The TALK!
"Your voices, your choices"

A white paper by:

ASU Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law

Arizona State University

Academy for Justice

Acknowledgements

This white paper is a production of the **Academy for Justice** at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University. The catalyst for this white paper was a youth event held on February 2, 2023 at the Escalante Multi-Generational Center in Tempe, Arizona where nearly 70 teens gathered to have candid conversations with law enforcement. The white paper is intended to provide proposed solutions and next steps in addressing social media, mental health, and teens' perspectives of police.

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About the Academy for Justice

The **Academy for Justice** at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University is dedicated to bridging the gap between academia and on-the-ground criminal justice reform by making scholarly research and ideas accessible to policymakers, stakeholders, journalists, and the public. Our primary objectives include identifying the major challenges confronting our criminal justice system; developing and promoting fact-based, non-partisan scholarship that identifies potential reforms; and facilitating the sharing of information between academics and those responsible for making and implementing criminal justice policy.
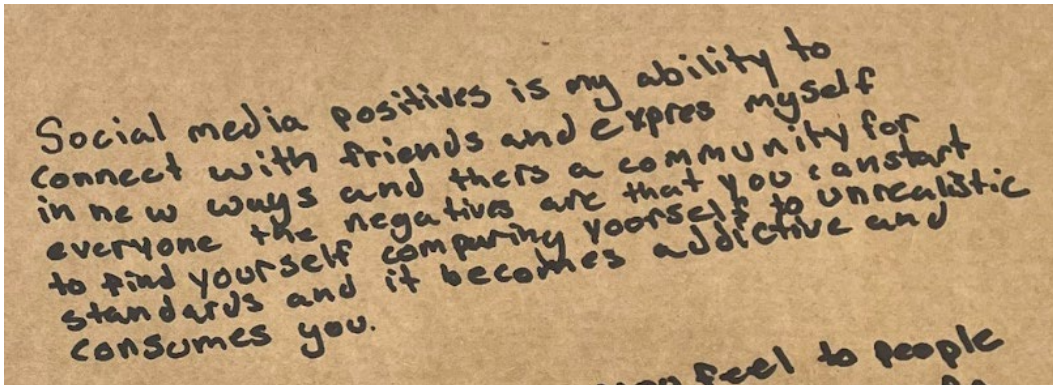
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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teens today are more connected than ever. Social media allows youths to communicate and share information rapidly, to both great convenience and extreme detriment. In part related to their social media usage and particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, youth in America have experienced a concerning increase in struggles with mental health. **In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared child and adolescent mental health a national emergency.**[1] Also surging to the forefront during this time is a national conversation surrounding race and policing. Following the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, America erupted into protest against police practices. **Youth in America have always been deeply involved with social movements, and these protests have been no different.** The voices of these young Americans aren't always heard, and when heard, they are not always listened to.

On February 2, 2023, over 60 teens from six different Tempe Union High Schools gathered to let their voices be heard at **"The TALK! Your Voice, Your Choices" Candid Conversations between youth and law enforcement"**, co-hosted by the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), the Academy for Justice at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University, and the Tempe Police Department. This event allowed high school students who have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, racial protests, and the ongoing ups and downs of social media, to use their voices and be listened to by adults with power in their community, with the ultimate hope that the students would walk away **feeling empowered and knowing they have a voice worthy of being heard at the decision-making table.**

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[1]*AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (Oct. 19, 2021), https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/.

Social media positives is my ability to connect with friends and express myself in new ways and thers a community for everyone the negatives are that you constant to find yourself comparing yourself to unrealistic standards and it becomes addictive and consumes you.

...n feel to people

II. ISSUES

A. Social Media

Today, social media has a nearly inescapable hold on American society. It is particularly pervasive among young people.[2] Research supports generally negative views of social media. A 2020 Pew Research Center Study found 64% of Americans believe social media has a mostly negative impact on the way things are in the United States today.[3]

Concern lingers around social media's ability to spread misinformation and allow harassment online.[4] Furthermore, social media has hastened political polarization in recent years, and indeed there is a difference in how those with differing viewpoints see social media.[5]

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[2] Emily A, Vogels et al., *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Aug. 10, 2022),
https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/.
[3] Brooke Auxier, *64% of Americans Say Social Media Have a Mostly Negative Effect on the Way Things are Going in the U.S. Today*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 15, 2020),
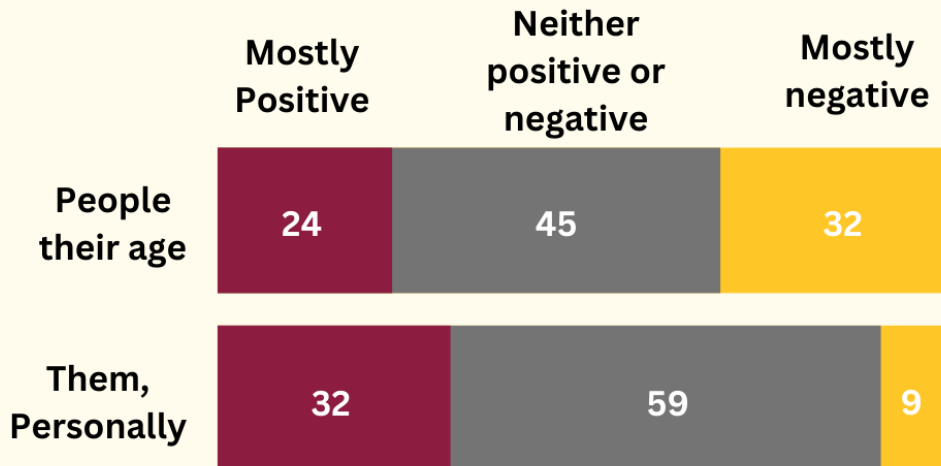https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/.
[4] *Id.*
[5] *Id.*

Teens more likely to see potential negative effects of social media for other teens than for themselves

% of teens who say social media has had a _____ impact on the following

	Mostly Positive	Neither positive or negative	Mostly negative
People their age	24	45	32
Them, Personally	32	59	9

Note: Teens are those aged 13-17. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey Conducted April 14-May 4, 2022.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER.

 "[Y]ounger adults are more likely to say social media have a *positive* impact on the way things are going in the country."[6] While they are more likely to see the helpful applications of social media, young Americans still generally see social media as a negative force.[7] Notably, teens are more likely to see the negative effects of social media as it relates to other teens than themselves. Only 9% of teens say that social media has a mostly negative effect on them personally, while 32% of teens believe social media has a mostly negative impact on other people their age.[8]

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[6] Auxier, *supra* note 3.

[7] *Id.*

[8] Monica Anderson et al., *Teens' Views About Social Media,* PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Nov. 16, 2022),
https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/2-teens-views-about-social-media/.

B. Mental Health

It is impossible to discuss social media without also discussing mental health. According to "Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011–2021", released in February 2023, by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), <mark>youth mental health is trending in a negative direction</mark>. In the decade studied, there was an increase number of youths who experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, seriously considered attempting suicide, made a suicide plan, or attempted suicide.[9]

Percentage of High School Students who:
Experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year in the United States, 2021

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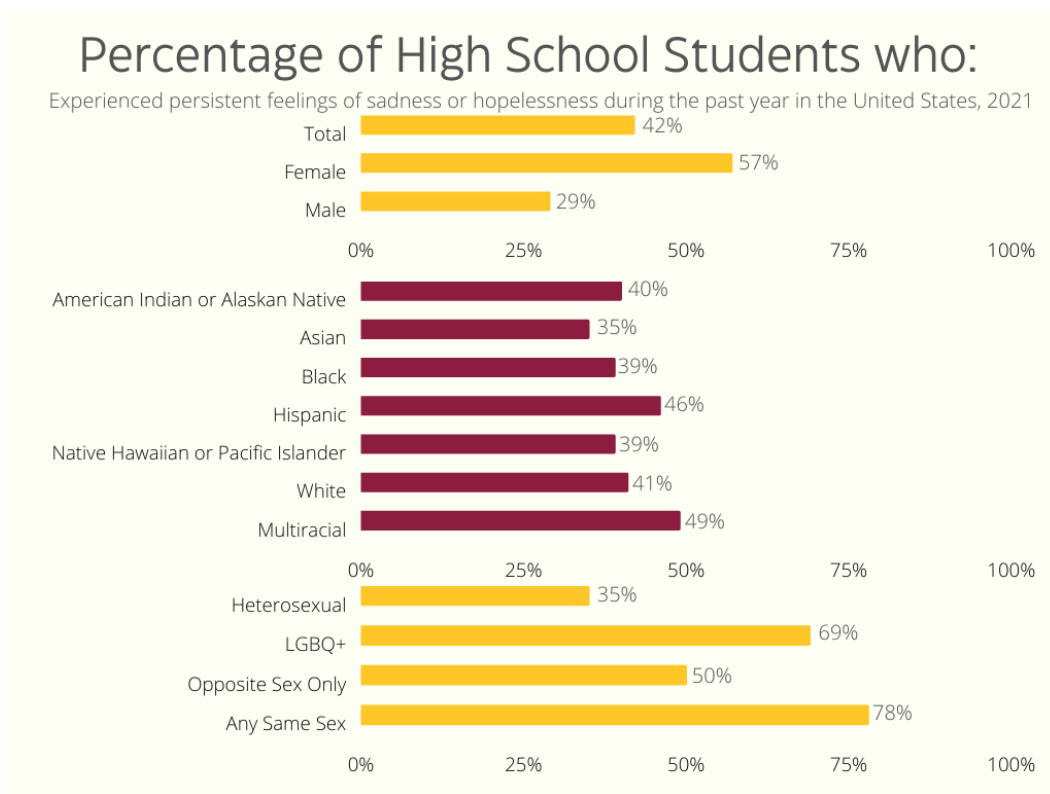
[9] Youth Risk Behavior Survey, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf (last visited May 24, 2023).

Students with diverse identities such as female students, LGBQ+ students, and Hispanic students, were more likely than their peers to experience poor mental health.[10] Furthermore, children who grow up in low-income households are more likely to struggle with mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders.[11] CDC data shows that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health of many young people.[12]

Feeling close to people at school provides critical protection for students during severe disruptions

Students who felt close to people at school | **Students who didn't feel close to people at school**

35% | 53% | Experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past 12 months

14% | 26% | Seriously considered attempting suicide during the past year

6% | 12% | Attempted suicide during the past year

For more information, visit cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom

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[10] *Id.*

[11] Robyn A. Cree et al., *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL (Dec. 21, 2018), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6750a1.htm#T1_down.

[12] Sherry Everett Jones et al., *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports (MMWR),* CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL (Apr. 1, 2022), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7103a3.htm.

Poor mental health was less extreme for teens who were virtually connected during the pandemic and felt close to persons at school.[13] "Youth who felt connected to adults and peers at school were significantly less likely than those who did not to report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (35% vs. 53%); that they seriously considered attempting suicide (14% vs. 26%); or attempted suicide (6% vs. 12%). However, fewer than half (47%) of youth reported feeling close to people at school during the pandemic."[14]

C. Policing

Issues with race and policing in America were also brought to the forefront during the pandemic. At only 17 years old, Darnella Frazier took a video of Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck until Mr. Floyd died.[15] Ms. Frazier later posted the video on Facebook, where it went viral sparking protests across the country.[16] **The protests following George Floyd's death were some of the largest in American history, with an estimated 15-26 million Americans participating.[17]** In the summer of 2020, teens protested, both in the streets and online via social media.[18] Ms. Frazier was not the only teenager outraged over George Floyd's death, and Facebook was not the only social media platform people used to share messages of protest and support. **Pew Research Center found 37% of Americans posted or shared content on social networking sites about race or racial equality in June 2020.[19]** Young Americans use social media more than older Americans, so it is no surprise many of these postings were created and shared by teens.

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[13] *Id.*

[14] *New CDC Data Illuminate Youth Mental Health Threats During the COVID-19* Pandemic, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL (Mar. 31, 2022), https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html.

[15] Nicholas Bogle-Burroughs & Tim Arango, *Darnella Frazier, the Teenager Who Filmed George Floyd's Arrest, Testifies at the Trial*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Mar. 31 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/us/darnella-frazier-video-george-floyd.html.

[16] *Id.*

[17] Larry Buchanan et al., *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,* THE NEW YORK TIMES (July 3, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html.

[18] Kim Parker et al., *Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter* Movement, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (June 12, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/

[19] *Id.*

7 in 10 Americans say they've had conversations about race in the past month

% saying they have _____ about/focused on race or racial equality in the last month

Activity	
Had conversations with family or friends	~70
Posted or shared content on social networking sites *	~37
Contributed money to an organization	~9
Contacted a public official to express their opinion	~7
Attended a protest or rally	~6

(Scale: 0, 25, 50, 75)

*Based on social media users
Source: Pew Research Center, Survey of U.S. Adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.

Anger over George Floyd's death beneath the knee of Minneapolis law enforcement ignited a larger debate around police and their interactions with Americans of color. Young Americans spoke to each other and organized protests in their communities—often through social media— against police brutality, racism, and other issues with policing in their communities.[20]

In 2020, for the first time in 27 years, Gallup found less than half of Americans had confidence in the police.[21] While many Americans do still have a great deal of confidence in our law enforcement, it would be inappropriate not to point out the effect the last three years have had on teens' perceptions of police. Those same teens sharing information and organizing protests in the summer of 2020 are still young Americans today, many of them still students, and **their faith in our systems of policing remains shaken.**

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[20] Mihir Zaveri, *'I Need People to Hear My Voice': Teens Protest Racism*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (June 23, 2020),
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/us/teens-protest-black-lives-matter.html

[21] Megan Brenan, *Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions* Surges, GALLUP (Aug. 12, 2020), https://news.gallup.com/poll/317135/amid-pandemic-confidence-key-institutions-surges.aspx

AMERICANS' CONFIDENCE IN THE POLICE
% who say they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police
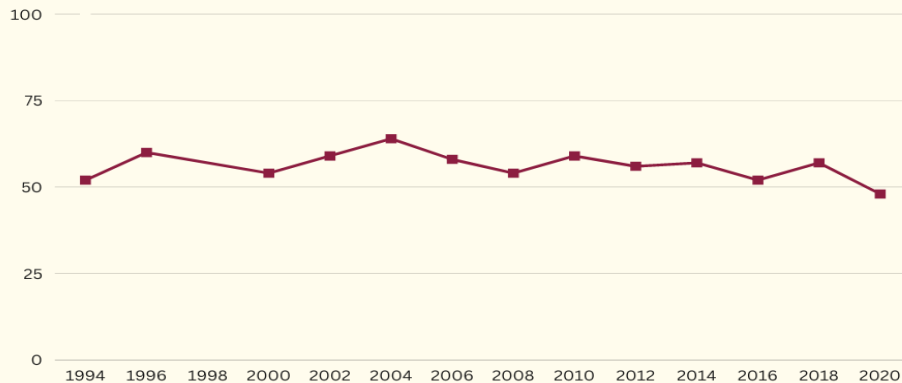
GALLUP

III. **THE TEEN PERSPECTIVE GATHERED FROM "THE TALK! YOUR VOICE, YOUR CHOICES" CANDID CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN YOUTH AND LAW ENFORCEMENT"**

A. Social Media

Teens are seemingly aware of the grip social media has on them, and report various **negative impacts** of its use. These include issues with body image, cyberbullying, unhealthy comparisons, time management, the lack of in-person communication, and more. **The teens who attended the February 2, 2023, event discussed their perceptions and experiences. Many reporting that people only post what they want others to see.** Ultimately, their friends and acquaintances on the other side of the screen are left comparing themselves to an idealized version of their peers. This can lead youth to feel like they're not as good as those they see on social media, whether it's regarding academic achievements, body image, or romantic relationships. Beyond increased pressures from those they know in real life, some youth also shared the feeling that corporations, both those that own social media and those that advertise on it, actively seek to "suck them in" which results in **wasted time and unhealthy interactions with anonymous users.**

The anonymity of social media allows people to be harsher than they would in real life—hiding behind a screen. Cyberbullying is not just perpetrated by people teens know. They face bullying and harassment from people they may have never met. Furthermore, teens believe the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these effects. Isolation meant youth spent even more time on social media communicating with those they could no longer see in person. Unfortunately, the more time they spent on social media, the more serious all of these problems became.

However, teens also reported several **positive benefits** of social media. Social media allows them to communicate with people outside their immediate physical presence, **to find a sense of community they may not have in "real life," to spread awareness of important issues, and to learn what their parents or school may not teach them**. Online communities can provide many teens with support to discuss things they may not feel comfortable or safe sharing with family or friends. Youth can also learn in new ways, find inspiration, and get involved in social movements they would otherwise not be connected with. While there are clear negatives and positives associated with social media, it is here to stay for the long haul. Instead of fearing its continued presence in their lives, **teens aim to learn to use it more positively to connect and inspire as well as continue to speak out against the sorts of misuse that make social media detrimental to them.**

B. Mental Health

Parents often don't notice their children's struggles with mental health, and when they do, it's either too late or those issues remain unaddressed. The stigma surrounding mental health is persistent and makes many feel they cannot speak up about their difficulties. Many teens claimed to put up a "mask" or facade of happiness and health when around others while struggling in private. Discussing mental health can be uncomfortable, but teens expressed a hope that their peers and adults would make a greater effort to reach out and check in with them and to tell them "it's okay to not be okay." However, every individual is different, as some students also stated being pushed too forcefully to share or talk about their mental health might cause them to "shut down." As such, students **stressed the importance of listening to youth as individuals with different backgrounds and different needs**.

Three important principles for adults to follow when looking to help teens with their mental health struggles are: taking mental health seriously, listening to youth as individuals, and meeting them wherever they might be on their health journey.
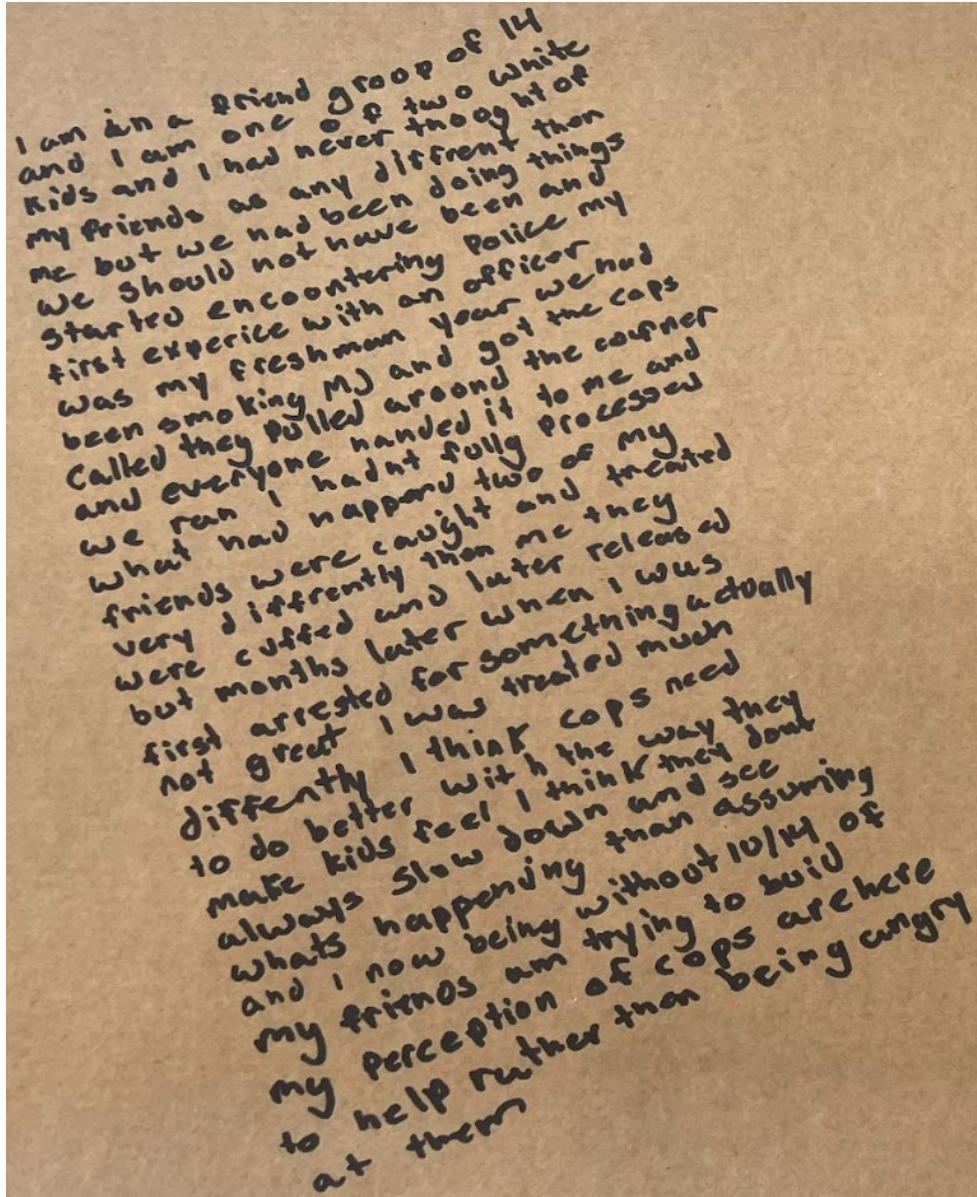
Young people recognize that their parents also may have their own individual struggles with mental health. Many expressed not wanting to "bother" their caretakers with their mental health struggles, while others recognized how their parents' experiences with mental health might transfer to themselves. Students also mentioned fighting with their parents about mental health, particularly when told to "suck it up" or when they felt like they weren't listened to. It may not be obvious when a young person is struggling, but by **providing support and destigmatizing** these issues, adults can make teens feel more comfortable recognizing and resolving their mental health difficulties.
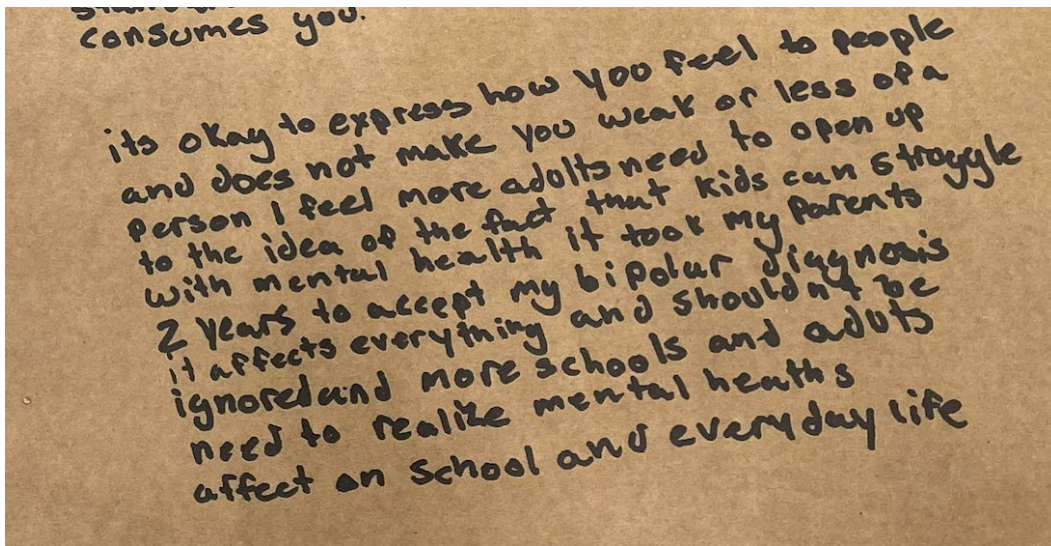
C. Policing

Overall, many teens expressed they see individual law enforcement officers in a positive light. Many teens recognize that most, if not all, **individuals seeking a law enforcement career do so to help others and support their communities at great personal risk.** Several students also feel very connected to the student resource officers ("SROs") they see every day in school. These law enforcement officers exist in schools to promote safety and

discipline, but many students have found support and mentorship with their SRO. Particularly, **when an SRO "looks like them,"** – that is to say, an SRO is a woman, or a person of color, or even from the same neighborhood as the student – teens find they are more able to speak to the SRO about difficult or personal topics.

I am in a friend group of 14 and I am one of two white kids and I had never thought of my friends as any different than me but we had been doing things we should not have been and started encountering police my first experice with an officer was my freshman year we had been smoking MJ and got the cops called they pulled around the courner and everyone handed it to me and we ran I hadn't fully processed what had happened two of my friends were caught and they were very diffrently then me they were cuffed and later released but months later when I was first arrested for something actually not greet I was treated much diffrently I think cops need to do better with the way they make kids feel I think they dont always slow down and see whats happening rather than assuming and I now being without 10/14 of my friemds am trying to build my perception of cops are here to help rather than being angry at them

Teens voiced room for improvement in discussing police departments as a whole. Overall, students expressed they felt **police can be too aggressive, bad at communicating clearly and de-escalating situations, and often abuse their authority**. There is a lack of transparency between the police and the public that is not lost on many teens, who expressed a wish to understand police training and practices better. Many believe policing in their communities could be better if law enforcement received more or better training on issues like mental health, domestic violence, and racism. However, many others feel the abuses of power and "superiority" they see exhibited in law enforcement are part of the **culture and leadership in police departments**. These students expressed skepticism that better training would truly fix the systemic issues they see.

Additionally, many teens noted that they only interact with police officers when something has gone wrong, so their perception is generally negative. Furthermore, **many students have parents or family members who have had negative experiences with the police, who pass down a dislike and mistrust of law enforcement to their children.** They rarely see positive examples of police authority, and so their negative perceptions and generalizations are only affirmed through further unsavory interactions with law enforcement. In these cases, teens expressed once again how important their SROs are to changing these generalizations. Having an adult in school who asks them how they're doing and checks in with them frequently regarding their wellbeing or home life made students realize that not every interaction with police is negative and made them more likely to trust police in the future.

Many students mentioned that these **safe spaces provided by their SROs have transformed their perception of police.** These teens felt that if they had more one-on-one supportive interactions with police, such as those with the officers at the "The TALK!" event, this might help them have a more positive and beneficial relationship with the police.

IV. <mark>Conclusion and Next Steps</mark>

Teens today are dealing with a myriad of unique difficulties. They would like to be taken more seriously as change makers and be listened to by the people in power. "The TALK!" encouraged candid conversations between teens and law enforcement. Continued conversations with teens, their parents, and people in positions of power such as police officers and school administrations will allow students to become more positively engaged in their communities.

Moving forward, promoting teen engagement through additional events and outreach with law enforcement, policy makers, journalists, and advocates is vital. Listening to teens about their experiences and their perspectives is central to creating change for the future they will control. This is just the beginning.