The Black Voices Project highlights Black and African American perspectives on policing, protesting, and political representation in Ferguson and St. Louis, Missouri centrally focused on the 2014 unrest following the death of Michael Brown. Through engaged dialogue with 29 members of the Black community, the project looks to challenge mainstream media discussion of Ferguson unrest.

Twelve miles northwest of St. Louis City, Missouri is Ferguson. The August 2014 death of 18 year old resident Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson has sparked civil action and national discussion on race and police brutality.

**Black Voices**

Concerned Citizens
Nonprofit Leaders
Military Veterans
Community Activists
Entrepreneurs
Faith Leaders
Youth Organizers

29 Interviews

**IDENTITY**

How do you define yourself racially?

- Black (28%)
- African (21%)
- African American (21%)
- Black or African (17%)
- Black or African American (10%)
- Negro (3%)

"Lack of freedom."
"Feeling a sense of inferiority."

"Worrying for our children."
"Having to prove oneself."

"Being proud in culture."
"Never having a feeling of control."
"Being profiled and criminalized from birth."
What has changed locally?

Civilian Oversight Board
St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay has established a Civilian Oversight Board where selected citizens can investigate community complaints against police.

Policing

What would proper policing look like?

- Community policing
  - Police officers live in communities they work
  - Build positive relationships and serve as a resource
- Addresses unconscious racial bias through sensitivity training
- Prevention of crime through economic investment in low-income communities
- Community input in the review, hiring, and firing of police officers.

What is missing from the local conversation on race?

Discussion of:
- Unconscious Bias
- Racial Profiling
- Systemic Racism
- Economic Justice
- Arts, health, and wellness in the black community
- Unification in the black community
Police Brutality

What is police brutality?

**PHYSICAL**
- Excessive force for given level of threat for restraining, arresting, or disarming an individual
  - *weaponry: lethal weapons used instead of tazers*
  - *manhandling: bodily aggression*

**EMOTIONAL**
- Unconscious bias and sense of superiority
- Intimidation and bullying

Police interactions with people of color: Issues

- Lack of contact unless in a time of trouble
- Language of disrespect, superiority, or force.
- Judgement or fear in interactions

FERGUSON RESPONSE

POLICE MILITARIZATION

The August 2014 protest of the death of Mike Brown and November protest against the non-indictment of his perpetrator quickly escalated to tanks, gear, and weaponry juxtaposed to civil disorder. Many felt it to be heavy-handed and driven by intimidation tactics against local residents. One community organizer recalls the response and its effect on protesters:

"It was overdone by the police. I can say firsthand, [you had] officers pointing weapons and shot guns. I've had a shot gun pointed at myself. Police dogs and armoured carriers. Just to see that, that's the militarization that also helped fuel the outrage that was taking place."
**Civil Unrest**

**Immediate Aftermath**

4 HOURS

Is how long it took for Ferguson and St. Louis Police authorities to remove Mike Brown’s body from the street of Canfield Drive. His body left in a public area under the August sun and heat, served as a sign of disrespect and callousness to the community.

**Why did Mike Brown’s death prompt the August and November 2014 unrest?**

Through filming and photographing Mike Brown’s body left on the street, social media provided a space for those locally and nationally to share and be heard in their outrage. The viral nature of these images placed pressure on mainstream media to respond to Brown’s death.

**Location**

Many describe the 2014 unrest as the “lid blow off the pressure cooker.” Conflict between police and communities of color have come to the light with recent Department of Justice investigation which uncovers racially motivated traffic violation and ticketing quotas. As well, the institutional and systemic injustices which have affected Ferguson, a predominantly Black community, built up community anger and a response in the form of unrest.

**Did you protest during the 2014 unrest?**

![Pie chart showing 52% yes and 48% no]

**What did you gain through the process of protesting?**

- Solidarity.
- Identity.
- Relationships.
Protesting

It’s Influence on the Black Community

- Brought local and national attention to issue of police brutality.
- Fostered dignity, encouragement, empowerment, and consciousness on injustice.
- Sparked youth driven activism and leadership.

“Protesting has given us a voice. There were times were we felt voiceless. It’s allowed young people to get out and get involved in a movement that they see is worthwhile and can connect with.”

Violent vs. Peaceful Action

“This is an unrest. An uprising. It’s not always going to be pretty, peaceful, or convenient.”

MESSAGE & IMPACT

- Violence depicted anger built up within the community against injustice. For some, there was no other way to convey the struggle of oppression given the historical nature of violence against people of color in the United States.
- Violence rather than peaceful action prompted media cover, which further criminalized protesters.

Media Representation

Media discussion of 2014 unrest dramatized violent action, focusing on destruction and looting, criminally branding an entire area. Additionally the lense of violence focused on the action of protesters rather than action by police, teargas and rubber bullets included. Even so, many felt media coverage brought the necessary local and national attention to Mike Brown’s death.
What is the political future of Ferguson and St. Louis?

- New leaders of color
- Holding politicians accountable to the communities they serve
- Emphasis on voting within the black community

A more radical solution for change posed by youth activists and organizers is denouncement of systems of oppression by looking inward. This would take the form of independent black communities centered on entrepreneurship and community based collectives.

Ferguson is....

- Healing.
- A boiling pot.
- An eye-opener.
- The center of revolution.
- A catalyst.
- America.

A beautiful place.
In a state of uncertainty.
A cautionary tale.
A spark for the new youth movement.
Everywhere.
Power.

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