

New Measures of Public Safety: A Youth-Led Vision in Saint Paul

The [Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab](#), in collaboration with the [Saint Paul Office of Neighborhood Safety \(ONS\)](#) and [World Youth Connect \(WYC\)](#), spoke with young people to create new ways of measuring safety as part of a Community-Based Indicators (CBI) research project. In the summer of 2023, the GPL and WYC held interviews and focus groups with 50 young people from Saint Paul (ages 13-24) who identified as highly impacted by violence. This summary provides an overview of what we learned, why it is important, and what we plan to do next.

Why are new measures of safety important?

Across the country, mayors and other public leaders say public safety is a top priority. But those leaders face a challenge: they do not have the insights or tools they need to define and measure changes in safety based on the topics that residents care most about. Without these tools, leaders report that they do not know if their decisions — the policies they set, the initiatives and programs they fund, and the institutions they oversee — improve public safety for residents. This disconnect means that the needs of the communities that experience high levels of violence and policing are often not represented in decision-making processes.

What did we learn about safety from youth in Saint Paul?

The GPL analyzed interviews and focus groups with 50 young people to identify four themes.



Theme 1: Being on guard

“Being on guard is just being aware, ... and being aware is being alive.”

— 23-year-old participant

Because of frequent violence and threats to their safety, almost **two-thirds of participants** said they must regularly scan their surroundings for signs of danger to protect themselves and, in some cases, their children or younger siblings. Anticipating violence has become a part of daily routines.



Theme 2: The train

“I hate it. I really do hate it. I hate it a lot ... the drug use. I like Saint Paul, but the drug use and how people just don’t even care. My son could be sitting right on the train with me, and they’ll try to smoke on the train. It’s just bad trying to travel around.”

— 21-year-old participant

The METRO Green Line could be a vital method of affordable transportation for many youth. But because they perceive it as a source of threats to their safety, including exposure to drug use and physical violence, **one-third of participants** say they avoid it, instead taking the bus, using rideshare apps, or walking.



Theme 3: The police

“You see my height and skin color and the way I look. The obvious thing is, ‘Oh, it’s a tall Black man.’ I’m being sent to either a prison or shot on site. This is what I fear the most. So, I’d rather avoid police at all costs. ... If a policeman approaches you, you say nothing, because everything and anything will be held against you.”

— Participant entering 9th grade

When it comes to public safety, police officers are at the forefront of participants’ minds — more often as a threat to safety than as a source of it, especially for Black participants. **Just under half of participants** said they limit interactions with police due to a range of fears, including direct physical harm, being mistakenly or wrongly accused of a crime, and being the victim of racist policing. By contrast, **just over one-fourth of participants** said that they feel safer in the presence of police.



Theme 4: Social media

“Every time I opened Instagram, somebody else passed away. ... I just wanted to look at a funny video and laugh.”

— 20-year-old participant

Participants said that for them, the danger of social media was often psychological rather than just physical, often from disturbing content online or cyberbullying. **More than half of participants** said that while they like to use social media for activities such as connecting with friends and family, they regularly encounter content that negatively affects their well-being.

The GPL used these themes to develop indicators, or measures, of public safety. Continuing this work, the ONS, GPL, and WYC will test 1-2 indicators to assess their effectiveness. To learn more about community issues in Saint Paul, check out the full report on [the GPL’s website](#).

The indicators identified in the report include:



Neighborhood Indicators

- **Play outside**, including biking, running, or taking walks
- **Move freely without worry**, including visiting nearby stores
- **Socialize with others**, including hanging out with family and friends
- **Attend social gatherings**, such as fairs or cultural events
- **Go outside at night**, including visits to a park or grocery store



Train Indicators

- **Ride the train**, including to get to work and visit friends
- **Sit in their preferred train car and seat**
- **Remain in the same train car** for the duration of the ride

Who are the research participants that contributed to these ideas?

The interviews were designed to learn what makes participants feel unsafe and how their behavior would change if they felt safe. The GPL and ONS focused this research on youth because of an increase in violence involving this group in Saint Paul.

Age

42% ages 13-17
58% ages 18-24

Gender

56% Male
40% Female
4% Non-binary

Race and Ethnicity

58% Black or African American
22% Asian
20% Other

Neighborhood

34% East Side
18% Frogtown/Rondo
14% Downtown
10% West Side
24% Other

