

# BROWNSVILLE YOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

JUNE 2022

## COMMUNITY SAFETY ACTION PLAN



MUTUAL MELANY

Brownsville  
Community  
Justice  
Center

HESTER ST

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

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The summer of 2019 saw a raft of gun violence in Brownsville, culminating in the tragic mass shooting on Old Timer's Day, bringing national attention to the gun violence crisis in the neighborhood. With support from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), the Brownsville Community Justice Center (BCJC) responded by launching the Brownsville Youth Leadership Council (BYLC). Since 2020, the BYLC has worked on addressing the root causes of gun violence in Brownsville through healing, restorative practices, and community advocacy.

Here, the 2021-2022 BYLC presents their Community Safety Action Plan– a culmination of a year of participatory public policy-making engaging over 100 youth in Brownsville. The Community Safety Action Plan utilizes data collected from our series of Healing Summits to identify six key themes that impact neighborhood safety. Each theme is paired with short-term and long-term action items that address the issues in each theme, as well as supporting data to support the recommendations. The Community Safety Action Plan serves as a call to action to our elected officials and key stakeholders to marshal the resources, energy, and support to enact these community-led recommendations.

## **Brownsville Youth Leadership Council**

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council (BYLC) supports youth leadership to tackle the challenges of community violence and develop creative solutions to addressing community trauma and improving neighborhood safety. The BYLC works to unite communities across Brownsville by recruiting youth leaders representing 10 different NYCHA developments in Brownsville. These developments include: Marcus Garvey Apartments, Brownsville Houses, Langston Hughes Houses, Van Dyke I & II Houses, Seth Low Houses, Glenmore Houses, Tapscott Houses, Howard Houses, Marcus Garvey Houses, and Tilden Houses. Over the course of their year-long internships, our BYLC members receive immersive training in public policy, healing justice, community advocacy, placemaking, and public speaking.



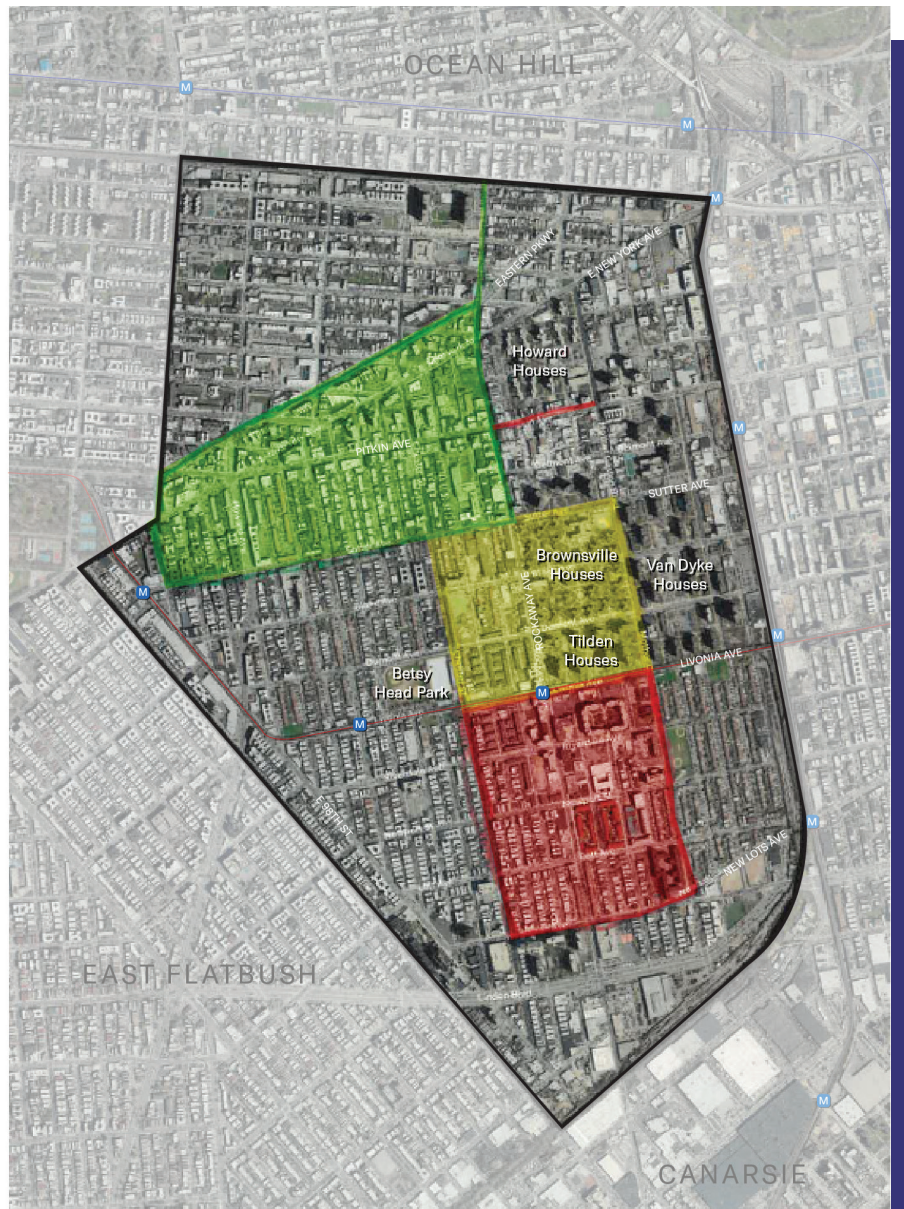
# HEALING SUMMIT

BYLC led the development and implementation of five Healing Summits in five different locations across Brownsville that engaged a total of 90 youth. The Healing Summits were Phase 1 of a participatory policy-making process where BYLC collected data using a multitude of modalities including a community safety mapping activity, a written survey, and a youth-led focus group. BYLC youth spearheaded the research design and analysis in partnership with Hester Street. The 3-hour agenda also included youth-led community building activities, facilitated dialogue about healing and conflict, and games and raffle prizes. All Healing Summit participants were given \$25 gift cards for their engagement.



*Example of a community safety map in Brownsville where areas are marked by color to indicate how safe the individual feels there.*

Safe ■  
Safe under certain conditions ■  
Unsafe ■



# RECOMMENDATIONS / ACTION PLAN

## Theme 1: More Youth Programs

In focus groups with youth from Brownsville, Crown Heights, Bed Stuy, and other central Brooklyn neighborhoods, the Brownsville Youth Leadership Council heard of the need for more youth programs to improve community safety.

“Programs like BCJC help improve community safety.”

- Healing Summit Participant

### In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council recommends expanding youth programming that empowers youth to work towards bettering Brownsville, like the programs offered by the Brownsville Community Justice Center. We want to see more programs that prioritize personal development, with an emphasis on community-centered work and advocacy. The city should also work with youth centers to make it easier to offer programs in parks, which they are often adjacent to, in order to broaden their outreach and better promote their services. As one youth leader put it, “Other communities have safe spaces for youth,” and Brownsville deserves the same.

“Better community centers keep people out of unsafe situations.”

- Healing Summit Participant

### In the long term:

The BYLC sees youth playing an important role in the development, outreach, and operation of programs at community centers. Community centers should receive resources to hire youth to support programming and build community.

“[We want] programs and opportunities for youth to help create community.”

- Healing Summit Participant

Additionally, city council members should play an active role in supporting and promoting youth programming at centers, given the important role it plays in keeping communities safe.

### Action Items:

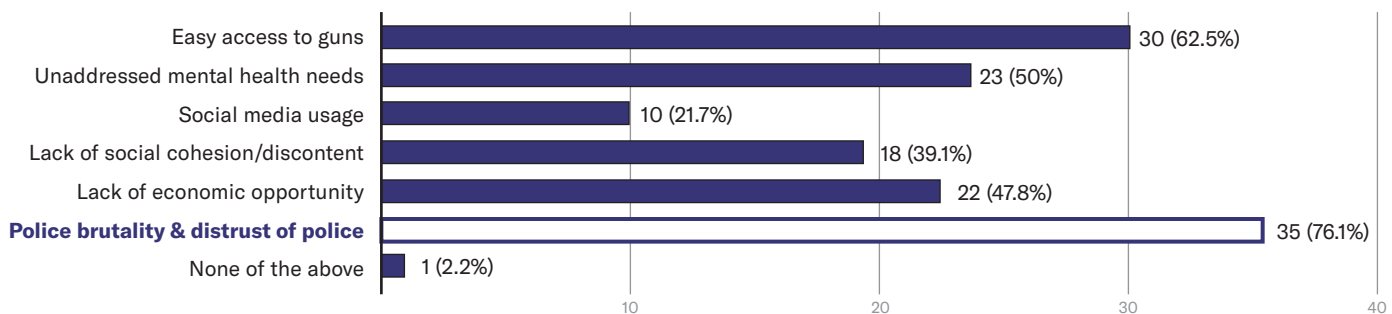
1. Offer more youth programming, like the Brownsville Community Justice Center, that offers opportunities for youth to create community
2. Open gyms and workout centers for youth and promote active/passive after school activities
3. Expand community outreach for youth programming
4. Offer programs in parks connected to community centers
5. Hire youth to develop and conduct youth programming at community centers
6. City council play a more active role in promoting youth programming



## Theme 2: Addressing Gun Violence & Policing

In a survey conducted with 46 youth from Brownsville and other central Brooklyn neighborhoods, 76% of respondents said that “police brutality and distrust of police” was a top factor that causes their communities to feel unsafe. In focus group conversations, many youth shared that cops prevented people from feeling safe. At the same time, 65% of survey respondents said that “easy access to guns” was a top factor in making their community feel unsafe, and in focus groups, youth connected a lack of police in their communities with an increase in gun violence. Youth Leaders feel that police should play a role in addressing gun violence in their communities, starting with interactions with the police.

What are the top factors that cause your community to feel unsafe? (select up to 3)



### In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council recommends police involvement in community events to encourage positive daily interaction between police and community members. Focus group participants had mixed responses to the idea of increasing police presence in their neighborhoods. While some said it would make them feel more safe, others shared that increased surveillance in their neighborhoods would make them feel less safe. Due to these responses, the Youth Leadership Council recommends improving relationships with police first, with the goal of lowering rates of police brutality and harassment.

### In the long term:

The BYLC is calling for better police training, especially when police deal with mental health crises. The Youth Leaders would also like to see a police force composed of officers from our community.

“[We] want police that are from Brownsville, not Staten Island.”

- Healing Summit Participant

If police are going to play a role in tackling gun violence in our communities, Youth Leaders want a police force that is trained to be respectful, that they can trust, that doesn't harass or brutalize them; a police force that is from our community and is knowledgeable of it.

### Action Items:

1. Encourage more positive interactions between police and community members
2. Improve police training, especially for dealing with mental health crises
3. Hire police officers from the communities where they work

## Theme 3: Using Drugs to Cope with Violence

In focus group conversations led by the Brownsville Youth Leadership Council, many youth shared that they drink and use drugs to cope with violence in their communities. To make our community safer, the Brownsville Youth Leadership Council wants to reduce the harm that can result from drug use.

“Almost half the room would say they smoke or drink to deal with experiencing unsafe situations.”

- Youth Leader on a Healing Summit Focus Group

### In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council recommends expanding access to resources and education materials about drug use. Youth Leaders want our peers to have easy access to websites and pamphlets that share information about using drugs, and recommend increasing outreach efforts, like tabling at community events, to get education materials into the hands of more youth who cope with violence by using drugs.

### In the long term:

The BYLC recommends investing in harm reduction services, like needle exchange programs, overdose prevention training, and safe injection sites, while continuing to expand the availability of education about drug use. Brownsville residents need better education about using drugs to make informed decisions about how they cope with violence. At the same time, Brownsville residents who choose to use drugs should be able to do so safely through access to supportive and caring facilities and without fear of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

### Action Items:

1. Distribute education materials about drug use, especially through digital mediums
2. Increase outreach efforts to educate community members about drug safety
3. Invest in harm reduction services like overdose prevention trainings and safe injection sites

# Theme 4: Mental and Physical Self-Defense

Youth highlighted the need for specialized mental and physical health resources to deal with unsafe situations. In focus group conversations, youth expressed the need for resources to support them when they encounter unsafe scenarios. They also need ways to heal and process trauma following incidents of violence. The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council characterizes this as a need for mental and physical self-defense.

## In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council proposes increasing physical and mental self-defense programs for Brownsville residents to prepare and protect themselves in situations of violence. Not only are the youth referring to martial arts classes and protection, but also the healing through exercise and health programs like yoga and basketball.

“Exercise is a way to heal.”  
- Healing Summit Participant

These programs should be supported, expanded, and accessible for all Brownsville residents starting from a young age. Youth Leaders also propose that the city should support mental health programming in community centers, like healing circles, meditation and other healing practices to support youth who experience violence.

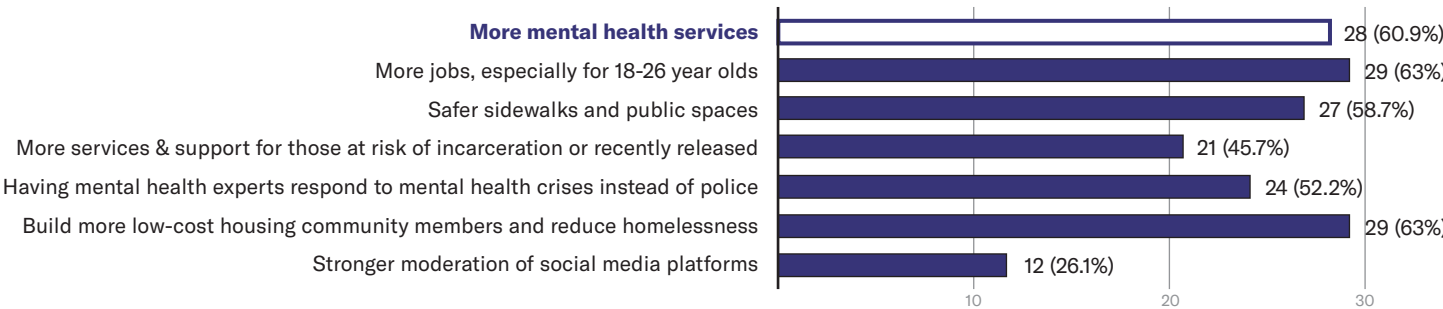
## In the long term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council also recommends expanding access to mental health resources, like therapy, that can protect youth who experience violence, and assist youth in processing trauma. From the same survey, 61% of respondents said “More mental health services” would make their community safer. The city should provide funding and resources for counselors in schools, community centers near housing developments, and youth centers to support the physical and mental health of Brownsville youth. Counselors should be trained to build relationships with youth, and encourage us to express our emotions in a supportive and safe way.

“More mental health awareness would support Brownsville.”  
- Healing Summit Participant

Also, assuring youth that mental health services are anonymous and confidential will encourage more youth to access such services.

Which of the following would make your neighborhood safer? (select up to 3)





### Action Items:

- Increase mental and physical self-defense programming for youth like healing circles, meditation, yoga classes, and opportunities for exercise
- Expand access to therapy at schools, community centers, and youth centers
- Support counselors in building relationships with youth
- Make accessing mental health resources more accessible by protecting youth's privacy and confidentiality
- Offer more counselors in schools to lessen the caseload and allow for a deeper understanding between student and counselor

## Theme 5: Better Food Options

Brownsville is a food swamp; unhealthy junk food is much easier to come by than healthy food options. This has a serious impact on youth development, education, economic and health outcomes, making Brownsville less safe than communities with healthy, affordable food options.

### In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council wants to see community gardens play a role in providing healthy food and food education for our community. There are many community gardens throughout Brownsville, but they need better maintenance. Parks should support job opportunities at community gardens, which would provide youth with an incentive to upkeep the neighborhood. In addition, digital and physical education resources, like a website or flyers, should be available to our community, as well as healthy cooking programs. Community gardens could provide the space to distribute these materials and host programs. The city could also sponsor partnerships with local gyms and fitness centers to promote healthy eating, as well.

### In the long term:

The BYLC wants to see fresh, healthy, and affordable food options in our community. The city should partner with delis, corner stores, and super markets in the neighborhood and invest in making healthy foods accessible in Brownsville. Stores and restaurants in Brownsville should provide healthy options.

**"We deserve the same fresh, healthy food that's available in other communities."**

*- Youth Leader*

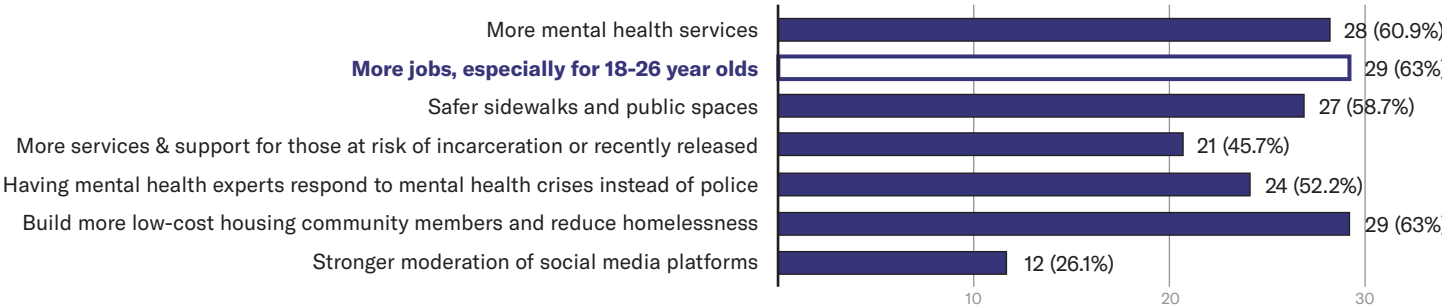
### Action Items:

1. Support job opportunities for youth at community gardens
2. Promote healthy eating and distribute education materials at community gardens, gyms, and fitness centers
3. Invest in making healthy foods accessible in delis, corner stores, and super markets

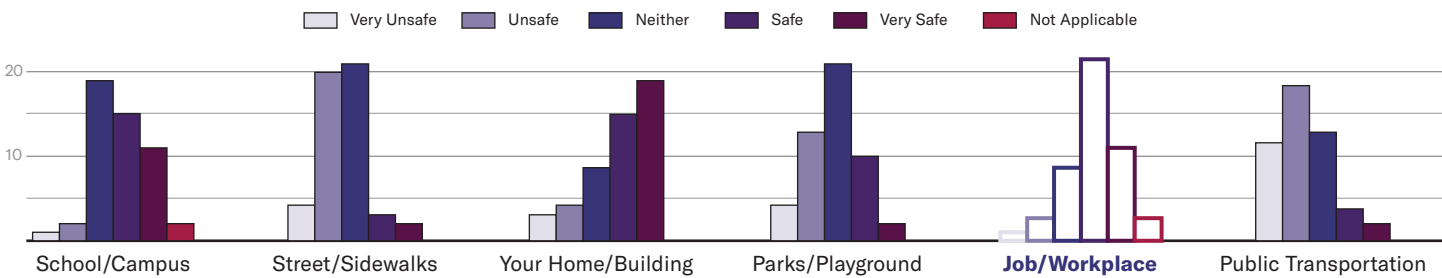
# Theme 6: Job Access

In a survey conducted with 46 youth from Brownsville, Crown Heights, Bed Stuy, and other central Brooklyn neighborhoods, 63% of respondents said that more jobs, especially for 18-26 year olds, would make their neighborhood safer. Also, when youth were asked how safe they felt in different places in their neighborhood, they reported feeling most safe at home followed by their place of work. This shows that jobs don't only provide youth with an opportunity to make money and advance their careers, they also provide safe spaces for young people.

Which of the following would make your neighborhood safer? (select up to 3)



On a scale from 1 (very unsafe) to 5 (very safe), how do you feel in the following places?



## In the short term:

The Brownsville Youth Leadership Council wants more access to career training. Brownsville residents need more career training programs and access to career pathways outside of the service industry. The city should support job fairs and tabling at community centers and neighborhood events. Programs that teach youth how to build a résumé and practice for interviews should be offered at community centers, as well.

“People want more job opportunities in the area to feel safe.”  
- Healing Summit Participant

## In the long term:

The BYLC wants to see jobs in Brownsville pay an equitable, living wage and provide a pipeline to career jobs. Youth Leaders recommend that the city supports local businesses in Brownsville by providing trainings and resources on how to start a business. Youth Leaders also want to see investment in Brownsville through accessible loan programs. This would open up more opportunities for youth to access jobs, especially if businesses partner with schools to hire youth first. The city can increase economic opportunity and improve neighborhood safety by investing in local businesses that put youth first.

## Action Items:

1. Support job fairs and tabling at community centers and neighborhood events
2. Provide access to career training, résumé building and interview practice
3. Provide trainings and resources for local businesses
4. Invest in local businesses and expand access to loans
5. Encourage local businesses to partner with schools to hire youth first



# CONCLUSION

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Through this Community Safety Action Plan, the Brownsville Youth Leadership Council calls on our elected officials and key stakeholders to marshal the resources and energy to enact these community-led recommendations. Elected officials can make Brownsville a safer community by:

- Supporting more youth programs,
- Addressing gun violence and the disparate impacts of policing,
- Reducing harm that results from the use of drugs to cope with violence,
- Providing resources for mental and physical self-defense,
- Improving access to fresh, healthy, affordable food,
- And increasing the availability of stable, career-track jobs.

The action items presented in this Community Safety Action Plan pave the way to a more just, equitable, and caring Brownsville. This plan presents a unique opportunity to address the root causes of violence our community through any number of creative actions developed by Brownsville, for Brownsville. BYLC looks forward to seeing these action items implemented, and is excited for the healing they will bring to Brownsville. We also recognize that this plan represents one step towards a goal that we must continually strive to achieve. BYLC will continue to play a role in making our community safe through healing, restorative practices, and community advocacy. We encourage our elected officials to join us in this work.





# APPENDIX

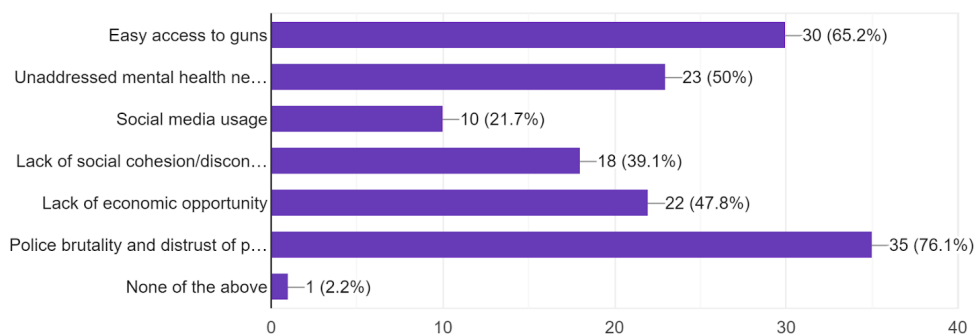
## Community Safety Survey Results

The Community Safety Survey included 5 safety questions and 6 demographic/general questions. The survey gained 51 responses over 5 Healing Summits.

### Safety/Health Questions:

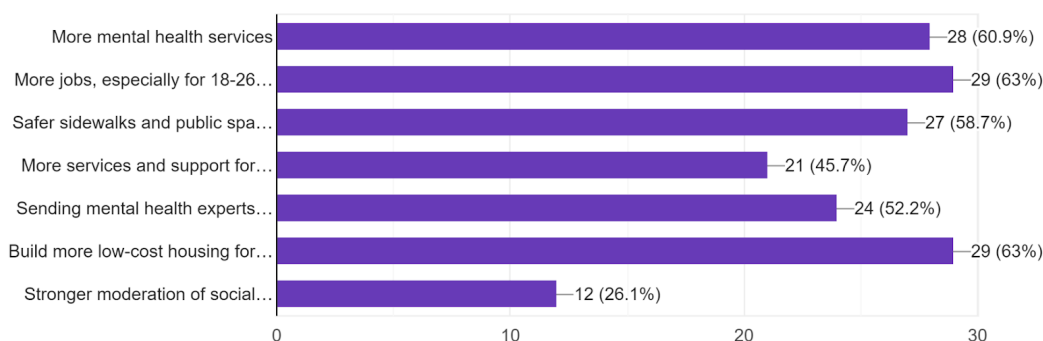
What are the top factors that cause your community to feel unsafe? (Select up to 3)

46 responses



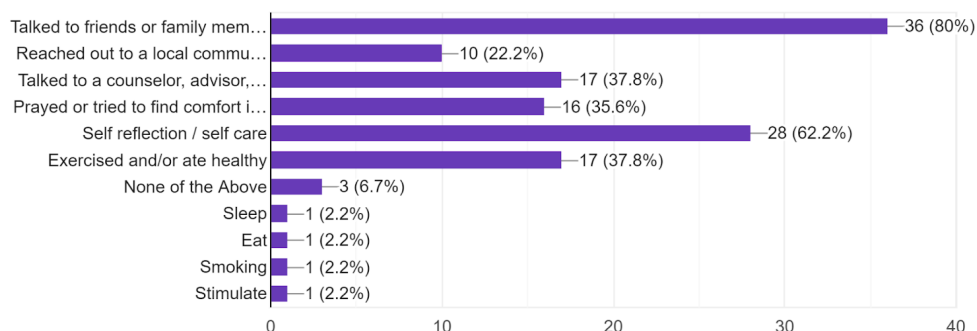
Which of the following would make your neighborhood safer? (Select up to 3)

46 responses

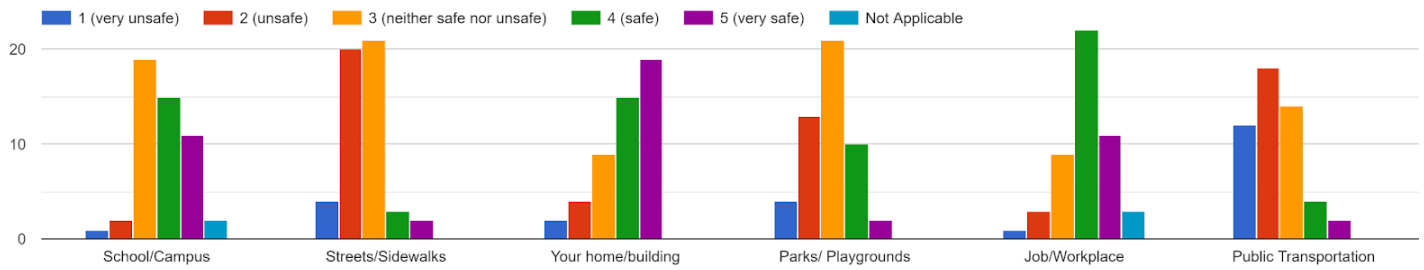


Which (if any) of the following strategies have you used to take care of yourself and your mental health? (Select all that apply)

45 responses



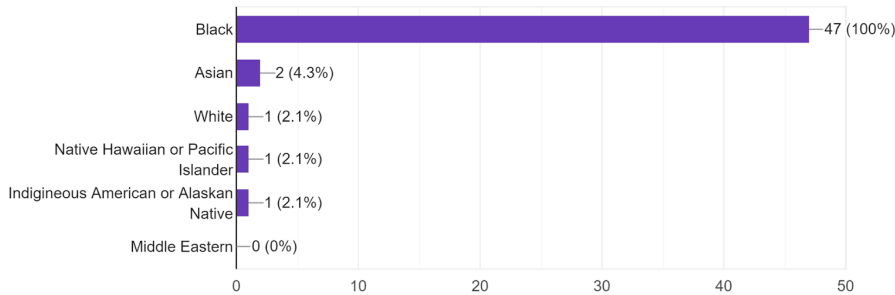
On a scale from 1 (very unsafe) to 5 (very safe), how do you feel in the following places?



## General/Demographic Questions:

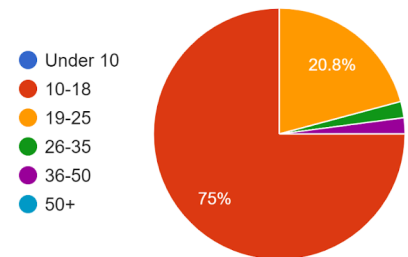
What is your racial group? (Choose all that apply)

47 responses



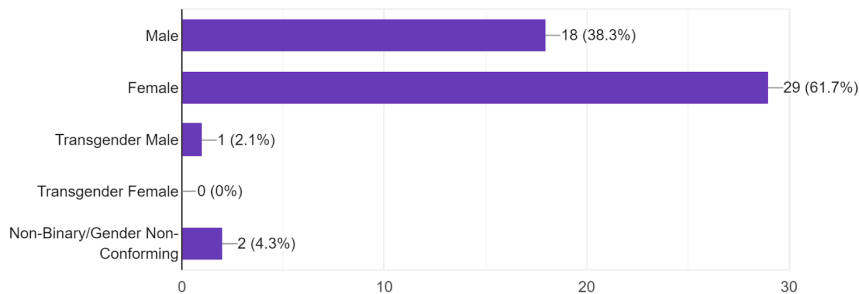
What is your age group?

48 responses



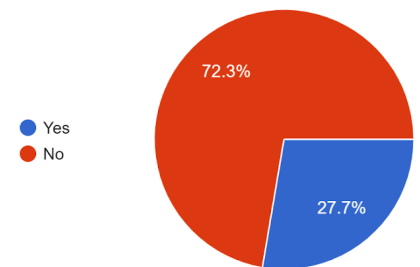
What is your identified gender? (Choose all that apply)

47 responses



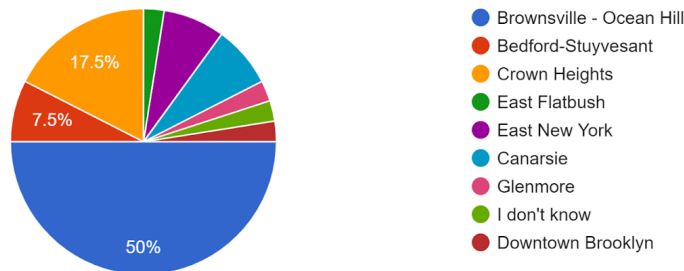
Are you of Hispanic or Latinx origin?

47 responses



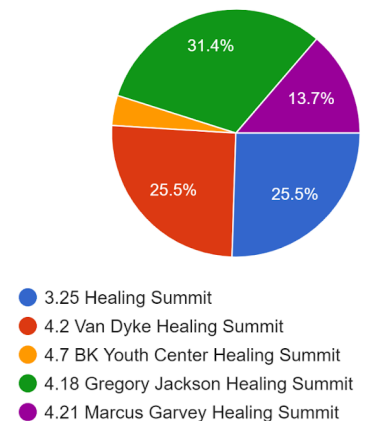
What neighborhood do you live in?

40 responses



Which Healing Summit was this survey from?

51 responses





# Healing Summit Focus Group Responses

All Healing Summits included focus groups facilitated by the Youth Leaders. Below are synthesized ideas and quotes from these focus groups laid out by theme.











**Brownsville  
Community  
Justice  
Center**

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