Community Safety in Minneapolis:
What Youth Want You to Know

In 2023 as part of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative Local Action Plan, Minneapolis gathered community safety experiences and solutions from young people to amplify them to decision-makers. Since 2020 when Minneapolis police officers killed George Floyd and teenager Darnella Frazier recorded the incident on her phone, setting off a period of unrest in the city, young people have been talking to each other about community safety. This project provides an opportunity for their voices to be heard by elected officials and other city decision-makers.

Over the course of a summer, a team of college-age Urban Scholars interviewed more than 100 teens and young adults who live, learn, and work in Minneapolis. They then analyzed what the youth told them. This brief discusses the main themes of these conversations and the recommendations put forth by young people in Minneapolis.

Safety perceptions & experiences

"Safety is like having people you trust and feel safe around you."
"I feel safer around my peers. People I know."

One of the key takeaways is that young people feel safest in trusted relationships. Whether at school, parks, or on the streets, having people they know and trust around them lends a perception of safety. "I'm safe around my friends, my teachers, and the people I know the best – those who can help when I need them."
They talked about how safety feels: that they can walk to a bus stop, catch a ride, and get home safety whether they are going to school or to hang out with family or friends. Youth, like many adults, feel safer in an inclusive environment, one that helps them connect to other people and values diversity.
It also became clear that safety isn't evenly distributed across the city: While young people in certain parts of the city felt safe in their neighborhoods and at home, in other parts of the city, they observed, "Even at my house, I fear a car, or somebody might jump over me." Several mentioned dark streets at night and the lack of adequate lighting keeping them home.

Community involvement
Participants agreed that safety involved community. They repeatedly expressed the need for more spaces for teens and young people to be together safety. They want inexpensive places between home and school to be with their friends, but often feel that business don't want them there. Participants expressed that leaders use the argument of safety to take away rights and amenities in the community. Examples of this might include schools locking bathrooms to prevent vaping, or Metro Transit removing benches that might be used by people who are unhoused.

"In schools, we need to work on building trust with our teachers. It's not just about them trusting us."

"School districts should incorporate subjects that resonate with young people – topics that are directly relevant to their communities."

They described community as needing strong communication skills, both among youth and between youth and adults. They see technology as a way for communities to build a more positive environment, reduce youth conflicts, and boost their ability to advocate for change.

Youth perceived that their voices and opinions are often not sought or considered.

Transportation safety

"Cars drive increasingly fast. It makes it hard to cross the street, even around schools."

"Waiting for train, one faces [people] who struggle with substance use."

Participants consistently talked about safety while going about their lives using Minneapolis streets. North High students conducted a survey and found that safety getting to and from school was a significant concern, especially for those who relied on public transportation. They suggested a return to the yellow school busses as an option might be advisable until Metro Transit is able to address systemwide concerns. Walking alone feels dangerous, especially in the dark.

Youth also mentioned speeding and other dangerous driving, including by people in stolen vehicles, as being a safety issue. Many felt that being in a private vehicle gave them a measure of safety compared to being on foot or bicycle or waiting at a transit stop. Yet they also talked about the frequency of car theft and cars being burglarized and perceptions of gas stations as dangerous places.

Law enforcement

"I want to feel safe even when the police are not there, because when they are, I worry too much."

The relationship between police and young people in Minneapolis is fraught. Some youth welcome a police presence, feeling that living by a police station gives a sense of security, and they are hopeful that the documented police brutality of recent years is finally being dealt with. "My perspective," said one participant, "leans towards investing in broader public safety measures rather than just public patrols." Others said seeing police around can signal that a space is unsafe.

The team interviewed 30 high school Step Up students serving as PEACE interns within the police department, and even among these youth who felt that their police colleagues cared about them, they still voiced mistrust. On the one hand, they noted, "Police are really transparent about the problems with police brutality. They aren't as bad as they're portrayed. All of them aren't going to discriminate." But many still agreed that the police wouldn't be their first call when they witness something illegal: "If I see something, I don't say something. The best option is to walk away." They expressed uneasiness that some of the terms that police use, like cleaning up gang violence, are really code for harshly policing black people.

They found some common ground in the dangers of negative perceptions, noting that many police officers they work with express frustration that when a police officer does something wrong, it gets widely publicized and all police are blamed, but no one notices when they do something selfless or kind. One youth responded, "Try being a black teenager."

Gun violence

> "I seldom leave my house because of the danger. We're afraid to even water our garden. The sound of gunshots is almost weekly, so we just stay out of harm's way."

Throughout conversations, participants expressed concerns about widespread gun violence and easy access to firearms. Concerns for personal safety because of guns were not distributed evenly across the city, but youth were concerned for the safety of their peers overall. One youth described frequent gunshots in his North Minneapolis neighborhood as "tragic normalcy." He said, "Everyone knows it happens, but no one speaks about it. It's just accepted as a way of life," noting how guns can empower self-defense but are also weapons of harm. One young participant spoke strongly in favor of the second amendment as a means of self-defense to ensure personal safety.

Many participants lamented the exclusion of youth voices in pivotal discussions, advocating for their involvement to curb gang and gun violence.

Participants generally agreed that they hear often about incarcerating or restricting young people but not much about equipping them with resources or addressing root causes. Youth advocated for shifting from a reactive criminal justice model to one that actively seeks to prevent violence.

Recommendations

Below is a list of broad recommendations that emerged from these discussions or were implied as potential solutions. Participants ranked the recommendations in order of preference using an online ranked-choice voting system to decide which ones to put forth. Here are the top recommendations that emerged

Amplify youth voices in decision-making forums. City of Minneapolis creates ways to ensure youth voices are heard on decisions that affect them. This might include youth councils, seats for youth on advisory boards, or special engagement with youth on vital issues.

More safe community spaces for youth. Public spaces are often hostile to youth autonomy. Create more spaces where youth are welcome to gather together safely and hang out comfortably. Provide funding for organizations to maintain these spaces year-round at times when teens can use them.

Eliminate homelessness. Provide adequate funding to ensure that no children, teens, and young adults are homeless in Minneapolis, and help adults currently on the streets find safe and stable housing. Provide more family services and mentorship to youth without family support.

Improve transportation safety and accessibility. Children and teens need to use Minneapolis streets to get to school, work, and activities. They should be able to do so safely, whether they are walking, biking, using transit, or driving. Improve transit frequency and routes that get students to school and activities.

Improve school safety. Make a safe and welcoming school climate a priority. Involve young people in making decisions about what will keep them safe. Find alternatives when a safety "solution" punishes or endangers other students (such as locking bathroom doors to prevent vaping or skipping class).

Improve how police interact with youth. Require police officers to learn ways of effectively working with youth by connecting them with other city departments that have experience in youth work. Actively invite teen voices in on issues that involve them. Provide opportunities for police offers to interact with youth not as authority figures but as learners. Build trust through activities with shared goals.