



*Nobody's going to listen to me.  
We're nobodies. We're just a  
couple a homeless black people  
who's just another statistic.*

Black man, 52, Richmond, CA



# BEING HEARD

VOICES FROM  
MARGINALIZED  
COMMUNITIES



AUGUST 2017





The Topos Partnership is grateful to the **Ford Foundation** for the support which made this work possible, and truly appreciative of the accomplished leaders who agreed to be on our Advisory board to guide and challenge the research throughout.

### **ADVISORY GROUP**

Dante Barry  
Executive Director, Million Hoodies for Justice

Judith Browne Dianis  
Executive Director, Advancement Project

Juan Cartagena  
President & General Counsel, Latino Justice

Mary Crowley  
Vice President of Communications  
& Public Affairs, Vera Institute of Justice

Kris Hayashi  
Executive Director, Transgender Law Center

Mimi Ho and Taj James  
Co-Directors, Movement Strategy  
Center- Blackbird

Joo-Hyun Kang  
Director, Communities United for Police Reform  
(CPR)

Jenny Levison  
Vice President of Marketing, Communications,  
and Development, Center for Social Inclusion

Jodeen Olquin-Taylor  
Vice President, Policy and Partnerships, DEMOS

Lorraine Ramirez  
Senior Program Manager, Neighborhood  
Fundors Group - Fundors for Justice

Rashad Robinson  
Executive Director, ColorOfChange



*The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence.*

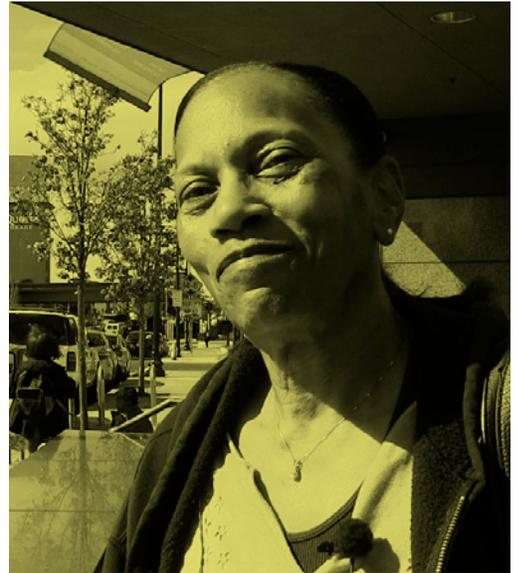
**Ella Josephine Baker**

At the current moment, a broad swath of Americans feel less like citizens, and more like subjects of an elite ruling class. For marginalized groups of Americans, a distant, even oppressive, government is nothing new. Yet the pain of declining community investments, the rise of a police surveillance state, and the weight of inequality is felt acutely, and consistently in their daily lives.

Over the past year, Topos listened to the voices of marginalized groups who often are not heard – by elected leaders, by the media, even by public opinion researchers. We went to the streets of inner-city Baltimore, Oakland, and New Orleans, where we heard from people who felt neglected and often invisible. The intersection of race, gender, and class was at the core of this investigation, so we centered our conversations on lower-income African Americans and Latinos (citizen, documented, and undocumented immigrants), with an emphasis on lower-income women of color and people of color who are LGBTQ, in particular, those who are gender non-conforming.

The report that follows includes the voices of those who are homeless, who have lived or continue to live in challenging, often unsafe conditions, and whose experience with government is often destructively neglectful, if not outright hostile and violent. They share stories of worsening conditions, police abuse, and continuing personal and structural racism. But they also share stories of perseverance, resilience, and hope.

In this research, we sought to understand how to better engage these historically underrepresented and disenfranchised communities in collective action, with the belief that mobilized communities across socioeconomic and demographic spectrums have the power to shape public policy, systems and structures.



To achieve this objective, we listened carefully to our research participants to better understand:

- To what extent do marginalized people view themselves as having any power to change government systems that can be negligent, ineffective or oppressive?
- Do marginalized people have any reason to believe that government can be used as a constructive tool, or that government can act as an ally?
- And, most importantly, how can advocates strike the right balance between criticizing government, government officials, and harmful public policies, while still promoting government as a critical problem-solving instrument when in the hands of the people?

The analysis and recommendations that follow are intended for those who seek to better understand, represent, communicate with, or engage historically disenfranchised communities, including policymakers, foundations, and non-profits either working in, or planning to work in this space. Those organizations that are already deeply embedded in marginalized communities are likely to find a great deal of confirmation of their on-the-ground experience. The information gleaned from this research is intended to provide new insights, enhance current tools, and complement existing work taking place in the field.

We are truly grateful to the accomplished, committed thought leaders who agreed to be on our Advisory Board to guide and challenge the research throughout, and to the thought leaders who shared their expertise on these significant challenges. These skilled leaders are already doing the hard work of building movements in communities across the nation. Their experience and insights were invaluable in shaping the research investigation.

Most important, we are thankful and honored that people trusted us enough to lay bare their fears, their pain, and their resolve for a brighter tomorrow.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inciting a greater understanding of and belief in people's untapped power...

The daily, lived experience of historically disenfranchised people indicates that they are neglected, even invisible. While they often agree that speaking up leads to change, more often than not those assertions sound like platitudes, rather than the reality of their lived experiences.

This research suggests the most critical, fundamental challenge we face is getting people to understand, and truly believe, they have power to effect change in public systems and structures.

Common communications practices can miss the mark or even undermine people's belief in the power of collective action. Understanding why people feel disempowered, what can further distance them from government, and what inspires activism, is the goal of this research.

## WHERE'S GOVERNMENT?

Life is hard, and getting harder for historically disenfranchised communities in the United States. No stranger to government neglect and oppression, marginalized people see increasing levels of decay and violence in their daily lives, and shrinking opportunities for jobs and activities for children and families.

When asked to explain why things are the way they are, more often than not marginalized people, like the general public at large, cite individual responsibility: whether to take drugs or not, to get an education or not, to respond violently or not, and so on. At the same time, the systemic and structural influences that shape their lives for the worse are also visible, and quickly brought into focus with the right prompt.

Like Americans generally, people in marginalized communities feel distanced from government. From their perspective, government is run by elites, for elites, not for the people. Importantly, however, the impact of a distant and uncaring government hits home especially hard in marginalized communities. Many Americans are frustrated by government inaction or by decisions they disagree with, but in marginalized communities the painful consequences of that inaction or even hostile action, are sharp and apparent.

## POLICE AS ONE FACE OF GOVERNMENT

Perhaps no other domain of social life draws issues of governance, community participation, investment, violence, and neglect into starker relief than the question of policing. Women of color, in particular, have conflicted feelings when it comes to police. They don't want to feel vulnerable to violence, which paradoxically can sometimes mean having a cop on the corner to deal with drugs, but in other cases means not having a cop on the corner if your son is outside playing.

When they consider safety, police are so squarely in the picture for people in marginalized communities, that they cannot imagine a reform agenda that does not include police. They typically center their commentary on person-focused reforms such as better training, replacing "bad" cops with "good" cops, and building connections between police and the communities they are supposed to serve. Advocates seeking systemic reforms, such as shifting resources from policing to other community strategies, may find themselves trapped in a safety frame that inadvertently builds support for more police instead of a reform agenda that would result in healthier, stronger communities with less reliance on police.

With this in mind, it is a challenge for advocates to critique the failings of government while not undermining the role of government as a tool for change.

Marginalized people don't need to be convinced of the importance of government. Unlike white middle class America, which struggles to see the impact of government on their daily lives, underserved communities readily see a role for government. They see it in the neglect of their neighborhood structures, the lack of opportunities for their kids, and the oppressive weight of the police state.

Government could and should do more, they believe. They see what other communities have available to them, and know that resources exist. Resources aren't the problem, they insist, priorities are the problem. And communities of color aren't treated as a priority. Appeals to "make your voice heard" can easily fall flat when their lived experience shows them that those in power don't listen to their needs, or are even hostile to their needs with actions to ban their military service, direct which bathroom they use, or deport their families, for example.

Marginalized people feel both invisible and hyper visible. When it comes to the conditions of their communities, or the resources available to them, they feel invisible, neglected, as though they have no voice. At the same time, they feel hyper visible when it comes to police.

*If we're asking people to vote, we have to, with integrity, address the fact that government falls short. And I think too heavy of a critique would just ensure that people who are already disengaged remain disengaged. I think there's a way to have the conversation with integrity without overdoing it.*

**Alia Harvey-Quinn**  
Director of FORCE, a project of the  
PICO National Network

## AN AUTHENTIC, EMPOWERING CONVERSATION

Common communications practices can miss opportunities to empower marginalized people, and can even inadvertently undermine people's belief in the power of collective action. Advocates, organizers, funders and community leaders who are interested in building power and momentum in the social change movement should consider the following recommendations as they develop and implement near and long term civic engagement plans.

***For people to understand, and truly believe, they have power to effect change, there are several specific steps communicators need to follow:***

**Prioritize ongoing, year-round efforts, focused on concrete change, not simply electing candidates or supporting political parties.** Ongoing efforts focused on policy give people opportunities to engage and learn how to change the policies and systems that outlast specific elected officials or political parties.

**Orient the conversation around solutions, not problems.** Too often, communicators put all the emphasis on the problem, and people think there are no solutions. In particular, when it comes to marginalized communities, the broad systemic challenges overwhelm and paralyze those we are trying to engage.

**Reverse the typical sequence for communicating policies.** Often, communicators start with a big, lofty challenge, and then talk about the policy to address that challenge. What that policy means for people's lives is often buried in the conversation. This research suggests that communicators should start with a tangible solution, bridge to the policy, and then explain how that policy begins to address systemic problems. That sequence is far more empowering because people are better able to see a path forward.

**Tell stories of successful collective action to empower, inspire, and motivate continued action.** People rarely hear of wins. Meanwhile, they experience threats and loss in their lives. When we warn of even more threats to their already precarious lives, we create powerlessness. We have successes. We need to share them widely and often, and we should not undercut them with the notion that "it isn't enough." The specific win matters less than the idea that people got something significant accomplished, which inspires people to keep going for more, for that next bigger win.

**Ground the conversation in marginalized groups; do not hide from race.** Empowered people of color from underserved communities, telling the story of their work, their success, their vision for positive change, are powerful and inspiring messengers.

**Recognize that "community" has multiple levels.** When marginalized people of color refer to "the community coming together" they aren't thinking narrowly about a physical area or a specific geography. "Community" includes their community of identity, which might be based in race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. One respondent might refer to a broader community of black and brown people while another might reference transgender people. The need to share common cause is the same, whether the community is a physical area or identity-based.

**Make specific calls to action, not just vague assertions to "use your voice."** People often don't know what they can do to create change, other than vote. Modeling civic action, and specifically calling for one or two steps "beyond voting" help people see what is possible and how to go about enacting change themselves.

**Include "potential," a powerful ideal.** People believe in the inherent potential found within their communities, and it is this potential that inspires the belief that change is possible.

When we exposed survey research participants to a message based on these recommendations, belief in the power of people working together to effect change soared by double digits.

The analysis and recommendations that follow are the Topos Partnership's alone. Other strategists may come to different conclusions.



# LIVED EXPERIENCE



## LIFE HERE IS HARD, AND GETTING HARDER

As they consider their daily lives, people of color in marginalized communities, and especially women, reflect on a range of worries: fear of violence, pervasiveness of drug abuse, homelessness and prostitution, gentrification and a lack of good jobs, to name a few.

Particularly in Baltimore, where regardless of whatever else poor people of color think, feel, imagine or do, they do so within a context of actual and possible violence

*There is just so much stuff out here, people are just scared...the violence, killing and drugs...I'm scared to let my daughter go out and play so I just let her play up there [on the stoop].* Black woman, 43, Baltimore, MD

*Yeah, I feel like it's a little bit more dangerous now. It's a lot of shootings and robberies and stuff like that.* Black man, 25, Baltimore, MD

"Abandominiums" – empty, boarded up homes which are a hotbed of drug activity and prostitution – contribute to Baltimore residents' sensation that their neighborhoods are unsafe. In Oakland, rapid gentrification creates unease and instability, and a sense that struggling people are a low priority.

*That's where all the drug dealers go...the prostitutes...you see them off into the abandoned house. I mean, yeah, that's a big cause right there, so many abandominiums.* Native American woman, 57, Baltimore, MD

*I grew up here in west Oakland...I feel like the whole make-up is different, and I feel like gentrification is disproportionately displacing low-income, and then on top of it, especially now with the homeless as well, it's making people homeless because rent is \$2,500 for a one-bedroom and people are coming from San Francisco who were paying \$3,500 so they're willing to pay \$2,500 easy. They just built a million-dollar home in west Oakland which shows you that they don't even plan for us to be here.* Black woman, 29, Oakland, CA

In both Baltimore and Oakland, it used to be different; there was less violence and more activities and opportunities for kids to engage in. Some participants point to the influx of drugs and the accompanying violence as the culprit for their more dangerous living circumstances, while others note that a shift in public resources going away from their communities as the contributing factor for their community's downfall. In Oakland, rising housing costs in San Francisco are causing wealthier folks to move East, pricing out current residents.

These changes in the community's circumstances are articulated as a break from what conditions were like in the past, a time period which can be defined as anywhere from a few years ago to decades ago depending on the age of the participant describing the community's circumstances and the issues that are most important to them. However, across the board, community members have a sense that they are suffering to a greater extent than they used to in the past.

There is a feeling that the community's social fabric itself is unravelling. Institutions and steadfast traditions in these communities are not simply dissolving – to our Baltimore participants especially, these elements of the social order are inverting. The world has turned upside down.

*Just about everything is out of order.*

Black woman, 77, Baltimore, MD

*I don't know when it became preferable to shoot somebody rather than to settle their disagreements.*

Black woman, 67, Baltimore, MD

*When I was coming up, there was the parks. They've taken that away. There was 4H club, they take that away. If they keep taking everything away for the kids to do, then what is there to do but do crime and keep the crime rate up and keep things up? If there's no activities for kids to do, this world will end.*

Black woman, 52, FL

*I feel like there's no togetherness. It's more like independent, like surviving on your own. It used to be, in my area, it used to be like around Father's Day we would do this thing where everybody would get together and we would have events, like anybody who's a dad could get free food or anything, we would talk to each other, but now it's just like...nothing but drinking, smoking, everybody's fighting.*

Black woman, 26, Baltimore, MD

## OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

*A young Black couple in their mid-20s shared how they essentially grew up hiding from the violence, staying in their homes, only leaving when they had to. They urged the importance of telling people not to stereotype the projects. They wanted others to understand that there is a universe of talent and potential here as well.*

*They had been discussing whether or not to leave Baltimore, now that they have a newborn baby. And though they'd spent much of their youth avoiding its mean streets, Baltimore, they decided, had a universe of possibilities itself, ones they'd only just begun to become aware of.*

In particular, respondents consistently worried about kids' behavior these days, and how collectively, their behavior has changed the character of their neighborhoods.

*The new generation. They're not going to school, they want to fight...they want to sell drugs in our area. They're not even from our court but they come to our court to sell drugs.*

Black woman, 26, Baltimore, MD

*If you notice nowadays, kids do not have manners and respect like they used to. It's yes, no. Not around here. Yes ma'am, no ma'am. Yes, no. Come on now, not "Huh? What?" We don't do that... If you want something, you ask for it. You just don't take it, it's not yours.*

Black woman 63, Baltimore, MD

## ESCAPE, ENDURE, HOLD ON, OR TRANSFORM?

Though critical of their circumstances, research participants don't necessarily want to give up on their communities. They describe four different, often overlapping, perspectives on their community that influence their ability to engage in change.

Transform – many of the research participants are optimistic that transformation is possible, and some are willing to put the time and energy into helping that transformation come about.

Escape – others plan to escape their community, if and when they are able to do so. Importantly, some of these people believe transformation is possible, however, they are less interested in helping to bring that transformation about.

Endure – There are those who plan to endure. They tend to be older residents who are pessimistic about their community, but have reasons to stay, such as family ties or economic realities.

Hold on – Finally, in areas that are rapidly gentrifying, where “change,” means increasing property values, many simply hope to hold on to their homes and not get forced out. While optimistic about and dedicated to their community, they are often pessimistic about their ability to enact change or influence “progress.”

Rootedness to place is a big factor in determining which category people ultimately land in. A person has more at stake in a neighborhood she has lived in for decades, and is more open to doing the hard work of transformation. But external factors and policies also influence rootedness – debt, cost of housing, eviction policies, and so on influence a person's ability to become rooted.



# WHY THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY ARE

Our research finds that one of the important stumbling blocks in the conversation about how to best serve marginalized communities is a difference between a typical expert view focusing on policies and structures, and the default community-member emphasis on individual responsibility.

In our American “bootstrap,” or individualist, society, people easily explain success and failure through an Individual Responsibility lens. This is a meta lens through which Americans see a wide range of issues. Like the general U.S. population overall, people of color in the most oppressed, marginalized communities often explain “why things are the way they are” by pointing to a person’s individual choices and actions – the choice to use drugs, not get an education, join a gang, bad behavior, and so on.

In this way, lay people and experts are of different minds – creating potential disconnects and misunderstandings. On one hand, experts emphasize the power of structures and the failure of systems in determining a person or community’s outcomes. Experts think first and foremost of policies, not individual choices.

On the other hand, even for average community members whose first thoughts center on personal choices, the importance of systems and structures in influencing a person’s or community’s opportunities or lack thereof lies just under the surface – creating openings for a constructive dialog about big-picture change.

## THE EXPERT VIEW

Topos interviewed a wide range of experts coming from different experiences including academics, organizers, and non-profit leaders, across a wide range of disciplines from criminal justice to poverty to transgender issues, and listened to them discuss inequality through the lens of structural and systemic failures that undermine whole communities of people.

Experts emphasize the structural factors such as housing, education, criminal justice, transportation infrastructure, etc. that systematically affect people of color, people of lower socioeconomic status, and people in marginalized groups. The way to create and sustain lasting change on a large-scale, of course, is to look at the structural root causes that lead to inequality and address them with policies that can eventually improve outcomes for many. In this way, experts center their energy on the ability of policies to create change at the macro level, and do not limit their view to the individual politicians or political parties that may bring about such change.

Problematically, the Expert View is not shared by most lay people. Those who work most closely with marginalized communities understand the problematic clash between experts' focus on systems and laypeople's default emphasis on individual control.

Advocates and experts who are unaware of this tension may inadvertently talk past the very people they are trying to mobilize towards advocacy and henceforth, miss opportunities to connect and engage with the communities or groups they work with or specialize in.

*You see that with rape or sexual violence. Women are constantly feeling like they have to find a way to make it an individual problem that they can correct by wearing the right clothes or watching out when they go out, or doing the right things. Otherwise it's just rape culture and you can be raped at any given point in time. Then you can't exist. So I think people understand it to be a systemic problem, but then are quick to individualize it in an effort to feel okay about living. So we have to figure out how to message to those systemic realities without demoralizing.*

**Andrea J. Ritchie**  
organizer, attorney, author,  
Researcher-in-Residence on Race,  
Gender, Sexuality and Criminalization  
at the Social Justice Institute  
of the Barnard Center for

## OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

*A husband and wife complained at length about the amount of trash in the street. Directly behind them on the sidewalk for the duration of the interview was a full-size mattress that sat in the rain and was still there the next day. It had been a big obstacle for the couple to get around as they walked down the street prior to the interview.*

*They noted that people put trash wherever they want. Trash is picked up regularly, they insisted, and while the streets should be cleaned more often, the source of the*

*garbage in the street was neighbors who brought things out to the curb right after garbage was collected.*

*For these interviewees, it was an issue of personal responsibility to keep the streets clean and something close to a moral failure for neighbors to ignore the greater good and dump trash outside whenever they feel like it.*

Hispanic woman, 57  
Hispanic man, 59  
Oakland, CA

## THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

When historically disenfranchised people of color think about why some succeed more than others, they primarily attribute the outcome to individual responsibility. Even when focused on why some communities thrive more than others, or why disparities exist between racial or socioeconomic groups, people rely first and foremost on explanations that involve individual behavior. For example, our research participants often described disparities as being the fault of parents for not equipping their children with the necessary skills to succeed. People conclude that these “bad parents” don’t raise their children in knowing right from wrong; they don’t instill a work ethic in them; and they don’t appropriately discipline their children.

*And I even asked them, “Why are you out here doing this? You know your mother wouldn’t want ...” “Oh, she down there smoking crack.” You know? Come on. I guess you only know what you’re taught. He’s like, “I don’t know no other way.” Native American woman, 57, Baltimore, MD*

*These kids would not be so outrageous if they had discipline in the home. No, I don’t agree with beating and banging on them, but sometimes a little strap don’t hurt, a little switch off the tree won’t kill them. Black woman, 63, Baltimore, MD*

Extrapolating from the individual to the community, some of our research participants blame their community’s poor conditions on their neighbors, the people in their community. In this way, community failings are attributable to the collective effect of bad decisions, bad attitudes, and a lack of caring.

*If people would clean up after their self and stop throwing stuff all over the place, because I get tired of getting out here cleaning up. Black woman, 43, Baltimore, MD*

*But it’s like, what are you showing these police? It’s like, kill us, because obviously if we’re killing each other, what’s the point of police not killing us? So I feel like for police to make a change, we have to make a change in ourselves as individuals. Mixed race woman, 16, Oakland, CA*

*If we clean our own homes, and our piece of sidewalk, then others will see and follow by example. Hispanic woman (Mexican immigrant), 35, Baltimore, MD*

Even when participants focused in on the role of government, change begins, as some participants argued, at home, and then works its way outward or has ripple effects outward.

*They [the government] should [help], but my thing is that if you don’t try to change your situation, how can you ask somebody else to change the situation for you? If you have parents that have kids and don’t have a good job...you have kids that are even in school are having kids...I feel like us parents should change how we are bringing up our child and our kids first before we ask government for help. Because you can’t ask the government for help if you’re not working... you don’t do nothing for your child, then how can the government help you? Black woman (Ivorian immigrant), 23, Baltimore, MD*

When people reason using an Individual Responsibility Perspective, it is harder to see upstream to the structural forces that cause disparities, or to the collective actions and policies that could improve their lives.



## THE STRUCTURAL VIEW – NEARLY VISIBLE

Though people in historically disenfranchised groups default to an Individual Responsibility Perspective to explain outcomes, it is relatively easy to re-focus their attention to structural factors.<sup>1</sup> For example, our participants were acutely aware of the conditions which play a role in holding them back, including a lack of jobs, schools in poor condition, poor quality education, the effects of gentrification on housing options, lack of public safety, and so on.

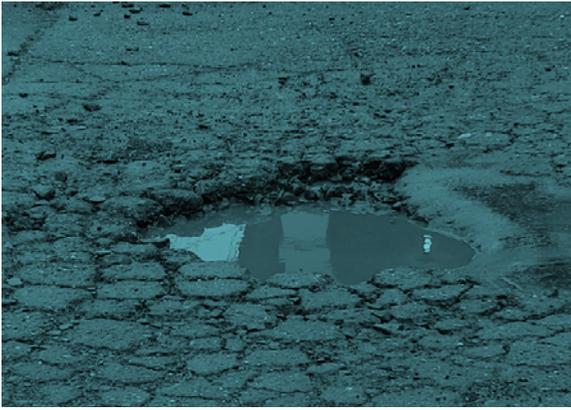
*Housing. You hear about a lot of vacant properties – oh, this is for housing, this is for low-income individuals like myself, but then we fill out a dozen of applications and we get a call that we’re not qualified.*  
Black woman, 25, Oakland, CA

*Like this environment just doesn’t have enough, you know what I’m saying? If it had enough, then maybe...better things would come from this area. But because it doesn’t have enough, it forces people to make decisions that they wouldn’t normally have to make on a daily basis.* Black man, 25, Baltimore, MD

*We just don’t have enough resources in Oakland, and I don’t know why that is. I don’t know if that’s the government, I don’t know if that’s the funding, I don’t know if that’s the misallocation of funds which people always say is the case in Oakland. They’re quick to give you a parking ticket, but as far as utilizing any of those services that they’re supposed to be giving to the people, it’s very hard to even see that delivered.*  
Asian woman, 27, Oakland, CA

*More trash around, potholes, they don’t clean up things. They just tore a gas station down for no reason. They’re not putting anything there. It’s just making it look dry and deserted.* Black woman, 35, Oakland, CA

<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Topos research with people in white, middle class communities consistently finds that it is very difficult to get them to see the ways systems and structures influence their lives.



Sometimes, our participants discuss disparities in explicitly racial terms. Oftentimes, however, people point out unfairness based on socioeconomic status. It is fairly clear, based on the overall pattern of response, that people intuitively grasp the intersectionality of race and class in the disparities they see.

*When black people started moving in all the white people started moving out, and the upkeep of the roads just went downhill. Black man, 27, MS*

*I work in the public education system, so I definitely see differences within like the school structures and stuff like that in varying communities. More affluent communities have more resources and things like that, while we might not have the same amount of structure or resources that we definitely need in the inner city. Black woman, 26, Richmond, CA*

*I have had the chance of traveling and seeing the difference... It's the rich. As soon as you get off the freeway, you're like, oh my god, I don't belong here. Is somebody going to pull me over? So you definitely can see the difference. Black woman, 25, Oakland, CA*

*Maybe local governments do have a lack of resources, but I think it's overt in the way that they still hoard those resources for other communities they feel like are more worthy and deserving. So I would say it's overt especially around class and racial lines, about whose community and who as a people is seen as worthy of investing in and being supported. LGBTQ Black man, 31, New Orleans, LA, originally from NJ*

The fact that the influence of community conditions on individual wellbeing is so clearly visible to people in these communities is an opportunity to shift thinking away from individual causes (and individual solutions) to upstream political solutions. How to effectively do that is a key question addressed later in this analysis.



## THE UNITY PERSPECTIVE – BRIDGING PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

While the Individual Responsibility Perspective relies on individual actions to explain disparities, and the Structural View points to the role of conditions and systems to explain disparities, the Unity Perspective bridges the individual and the systemic, the personal and the political.

Research participants consistently cite lack of unity as a reason disenfranchised groups are held back. Some see lack of unity as a feature of modern life; in the past, people spent more time together in community activities, in church, in political action (civil rights), etc. and were therefore more unified both in daily life and in common cause.

They see achieving “unity” as both a goal in itself (to enhance personal relationships with one another, thereby improving the community’s overall quality of life), and also a means to an end (since coming together results in the power to get things done, to enact change).

**In some ways, the Unity Perspective emphasizes the Individual Responsibility Perspective and obscures the role of systems and structures.** For example, one core source of community dissolution is violence, particularly gang and drug-related violence. As a young mixed race woman from Oakland said, “We have to all come together because mostly every day, all you see is people fucking killing each other.” This perception of communities divided by violent, often petty disputes that turn deadly is widespread among our research participants. Problematically, this widespread belief also forefronts violence by individuals while masking the root causes of violence.

Also common is a perception that this lack of unity represents a significant rupture from the past.

*Everybody that lives in this neighborhood needs to get together. Everybody is so divided. They just need to come together. Like when I was growing up, our old neighbors used to get together and everybody used to get out and clean up. They used to help out in the community. (Black woman, 43, Baltimore, MD)*

Sometimes our research participants explicitly cited a lack of unity among people of color in that people of color don’t trust each other or don’t work together for common goals.

*They [Brown and Black people] don't trust. They don't even trust their own kind, so it's going to take a lot for them to even get any kind of unity going. Black woman, 63, Oakland, CA*

*That sounds nice and everything, but it depends on the community that you're in, the area that you're in, for somebody to do something like that. This area, this community, nobody's going to do anything like that. Black woman, 43, Baltimore, MD*

*We got our own African-American people that want to turn your nose up. See, we hate ourselves. We hate ourselves. We turn our nose up at somebody, we're like crabs in a barrel. You can pull up, but I don't want you go get out. I want you guys to stay over there in that barrel. I'm going to stomp on you, I'm going to do whatever I've got to do to keep you down, because we've got egos and problems in the African-American culture. Black woman, 65, Oakland, CA*

Unity within communities is perceived as a problem because of violence, but people note that unity across communities is a problem too. Interracial tension and violence between racial and ethnic groups is a source of fear and held as an example of further social and political marginalization.

*We are safe at home, but not in the streets. We can get assaulted by black people. It's dangerous at night. Hispanic woman (Mexican immigrant), 35, Baltimore, MD*

*Blacks assault Hispanics; it happened to me twice, just walking home. Hispanic woman (Honduran immigrant), 45, Baltimore, MD*

For all the potential traps in the Unity Perspective, it may provide a catalyst for collective action. For example, when considering personal interactions (as opposed to collective action), people are more likely to say that folks help each other out. This lived experience of "unity" is a potential foundation for building unified collective action.

*Togetherness. The barter system is still around. We always work with each other. Disagreements are sometimes healthy and they can end right there. Some people publicize them as being something else, but it's nothing more. I love my community, all of them. Black man, 35, Richmond, CA*

*I think overall, to me, there's just a sense of cohesiveness here amidst all of the negative stuff that you may see, or conflict or poverty or anything. There's just a sense of togetherness, everybody still kind of working together to make what we have work for us. Black woman, 26, Richmond, CA*

*You hear on the news about 'so and so got shot,' but what you don't hear is that 99% of the time folks are looking out for their neighbors, for their neighbors' kids. I remember living in the 'hood and being broke and needing to go through stuff, and having my downstairs neighbor, who I only know as a neighbor, looking after my children, and things like that...We have unity. LGBTQ Black man, 31, New Orleans, LA, originally from NJ*

In addition, in the face of a Trump presidency, some see a greater unity among people of color now for a common cause – to speak against the marginalizing rhetoric of Donald J. Trump.

*I think it's cultivating unity among people, because people can make a change. They really can. Black woman, 63, Oakland, CA*

*Like all these races come together now because Donald Trump is president. Mixed-race woman, 16, Oakland, CA*

Finally, but most important, people of color, particularly those who are politically engaged to some extent, are highly suspicious that calls to "unify" are either shallow or are ways to place blame and responsibility on the communities themselves for the situation they face.

*True unity [is what I want]...not just that very surface level of being like we're against the same thing, but knowing that we're FOR the same thing...I care about the issues you care about even if they don't affect me. LGBTQ Black woman, 32, New Orleans, LA, originally from WI*

*I knew a lot of people growing up where I'm from who used to always complain, and they'd be like, 'Niggers is nothing but crabs in a bucket. We constantly fight each other. If we just unified and stopped all this silliness, we wouldn't be in the condition we're in.' And on the face of it, that sounds like a good thing to say, because it's pretty. If we'd just unify, then everything would be solved. Yet I don't think anybody asked the question why these crabs are in a bucket rather than the ocean. LGBTQ Black man, 25, New Orleans, LA, originally from CA*

The circular nature of "unity" – that people need unity to wield the power that wins resources, and yet resources are needed so people can unify (come together for a common cause) – means that "unity" is an insufficient strategy on its own. People in marginalized communities want unity as an end goal in itself. However, when "unity" is part of a broader civic engagement strategy, it should not be just a bumper sticker. The call to unify should come from a trusted messenger with honorable intentions, and be combined with specific action steps.

# PERSPECTIVES OF, AND RELATIONSHIP WITH, GOVERNMENT



Like Americans generally, people in marginalized communities feel distanced from government. Government is run by elites, for elites, not for the people.

Importantly, however, the impact of a distant and uncaring Government hits home especially hard in marginalized communities. Many Americans are frustrated by government inaction or by decisions they disagree with, but in marginalized communities the pain of that inaction or even hostile action, is sharp and apparent. Their relationship with government is characterized by both neglect and brutality.

*You don't expect much out of government because your history with government has not been good. When awful things happen, like the election, you think, "You know what, this is really jacked. But you know what, I know how to do oppression. I nursed on oppression, so I know how to deal with a situation where people are hostile." I think in some ways, at least in communities that I'm involved in and with, people feel like...oppression is always right around the corner.*

**Brenda V. Smith**  
Co-Director, Community and  
Economic Development Law Clinic  
Director, Project on Addressing Prison Rape

## WHO ARE "THE PEOPLE?"

In America, government is often conceptualized as *of, by and for the people*, a vision which, for some, represents freedom, equality, and democratic participation. This concept structures many efforts to involve citizens in the everyday practices of governance on both a local and national scale. But too often, these efforts are hampered by a lack of understanding that for marginalized groups, it is very unclear whether "the people" includes them.

For the Black, Native American, and Latino community members involved in this research, this vision of government brings up the sting of current and historical wounds and underscores that U.S. government was not designed to be inclusive of them. They feel strongly that in an injustice that is both historical and ongoing, their groups have not been included in definitions of "the people." For some participants, this historical connection is explicit:

*We're in 2017. Racism or Jim Crow laws - the policies they have are just modern-day racism...the 13th Amendment says that if you're classified as a criminal then you have no rights. So that was their way of putting the new slavery program together. Why do we have private prisons that are paid... Everything is meant to keep us oppressed. For instance, crack cocaine was put here by Reagan, and the only reason they started making these laws was when it started going into the rural areas. It was okay as long as the blacks were just killing each other and smoking it. Black woman, 29, Oakland, CA*

Forms of historical and ongoing trauma vary, with Native American, Latino and Black participants often articulating different issues. For Latino participants, anti-immigrant dialogue and fear of deportation results in acute fear for them and their families. For Black participants, history provides lessons of both trauma and strength. Native American participants reference centuries of broken promises by the U.S. government for their lack of trust today.

For many Native American people, histories of dispossession, forced education, and broken treaties make it very clear that their communities are not meant to be part of “the people.” According to one Native American participant, “Government and injustice go hand in hand,” in a way that is related to, but different from the injustices that other marginalized groups in the United States experience.

Nonetheless, there is a sense of belonging, too, suggesting a complicated relationship between Native American people and the United States. “This is my country, this is where I was born, and it’s where my ancestors are from, so this is my country. I don’t care about what the government calls it; it’s my country,” stated a 25-year-old Native American man from Baltimore. For this participant, despite the persistent oppression of his people, he still feels a sense of belonging to the United States.

History is not just a source of wounding, pain, and sadness but also a source of strength. Voting is one way that community members feel their voices can be heard. For African Americans, this is often articulated in terms of “history,” that because of sacrifices made during the Civil Rights Movement, Black people today need to invest in voting, a right earned through decades of sacrifice by their predecessors.

*I believe in voting. Truly. We may not have the best choices in the world, but that’s a right that you never give up, the right to vote. I grew up in the times when you couldn’t vote, so I know... We as a black community, we don’t look back in our history. A lot of these young kids don’t know our history, they don’t know the struggle, they don’t know what we as a black person went through during those times.*  
Black woman, 67, Baltimore, MD

*If a person doesn’t know where they come from, how are they going to know where they’re going? If they’ve never had behaviors modeled in front of them, how are they going to, as adults, model those same behaviors? Unfortunately for blacks and browns, they have lied in history books and schools... they’re coming from kings and queens. They don’t know that Africa was a thriving continent millions of years ago. They don’t know the history.”*  
Black woman, 65, Oakland, CA

## A LIFE OF INJUSTICE

*When I was young, I was thrown into boarding school... When I started in boarding school, you still had the idea “save the man and kill the Indian.” Because I went through reservation school, and that’s the idea. They told me I had to get my hair cut, which I never had my hair cut before. I have to admit, I cried. I thought it was going to hurt. It didn’t hurt, but I had to get my hair cut. Then I was told I had to become civilized. How do I do that? I’m alive, I’m civil. How can I become civilized when I’m alive and civil? I treat everybody the way I want to be treated. So I said, “Okay, no problem.” At six years old, you know, you don’t have a say in any aspects as to what you’re supposed to be when you’re in boarding school. They make the decisions for you. Then they told me I had to go to church every Sunday to become civilized. I’m like, okay... I never had that before. I started going to church. Then they showed me these pictures of Jesus. He had long hair. Why did I have to cut my hair? I never understood that.*

*Then they taught me all these rules, these ten commandments. One of the ones I never could understand is the basic one, thou shalt not kill. So I said, okay... that’s a concept I can understand, thou shalt not kill. Then basically after studying in the ways of the white man, sure, you can kill this guy, he’s not Christian. So what does that make me? What they said at the beginning, I’m a savage. When I was reading my history books in the 8th grade, I threw them all in the trash, and my teacher didn’t like it... there was a line in there that said when Columbus discovered America, he discovered the red man, who was basically no better than a dog. A savage. And at 14 years old, I started getting very angry as to what I was being taught. I’ve got to admit that that anger is basically what kept me alive, but then it also eats away at you, which is I guess one of the reasons why I became an alcoholic at a young age.* Native American man, 66, Baltimore, MD

## GOVERNMENT = DISCONNECTED ELITES WHO RULE US

While experiences in countries of origin and in the U.S. may vary widely for Latinos, several factors create common concerns and conditions. First and foremost are the material conditions – legal vulnerability and limited opportunities for economic mobility. Second is the common experience of racialization as Hispanics/Latinos and the assumption that they are here illegally.

*The government is a disaster right now. There are so many people with fear. When he came in people became traumatized. You used to see people out on the street walking around. And now with the fear, lots of people are traumatized by the promises to deport. Even a year ago, people used to walk around in the park wherever they wanted, and now they don't.* Hispanic woman (Guatemalan immigrant), 38, Oakland

Those with multiple marginalized identities, such as people of color who are LGBTQ, often struggle to know where they fit in society.

*The more identities you have that are marginalized within society, the harder it is to get job opportunities that pay well, to find housing that's affordable...it's what I see for the community that I have of queer people of color in New Orleans...they get pushed out cause they're queer, they get pushed out cause they're black.* LGBTQ Black man, 31, New Orleans, LA

*A lot of men who are black who have relationships with trans women are not actually ashamed of the relationship itself, but afraid of the backlash from their peers, because they are not gay men so they are not probably that connected to the LGBT community.* LGBTQ Black man, 36, New Orleans, LA

As noted by Sean Lund, Messaging Director for the Movement Advancement Project, and an expert on LGBTQ issues, "There are so many intersections of race and class and gender and economic status for trans communities. As with other communities that face intersectional issues, the cumulative effect of layers of bias and economic challenges can be devastating."

In interviews with experts, "government" typically is expressed as policies and practices – in government legislation, law enforcement, sentencing, etc. – and the disparate impact on people of color and people with low socioeconomic status. Lay people, on the other hand, focus on politicians, not policies or institutions, when they think about government.

*When I hear the word "government" I feel like politicians and stuff like that, like presidents, stuff like that. Like Donald Trump.* Hispanic woman (U.S. born), 16, Oakland, CA

*I don't talk about y'all president. I don't mention he name...No, I try not to. I don't like what he's doing, I do not think that he deserve to be where he is.* Black woman, 63, Baltimore, MD

*First off we need a mayor who cares. Mayor Libby is about money. She's not about bettering Oakland.* Black woman, 29, Oakland, CA

Further, like the general American population, people belonging to marginalized groups see government as an assembly of elites who rule us but have no other connection to us. Feeling more like subjects than citizens, many express a sense of powerlessness.

*I'm powerless over it so it's not going to happen anyway.* Black woman, 25, Oakland, CA

*The government is not for the people, they are for themselves. We (the people) are fighting against that just by existing, we are struggling to survive, to live, to make a living. The government doesn't treat all communities the same because they exist for their own benefit.* Hispanic woman (Salvadoran immigrant), 32, Baltimore, MD

This perception of ruling elite is so strong that it is even represented spatially in people's descriptions, as the government officials being high up and ordinary people being lower than them.

*Big, tall buildings, bureaucracy, the big brother looking over us. That's what I think of.* Asian woman, 27, Oakland, CA

*And I feel like if the people who, once again, have power and that people look at as so big and so powerful could come down and get on our level for once, it would be impactful, man. It would be dynamic.* Black woman, 25, Oakland, CA

## DOMINANT VIEW OF RELATIONSHIP TO GOVERNMENT – NEGLECT

The image of disconnected, lofty elites implies for marginalized communities that only top-down government has the power to change conditions for people; change can only come from the top, where real power lies.

People see one of two potential paths to change situations in disenfranchised communities: 1) politicians have to “come down” and “be with us” to be effective change agents within communities; or 2) people have to take matters into their own hands and act on their own behalf to promote change.

Many urge a more bottom-up model of government.

*I would love to see them come back into the community. Talk to the young folks...Ask the community what do you want...they need to feel the community, feel the needs. If you feel the hurt you can help the hurt.* Black woman, 77, Baltimore, MD

*I think the government should be more involved with the people. They should let the people know, besides standing on TV or doing a fundraiser, get out there with the community. Let them know that you really care.* Black woman, 63, Oakland, CA

*If everybody who is a politician or whoever represents that community is from that community that should be the first thing.* LGBTQ Black woman, 27, New Orleans, LA, originally from PA

A few have simply given up entirely on government and see change as a matter of taking matters into their own hands. One 57-year-old Native American woman from Baltimore describes change as a matter of “coming together in order to defend our turf.”

*I think they should listen more to the communities and the populations that are most affected and impacted, and not just listen to them but follow their leadership. If you say you're concerned, if you want to help black trans women, you have to meet with black trans women and you have to ask them what they need.*

**Janetta Louise Johnson**  
Executive Director, TGI Justice Project

Insofar as they see a relationship to government, most of our research participants characterized their relationship as one of neglect. In both Oakland and Baltimore, people in underserved communities say government has disinvested in them, and in some cases, is actively working to make their communities less livable.

This neglect comes in many forms, manifesting itself as persistent social problems from homelessness, drug addiction, potholes, and dilapidated schools to the absence of potential positive opportunities like education, valuable work at a living wage, and recreational activities for children and adults alike.

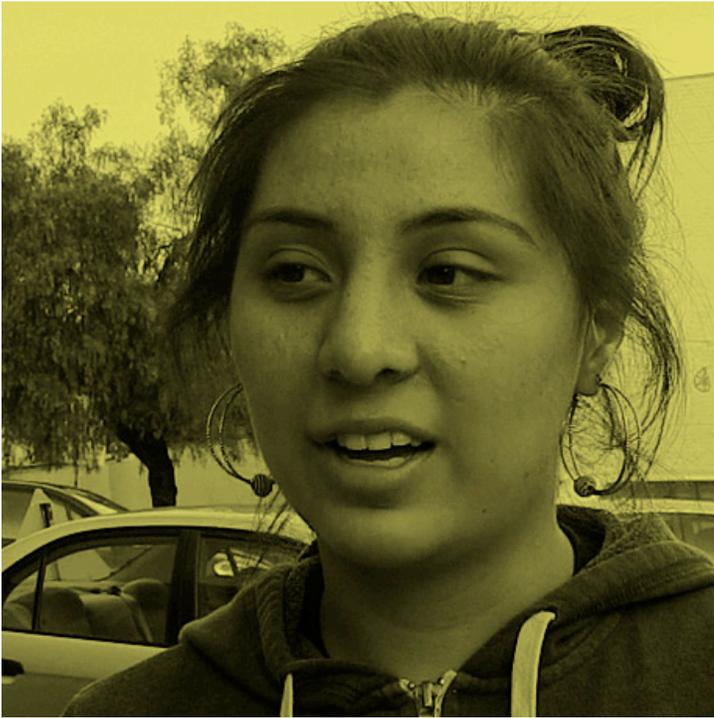
*We don't have enough homeless shelters. They have shelters where people can come and get a shower but not necessarily get a bed.* Black woman, 29, Oakland, CA

*Because Oakland doesn't have a lot of activities for kids. The little activities they do have are getting shut down, or somebody's not having enough money. It's always something when it comes to the east.* Black woman, 35, Oakland, CA

*Not where I'm at now, but the neighborhood I was in was kind of infested... I mean it's in the school playgrounds, used needles, drug dealers. They done run the kids off. They can't even play there. You're just scared of shootouts.* Native American woman, 57, Baltimore, MD

This perception of neglect transcends the traditional public-private divide, emphasizing less the difference between government and business, and instead lumping them together as disinterested powers-that-be. Participants see neglect in both their failing schools and the lack of grocery stores, in clean streets and in jobs, phenomena which gesture equally to an absence of resources and the need for further investment in their communities and particularly their children.

They firmly believe government could and should do more, which marks a distinction between communities of color and the rest of the country. A common view among many members of the general public is that government action is constrained by resources – we don't have the money to do everything we'd like to do. Marginalized communities of color, however, see the problem as a lack of the government caring enough to make them a priority, not a lack of resources.



*For me, the question of whether or not governments have enough resources is a red herring, because governments have enough resources. The United States government has the largest military in the world...on the military alone we spend more than almost every other thing we spend money on combined. And if we did a 50% reduction in military spending, there would be virtually limitless resources for all of the other things. It's about the priorities, it's about what's important. LGBTQ Black man, 31, New Orleans, LA*

For most of our research participants, this perception is formed by the belief that other neighborhoods have resources they do not have, or by what their community once had, but has no longer. It's possible for things to be different, they believe, because they see how issues are treated in other locations. This difference in investment is articulated along racial as well as class lines.

*I feel like the white communities are treated better than the blacks. If you go into the white markets, they have better food than they do in the black communities. You find your junk food as soon as you walk through the door in the black communities, but you find your vegetables and stuff like that when you go to the white communities, up front. Black woman, 63, Oakland, CA*

*All communities should be treated the same it shouldn't matter your social class...but we see the government system is always edifying and building on the needs of people who have money. We see the differences between Laurel and Piedmont and Berkeley, other communities where the people are middle-upper class or middle class, where resources are directed there. But for example we see our communities, our streets, the garbage, the lack of maintenance of buildings, the lack of maintenance of public lighting, community safety, no resources are allocated for our community, why is that? Hispanic woman (Mexican immigrant), 38, Oakland, CA [translated from Spanish]*

*The government doesn't treat everyone equally. As a mother I've sent my kids to city schools and county schools. City schools are the bottom of the bottom compared to the county schools. Even as far as the free lunches. The free lunches they offer in county school are different than the ones they offer in city schools...Even activities. Your children are exposed to more in the county schools. When my kids went to city schools there were no activities. Mixed race woman, 37, Baltimore, MD*

*The government doesn't treat everyone equally. They obviously have their preferences about things so they really only want to help the people they think will benefit them [the government], not the people who should be helped, who need that help. The government right now is supporting people like them—their kind, people who have a lot of money and they are the ones benefitting, not the people who need money like us, the 99%. Hispanic woman, 18, Oakland, CA [translated from Spanish]*



While individual quotes may refer only to race or only to class, most see the division as stemming from the intersection of both. Class is often the division that is immediately visible and immediately named, but people also recognize that richer, more well-off, middle-class neighborhoods are by and large white neighborhoods. In this sense race and class go hand-in-hand to explain the division of who gets resources, money, attention and who has their needs met. In fact, when considering economic status, several participants talk about a common cause across race.

*Nowadays it's not only the poor black people, it's just the so-called poor of any race and things like that... not even necessarily poor. You know the people, the so-called middle people or whatever, the ones who think that their lives or whatever are going to last forever, they're being brought to reality as well, so I wouldn't really put it so much as even on the poor people only. It's everybody now.* Black woman, 56, Oakland, CA

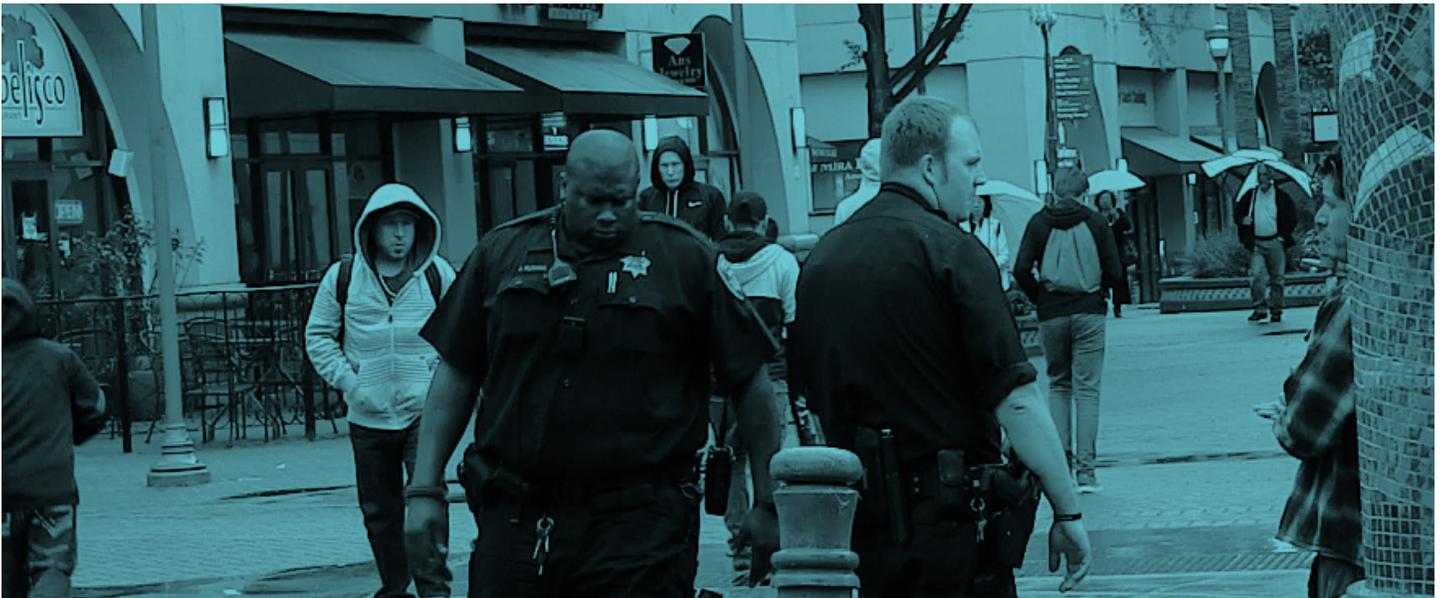
*It's not just our color; it's a lot more colors that are being treated like that too.* Black woman, 35, Oakland, CA

What little investment there is continues to be thwarted by lack of effective use of resources or, particularly in Oakland, is associated with gentrification that threatens to further marginalize those who are already struggling. Community members speak of gentrification with significant sadness and frustration, watching their communities change only to become increasingly inaccessible to them and people like them.

*I've watched Oakland change, especially East Oakland, what they want to call Deep East Oakland. I've watched how they've changed downtown, and really the concern of the local government is commercializing Oakland and the gentrification of Oakland, and they're pro that and not pro the people that have been in Oakland for many, many years. The people of Oakland are suffering.* Black woman, 65, Oakland, CA

In comparatively economically depressed Baltimore, financial investment in the community seems more appealing:

*I live in North Baltimore, a part of Baltimore called Hampden, which is an old blue-collar, which right now it's being taken over by basically white-collar workers. The neighborhood's changing. It's been, over the course of the years, over the past, I'd say 20 years, what I've seen, it's changed for the good. Everything has to change, and it's been for the good because all the old people are moving out. You get younger people moving in, and the college itself, Hopkins, is buying up a lot of the properties in the neighborhood and making changes.* Native American man, 66, Baltimore, MD



## SPOTLIGHT ON POLICE

Perhaps no other domain of social life draws these issues of governance, community participation, investment, violence, and neglect into starker relief than the question of policing.

For experts, police brutality is a significant problem in vulnerable communities. People of color are targeted for harassment, unfair searches, and even shootings because of implicit bias. Although police shootings of Black males have received the most media attention recently, experts cite the specific toll that police take on women in these communities. *“The number one most substantiated claim in most police departments when there are complaints against officers is sexual assault or harassment,”* according to Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff, Professor in Policing Equity, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and President of the Center for Policing Equity.

Community members in both Oakland and Baltimore express a wide range of perspectives about police, from a sense that police are brutal people invested in keeping marginalized groups down, to the idea that a lack of police in their neighborhoods allows crime and violence to go unchecked – in the same pattern of neglect that marks their public schools, community centers, roads, and other resources. They don’t want to feel vulnerable to violence, which paradoxically can sometimes mean having a cop on the corner to deal with drugs, but in other cases means not having a cop on the corner if your son is outside playing.

When considering “safety,” police are so squarely in the picture for people in marginalized communities, that they cannot imagine a reform agenda that does not include police.

Community members are not always immediately forthcoming about policing; some people are afraid to even discuss the police, which points to a larger trend of marginalized groups fearing surveillance. Most participants express fear and concern about the nature of policing. Although the gravity of the fear and the focus on police as a primary concern varies, most people feel that police need to be reformed. They express concerns about police officers who are excessively violent, ineffective, corrupt, and unhelpful.

*If you’re in the job for the money and not to protect the public, the people, then you need to get another profession. You need to get another profession. If it’s out there to do harm to somebody, then why are you doing it? You might as well just be a criminal on the street. Black woman, 63, Baltimore, MD*

*If a police saw a white woman standing on a corner and she had a white dress on, and she wasn’t doing nothing but probably just waiting for one of her rides to pick her up, the police wouldn’t mess with her. They wouldn’t think nothing. But if it was a black woman of color standing on the corner with a dress, they would think something, slow down, stop and look. Hispanic woman (US born), 16, Oakland, CA*

Importantly, the people we interviewed in marginalized communities tend to express that police are treating people poorly rather than assuming that the unfair treatment is based on race. They strongly criticize the police, not necessarily as being racist or biased, but because they don’t care about the people in the communities.

*There are police officers who just flat out don’t care, sadly. Hispanic man, 18, Oakland, CA*

*Many police, I don't know what they have against us. They stand there staring at you in such a way, they make you feel so bad. They look at you like, excuse the word, like a piece of garbage.* Hispanic man (Guatemalan immigrant), 52, Oakland, CA (translated from Spanish)

At the same time, violence is a constant, pervasive concern for participants, so some see a lack of effective policing as just one more sign of the structural neglect their communities face. Much like the absence of good schools or access to grocery stores, police responsiveness and presence when it is needed are lacking in comparison to wealthy neighborhoods.

*In my experience, when I have called the police, the response times are a lot longer. Had that been maybe in the Oakland hills or in the Berkeley hills or in El Cerrito or Albany where the resources are an all-time high, then that response time probably would have been minutes, maybe even less. We just don't have enough resources in Oakland, and I don't know why that is.* Asian woman, 27, Oakland, CA

*There are a lot of injustices especially for the Hispanic community. How the police treats us here, like we are not priorities, if we were people of a different color it would be different...When there are car crashes here they are not a priority for the police so really we should stop paying them because they don't want to do their job.* Hispanic woman, 27, Oakland, CA [paraphrased from Spanish]

For these community members, while they often recognize problems with over-policing, they also see the potential benefit to their communities from having a more effective, even larger, police presence, perhaps as a sign of investment, safety, and stability that they perceive occurs in other neighborhoods.

*I personally wouldn't mind having more police because they'll be looking around, checking to make sure nothing's going on and that would lead to less crime, because criminals would know there was a higher chance of getting caught.* Hispanic man, 18, Oakland, CA

*They need a lot more police action around here... Just to stop a lot of drug traffic.* Black woman, 43, Baltimore, MD

While it would seem counterintuitive that people with significant criticisms of police would want more of them, it actually speaks to 1) the level of violence that people feel surrounded by in their environments and 2) the power of the "safety" frame in limiting the options people see. There are two conflicting models at play. One cognitive

model is that oppressive police are the problem. And that model conflicts with the second cognitive model, which suggests that crime and violence are the bigger problem and the *negligent* police aren't doing enough to solve it.

Latinos have a particularly potent set of responses to policing because of the persistent fear of deportation. Latinos, undocumented or not, are often assumed to be non-citizens, contributing to an overall ethos of criminalization and illegality shaped by a form of racial profiling viewed as unique to Latinos.

*The police will stop any Latino minding their business but they won't bother a black person or a white person just doing nothing. The police in Baltimore do and don't cooperate with ICE [Immigrations and Customs Enforcement].* Hispanic woman (Guatemalan immigrant), 43, Baltimore, MD

Another participant suggests that even minor incidents, like traffic issues, pose a threat:

*"The first thing police do when they come on the scene for a car accident is ask for papers because they are looking to deport."* Hispanic man (Salvadoran immigrant), 40, Baltimore, MD

With the election of Trump, who is committed to increased immigration enforcement particularly targeting Latinos, many are more fearful. It is common to hear Latinos say that they and their families have decreased unnecessary trips out of the home and minimized contact with government officials in the wake of his election.

What is essential, according to most, is to improve the quality of police, not just the quantity. Given the overwhelming danger which often permeates their lives, they want police officers with a deep understanding of and focus on community safety, not the corrupt, violent, and unhelpful officers they too often encounter. Most interviewees express an explicit desire for competent policing and see effective policing as a force of good that will reduce the most common types of crime. Competent policing is seen as both a practical need and a signal that a community is equal – just as worthy as others of protection and attention.

Just as effective, caring, political leaders should be connected to their community, good police officers are often defined as being from the community or at least rooted in the community and deeply comfortable with it. Calls for community policing are common.

*Are you from here, Mr. Police Officer? Yeah, you're doing a damn good job. Are you from here? If you're not, would you get out and walk the area for about ten minutes, or are you scared somebody might whoop out on you? Are you judging, once again judging a book by its cover? Black woman, 25, Oakland, CA*

*I think it should be mandatory that the police that are here should be somewhat from or embedded, invested in the community that they're serving in some type of way. Black man, 35, Richmond, CA*

*We need the right policing in these neighborhoods (inner city neighborhoods), not more, but the right policing. The other day I was at my friend's house (in the suburbs) and her son and her son's friend was in the alley playing. The police pulled over, got out of his car and started playing basketball. That's how you police a community, you reach out. And she said he always does that. That's how you get to the people you make them feel comfortable with you and when they see something they are not going to turn their head, they are going to feel comfortable with going to you. Mixed race woman, 37, Baltimore, MD*

For these community members, being of the community and also being a smart policeman offers a kind of understanding that would promote discretion. Rather than the over-response and excessive violence that shapes many police encounters, they would have something different, more attuned to neighborhood rhythms.

*Not everybody that's on the corner is doing wrong ... I'm not saying that some of them are not. You have to be able to distinguish – who's who, and who's doing what. And just like I can figure it out, you're a trained policeman, you should be able to know who's doing what and when and where. Black woman, 67, Baltimore, MD*

*We've got folks that are saying, "We need community-based solutions to violence," and then someone is murdered in the community and folks are like, "I really hope that person is locked up and charged with a trumped-up charge and hate crime kind of thing," even though we know that is not going to...like we know that that's not going to prevent the next person from being murdered or having a violent encounter...*

**Wesley Ware, Co-Director, BREAKout**

Importantly, this issue is confined mostly, though not entirely, to "safety" – to responding to crime that has already occurred or limiting the ability for people to conduct illegal business. **What is missing in the thinking of most community members is a policy agenda for increased safety that doesn't include police.** They can imagine more effective police, better trained police, greater or fewer numbers of police, but they do not readily imagine a strategy that shifts resources from policing to other investments that prevent crime and strengthen neighborhoods.

*If we're in the black community there's going to be ten officers coming after him, and you're just like, did you really need that many officers for this one person? Like I don't think you really need all those people. But it's the undertone, where it's like, well, obviously, it's because I'm black. There's no other reason. What else would be the reason? ...I just wish they would just take out the bad cops, put in more of the good ones, and things would start to change a little more. Black woman, 26, IL*

Prevention measures that would reduce the incidence of crime are rarely part of people's consideration when they are focused on improving policing. However, separate from conversations about policing, it is common for participants to focus on children, suggesting that if the kids "had something to do" they'd be less likely to get involved in gangs. Others note that there should be more jobs, other ways to get by than relying on informal street-based economies. Shifting from a "safety" frame to a "neglect/invest" frame opens opportunity for this kind of participatory budgeting of resources.

In summary, overall, communities highlighted in this work have an ambivalent relationship to the police. On the one hand, Black Lives Matter and the spotlight on mass incarceration and police brutality have emphasized the massive level of power that police have to shape communities for the worse. On the other hand, neglectful policing signifies for some community members the same issues that structure other institutions in their neighborhoods. *Better* policing that mirrors a more functional and healthy relationship with governance overall is readily visible, but for the long-term, advocates will have to work to have people see a reform agenda that doesn't involve police.



# IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

## URGENT DESIRE FOR ONGOING ACTION

One clear implication of this research is people's strong and urgent desire for change. Their concerns (safety, lack of services, poverty, etc.) are so pressing and so present that they seem ready to engage with ideas that would get to the root of the problem.

Still, this research cautions that people of color in marginalized communities are particularly likely to default to thinking of *politicians* as change agents, and not necessarily the *policies* as *vehicles of change*, or do not think that people like themselves can be agents of change. Even those who are enthusiastic about organizing for change typically focus on organizing to get the right people in office, and not organizing to advocate for the policies and investments that will make a lasting social impact.

*We need a leader who will get people together, and if we start good things are going to happen. But we don't have a leader, well we have leaders but not good leaders and that's the problem... We need to change and we need to find a good leader.* Hispanic woman (Ecuadorian immigrant), 46, Oakland, CA [paraphrased from Spanish]

*It's going to take someone like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X - a revolution.* Black woman, 29, Oakland, CA

People are likely to default to the idea that government and politicians have the power to change conditions for people, and that change will come from the top – those who have power and control. Since they focus on politicians as change agents, as opposed to policy, it is natural for them (like most of the general American public) to think of voting as their only recourse. Organizing only during the election cycle on behalf of candidates furthers the notion that elected leaders bring change, not the people in communities themselves. **Ongoing, year-round organizing is needed for lasting change. People on the ground are not only receptive to a year-round strategy, they want to move in this direction.**

## CONNECTING THE DOTS – TANGIBLE SOLUTION TO POLICY GOAL TO BROADER SYSTEM

Even more than most Americans, people of color in marginalized communities need clear causal chains to establish the role of policy, to understand that solutions exist and in many cases, live beyond the political figureheads we've come to associate with government.

*I personally feel like the most important thing that we need to [do is advance]...the concept of invest/divest, of divesting from these failed systems and mass incarceration and criminalization and the reinvestment of those resources into our communities in particular ways, in education, healthcare, transit, and economic opportunity, is the most important thing to transforming people's view of government...*

**Jennifer Epps-Addison, Network President  
and Co-Executive Director,  
Center for Popular Democracy**

People in underserved communities see the results of government inaction and often describe it as the government trying to “keep us down.” If policy solutions are more visible as the intermediary mechanism between the government and community conditions, people are likely to become more understanding of, and committed to, the need for ongoing social change.

For example, laypeople talked about the government as intentionally greedy, corrupt, and wanting to “keep people down” while experts talked about policies that disproportionately and unfairly create more wealth for the wealthy based on the corrupting influence of money in politics. People talked about the government introducing crack cocaine into neighborhoods to “keep people down” while the experts talked about the unfair way that sentencing in the criminal justice system disproportionately affected vulnerable communities by harsher punishments for crack versus powdered cocaine.

While the content is not so different, the way that people attribute intentionality to the government trying to “keep people down” is important because it obscures the specific policy mechanisms by which disparities are created or perpetuated. **In so doing, it tends to reinforce people's feeling of powerlessness and the inability to conceptualize making a difference against a powerful amorphous government intent on oppressing people in their communities.**

For underserved communities, it is important to orient the conversation around specific solutions, and then take them along a learning journey over time. They already know the problems they face; it's the solutions that need visibility. Orienting the conversation around specific solutions that improve their lives, and then connecting to the broader policy that drives those solutions, and eventually to the broader systems at play, is more likely to engage and inspire action in the short, medium and long term.

## EMPOWER WITH EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL CITIZEN ACTION

It is clear from this research that some community members are so pessimistic and discouraged by the weight of the neglectful and oppressive systems that affect their lives that they have given up on any notion of change. A sense of defeat and apathy prevents them from engaging further in seeking out change for fear that their already limited time would be wasted.

One of the most powerful tools organizers have to mobilize action is their own work, their own stories of success. People rarely hear about stories of successful collective action; they only hear stories about problems. Consistently, when interviewers shared stories of success with research participants, their interest, excitement, and belief that change is possible, jumped. Many times respondents said hearing the stories made them want to do more, as one respondent said, "I need to be part of the catalyst. I can't wait for other people to start things...and that's exciting but scary." Many others said they felt compelled and encouraged to go out and do more, to be more involved in their communities.

*After you finish praying on your knees for that loaf of bread, you're going to have to go out there and get it, else you're going to be starving to death right there on your knees. Black woman, 56, Oakland, CA*

*I forget how many acres, but they have a farm over in North Richmond, and when people say North Richmond, you think of the worst of the worst and the baddest of the bad. They have such a bad thing about them, but they have a whole farm that's thriving and growing local food. Black man, 35, Richmond, CA*

*Over on the South Side of Chicago, which is kind of known for being a very impoverished area - buildings run down, gang violence, drugs - the community actually got together and they built a Whole Foods over on the South Side. I was like, that's crazy. And there's a Starbucks and a Chipotle. Like, what? That's unheard of to ever see that, but the fact that it's actually done just shows that people want this and they need to see this, because it shows them better. Black man, 27, IL*

The particulars of the story are less relevant than the idea that organizing and citizen action makes a difference.

**Traditionally disenfranchised people are able to listen to these stories and draw on their own sense of resilience, to be empowered to act on their own behalf and not wait for the government to get around to noticing them.**

*There's an enormous alienation gap and mistrust gap that exists between government entities and low-income communities, and low-income communities of color and marginalized communities in this country, and I do think that gap needs to be addressed and some bridges need to be built. At the very local level there are activists who are able to overcome all of that distrust and all that alienation and all that suspicion and work at the local margins of making some change...*

*It's very hard to get people to engage. I think part of that is frustration and alienation and part of it is people not seeing what the possible impact would be. But I think part of it is also that just being a resident of a marginalized community or low-income community is incredibly stressful and difficult and there are enormous obstacles to involvement. Every day that someone spends on an organizing campaign is a day that they have to find childcare or miss a day of work or try to piece together lives that are incredibly complicated and destabilized anyway - to engage in political activities that feel kind of far removed...*

**Robin Steinberg**  
**Founder and Executive Director,**  
**The Bronx Defenders**

## MODEL COLLECTIVE ACTION & UNIFY – BEYOND VOTING

Even when supportive of citizen action, people of color in marginalized communities, like the general public overall, are often uncertain on how to go about the process of change. Even the most basic steps in civic action are outside most people's experience.

When we noted this dynamic in early 2016, we found that exposing people to the idea of taking one or two steps beyond voting, with a simple toolkit of ideas, was enough to catalyze engagement. The proof of this strategy was the explosive success of Indivisible's handbook just after the 2016 Presidential election.

The idea of "taking one or two steps beyond voting" is effective in getting people to see voting as a necessary given, but communicators should also focus on some active way of engaging with the community year-round. People get excited by the concept and practice of grassroots organizing, and are invested in the idea that grassroots organizing and communities coming together to make change can/should happen and can/should exist all the time. A particularly important benefit for people of color in marginalized communities is that community action brings people closer and promotes unity.

Note though that the specific steps of collective action should be the focus, and unity is only one benefit. Calls for unity in isolation can sound hollow, or can inadvertently seem to be an admonishment to the community, as one research participant noted in reacting to a general call to unify:

*There's no action steps with that...it puts the blame on the people in the community, not actually on the government and the people that took the resources away from the community to begin with...To see the steps of how things come to be...this is how you get change in your community, because it is overwhelming. LGBTQ Black woman, 27, New Orleans, LA, originally from PA*

Leveraging collective power resonates for many folks because they feel it allows people to come together to demand more. It allows people to "perform" collectivity and view the unity of the community as an investment in the power of their community. The idea of "taking action beyond voting" is quite salient and shows others, especially the government and elected representatives, that a community is unified and invested in positive change. For instance, one participant noted, "When they see people taking a vested interest in their community, not just their house, their yard, their space, we are all in this together and once we recognize that, we can come together and do things."

## THE POWER OF POTENTIAL

Finally, as noted throughout this analysis, people in marginalized groups have complicated relationships with their community, whether it is a geographic community or a community of identity. Investing time and energy in transformation is a tough call to action. A motivating value that research participants shared regarding why investment in their community is worthwhile is – Potential.

Some participants see tremendous potential in their communities, and want others to recognize that potential as well. This idea is powerfully exemplified by a husband and wife who described their neighborhood in Baltimore as an incredible, untapped source of talent, from musical to intellectual.

*It's not the typical projects. Like our community have different type of mindsets even though we're around the same hood people. Some people in our community like rock music, some people in our community plays guitar. Like I heard someone play the piano the other day, the keyboard. There's a lot of talented people in our neighborhood, we just don't really have a chance. So I would want people to know there's talent here, there's love here, there's power here. It's just we don't have a chance to break out to show someone, or that we're scared because of where we're from...This place has a lot of potential. Everybody wants to tap into their potential so they can grow or be noticed or something like that, but this place has a lot of potential. If people are willing to invest in this environment, they would see the potential themselves. Black woman and man, 26 and 25 respectively, Baltimore, MD*

**The power of "potential" can provide the hope and aspiration people need to be inspired to keep working and keep the faith, that change is possible.**



# PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER



This strategy will go a long way toward engaging and empowering people in historically disenfranchised communities throughout the country. To test and demonstrate the impact of this strategy, we conducted a survey designed to understand the effects of various messages on key indicators of engagement, attitudes toward government, policy support and so forth. The findings confirm what our qualitative research unearthed – that the recommended strategy is effective in moving people to action.

The survey included a control group that received no message, and three test groups where people were exposed to one of three fictional news stories. All three news stories put race at the forefront and were grounded in the experience of marginalized groups.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION STORY

***This fictional news story incorporates all the recommended elements. It is oriented around solutions, features a story of successful collective action, incorporates the values of potential and unity, and makes Beyond Voting an explicit call to action. It is clearly about a marginalized community of color, with local people speaking as community messengers.***

*It was once a vacant lot where gangs hung out – now it’s a bustling community center, alive with after school activities, community meetings, counseling, adult education courses and much more. “This neighborhood has potential. The people here have heart and good ideas; we just need a fair shot,” says Keena Williams, one of a dozen leaders who unified this predominantly black and Hispanic community to win public funding for the Center.*

*“Voting is important but it takes more than that to get things done,” added Lavon Booth, another neighbor working for improvements. “We support each other, like driving an older neighbor to the grocery store 5 miles away because we don’t have one in the neighborhood. This time, we used our unity for community change. We came together, wrote letters, had meetings, and went to the Capitol. We reminded leaders that every community – urban, suburban, rural, white, black, or brown – needs certain things to thrive, like great schools, safe streets, health care, and parks. For too long, elected officials ignored our community, cut funding, and everything decayed. Now, this is the start of bringing things back.”*

## DISPARITIES STORY

***This fictional news story incorporates many of the recommended elements, but includes a specific focus on (geographical) disparities in resources. It is oriented around collective action for a solution (though a “goal” not yet a “success” as in the previous message), incorporates the values of potential and unity, and makes Beyond Voting an explicit call to action. It is clearly about a marginalized community of color, with local people speaking as community messengers.***

*Just five miles, and yet a world apart. One side of town has a new high school while on the other side of town the high school is more than 50 years old, with all the maintenance problems you’d expect. One side of town has a popular park, while the other has vacant lots. It’s a pattern that repeats itself across the nation.*

*“This neighborhood has potential. The people here have heart and good ideas; we just need a fair shot,” says Keena Williams, one of a dozen leaders who is working to unify this predominantly black and Hispanic community to win public funding for a community center.*

*“Voting is important but it takes more than that to get things done,” added Lavon Booth, another neighbor working for improvements. “We support each other, like driving an older neighbor to the grocery store 5 miles away because we don’t have one in the neighborhood. This time, we are using our unity for community change. We are coming together, writing letters, holding meetings, and going to the Capitol. We are reminding leaders that every community – urban, suburban, rural, white, black, or brown – needs certain things to thrive, like great schools, safe streets, health care, and parks. For too long, elected officials have been ignoring our community, funding everywhere else but here, and everything decayed. Now, we are working to bring things back.”*

## STRUCTURAL RACISM DEFINED STORY

***This fictional news story incorporates some of the same language, but is really designed to be a simple explanation of structural racism, a communications approach that has been getting attention recently.***

*“People sometimes don’t know what ‘structural racism’ is all about,” says Keena Williams, one of a dozen leaders who is working to unify her predominantly black and Hispanic community to win public funding for a community center. “Think of it this way: If over time we invest public money in one community but not another, so one of them has great schools, safe streets, health care and parks, and the other does not, which one is going to thrive? Or, if we have harsher penalties for stealing from a grocery store than for white collar crime, who is going to end up filling our prisons?”*

*These are the kinds of policy and investment choices that are made in the open; none of this is a secret. It’s not about whether a single person has racist views or makes these decisions consciously. It’s about the impact of policy choices over time, the history of where investments have happened and not happened, which results in some communities thriving and others struggling – that’s structural racism. Not personal, but built into our lives in structural ways over time that have a major impact.*

*“This neighborhood has potential. The people here have heart and good ideas; we just need a fair shot. That’s why we’re working together to overcome the impact of structural racism and demand more for our community,” says Lavon Booth, another neighbor working for improvements.*

On one level all three experimental texts were based on the same basic formula. All three put race at the forefront and featured empowered people of color in marginalized communities taking positive action. The survey set out to determine whether texts organized along these lines can have beneficial effects relative to the "control" group.

In other ways, the texts differed in emphasis: One story was oriented toward a successful, very tangible solution, and made sure to link to a more significant policy problem (a consistent lack of resources). Another story balanced the policy problem and tangible solution, and defined the significant policy problem as unequal resources. The final story focused on educating people about the systemic problem, systemic inequities, and put less emphasis on specific solutions. The aim here was to compare which kinds of emphasis are most and least helpful in leading to understanding and action.

Keep in mind the goal for this communications effort is to get people to engage in collective action for social change, specifically making the public sector work for marginalized communities. Once people are engaged, once they get past the obstacles that prevent their activism, they can embark on a learning journey on which they can become even more "woke."

Can we get them started on the journey in a way that supports deeper systemic learning and a more engaged social movement? (In other words, a strategy that doesn't stunt their ability to learn and act in deeper ways as they engage over time?)

The survey was conducted amongst people of color who earn less than \$50,000 annually, and also amongst white people (to understand the effects of the recommended strategy if it is used as a broad-based communications vehicle).

Before reviewing the findings from our primary audience of interest, it is worth noting the effects of the experiment among white Americans. Strategists often conclude that it is wise to mask race when appealing to white Americans, but these survey findings suggest something very different. Among white people, all three message approaches have beneficial outcomes. Compared to a control group that received no message, all three messages increase the percentage of whites who believe government should do more to solve problems; to increase investment in schools, bridges and other needs; and to continue making changes to give blacks equal opportunities with whites. (We caution that the research with white Americans was done to look for potential red flags. It was not designed to speak to them. However, since the preliminary findings show potential, more should be done to understand the ability of this strategy to address racism.)

Collective Action	Disparities	Structural Racism
Empowered POC	Empowered POC	Empowered POC
Solution	Problem + Solution	Systemic Problem
Success	Goal	Education
About Lack of Resources	About Unequal Resources	About Systemic Inequities
Specific Call to Action	Specific Call to Action	Soft Call to Action

Turning to our primary audience of interest, marginalized people of color, the recommended message strategy, as illustrated in the Collective Action story, is the strongest approach because it overcomes this audience's principal objection – that change is hard and unlikely.

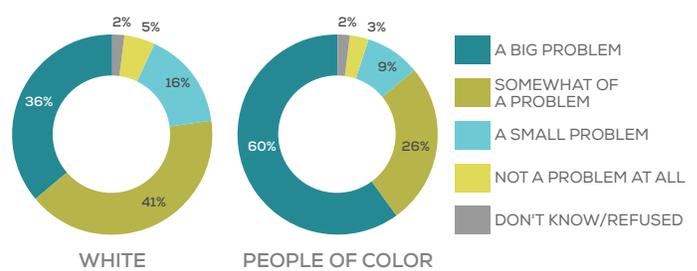
On many measures related to concerns about disparities, people of color already have high levels of awareness and concern, particularly compared to white audiences.

As Chart 1 indicates, large proportions of lower income people of color already believe racism is a problem today (60% of lower income people of color say racism is “a big problem” compared with 36% of white people, a +24 point difference) and three-quarters believe “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal opportunities with whites” (74% of lower income people of color versus 42% of white people, a 32 percentage point difference).

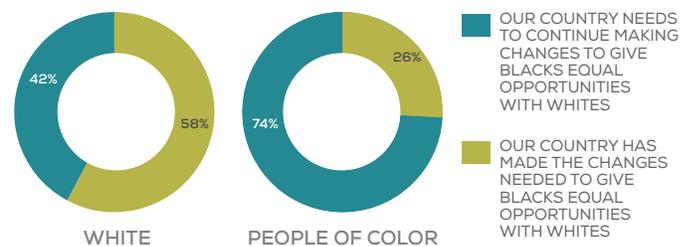
And when it comes to poverty, large proportions of lower income people of color already recognize the role of circumstances in leading to poverty (72%, 55% respectively, a 17 percentage point difference), and they want government to do more to solve problem (75%, 54% respectively, a 21 percentage point difference as Chart 4 indicates).

Messages that feature these ideas, the continuing challenge of racism, disparities, explaining the importance of conditions leading to disparities and making the case that government should do more, are unlikely to do much to shift opinion among lower income people of color, because they are already aware of these challenges and believe in the importance of government to address these conditions, meaning it is difficult to lift already high perceptions.

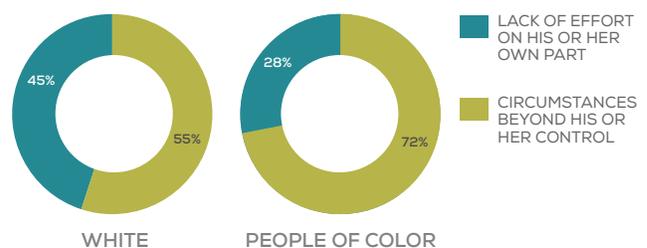
## 1 HOW BIG OF A PROBLEM IS RACISM IN OUR SOCIETY TODAY?



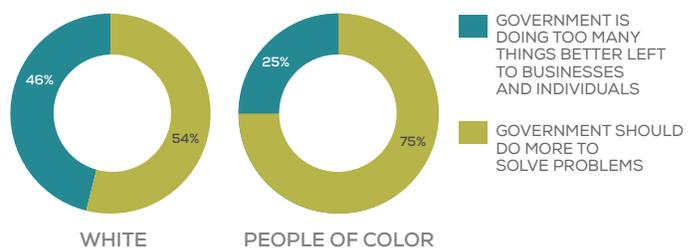
## 2 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES



## 3 MORE TO BLAME IF A PERSON IS POOR

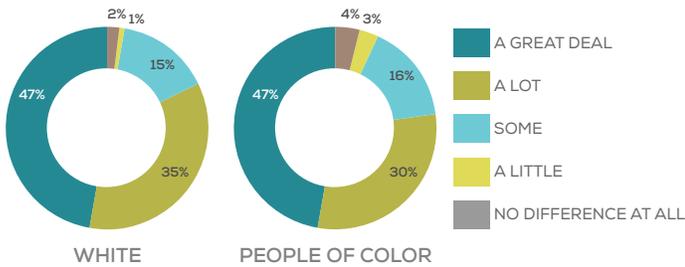


## 4 GOVERNMENT SHOULD



5

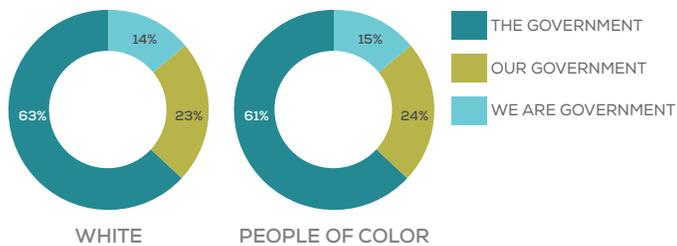
HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE CAN PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER MAKE IN SOLVING PROBLEMS?



However, there are several key drivers of collective action where lower income people of color have the same, relatively weak response as whites. When it comes to the difference people working together can make in solving problems, just 47% say “a great deal” and white respondents are more likely to say “a lot” (35% and 30% respectively).

6

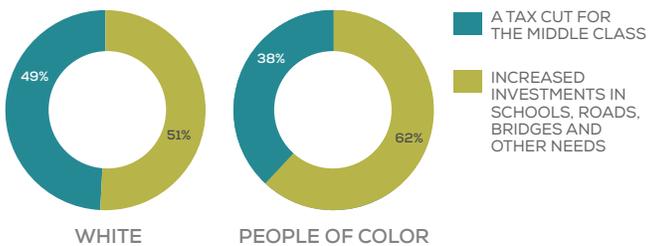
RELATIONSHIP TO GOVERNMENT



In characterizing their relationship to government, responses are nearly identical, with more than 6 in 10 survey respondents characterizing government as “THE government” as opposed to the more active, ownership suggested by “OUR government” or “WE are government.”

7

INVESTMENTS OR TAX CUT?



Finally, lower income people of color are only slightly more likely than white respondents to choose increased investments over a middle class tax cut (62% of people of color say “invest” compared with 51% of whites, an 11 percentage point difference).

These are the measures with the most opportunity for communications to influence attitudes and action.

The recommended strategy, Collective Action, with its story of successful action (the first scenario), makes strong gains in inspiring lower income people of color that change can happen. Compared with the control group, people exposed to this message were 18 percentage points more likely to say people working together can make a great deal of difference and they were 7 percentage points more likely to support increased investments over tax cuts.

In contrast, the Disparities message doesn't shift opinion – for or against – any of the key indicator questions.

The Structural Racism message, problematically, shows only one significant shift. It further distances people of color from government, resulting in a 13 percentage point increase in those who characterize government as “THE government.”

The survey research confirms that communications featuring empowered people of color from marginalized communities, sharing solution-oriented stories of collective action to address inequities, are effective in engaging people into social action. This approach encourages people by: 1) showing marginalized people being successful; 2) modeling steps people can take to enact change; and 3) demonstrating the tangible benefits that can improve their lives, before connecting to the policies and broader systems in play.

Finally, this strategy is consistent with a learning journey that supports fuller understanding of the systemic and structural challenges as people become more deeply engaged.

I'd say one of the biggest things more so than anything else is making folks, just regular, everyday folks, realize the power that they have to make change... When people see those kind of initial changes and responses to their demands [they think], “Whoa, wait a minute, we can really change some things if we unify and band together.” So it's not like it's rocket science, it's just having people realize the collective power that they have and what to do with it.

**Norris Henderson**

**Executive Director, Voice of the Experienced  
(VOTE)**



# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This research finds that many common assumptions strategists may make when it comes to effectively communicating with marginalized communities are wrong.

People do not need to be convinced there are serious problems to solve. They see serious problems first-hand, every day.

People do not need to be convinced that there is an important role for government. They already believe government should do more, and they also believe government is not making marginalized people a priority.

People do not need to hear they should use their voice. They need to believe, truly believe, their voice will make a difference.

Believing in their power to affect change, is the key to engagement.

Communicators have a potent and underutilized tool – their own stories. Community organizers are leading successful change all around the nation. But too few people are hearing about those stories of success. People of color from underserved communities, telling the story of their success, their vision for positive change, the potential they see, are formidable and inspiring messengers. Modeling the success of communities of people taking steps beyond voting shows what successful civic action looks like. Bringing those stories together into a bigger vision for systemic change, reveals a path forward that seems achievable.

# ABOUT TOPOS

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding.

Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information: [www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com)

Or email us: [team@topospartnership.com](mailto:team@topospartnership.com)

# METHODOLOGY

The goal of a Topos project is to explore how people think about an issue, in order to find the starting point for successful communication and engagement, leading to shifts in perspective and more constructive understandings that present a clear call to action.

We do this by identifying the existing cultural common sense – the hidden patterns of understanding that undermine or encourage public engagement – and adapting or altering these in ways that provide new possibilities for building support.

Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals– a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist– the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, to give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and to suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

This research project builds upon extensive previous research conducted by the Topos Partnership investigating people’s attitudes about government, democracy, public revenue, the voting process, and collective action.

The research for this project consisted of consultations with an advisory group, in-depth interviews with experts and advocates, small-group discussions with low-income people of color, ethnographic research in Baltimore, MD and Oakland, CA, and in-depth interviews with LGBTQ people of color in New Orleans, LA.

## EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In addition to consultation and guidance from the advisory group, we interviewed the following experts and advocates in March 2017. Their insights and expertise in this field served to refine directions and questions for the research project.

Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff  
Professor in Policing Equity,  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
President, Center for Policing Equity

Jennifer Epps-Addison  
Network President and Co-Executive Director,  
Center for Popular Democracy

Alia Harvey-Quinn  
Director of FORCE, a project of the  
PICO National Network

Norris Henderson  
Executive Director, Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)

Janetta Louise Johnson  
Executive Director, TGI Justice Project

Sean Lund  
Messaging Director for the  
Movement Advancement Project

Andrea J. Ritchie  
organizer, attorney, author, Researcher-in-Residence  
on Race, Gender, Sexuality and Criminalization at the  
Social Justice Institute of the Barnard Center for  
Research on Women

Brenda V. Smith  
Co-Director, Community and  
Economic Development Law Clinic  
Director, Project on Addressing Prison Rape

Robin Steinberg  
Founder and Executive Director, The Bronx Defenders

Wesley Ware  
Co-Director, BREAKout

## ETHNOGRAPHY

The strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people's experience of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography – engagement with people on their own terms in their own environment, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. In practice, the ethnographic research in this project consisted of engaging people in impromptu conversations. Interactions took at least 4 but no more than 40 minutes, depending on how much time and willingness a given subject had to delve into the topics. The conversations were typically one-on-one, but also included exchanges with small groups of 2, 3, and 4 people.

In April and May of 2017, four Topos ethnographers (two African-American women, one African-American man, and one Latina) conducted research with 126 subjects in low-income neighborhoods in Baltimore, northern California (Oakland and Richmond) as well as New Orleans. Conversations took place in English or Spanish with subjects who identified as African American (63), Hispanic (46), Native American (7), North African (3) or Mixed / Other (7). Since the emphasis for this project is women of color, most interviews were conducted with women (90). In addition, our interviews included at least 13 LGBTQ people of color (the actual number is likely higher as not all respondents indicated their orientation). Hispanic participants represented various countries of origin including: Mexico (17), El Salvador (10), Guatemala (6), Honduras (5), Bolivia (1), Ecuador (1). Most conversations were audio or video recorded, though in certain cases (e.g. especially with undocumented Hispanics or other respondents who were uncomfortable with recording) researchers relied on note taking.

Our highly experienced team of ethnographers conducted all interviews: Mariama Eversley, Diane Garbow, Charles Lord, and Michelle Munyikwa. Their bios are available at [topospartnership.com](http://topospartnership.com)

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In addition, Topos researchers conducted 10 small group phone sessions with a diverse group of 30 subjects in April and May of 2017. Each small group discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes.

This method enables researchers to test the clarity, stickiness and repeatability of key ideas in a setting where they can probe subjects' responses and gauge how ideas survive or change in the ebb and flow of a group conversation. During the group conversations, respondents were exposed to a number of communications approaches. Some of the conversations were exploratory in nature, while some were in response to specific test language.

These 30 subjects were low socio-economic status, and included 6 White women, 15 women of color and 9 men of color.

## ONLINE SURVEY

To complement the ground level analysis and methods, Topos also conducted an experimental online survey to gain insights into message dynamics at work. This helped us confirm and quantify patterns that we were seeing based on other methods.

A survey of 1,293 American adults was conducted online, July, 2017. Half of the participants represented our main audience of interest (lower income people of color) and half the participants were representative of the white population. The survey incorporated a number of experiments designed to understand the impacts of various communications strategies. Respondents were roughly equally divided into groups, which included a control group and three experimental groups that determined which message respondents received.

After hearing the message, presented as a "news article," respondents answered an open-end recall question about the message, as well as a number of indicator questions that were also asked of the control group.

## WHY OAKLAND, BALTIMORE AND NEW ORLEANS?

Ethnographic research elicits particularly authentic responses because ethnographers go to where people live, work, and play, capturing people who may not normally participate in research, and interacting with them in the course of their daily lives.

With input from our Advisory Group, we selected Baltimore, MD and Northern CA (Oakland and Richmond) as our primary locations. Though both are inclusive of marginalized communities, each location represents different cultural and economic experiences.

Northern California is racially and ethnically diverse, struggles with crime and gentrification, and has a history of activism. Oakland is considered one of the most diverse cities in the nation. According to 2016 population data, 28% of its residents are Black, 25% are Hispanic, 16% are Asian and 13% are mixed race or some other race. Its proximity to San Francisco makes gentrification one of its most pressing economic challenges. Finally, as the birthplace of the Black Panther Movement, it has a rich history of political and civil rights activism.

Baltimore, MD is racially segregated by neighborhood, has struggled with white flight and whole blocks of abandoned properties, and has experienced long-standing community tensions with police. Baltimore is a majority Black city; 63% of city residents are African American. According to census data and our ethnographers' observations, the speed with which neighborhoods change racial compositions is striking. Along with the racial composition of neighborhoods changing, the overall circumstances of the neighborhoods shift from boarded up shops to manicured lawns. Policing is a particular challenge in Baltimore. It incarcerates a greater percentage of its population than most U.S. cities, pays millions of dollars to victims of police injustice, and has recently been in the national spotlight due to the brutal death of Freddie Gray.

Finally, while we included LGBTQ respondents in all research steps, we wanted to include additional voices to better represent this community. Trans people, in particular, often feel very vulnerable and are reluctant to participate in this kind of research, particularly on camera. Fortunately, Topos Researcher Mariama Eversley is a known advocate and ally in New Orleans' LGBTQ community, and was able to win the trust of several people who agreed to be interviewed. New Orleans draws LGBTQ people from around the nation, so we were able to include a range of voices in these interviews.

It is our hope that the very different cultures and histories of these cities, yet with commonalities in response, will allow advocates in other parts of the U.S. to see something of their own experience in the analysis.