehicle for generating information and discussion. The images captured through photovoice convey important themes and messages to the broader community.¹⁸ Lastly, the social nature of the medium can bring the community and policy makers together for dialogue and also spread messages that can inform and impact police reform. It can educate the public about community-policing issues and at the same time bring citizens and law enforcement together for shared social experiences through forums like art shows and exhibits.²³

Through photovoice, young people can effectively draw attention to social-political situations.²³ The process can help them engage in self-discovery and educate the community about their identity, perspectives, and priorities. Photovoice can be used to increase youth self-competence, critical awareness of environment, and cultivate research for social change and political action.¹⁸



“HOOP” by Kia, 19, SWB Photographer

USING PHOTOVOICE TO ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING IN YOUTH-POLICE INTERACTIONS

The Invisible Institute of the University of Chicago Law School describes the youth-police encounters on the Southside of Chicago as “hostile and dysfunctional” mainly because of the lack of positive communication between the two groups.²⁴ In order to improve youth-police interactions not only in Chicago but nationwide, young people and the police must be able to engage in open and honest dialogue about their differences. These conversations may require nonlinear methods of communication, which can best be facilitated through photovoice.

Through photovoice, young people can be heard and actively engage in changing police culture by using photography to show the police their daily experiences, observations about their community, and their attitudes towards police.²⁵ Photovoice allows young people and the police to engage in dialogue that does not typically

“WARNER SWASEY BUILDING” by Chris, 16, SWB Photographer





take place during youth-police encounters on the streets. Young people and police may see some of the same people, places, and activities in a neighborhood but experience them differently. The police often experience neighborhoods as gatekeepers, while young people experience neighborhoods as community insiders who have little control over their surroundings. Through the process of photovoice, youth can give police a portrait of the neighborhoods that only insiders could portray.²⁰ These insights can then be used as tools to improve the quality of youth-police interactions.

Procedural justice focuses on the way police and other legal authorities interact with the public and how the characteristics of those interactions shape the public's views of the police.²⁶ Positive informal contacts between youth and the police also increase young people's confidence in policing. Informal contacts between these two groups can be facilitated by creative placemaking through art. The goal of creative placemaking is to develop places of belonging in communities through the process of sharing art.²⁷ In these spaces, creative life and civil life can intersect and invite authentic collaboration between diverse people in the community. To improve community-police relations we

need to create authentic opportunities for young people to express their concerns to the police through art, free from legal, physical, or emotional harm.²⁷

Shooting Without Bullets explores how photovoice can be useful in the police reform process, specifically by providing youth with meaningful opportunities to share their ideas about community safety and tell their stories about youth-police relations. Since photovoice allows young people to express their passions, opinions, and humanity through photography, they can speak directly to law enforcement and policy makers in an authentic manner.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF PHOTOVOICE IN CLEVELAND POLICE REFORM

In Cleveland, public debate about police accountability, structural violence, and racial disparities in the criminal justice system is ongoing. To ensure systemic change in Cleveland policing, the Cleveland community needs to engage in public and private conversations about issues of law enforcement and race, especially in the context of youth-police interactions. Law enforcement and public officials must publicly acknowledge that black youth are often not afforded equal treatment under the law, commit to changing the institutional dynamics that allow for that

disparity, and make room for young people to speak truthfully about how their lives are affected by procedural injustice in policing.

The Settlement Agreement sets out to reform unconstitutional policing practices within the CDP. It calls for youth participation in the police reform process, but the extent of their participation is uncertain. **Fairness, transparency, and collaboration are highlighted in the Agreement, but for these cultural changes to occur, young people and the police must first develop a relationship.** The first step to fostering this relationship is engaging in dialogue. Through dialogue, they will develop a common language that will allow both parties to better understand one another. In conversation, they can share insights, raise questions, and propose solutions to community-policing conflicts. Police have a ubiquitous presence in the lives of black youth, but they continue to live in separate worlds and experience different realities.²⁸

Where the possibility of youth-police relations seem polarized, the camera helps young people discern the fault lines of their relationship with the police and reshape them to meet their needs.²⁹ It may be easier for young people to hand police or policy makers a photograph that expresses what they are trying to communicate rather than merely speaking it.²³ The color, lines, textures, and rhythms in an image provide the necessary basis for the viewer to better understand the experience, emotions, and ideas of the photographer.²³ Conversations about race, equality, and police accountability are complex and inherently emotional and may be better expressed through nonlinear methods of communication such as photography.

To accomplish this, informal spaces need to be created for young people and law enforcement to have real conversations about policing.

These spaces can be coffee shops, schools, universities, art centers, museums galleries, community centers, spaces of public art and even billboards.²³ While there is no shortage of these spaces for addressing community problems in Cleveland, it's questionable whether youth voices are being captured in them. ■

PLANTING THE SEED TO FOSTER YOUTH-POLICE DIALOGUE SPACE: "Shooting Without Bullets"

Shooting Without Bullets is designed to empower youth to share their opinions about social justice issues directly affecting their lives in a constructive manner. Combining social advocacy, documentary photography, expressive arts, and language arts, *Shooting Without Bullets* takes a multidimensional approach to assisting Cleveland youth to process complex social problems experienced by them, including police encounters.

Housed at NewBridge Center for Arts and Technology, a center that provides free after-school and summer arts programs to prepare youth to graduate from high school, *Shooting Without Bullets* provides an expressive platform for black youth to use photography to inform and impact criminal justice related reform in Cleveland. The participants also have the opportunity to showcase their photography to policy-makers and other criminal justice system related stakeholders.

Youth narratives are valuable and deserve to be expressed. The use of photovoice to develop civic engagement in Cleveland youth ensures that their voices will not only be heard in the halls of decision-

making power, but young people will also become agents of change who can express and determine what fair policing looks like in their community.

Participants in *Shooting Without Bullets* engage in dialogue, expressive arts, and language arts exercises about systemic racism, community policing, and personal-identity. Their photographs highlight their values, interests, and viewpoints about their neighborhood and family life. They also capture their emotional responses to growing up as a black teenager in Cleveland. Sadness, isolation, and anger were common in their works but so were pride, hope, and a longing for something more than what they currently have.

During one session, the young people traveled to the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport to see the 50 Faces of Cleveland exhibit showcasing Cleveland's Diversity in Portraits. None of the participants in the program that day had ever been to the airport, let alone on a plane. They were so excited and intrigued by the airplanes. When they arrived, they ran to the top of the airport parking lot to photograph the planes as they took off. Although they had yet to experience what it felt like to fly, it was the possibility of flying one day that fulfilled them in the interim. The police reform process needs moments like this, where even if we have yet to experience a cultural change in policing, or a mutual understanding of perspective, we can still feel it on the horizon. ***Shooting Without Bullets* is rooted in the belief that if we believe that change is possible we will work toward and wait for it, even when it is difficult. ■**

"HORIZON" by Kia, 19, SWB Photographer



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