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“IF FEAR WASN’T ENOUGH?!”: AFRICAN AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF  
POLICING AFTER BREONNA TAYLOR 'S UNPROVOKED DEATH

By

Moriah Antoinette Bellamy  
B.A., University of Louisville, 2019

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Pan-African Studies

Department of Pan-African Studies  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2021

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A Thesis Approved on

December 3, 2021

by following Thesis Committee

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Kalasia Ojeh

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Kossi Logan

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Kristin Swartz

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Breonna Taylor, David McAtee, George Floyd, and all of my African American brothers and sisters who have lost their lives as a result of racially biased policing practices. May your stories be remembered and serve as a manifesto declaring Black humanization and demanding the abolition of racialization in the criminal justice system.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chairperson, Dr. Kalasia Ojeh, for her support, wisdom, and patience throughout this process. Her mentorship during this journey has been invaluable and stretches beyond these pages. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Kossi Logan and Dr. Kristin Swartz for their continued support and guidance. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, friends, and sorority sisters of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., for their support on this journey has been endless and for that I am forever grateful.

## ABSTRACT

### “IF FEAR WASN’T ENOUGH?!”: AFRICAN AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AFTER THE UNPROVOKED DEATH OF BREONNA TAYLOR

Moriah A. Bellamy

December 3, 2021

This study investigates how African Americans perceive the racialization process in the criminal justice system following the death of Breonna Taylor. Focusing primarily on police-community relations in Louisville, KY, I find the Breonna Taylor case amplifies preconceived perceptions of race between civilian and non-civilian groups. To test the hypothesis that racialization in the criminal justice system has caused damaging effects on relations between African Americans and police, two virtual focus groups were designed to discuss participants’ experiences with law enforcement. My findings suggest that the racialization process in the criminal justice system negatively skewed African American civilians’ attitudes towards law enforcement and reaffirmed distrust between the groups. It is my recommendation to revolutionize law enforcement policing practices by restructuring policing practices with a focus on the community that eliminates racial bias and builds positive relationships that promote public safety and the well-being of all civilians regardless of race and ethnicity.



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## INTRODUCTION

African Americans' contact with law enforcement can lead to dangerous outcomes. (Alexander, 2010). The tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and David McAtee are prime examples of these dangerous outcomes. As these incidents became undeniably publicized in 2020, the year became a moment of racial enlightenment for many Americans. Not only did people begin to realize the role that race plays in the criminal justice system but also civilians began to reassess their relationship with law enforcement (Jefferies and Beckham, 2021).

After the death of Breonna Taylor, the African American civilians of Louisville, Kentucky, also known as Louisvillians<sup>1</sup> felt endangered by Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) Officers than protected. In response African American locals protested for 253 straight days in the streets, to no avail. They made efforts to validate their Black humanity, however, they were met with militarized police force instead of the compassion and empathy that would have come from a strong relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement. The death of Breonna Taylor and LMPD's response to protesters amplified the already existing tension between African American locals and LMPD, increasing distrust between both groups (Gibson et. al, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> I use Civilians and Louisvillians interchangeably when discussing African American people in Louisville.

In the aftermath of Breonna Taylor's death LMPD continued to police Black Louisvilleans using a punitive approach based on racial stereotypes about Black criminality. During this time the city of Louisville had its record number of homicides totaling 175. Seventy-five percent of the homicides were African American civilians. By the end of the year many of these homicide cases were left unsolved (Beane, 2021). LMPD's response to these statistics was to make more arrests and take the necessary measures to prevent criminal activity (Beane, 2021). LMPD failed to account for how this punitive approach to reducing crime would impact local civilians' perceptions of law enforcement, especially the African American community who have been primarily affected. Such policing practices in addition to Breonna Taylor's unprovoked death at the hands of LMPD have left African American locals to assume negative perceptions of law enforcement, creating an adverse relationship between the two groups.

Prior research on the relationship between police-community relations focusing on African American people neglect to adequately incorporate African American folks' perceptions of law enforcement and their experiences. When studying people of African descent, it is imperative to do so from a methodology that places African Americans' experiences at the core of research (McDougal, 2014). Therefore, this study will integrate an African studies methodological approach in order to provide an analysis of African American perceptions of law enforcement in Louisville, Kentucky in the aftermath of Breonna Taylor's death. Additionally, this research will highlight the treatment of African Americans by law enforcement officials during civilian protests in Louisville after the death of Breonna Taylor. Compared to other research, this study will discuss the ways in which law enforcement facilitates racialization in the criminal justice system

through the policing of Black bodies and how it impacts the relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement. Ultimately, this study aims to answer how racialized policing practices in Louisville, Kentucky impact African American civilian perceptions of LMPD and the nature of their relationship following the death of Breonna Taylor.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THE HISTORY OF RACE, RACISM, AND POLICING

In an analysis concerning law enforcement's role in the policing of Black bodies W.E.B DuBois states, "...The police system of the South was originally designed to keep track of all Negroes, not simply criminals..." (DuBois, 1901). This statement illustrates the historical origins—or initial intentions of policing. In fact, research regarding the history of policing in America reveals that race has always been a contributing factor in the ways in which law enforcement engages with African American civilians (Douglas, 2015). In order to address African American perceptions of law enforcement and the nature of their relationship, it is important to begin by acknowledging the historical ties and confronting the realities of America's past regardless of how harsh history may reveal itself to be. When researching people of African descent, it is imperative that researchers examine the sociohistorical experiences of the people they aim to survey (McDougal, 2014). To better understand contemporary issues, the past is relevant in that it provides the root cause of why events have transpired in the manner that they occurred.

Before law enforcement officials were officially established there were slave patrollers who, during the antebellum period, policed slave activity that remains apart of policing culture today (Douglas, 2015). In 1704, the American colonies established the first slave patrols (Pegues, 2017). Slave patrols were vigilante-style (Potter, 2013) and for early Americans, this was a lawful and legitimate system that implemented the law prior

to modern policing (Turner et. al., 2006). In addition to policing slave activity, slave patrollers administered punishment upon enslaved Africans. These punishments were typically violent and public acts against any of the enslaved men and women who dared to break slave codes and customs (Spruill, 2016). Slave patrols were established to maintain three key functions. Their first role as slave patrollers was to apprehend runaway slaves and return them to their slave owners (Potter, 2013). The second role of slave patrollers was to establish an organized group to terrorize and repress slave insurrections. Lastly, slave patrollers were tasked with maintaining a disciplinary system for enslaved Africans who violated the rules and regulations of the plantation (Potter, 2013). Slave patrollers accomplished these goals by exercising their power over the enslaved through fear and violence (Spruill, 2016). Ultimately, the goal of the slave patrols was to manage the enslaved Africans, the vital source to sustaining the financial capital of the plantation. This law enforcement system was established to reinforce the established social order of white supremacy and maintain the economic well-being of slave owners that we still see today (Pegues, 2017).

Immediately after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, slave patrols in the South evolved into modern policing essentially to maintain control of the newly freed African Americans and implement Jim Crow laws (Potter, 2013). The construction of early modern policing was modeled after several factors that society believed were essential to uphold. One of these factors was the need to regulate those who were deemed a part of the dangerous class. Despite their circumstances, resistance efforts made by enslaved Africans forged them into this social class. Enslaved Africans were already considered dangerous while in bondage. After enslaved Africans were freed, it only

magnified the existing racial stereotype that characterized African Americans as uncivilized and dangerous beings. (Spruill, 2016). Because of this blatant over-criminalization of African Americans, police were intentionally sent by southern government officials to enforce segregation laws (Grabiner, 2016).

The relationship between African Americans and law enforcement has been predicated on the maintenance of Black inferiority (Douglas, 2015). African Americans were not granted citizenship within the United States of American until the fourteenth amendment was passed in 1868 and even then, their rights as citizens were not honored for decades to come (Alexander, 2010). As modern policing began to develop, implications suggest that police officers, particularly in the South, were expected to make major adjustments. These amendments required law enforcement officers to shift from imposing slave patrol practices to implementing modern policing practices that required servicing African Americans – in only a matter of three years’ time. If policing practices were fundamentally structured to patrol and subject African Americans, then how was modern policing ever supposed to become an equitable system meant to protect and serve *all* citizens of the United States of America? The countless murder Black folks suggest that modern policing has not.

The failure to effectively revamp modern policing proved beneficial for the Jim Crow South. Modern policing was used to enforce the Jim Crow legislation which fundamentally maintained racial discrimination and segregation. Jim Crow laws regulated the actions and behaviors of African Americans as a means to reassert racist sentiments from enslavement. Curfews were implemented only for African American civilians and public spaces were demarcated in order to physically segregate whites and African

Americans. Police officers were responsible for enforcing these laws and reprimanding African Americans in the case that they would dare to disrupt the imposed social order. Nevertheless, the Civil Rights Movement was an era for which many African Americans fought tirelessly to dismantle racialized social control in the United States of America (Alexander, 2010). As African Americans fought to end segregation in the 1950s and early 1960s, they were met with law enforcement opposition. In efforts to subdue these civil rights activists, police officers hosed protesters, sent canine units to attack them, and assaulted them with their Billy clubs (Pegues, 2017). Police officers were employed to carry out political agendas that served to maintain Jim Crow (Klarman, 1994). It was clear that during this time law enforcement worked to protect the interests of white supremacists, which were ultimately disadvantageous to the African American community (Pegues, 2017).

Law enforcement's involvement in maintaining white supremacist ideals illustrate how the social and political climate can significantly influence police officer behavior over time. Eugene "Bull" Connor's conduct exemplifies this role that law enforcement played during the Civil Rights Movement. Bull Connor served as the Public Safety Commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama from 1937 until 1963. During his reign in office, he administered direct orders for the police department that explicitly opposed the Civil Rights Movement (Manis, 1999; Pegues, 2017). Moreover, Connor's administration exuded anti-Black sentiments. In fact, he ordered the officers under his command to rule Black fatalities from police misconduct as "justifiable homicide" (Manis, 1999, p. 80). When the NAACP publicly demanded that the United States Department of Justice investigate the department's corruption and discriminatory policing practices, Connor's



administration was resistant and failed to counter a local saying that represented the climate in Birmingham. The saying professed, “If the Klan don’t stop you, the Police will; if the Police don’t stop you, the courts will.” (Manis, 1999, p. 80). This slogan describes the racial discrimination pervading the criminal justice system. Though this took place decades ago, these issues are still prominent today. Police department agencies have continued to cover up police misconduct that suggests a prevalence of racial discrimination against African Americans. LMPD’s blatant misconduct and mishandling of the Breonna Taylor case is a primary example of racialized policing practices that encourage police abuse of power and authority that will be further discussed later in this study.

Following desegregation, racist sentiments remained amongst the public. Police officers were in no way immune to these racial biases that derived from societal perceptions concerning African Americans (Alexander, p.103). Therefore, discriminatory law enforcement practices continued and are still continuing today. This policing history has significantly impacted African Americans’ perceptions of law enforcement. These sentiments are depicted in recent polls reporting on the public opinions of the police. In a survey conducted in 2013, when asked if individuals felt significant progress had been made in police relations since 1963, only 32% of African Americans responded that they agreed progression had been made. In a 2015 survey---year after Mike Brown was fatally shot by a police officer while unarmed and with his hands in the air in surrender---results revealed that 76% of African Americans believed that there are issues in the criminal justice system concerning law enforcement and race (Pegues, 2017).

In fact, Spruill (2016) goes as far as to say that the policing practices in the Ferguson Police Department imitate slave patrol methods during the antebellum period (43). The United States Department of Justice uncovered the police department's discriminatory policing practices against African American civilians. Some of these practices mirror discriminatory trends that have survived throughout enslavement and the civil rights movement. Law enforcement officials in Ferguson were found by the DOJ (Department of Justice) to have intentionally targeted African American civilians using their canine units. Officers instructed their canines to attack nonviolent offenders without any justification for this accelerated use of force. Moreover, the Department of Justice confirmed that these law enforcement practices were racially motivated (Spruill, 2016). This style of policing practices originated from slave patrol tactics that were used to recapture runaway enslaved Africans. Not only do these methods of policing mimic historically racist sentiments, but the ways in which police officers have avoided accountability are also comparable (Spruill, 2016).

Pivotal in calling attention to these racial injustices were activists and organizations such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. These advocates lobby for racial justice and call attention to the racial disparities permeating throughout the criminal justice system. Furthermore, they investigate the ways in which racially biased policing practices over-criminalize African American civilians. Since 2012, the Black Lives Matter Movement has been advocating for the "(i) the abolition of the long-standing criminalization of the lives of people of color in the hands of local administrations of

justice and (ii) the abolition of the long-standing enactment of police violence on the lives of unarmed people of color in those same hands” (Pierce, 2020, p. 276). The Black Lives Matter movement is a declaration to law enforcement, demanding the recognition of Black humanity. ‘Black Lives Matter’ is a call to action. It demands for police officers to cease their involvement in policing practices that characterize African Americans as overtly dangerous and criminal (Pierce, 2020). This movement is a continuation of a long history of efforts within the African American community to challenge the existing racial order in the United States of America. Black Lives Matter is an extension of historical movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. What these three movements all have in common is their dedication to eliminating forces facilitating institutional racism, one of which is the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement policing practices. However, the focus of this paper is not to provide an in-depth discussion of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Although, it is important to acknowledge the movement’s efforts in the struggle against police brutality and discriminatory policing practices.

### RACIALIZATION IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

For centuries African Americans have been confronting society’s disdain for Black humanity. The sociohistorical dehumanization of Black bodies has produced stereotypes that have ascribed animalistic characteristics to African Americans. In turn, these stereotypes have ultimately caused African Americans to become relegated based upon categorizations that label them as “thugs”, having no respect for society’s law and order (Pierce, 2020). This has made African Americans vulnerable targets for the criminal justice system. Anyone bold enough to resist and confront the systems that

perpetuate the racialization of the criminal justice system are deemed outlaws and therefore subject to the very system they dare to challenge (Pierce, 2020). In an effort to restore law and order, law enforcement officers – being the ones responsible for its implementation – seek to apprehend the outlaws. During this process, police officers internalize these racist societal stereotypes and over-criminalize the African American civilians they come into contact with. By engaging in these prejudicial practices, police officers have become crucial facilitators in the racialization of the criminal justice system.

The transpiring events of 2020 maintain research findings that demonstrate the ways in which African Americans have experienced defenselessness to brutality and even death when interacting with law enforcement. The disproportionate rates at which African Americans are experiencing this is fundamentally a consequence of the overcriminalization of African American civilians in the criminal justice system (Pierce, 2020). African American death rates during police encounters are significantly disproportionate compared to any other race (Alexander, 2010). In a racial analysis of the disproportionate rates of fatal officer shootings, researchers found that though African Americans make up 13% of the population in the United States, 24% of African Americans were killed by police. According to CBS News, there were 164 known cases of police officer shootings that resulted in the death of African Americans within the first 8 months of 2020 (Cohen, 2020). Contrastingly, whites make up 60% of the nation's population and 46% of whites were killed by police. These racial disparities within the criminal justice system are concerning and deserve serious attention.

Any efforts that were made to vocalize these injustices only exacerbated existing tension between African Americans and law enforcement. Both police officers and African Americans were faced with immense challenges during this time. It seemed as if officers felt undervalued and disrespected as they tried to fulfill the orders that were given to them. On the other hand, African American civilians seemed to feel unheard and even blatantly ignored by law enforcement officials. Additionally, African American civilians were left feeling dismayed by the need to reiterate that their lives mattered also.

For the purpose of this research, this paper redefines policing practices. Policing practices are the routine customs that law enforcement officials exercise during their encounters with civilians. During this interaction, law enforcement officials completely disregard standard departmental protocols and procedures and act on their own recognizance. In other words, police officers conduct is not organizational, instead it has been shaped by social constructions. There is no standard definition of policing practices, therefore this research takes on the task of redefining police practices. Precedented research regarding police practices have ambiguous meanings guided by a common assumption that police practices are rules, tactics, and standards for which model the ways in which officers of the law protect and serve. This notion also assumes that police practices and police procedures are synonymous. This is not the case given that policing practices are shaped by officer attitudes and the contemporary societal opinions and biases of the time (Alexander, 2010). In other words, the prevalence of racial biases in society infiltrates officer attitudes and policing practices. These adopted societal perceptions ultimately end up influencing police interactions with African Americans. When officers approach African American civilians, they habitually engage in practices

that hostility and preconceived assumptions about the African American race. Basically, they criminalize African American civilians solely based upon their racial make-up (Douglas, 2015).

Additionally, for the purpose of the research, it is necessary to distinguish how policing practices differ from implicit biases. Implicit biases suggest that police officers are acting unconsciously when they encounter African American civilians and engage in discriminatory policing practices. It also subscribes to an ideology that suggests eradicating acts of racism, or in this case, racist police officers, is the key to resolving racially biased practices. Alexander (2010) provides an example of these racially biased policing practices from a research study that showed African American pedestrians in New York were stopped by police officers six more times than white pedestrians. African American civilians were disproportionately targeted by police, yet white pedestrians proved more likely to be arrested during the stop (Alexander, 2010). Although these encounters each occurred on an individual level and suggest individual implicit biases against African American civilians, these individual acts as a collective create a culture of racially biased policing practices that facilitate institutional racism.

Police officers are recognized as the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system (Gaines et al., 1999). In other words, officers are criminal justice actors who are responsible for introducing people into the criminal justice system. Law enforcement officials have a decision-making process that affords them immense discretion on how to enforce and regulate the law. Yet, these decisions are easily influenced by societal racism. Therefore, officers tend to project racial biases within their encounters onto African American civilians (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, because law enforcement

officials work in an environment that requires them to continuously perceive potential cases of violence, they develop a set of policing practices that identify, or can gradually begin to attribute certain characteristics to a specific class of people. Police categorize these attributes into two groups: threatening and nonthreatening. Then, based upon a civilian's gestures, attire, or racial make-up officers make mental assessments on the civilian's potential to be a threat. In doing so, these police practices allow officers to respond to any indications quickly and habitually they may perceive to be dangerous, regardless of whether or not they are in actual danger (Johnson et. al., 2015). In this case, race is the identifier and African Americans are the targets of these policing practices. These racist perceptions marginalize African Americans, falsely perceiving them as threatening. Therefore, when an officer engages in an encounter with an African American civilian, the officer's instinct to use excessive force is heightened, escalating matters.

Many of these encounters typically result in an arrest followed by confinement, or in recent encounters an unjustified death. As African Americans witness these discriminatory and life-threatening practices from officers who vowed to "protect and serve" the people, they begin to develop cynicism toward law enforcement thus, cultivating negative perceptions and a distrust of police officers (Kirk and Papachristos, 2011). This ideology of legal cynicism comes from the perception, which has proved to also be a reality, that law enforcement officers treat African Americans different from their white counterparts. This assumption is reflected in a poll revealed that four out of ten African Americans and Hispanics felt afraid that law enforcement would stop and

arrest them even though they were not guilty of any criminal behavior (Weitzer and Touch, 2006).

Understanding racialization is key in order to grasp how the phenomenon is applicable to the United States criminal justice system. Racialization is the “process by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon” (Murji and Solomos, 2005, p. 1). Racialization focuses on how physical characteristics can obtain meaning that defines an individual’s position in society. Race was originally established as a mechanism for which people began to identify others in correspondence with their biological differences, more specifically the color of their skin. This process is a natural habit for human beings. Placing people into social categories is how people navigate through the world in their everyday lives. However, this process easily manifests into othering. Individuals begin to categorize people into groups using various perceived attributes, forming stereotypes that can be dangerously discriminatory (Omi and Winant, 2015). Eventually, white people began constructing negative stereotypes and ideas about minority races that soon became a fixed part of their given identity. The African American race had become the main target of racialization (Murji and Solomos, 2005). These racist perceptions are evident within the ways in which African Americans are treated in the criminal justice system, particularly by law enforcement officials.

The criminal justice system’s structure and practices affirm and create racial meanings (Alexander, 2010). Societal attitudes toward African Americans have infiltrated the justice system and been adopted by police officers, making it difficult for African Americans to receive fair treatment. These biases have created racial disparities



in the criminal justice system that are facilitated by the police. For instance, as mentioned before, African Americans are more likely to be targeted by police. If the officer decides to arrest the individual, in court it is likely that the judge and prosecutor will sentence them to a lengthy time behind bars because of the biases that suggest African Americans are more likely to reoffend. Such disparities in sentencing adds to the disproportionate population of African Americans in prisons and jails, ultimately generating a cycle that reinforces Black criminality (Haney-Lopez, 2006). The over-criminalization of African Americans functions as a tool to maintain a “new racism”. “New racism” is the conceptualization of a new systemic approach that reconstructs racial inferiority using implicit modes of racism (HoSang et al., 2012).

Ironically, this phenomenon is not *new*. The sociohistorical narrative regarding African Americans and law enforcement show that these practices have been happening for centuries. Racism is adaptable and as racial constructions are challenged through time, systemic racism evolves, taking shape in the form of a scheme that continues to maintain white supremacy and repress any efforts that may threaten the established racial order. Alexander contends that this new form of racism has manifested into mass incarceration. Overall, imposing the same racial construct but with a new politically implicit approach. This process is what Reva Siegel calls, “preservation through transformation” (Alexander, 2010). Alexander’s work maintains that as racism evolves, so too does the criminal justice system. In fact, the criminal justice system has facilitated this continuous cycle of racial oppression. The evidence of this phenomenon is embedded in the history of race and law enforcement. For instance, after the racial progress of the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, by the 1980s the advancements that had been

made were eradicated by emergence of the “War on Drugs”, which funneled African Americans into the criminal justice system from trumped up drug charges, ultimately fueling mass incarceration (Clarence, 2013).

Law enforcement serves to protect civilians. Yet, police practices have shown to engage in discriminatory conduct against African American civilians that implicate the opposite outcome. Race has become a significant factor in how officers choose to treat civilians. Therefore, this study aims to research how the racialization of the criminal justice system impacts the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement. The research hypothesizes that the racialization of the criminal justice system has caused damaging effects on relations between African Americans and the police. The long-standing history between Black people and law enforcement as well as recent police killings will have a significant effect on African American’s perceptions of law enforcement. For officers, their field experience will have a significant impact on their perceptions of African American civilians. Finally, they will demonstrate little knowledge of the racial histories between African Americans and law enforcement.

The purpose of this research is not to suggest that all law enforcement officers are corrupt or racist. In fact, there are good police officers that exist and that work to improve relations with African American civilians. What this research does suggest is that racially biased systems constructed on the premises of white supremacy are corrupt, racist and working to maintain the inferiority of African Americans in efforts to preserve the dominance of white privilege and power via racialization in the United States of America’s criminal justice system.

## THE BREONNA TAYLOR CASE

The Breonna Taylor case and the aftermath that followed is an example of the racialization that continues to take place within the criminal justice system in the United States of America. On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was fatally shot by police officers employed by LMPD in Louisville, Kentucky. Taylor was in her home sleeping alongside her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, when plain clothes law enforcement officials raided the home using a no-knock warrant. Taylor and Walker were awakened when the officers used a battering ram to forcibly enter the home. According to Walker, both he and Taylor called out to see who was at the door but were given no response. Walker retrieved a gun to protect the two from what they deemed to be a threat to their safety. Once the officers broke down the apartment door, Walker responded with one gun shot, striking an officer in the thigh. In retaliation, the officers on the scene fired numerous shots—five of which struck and killed Breonna Taylor.

Law enforcement officials on the case were investigating suspects that they believed to be selling drugs out of Taylor's home. A warrant was issued to search Taylor's home because the police claimed that one of the suspects was using her residence to receive packages as a result of their previous relationship ties.

The facts of Breonna Taylor's case uncovered by the LMPD's investigation demonstrate that there were several instances of police misconduct. First, the no-knock warrant that was issued through the court for the raid, there were orders given that modified their approach to a "knock and announce". A "knock and announce" warrant requires law enforcement officials to knock and identify themselves as the police before entering. According to Kenneth Walker, in the event of the raid, he and Taylor did hear a

banging at the door. However, when they questioned the banger's identity, they did not hear the alleged announcement from the police. To reinforce the legitimacy of Walker's claim is his call to 911 dispatch. In the recorded call he states, "I don't know what's happening. Someone kicked in the door and shot my girlfriend." The only evidence supporting the officer's claims that they did indeed knock and announce is the testimony of an alleged eyewitness whose statements were unreliable and contradictory (Oppel and Taylor, 2020).

Secondly, Brett Hankison blindly shot off ten rounds toward Taylor's home. As a result, Hankison seriously endangered the lives of innocent civilians adjacent to the scene. Thirdly, the officers conducting the raid relieved the ambulance on duty from the scene approximately an hour before the raid commenced (Oppel and Taylor, 2020). The ambulance on standby is supposed to remain stationed in the event that during the raid someone is severely injured. In fact, an ambulance on the scene functions as routine protocol for the department (Oppel and Taylor, 2020). After Breonna Taylor was shot five times, Walker contends that she struggled for her life for nearly five minutes before she took her last breath. His testimony suggests that if an ambulance was present, then Taylor could have been properly cared for, increasing the chances of her still being alive today. Moreover, regardless of ambulance presence on the scene, the police officers failed to administer medical assistance to Taylor. More than 20 minutes had gone by after Taylor was shot by the police before she was given any medical attention (Oppel and Taylor, 2020).

Another malpractice that investigators uncovered were the errors on the incident report submitted by the police officers involved. There were several mistakes on the

report, one of which recorded that Taylor's injuries from the incident as "none" although she had been fatally shot five times. Furthermore, the report stated that there was no forced entry into Taylor's home, despite evidence that the officers used a battering ram to enter the home.

Despite the investigation's discoveries of police misconduct, no law enforcement officials involved in the raid were charged for Breonna Taylor's death. Rather, Brett Hankison, one of the two officers who fired shots into Taylor's home, was charged for wanton endangerment for firing gun shots that hit the apartment of one of Taylor's neighbors. Brett Hankison was terminated a few months after Breonna Taylor was killed on the basis that he showed "an extreme indifference to the value of human life" (Oppel and Taylor, 2020). The two other officers involved, Myles Cosgrove and Joshua Jaynes were officially terminated ten months later. Investigation shows/illustrates that the raid was inadequately planned and recklessly executed.

The Breonna Taylor case illustrates racialized policing practices in the LMPD. Furthermore, the aftermath of events that transpired give insight into the impact that race has on the relationships between law enforcement officers and African American civilians. Therefore, this paper aims to survey how exactly racially biased policing practices function as a tool to racialize the United States criminal justice system and ultimately impact community relations between police officers and members of the African American community.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was originally designed to gather the perceptions and experiences of both Louisville African American civilians and LMPD. The initial model of the research was comprised of three separate focus groups. The first focus group consisted of approximately six African American locals. The second focus group consisted of approximately four police officers employed by LMPD. The third focus group was comprised of a combination of the participants from the first and second groups. The initial goal of the research was to facilitate a dialogue between members of the African American community and LMPD.

During the recruitment process, efforts to recruit police officers in the Louisville, Kentucky area to participate in the study were not successful. Speculations suggest that the inability to recruit police officers is due to the open investigation of Breonna Taylor's death by the Kentucky state attorney and federal government. Police officers may be reluctant to freely discuss their opinions and their experiences related to their duties as law enforcement officials. This could potentially be a result of the distrust between African American civilians and the police. Additionally, this could be a result of fear. LMPD officers may be fearful of the various media outlets that intend to gather police officer input concerning policing practices, race and racism, and high-profile shootings such as the Breonna Taylor case. Officers may feel that some outlets could possibly distort their opinions and experiences or even, place them in a position to where they may

face termination from their place of employment. Furthermore, there is also a culture of silence in police departments that deter police officers from sharing their experiences and their opinions on topics related to race and police brutality (Pegues, 2017). Officers do not want to break this code of silence. Some police officers feel obliged to protect themselves as well as their peers in uniform from any possible consequences in the case that information is revealed that could be incriminating. This is expected due to the high profile of Breonna Taylor's case in Louisville, KY. As long as racialized policing practices continue to occur, especially as frequently as it has been happening at this moment in time, police officers will continue to express a reluctance to openly discuss these pertinent issues.

The research study was modified to solely focus on Louisville African American civilian perceptions of LMPD. To examine how racialized policing practices in Louisville, Kentucky impact African American civilian perceptions of LMPD and the nature of their relationship following the death of Breonna Taylor, this study conducted focus groups in order to gather information regarding local African American experiences, their perceptions of local law enforcement, and the deterioration of their relationship with LMPD. The study consisted of two separate focus groups. Each focus group was conducted virtually using a video conferencing application. Participants were randomly selected residents of Louisville, Kentucky. Each focus group consisted of five African American participants totaling approximately ten local African American participants. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 30. Three of the participants identified as male. Seven participants identified as female. The length of Louisville residency among participants varied between 5 and 24 years. Four out of the

eleven participants stated that they are from Louisville, Kentucky. All participants had obtained at least some college educational background. The household income among participants varied from \$30,000-\$80,000 annually.

The first focus group consisted of five participants. The first participant is Joshua, a 24-year-old male from in Louisville. He grew up in a single parent household with his mother with an annual household income of \$60,000. Another participant is Miranda, a 25-year-old from Newport News, Virginia. She grew up in a two-parent household with two other siblings. Miranda has lived in Louisville for eight years. Her annual income is \$60,500. Her highest level of education is a master's in engineering. Another one of the participants in the first focus group is Chelsea. Chelsea is a 23-year-old female from in Louisville. Her highest level of education is a bachelor's degree in nursing. Chelsea grew up with divorced parents along with two other siblings. Her annual income is \$30,000. Another participant is Jasmine, a 23-year-old female from Louisville. Her highest level of education is a bachelor's degree in accounting and computer information systems. Jasmine was raised in a two-parent household with an income of \$75,000. The last participant in the first focus group is Sasha, a 26-year-old female from Fort Wayne, Indiana. She has lived in Louisville for the past 15 years. Her annual income in \$81,000. Sasha was raised by single parents as the youngest of 8 siblings.

The second focus group consists of five participants. Damien is a 25-year-old male from Richmond, Kentucky. He has lived in Louisville for 5 years. He grew up in a two-parent household as the only child. Damien's highest level of education is a bachelor's degree in computer information science. His annual income is \$80,000. Sophia is also a participant in the second focus group. She is a 28-year-old female from



Cincinnati, Ohio. She has resided in Louisville for 10 years. Her highest level of education is a master's degree in physiology. Sophia grew up in a single parent household as the oldest of four. Sophia's annual income is less than \$20,000. Another participant is Marissa, a 23-year-old female from Louisville. She has lived in Louisville all of her life. Marissa's highest level of education is a bachelor's degree in communication. She grew up in a two-parent household with four other siblings. Her annual income is unknown. Latrese is another participant. She is 23-year-old female from Indianapolis, Indiana. She has lived in Louisville for 5 and a half years. Her highest level of education is a bachelor's in business administration in computer information systems. She grew up with divorced parents as the youngest of three. Her annual income is \$70,000. The last participant in the second focus group is Mason, a 30-year-old male from Chicago, Illinois. He has lived in Louisville for four years. His highest level of education is some college. He grew up with his maternal grandparents. His annual income is less than \$20,000.

Both focus groups were asked a set of guided questions to facilitate discussions concerning the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding race relations between African Americans and law enforcement. The questions were constructed to highlight three particular aims in the research to better understand the relationship between Louisville African American civilians and LMPD. These aims are directed to control for responses concerning: (1) how the criminal justice system works, (2) how the police facilitate racialization in the criminal justice system, and (3) how this relates to the African American community.

To collect and examine participant responses from each focus group, the research utilized grounded theory. Grounded theory is an efficient research method for revealing pertinent information about social relationships and behaviors (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). For the purpose of this study grounded theory offers an in-depth analysis of the participant's experiences and perceptions of LMPD. This research method helps to eliminate preexisting social ideologies. Additionally, grounded theory aids this research in that it surveys African American civilian's perceptions of law enforcement in a detailed manner that adequately represents their attitudes, experience and opinions (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). After the focus groups were conducted, participant responses were transcribed and then coded using grounded theory's three stages of data analysis (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). In the first stage, open coding, each transcript from the focus groups was coded line by line to identify phrases, patterns, and categories. During this stage of analysis, participant responses were compared in order to locate similarities and differences among participants. In the second stage, axial coding, the study examined participant responses to establish relationships and potential themes within the research data. Lastly, in the third stage, selective coding, the categories and themes were refined in order to solidify the underlying themes and findings of the research (Noble and Mitchell, 2016).

This research is oriented with an Africana Studies approach. The study was conducted incorporating the Afrocentric Paradigm, the Tripartite Model of Racism, as well as Critical Race Theory. This paradigm combined with these two theories helps to highlight the aims of this study. Additionally, this approach helps to navigate the research so that it is conducted within the best interests of the Louisville African

American civilians while it functions to find methods to liberate the community from racialized policing practices within law enforcement.

The Afrocentric Paradigm is the most effective framework that aligns with the aims of this research in assessing Louisville African American civilian's perceptions regarding their relationship with LMPD. The Afrocentric Paradigm is derived from the Afrocentricity ideology. Afrocentricity suggests that one of the main issues facing the African American community is the adoption of Eurocentric ideals and frameworks that are incapable of accurately representing the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of the people of African descent. By adopting Westernized conceptual frameworks to address situations that are highly impacting the African American community, it restricts their experiences to the purview of the European, or white experience (Mazama, 2001).

As a consequence of enslavement, people of African descent had become a dislocated community, forced to adopt European orientations. These orientations tend to negatively stereotype people of African descent. They do not provide depictions of people of African descent without incorporating racial bias. Portrayals of African American experiences are labeled negatively, inaccurately or, simply taboo because these experiences do not align with the Eurocentric way of thinking. Ultimately, Eurocentric theoretical frameworks are problematic in that it positions European ideals at the center and as the basis for examining all people's viewpoints, regardless of race, ethnicity and other demographics.

In contrast, Afrocentricity "places Africa at the center of African people's world while stressing all people entitlement to practice and celebrate in their own culture as long as it does not interfere with the collective well-being" (Mazama, 2001, p.389). In

other words, Afrocentricity acknowledges that people of different backgrounds, whether it be cultural, social, or economic, possess various perspectives therefore they should be equipped with the necessary tools that best suits their needs (Mazama, 2001). As a derivative of Afrocentricity, the Afrocentric Paradigm posits African culture, experiences, and ideals at the core of research. It seeks to study people of African descent while simultaneously advocating for their advancement (McDougal, 2014). According to this model, Afrocentric scholars should perceive the world through a lens guided by the three pyramidal elements of Afrocentricity: Grounding, Orientation, and Perspective. The objective of Grounding is for researchers to understand African history and the experiences of African descendants. This is key to this research in that it focuses on the socio-historical context of African Americans in order to investigate their relationship with law enforcement. Also, the experiences of the participants are essential to answering the research question. Orientation indicates that scholars must possess a regard for people of African descent as well as an interest in the fulfillment of their needs. This paper will discuss the racial disparities within the criminal justice system, particularly the ways in which African Americans are mistreated by police officers. Lastly, Perspective suggests that scholars view the world from a perspective that seeks ways to liberate and empower people of African descent (McDougal, 2014).

To effectively study African American perceptions of their relationship with law enforcement, the research will best do so using the Afrocentric Paradigm. Doing so will provide that African American experiences and their opinions are examined with a positive and constructive assessment. Also, it will maintain that scholars are able to acknowledge every facet of the African American lived experience. This includes, but is

not limited to African American culture, education, economics, and religion. Afrocentricity compels researchers to study African Americans with the aim of “cultivating a consciousness of victory” (Mazama, 2001, p.389) and striving to improve better conditions (McDougal, 2014), rather than focusing on oppression. Though this research addresses the discriminatory practices and conditions within the United States criminal justice system, its main focus is to seek ways to cultivate better relationships between African American civilians and law enforcement. This element is the ultimate goal of this study. I hope to utilize the findings to assist in the improvement of community-police relations within African American neighborhoods. One of the basic assumptions of the Afrocentric Paradigm is that the most efficient way to understand African Americans is from their own viewpoint. When examining each participant’s response, it requires the researcher to set aside any biases and position myself to see the world as they do in their encounters with law enforcement.

The Tripartite Model of Racism is well suited for the methodology of this research. James Jones’ Tripartite Model of racism defines racism as “an exercise of power against a racial group defined as inferior, by individuals and institutions with the intentional or unintentional support of the entire culture” (McDougal, 2014). Jones’ definition demonstrates the manner in which policing practices facilitate racialization in the criminal justice system. This definition acknowledges that racism can occur not only on an individual level, but also on an institutional level, just as this research suggests that the criminal justice system is racialized, and individual policing practices are what facilitate this systemic racism. Furthermore, the definition recognizes that racism can be both conscious and unconscious. Police officers that engage in racially biased policing

practices may not intentionally discriminate and target African American civilians. Police that perceive African Americans as dangerous and innately criminal may not consciously project these sentiments during their encounters with African American civilians. However, these practices are rooted in racism and perpetuate ideologies of white supremacy and Black inferiority.

This model recognizes that there are different levels of racism. The first level is the individual racism. This is racism that occurs when individuals participate in acts that are suppressive or deny any goods or services from individuals that belong to another racial group that is characterized as subservient (McDougal, 2014). The second level of racism is institutional racism. This is racism that is fundamentally ingrained in the functionality of a society's institutions and policies. Institutional racism happens "as a consequence of the conscious or unconscious manipulation of institutions in ways that perpetuate inequality." (McDougal, 2014, p.76). The third level of racism is cultural racism. This degree of racism occurs from the belief that one's cultural practices and traditions are racially superior to that of another groups (McDougal, 2014).

The Tripartite Model of Racism contends that the ways in which racism is perceived and understood is important to assessing how it should be accurately addressed (McDougal, 2014). For instance, if racism is mistaken for prejudice, then solutions to address this issue will attempt to change people's attitudes and beliefs. However, people changing their attitudes and beliefs does not directly tackle an issue if it is fundamentally woven in numerous institutions in society. The most adequate solution to racism will require a reform within the policies and laws because it is a matter that is occurring both

individually and institutionally. Having a proper conceptualization of racism helps to avoid these mistakes.

This paper will use this model of racism to investigate how policing practices facilitate racialization in the criminal justice system. Specifically, to recognize that though racially biased policing practices are committed on an individual scale among officers, these individual acts contribute to maintaining institutional racism in the criminal justice system. Also, this model will help provide a better understanding of the historical origins of the criminalization of African Americans, as well as the outcomes of such disadvantages (McDougal, 2014). Additionally, with this model this research can study how participants have personally experienced racism individually, institutionally, and culturally to assess their experiences with racism and the criminal justice system in the United States and whether it has impacted their relationship with law enforcement.

Critical race theory helps to depict the various ways in which the criminal justice system perpetuates racism. Critical race theory is defined as the “radical legal movement that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado, 2001, p. 144). Using the frameworks of both critical race theory and racial formation theory reveals how the criminal justice system is used to maintain racial subordination as well as preserve white privilege and power. In doing so, law enforcement officials, as the gatekeepers of the criminal justice systems, have become the actors who carry out this racist agenda.

Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to investigate how racialization in the criminal justice system impacts African American perceptions of law enforcement in Louisville, Kentucky following the death of Breonna Taylor. Additionally, this research

aims to create opportunities for LMPD to know and understand how African American civilians are feeling and provide insight on what locals would like to see happen in their community to improve their relations with local law enforcement.



## RESULTS

Based on the dialogue amongst participants, the research revealed four major themes in this study: distrust, fear, influence, and resentment. These themes help to assess how African American participants perceived their relationships with law enforcement. Through African American perceptions of law enforcement policing practices—whether or not they are viewed as racially biased—we are able to evaluate the ways in which police officers facilitate racialization in the criminal justice system and how it can impact their relationship with African American civilians. The purpose of this study is to specifically focus on how racialization in the criminal justice system has impacted the relationship between African American civilians in Louisville, Kentucky and LMPD in light of the Breonna Taylor case.

According to the results of the study and in reference to the Tripartite Model of Racism, acts of individual, institutional and cultural racism were all found to be witnessed by participants in the study (McDougal, 2014). Participants relayed having experienced all three forms of racism from their encounters with law enforcement officers. The most prevalent of these forms experienced by the participants was institutional racism. Although there were testimonies involving individual and cultural racism, the participants in both focus groups heavily engaged in conversation concerning the racial biases that occur on an institutional level. This is important to highlight because it demonstrates how racialization in the criminal justice system is a development the “new racism”.

Majority of participants expressed an overall distrust, fear, and resentment of the LMPD as well as other non-local law enforcement officials. According to participant responses, the distrust, fear, and resentment stems from participant's awareness of the racialization taking place within the criminal justice system. The study found that participants perceptions of law enforcement were based on a variety of factors: personal experiences, second-hand experiences—a friend or family member—and social media. Racially bias policing is continuously illustrated through these outlets. As a result, the racial disparities permeating throughout the criminal justice system have created a stigma against law enforcement officers within the African American community. In fact, majority of the participants stated that the content they had seen on the news and social media influenced their perceptions of law enforcement. Additionally, the study found that the participant's peers significantly influenced their perception of law enforcement. Here, Sasha shares how she came to develop her own perception of the criminal justice system:

I would say that social media influences my opinion of the criminal justice system heavily. Yea, because you hear all sides of it, but you mostly hear the sides of your peers. Your peers always tend to be on the negative side of the criminal justice system. Because sometimes they're expressing opinions on how they don't like how things are going.

Sasha acknowledges how social media and peer experiences have influenced her opinion of the criminal justice system. In this particular case, these factors negatively shaped her perceptions of the criminal justice system. The significant impact that the news and social media have had on participant perceptions of the criminal justice system and law enforcement can be greatly contributed to the fact that most participants did not personally experience an encounter with law enforcement. Narratives from friends and family members shaped participant perceptions of law enforcement officers.

Interestingly, more participants had personal experiences with LMPD than other law enforcement officials. Typically, encounters with law enforcement are situations involving a traffic violation. However, majority of these personal experiences took place at the local protests for Breonna Taylor's death. Participants who were present during the protests shared their experiences, expressing resentment toward the LMPD officers on the scene.

Furthermore, majority of participants expressed that their overall perception of the police is negative. Some participants shared that these negative perceptions were directly associated with the negative encounters they experienced with police officers. Some participant's negative perceptions were tied to the fact that they do not feel safe in the presence of law enforcement, nor do they feel secure calling their local police in any case of emergency. Many participants stated that another issue they face with law enforcement stems from officer abuse of power. Some participants felt that some police officers would even go as far as to harass them in order to assert their authority over them. As a result, participants expressed resentment toward police officers for abusing their authority. In comparison, only Marissa stated that her overall perception of law enforcement was positive. Marissa not only shared that she has had positive experiences with law enforcement, but she also expressed feeling safe and secure in the presence of law enforcement.

When participants were given a scenario that would provide them the opportunity to have full control over LMPD, participant answers overall expressed a need for officers to undergo more training. More specifically, some participants stated that they would implement proper training on how to better use their weaponry when responding to

various incidents. Other participants stated that they would implement minority relations training. This would include racial bias training as well as mentally and physically disable persons. These participant responses suggest that there lies a generally concern for how police officers interact with civilians in various situations. Majority of participants expressed that they have expectations for how they believe law enforcement officials should protect and serve their them as civilians. This expectation carries with a participant who shared that if he had control of LMPD relation, then he would implement community programs that would promote and facilitate positive interactions between Black youth and LMPD police officers. The results of this study showcase that there is an underlying desire within the African American community to cultivate better relationships with police officers. When participants were prompted to share their individual neighborhood relationship with law enforcement, the majority stated that the interactions and involvement of police officers in their community was sparse if even existent. They also stated that they would prefer for LMPD police to be more actively involved in their neighborhoods.

When asked whether participants felt that the criminal justice system always had racially bias policing practices and instances of police brutality, all participants agreed that there was a deep historical pattern of racially motivated misconduct. Additionally, some participants even began to parallel current events with past events in history where law enforcement officers engaged in racialized policing practices.

Particularly in this case, the racialized institution is the criminal justice system. Mason shared his own experience with LMPD not long after he moved to Louisville, Kentucky:

And just even recently before I even moved here, I think like I got stopped like almost six times in like within like a—I think like a five-mile radius. They stopped me like six times. And from that it just became a— “Damn, this is really harassment” at it’s finest. This is not, you know—and it’s like even if they were looking for someone that looks similar to me, it’s still a point where it’s like five people have stopped me within a five-mile radius it’s like—I mean this is not serving and protecting.

Although this situation is Mason’s personal experience involving an individual officer or a small group of officers, repetitive acts of racially bias policing contribute to the development of institutional racism within the criminal justice system.

One of the guided questions asked participants, ‘what does criminal justice mean to you?’. The results of the study found that some participants do not think of criminal justice as a separate entity apart from the criminal justice system. This guided question was formulated to evaluate the participant’s perspectives on what they view justice to be in regard to crime. Rather than exploring criminal justice as a form of receiving justice, participants mostly discussed it as a means of punishment, lacking the necessary rehabilitation opportunities for individuals to recover and reenter society. Sophia expresses this perceived shortfall stating,

But I know I took a Peace course... we got to talking about restorative justice and things like that and having an optimistic kind of outlook, that is what you would think that the criminal justice system would be like, you know, actually offering rehabilitation when people commit various different types of crime.

This participant speaks to the internal failures of America’s criminal justice system. That it only punishes and does not facilitate changed behavior, primarily seen in the form of rehabilitation. Some participants showed an interest in the implementation of

rehabilitation and actually exercising this alternative to punitive measures. Participant responses suggest a desire for the criminal justice system and police officers to service the needs of civilians who have committed crimes, rather than simply punishing them.

Additionally, according to the results of the study, participants who had negative perceptions of the criminal justice system immediately associated criminal justice with the institution that processes crime and justice. When participants were asked what criminal justice meant to them, most participants automatically began referencing the criminal justice system. The participants responded describing the criminal justice *system*—the penal system that functions as a means to enforce laws, rules, and administer punishment. Sophia’s response reflects this finding:

“But I think the first thing that comes to mind for me is you know, when you think of criminal justice, I automatically think of crime. And then you kind of tie that justice part into it, and I think of punishments that fit the crime, basically. Which we know that is not always the case.”

Here, Sophia automatically associated criminal justice with the criminal justice system. Latrese, also unable to separate criminal justice from the institution, immediately began to stating some of the racial disparities in the criminal justice system:

Like another word, that kind of popped into my head automatically was like...just incarceration of like Black men and women---the higher rates of incarceration versus like, white and other Hispanic races and their incarceration rate.

Overall, participants tend to express a distrust within the system because they have experienced at least one negative encounter with the system. Findings suggest that some participants may have difficulty separating the two, like Sophia and Latrese, because

receiving justice is taboo experience for them. The only experience that some African Americans have with criminal justice is being administered into the criminal justice system. This is typically a negative interaction and manifests feelings of distrust, resentment, and fear toward the criminal justice system as a racially discriminatory institution. Ultimately this is a testament to the injustices that they have experienced.

Contrastingly, the study suggests that participants with positive interactions may have experienced fair treatment in their encounters with law enforcement. Marissa shared that she experienced both a positive encounter with law enforcement and fair treatment during their interaction. In fact, it can be said that the officer on the scene treated her more than just fair:

I don't think my personal experience matches the reality that has been spoken to us. I've been in two specific situations where I'm definitely in the wrong. But, I was---like I had encounters with police and they didn't mistreat me. Or you know, made me feel unsafe. They actually let me off with a warning for stuff like that and I don't know if there's any other factors to do with that... But personally, I was definitely in the wrong for some of the things that I got caught up in but still got let—like I was let off. So I'm grateful for my experiences and I don't have any personal negative experiences with LMPD.

## DISTRUST

One of the following themes that was illustrated in the participant's perceptions of their relationship with law enforcement was a distrust of the police. Majority of the participants in each of the focus groups expressed feelings of distrust toward law enforcement officers in their community. Participants demonstrated having basic knowledge about the criminal justice system as well as a general awareness of the

inconsistencies and racial biases within the criminal justice system. When prompted to share what criminal justice meant to them, Miranda stated the following:

Um, I think that it's really situational. Because I think when it comes to criminal justice there's a lot of bias involved sometimes, and even though there is technically not supposed to be any. So, I think as far as criminal justice...it may not always be the decision that is expected and what you think should be right...there is always some technicality.

Most participants like Miranda showcased an understanding of how the criminal justice system is supposed to function, just as any reasonable citizen would. When exposed to instances where the criminal justice system is not functioning as it should, particularly as a result of racial biases, most participants demonstrated that they had adopted a general consensus that the criminal justice system is a racialized institution. As a result, participants had cultivated a distrust of the criminal justice system. Sasha blatantly states her perception of the criminal justice system, describing saying,

"I think our criminal justice system is crooked and there is no equality within that."

Mason shared a conversation he had with one of his peers discussing how the tense relationship between African American civilians and police officers' stems from generational mistrust:

You know, talking just with my elders and we're still having the same conversations generationally about mistrust, right? Mistrust within the Black community within police officers. And I was telling him today like yeah, he was like, 'Well you know you guys say this, but at the same time this is the person you call.' I say, yeah that the only option that we have. If we had someone else to call, we would call them."



Mason references how the African American community have historically created their own alternative means of safety and security. The innate distrust African American civilians have toward of police officers provoked them to begin policing their own neighborhoods as a result of feeling unable to rely on police officers because those officers were the same ones who were discriminatory toward them.

Participant responses demonstrated that this distrust of police officers also stems from participant belief that law enforcement will engage in not only racial bias, but also police misconduct in order to cover up their racialized policing practices. Mason further relays his distrust of law enforcement stating,

...and even going back to like knowing your rights, even if you do know your rights, depending on the situation you could be you know, that could be used against you. Because they'll find some clause or something or you know or use something against you. So, it's just like you know, ever like going historically, I mean we, I mean history has taught us we cannot trust local or federal or state government. It's just—and even the people that implement the law as police officers do, they are not in our best interest.

Mason's response highlights how skeptical African American civilians have become of the government and their local law enforcement in regard to covering up of police misconduct. This response also suggests a disconnect within community policing. As mentioned before, participants have expectations for their local law enforcement officers. Participants expect that it is the duty of LMPD to also have African American civilian's best interest in mind.

Another reason for participant distrust in law enforcement can be linked to the historical relationship that police and African American civilians share. Sophia shared

that her grandmother experienced racialized policing practices during the Civil Rights Movement:

My grandmother was from Alabama so like everything that went on down there like she went through that. So, the fire hoses, the—yall know what was going on... So, I definitely do believe there are historical ties to this. This has been going on for a while. And I'm sure we're all educated on this call. We know the history of the police and where the police came from. So, when they were initially started, they were not started with good intentions and so it's kind of hard to believe that all of these years later that now we're supposed to believe that they have good intentions specifically for the Black community when they were initially brought together to bring the Black community down. And so, it just makes sense that in the present times they are continuing to fulfill that role.

Sophia acknowledges the generational ties that lies within the tense relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement officers. Sophia also recognizes the historical context that significantly influences the way in which African Americans perceive and interact with police officers.

Furthermore, some participants expressed that their perceptions of LMPD have in turn impacted the manner in which they respond to the police. Sasha expressed the following:

I would say the first feeling that I always feel towards LMPD is—the best word would probably be animosity. Like, it's just like, I don't know. It's just like I can't trust you. So automatically like, I got my guard up and I'm a little hostile. Even if you just ask me a regular question, I'm feeling like there's an ulterior motive to what you're asking me like, or you're trying to get something started with me. Even if it might not be that that's what it is. It's just automatically how I feel cause your guard is already up based off of the things that have already happened and that mode, like that they have already set.

Sasha's negative perception of LMPD has manifested strong emotions that provoke the participant to become hostile during her encounters with the police. The hostility is not a response to simply be spiteful toward the police but a defense mechanism of protection. The participant is not trusting of the police and does not feel safe enough to answer the basic inquiries that LMPD may ask of her. This acute distrust of law enforcement originates from the participant's fear of LMPD as well as her experiences and exposure that negatively influenced her perception of the police.

### FEAR

In regard to fear, the research found that participants expressed feelings of fear because of their presumptions regarding the consequences that an encounter with law enforcement can have on their lives as African American civilians. Participants demonstrated a basic knowledge and understanding of the racial disparities in the United States of America's criminal justice system. This knowledge can be attributed to academic based knowledge, but for the purpose of this research, majority of their knowledge base derived from their personal experiences with law enforcement and/or an experience witnessed by one of their peers. As a result, the participants developed a fear of interacting with law enforcement based on how they have seen or heard encounters end in. When asked to share their impression of LMPD Chelsea shared the following:

...To me when I think about police, I think that they're supposed to be keeping us safe and protected. But when I actually think of what they do, if anything, I feel like they scare me. Like, I remember it was one time I was getting pulled over by police and I was literally thinking, I pray to God that don't nothing happen.

Here, Chelsea expresses feelings of fear in regard to their lives being drastically changed by a simple interaction with law enforcement. The following is a Sophia's response regarding feelings of fearful even without having experienced a negative encounter with law enforcement. Sophia shared how her aunt told her that her aunt would cry on cue during a police encounter as a de-escalation tactic in hopes of avoiding a fatal encounter with law enforcement. She also expressed concern about how simple traffic violations have resulted in the death of many African American civilians:

And as we've all seen these stories of people losing their lives over things like that. Like Black people losing their lives over small things like that. So, like even if I had an experience, that was kind of ingrained in me—that there is kind of like an 'Us vs. Them' mentality.

The feeling of fear and the power of authority that participants perceive officers to display during their encounters with African American civilians has created an 'Us vs. Them' mentality amongst the relationship between the two. According to the participant's response, this dynamic has become ingrained in African American civilians to the point where she does not feel safe in the presence of law enforcement, the very people who swore to protect and serve all citizens.

Latrese expressed that the way she perceives the African American community relationship with local law enforcement affects the way in which she plans for her future. She begins to make mental notes about ways to cope with racialized policing practices. One way in which Louisvillians can do this is by teaching their next generation how to respond during an encounter with law enforcement. Here she states,

...Like you know, police must not be looking out for us. Well, when I say us, I mean specifically Black people. You know, and now it's like I have to think about the future when I have children I'm going to have to give them that same talk like, okay, like this is what you need to do. Like, you know, if you ever get pulled over by the cops you know, put your hands on the dashboard, you know, comply like as much as you can

This is also an example of how fear has become generational just like distrust has become. Latrese stated that she planned to teach her future children about how to interact with law enforcement to avoid hostile or fatal situations. Commonly known as 'the talk', this planning has become a cultural custom within the African American community. The overall goal is not to continue generations of the negative relationships with law enforcement officials, but to practice mechanisms of survival.

Another type of fear that participants expressed was a fear of wrongful incrimination solely because of the color of their skin. Miranda shared the following:

I remember watching a video last week about a couple who owned a restaurant business and then went to go meet with someone who they were renting a space for storage and he pulled a gun on them—and the wife—the husband went to stop him from shooting and the wife was even scared to call the police because she was afraid that they were gonna think her husband who—they were both Black and the guy was white—that the police were gonna mistakenly shoot him thinking that he was the person committing the crime and it wasn't him. And so I think that like even if a situation were to happen and you had to call the police like you kind of almost second guess like, 'Should I really?' Cause there's situations where they've been called and they do the opposite and protect the opposite person or party of who they were supposed to be called for.

This situation exhibits both themes of fear and distrust. The wife did not trust the police to properly respond to the situation in the event that the officers who arrived on the scene would racially profile her husband and mistakenly cause harm to him. Although this was

personally experienced by the participant, these real-life incidents are what influence the perceptions of law enforcement.

According to participant's responses, the remedy to eliminating the fear from African American civilians is improving community policing. Sasha stated,

I will have them actively involved, and that's just so like not only you can get acclimated with like having them around all the time, but your children can get acclimated with having them around all the time. So that also like, when they see them in that aspect they really see them as someone who's there to protect and not someone who's always there to stir up trouble. So that takes away a lot of fear from others and my community

Fear as well as distrust of police officers in the African American community has become a generational issue. To break this pattern, participants suggested that police officers become actively involved in the local neighborhoods that they patrol. Building a relationship with the African American community will help dissolve some of the fear that the residents may have toward law enforcement.

## RESENTMENT

The research has demonstrated that participant's resentment toward law enforcement is initiated by feelings of distrust. The study results showed participants having a distrust of how police officer's exercise their authority. This may stem from experiences or an exposure to instances where participants have witnessed events where law enforcement has abused their authority.

Based on participant responses, expressions of resentment toward law enforcement were often a result of racialized misconduct that endangered the lives of

African American civilians. Miranda shares an encounter that one of her peers experienced that caused the participant to feel resentment toward police:

I do know one of my best friends, her little brother had a run in with the police. On a swim trip they were coming back home from their swim meet that was out of town and he's the only Black boy on the team and his coach was like "Go take a picture by that sign!" and he went by himself to go take a selfie in front of the sign to send to his parents. And as soon as he walked to the sign a bunch of police came up and swarmed him because they were under the impression that he was someone who had committed the crime somewhere else. And all they had was 'Black male suspect' as their tip.

Other participant's expressions of resentment often occurred when participants felt that police officers abused their authority in an attempt to assert power over them. Mason states,

"...and the reason why the mistrust is there, because every time they make 'mistakes', they never are really accountable for it"

Resentment towards law enforcement stems from fear and distrust that has accumulated over time. Developing resentment toward law enforcement can be caused by any sequence of events whether it be a primary or secondary experience. Joshua, who showcased feeling of resentment, shared his encounter with police with the focus group. He stated that he and one of his female friends were playfully throwing candy at one another when an officer in plain clothes witnessed the interaction. The police officer approached the participant and his friend inquiring if there was a problem. When Joshua questioned the identity of the officer, he states that the officer showed his badge, became hostile, and began to curse and suggest that the participant was endangering the friend. After sharing his experience, Joshua expressed the following:

But it was just like something so small, simple, you know. Like, you could've waited—that could've turned into something way different. You know? He didn't really even have to take his time to come over and ask me about some candy. But they go out of their way to cause trouble a lot of times, I think. So, you know, if something would have come from that, then the question would have been, 'Was the candy even worth approaching him in the first place?' So, stuff like that is why people like me lose faith in the system because you know, it's harassment. They go out their way and start issues a lot of times instead of fixing them.

Joshua felt that the police officer had used his authority to question him, initiating an encounter that he felt could have resulted in a harmful, or even fatal incident. In other words, Joshua felt that the police officer was harassing and antagonizing him. He states that situations similar to his own experience create a disdain, or feelings of resentment toward law enforcement. Based on participant responses, it can be concluded that this resentment stems from fear. Participants fear that in any encounter with law enforcement that they may end up being severely hurt, or even unjustly killed. Participants who showed feelings of resentment have internalized the incidents they have seen on the news, media, and what they have heard from their peers. As a result, this influences some of the participant's perception of the likelihood that such incidents could happen to them.

#### MEDIA AND PEER INFLUENCE

Social media, the news, and individual's peers were the most significant influencers in participant perceptions of police officers. Interestingly, participants who did not have a personal experience with law enforcement developed their opinions of law enforcement and the criminal justice system as a whole based upon these three contributors. Here, Latrese acknowledges her lack of primary experiences and proceeds



to share what it was that particularly shaped her perception of the police and the criminal justice system:

“A lot of the things that I knew about the criminal justice system and police, I found out through the news and media and just like talking to my peers and stuff like that. So, I just feel like because I kept hearing the same story like, ‘Black man innocent’, ‘Police officer kills innocent Black man’. Just like a lot of those type of stories, like, to me--- and then like even seeing videos. So, it’s not even like you’re hearing it but you’re seeing it too. And it’s like, OK, well I guess this must be how it be, you know.”

Latrese’s negative perception of the criminal justice system and the police formed as a response to a pattern of events legitimizing the existence of racially bias policing practices.

But I definitely, like, I was scared for my life, but you know it could have been completely different so the opinions and views that I’m fed constantly just doesn’t represent in my everyday life. Now, hearing stories and stuff? Yes, and having my father, and his history with LMPD and stuff like that. I can see how other people’s, you know, realities match the stigmas that are pushed out in the atmosphere.”

As mentioned before, Marissa, had viewpoints that significantly contradicted the majority opinion. Marissa did not have any negative personal experiences with law enforcement. In fact, in prior conversation she stated that all of her encounters with police were positive interactions. When asked what influenced her opinions of the criminal justice system, Marissa responded about the procedural aspects of the criminal justice system based upon her professional experiences as a court employee:

I used to work for the United States District Court—Federal Court, so like I literally think of just the process of how the system works. I think of, you know, getting the jurors together, I think of

the behind the scenes of what happened with the judges and the conversation that happens in the chambers. I think of, you know, the attorneys and all the paperwork that gets done beforehand. So, I don't really think of like, you know, right or wrong or like, color as far as that manner. I really think it's just a systemic thing that people are just really doing what the laws were already telling them what to do.

Marissa's professional experiences influenced her to have a moderate view of the criminal justice system, a very uncommon perspective amongst the participants within both focus groups. Although Marissa's perception is an anomaly within this research study, it is important to note how one's social environment can impact an individual's perception.

Ultimately, the results of the research study found that racialization in the criminal justice system has caused damaging effects on the relations between African American civilians and law enforcement. Furthermore, the study results demonstrate that the longstanding history of racially bias policing practices and recent events involving police officer killings of African American civilians play a significant role in influencing African American civilian perceptions of law enforcement. As a result of the absence of police officer participation, the study results were inconclusive in assessing the factors that may influence law enforcement perceptions of African American civilians. The results were also inconclusive in assessing whether law enforcement officials possess an awareness of the policing history between African American civilians and themselves.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the research ultimately confirm the study's hypothesis that racialization in the criminal justice system has caused damaging effects upon the relationship between law enforcement officers and African American civilians. Additionally, the research suggests that long-standing history between the African American community and police officers did indeed impact African American participant's perceptions of law enforcement. Furthermore, research showed that the recent African American killings as a result of police officer shootings did have an effect on how the participant depicted law enforcement officials. More specifically, the events following the death of Breonna Taylor had a significant impact on how participants viewed the LMPD police officers and their department as a whole. The study's hypothesis regarding police officers cannot be confirmed or disproved as a result of their absence in the study.

The results of this study showcase the impact that racialization in the criminal justice system has had on the relationship between African American civilians in Louisville, Kentucky and LMPD. This is especially important in light of the events that transpired after the death of Breonna Taylor. As mentioned before, the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement has historically had its restraints as a result of racially biased policing practices (Pegues, 2017). This research shows that centuries later, law enforcement officials are still engaging in discriminatory policing

practices that are over-criminalizing Black Louisvillians. As a result, African Americans have adopted negative perceptions of law enforcement, especially in their local communities. These negative perceptions manifest in African American civilians a variety of emotions and attitudes including but not limited to distrust, fear, and resentment toward their neighborhood police. Racially bias policing practices have also shown to negate community policing practices. This neglect intensifies the strenuous relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement. Participant responses illustrated occurrences where their interactions with their local law enforcement were predominantly crime oriented. In other words, when law enforcement officers did engage with African Americans, it was mostly during an encounter such as a traffic stop or in this special case, a protest confrontation. Some participants expressed that their interactions with LMPD lacked genuineness and care as a public servant. As a result, this caused them to feel not only alienated, but endangered by police. They did not feel protected and served by their local law enforcement. In fact, many participants feared any potential encounters with LMPD. Ultimately, this issue stems from the racialization in the criminal justice system. Racial stereotypes enabling racialized policing practices encourage police officers to over-criminalize African American civilians into an oppression that necessitates distrust, fear, and resentment.

This study accompanies previous literature that investigates African American perceptions of law enforcement. It also adds to previous discussions regarding racialization in the criminal justice system. Most importantly, this research is an expansion of the ways in which racialization in the criminal justice system impacts the relationship between Black Louisvillians and LMPD.

This research of this study was limited in that it did not provide LMPD perceptions of their relationship with African American civilians. Also, the research was unable to provide dialogue between LMPD and Louisville's African American civilians. These features would have provided a more robust illustration of the relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement in light of Breonna Taylor's death. Additionally, it would have given LMPD an opportunity to engage in dialogue discussing their needs from the community and even from their own police department. Facilitating a conversation between LMPD and Louisville's African American community may have created an environment to find resolutions to building a better relationship between the two.

There are some limitations to this approach. For instance, African American's perception of the relationship between African American civilians and law enforcement. Also, without the input from local police officers, it is difficult to accurately assess the root cause of the tension between these two groups. However, it remains necessary to assess these relations and how they have been impacted by the racialization in the criminal justice system. Police brutality is a public safety and health crisis. Therefore, it would be unjust and a disservice to refrain from proceeding with the research.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

During a local forum discussing how to improve police and community relations the question was asked if people should feel safe in Louisville. Louisville Metro Police Chief Erika Shields responded saying, “I think that to a degree, it depends on the community that you’re in, sadly. Everybody should be able to go out of their house and feel safe and we’ve got work to do.” [Beane, 2021] Chief Shields’ reply illustrates LMPD’s overt awareness of the inequity within certain communities. Wealthier and predominantly white communities tend to have less criminal violence whereas, poorer and predominantly African American communities like West Louisville tend to have more criminal violence (Pegues, 2016).

Improving relations between African American civilians and the police can potentially eliminate the disparities between these neighborhoods. The difference between these two communities is not only their racial make-up but also their interactions and involvement with law enforcement. Police presence in majority African American neighborhoods is invasive and confrontational. In cases like this, police presence should not be a deterrent but a symbol of community engagement. By building better relations between the African American community and LMPD it allows for African American locals to feel protected, it validates Black humanity, and provides a more efficient environment to reduce crime rates in the city.

To better serve the Louisville African American community it is important for LMPD to practice community-oriented policing in order to build better relationships but also to better understand the African American experience. By doing so this will be advantageous to both parties. African American locals will feel protected and police officers will be more efficient and effective in reducing criminal activity.

Following the investigation of Breonna Taylor's death, state and local government officials enacted a few policy changes in an attempt to reform policing practices. On June 11, 2020, the Louisville Metro Council passed legislation, banning "no-knock" warrants (Campbell and Nuyen, 2020). The law also required police officers to wear their body cameras while conducting search warrants (Oppell and Taylor, 2020). In the summer of 2020 Louisville Mayor, Greg Fischer, also announced that the city would be appointing a new Chief of Police (Oppel and Taylor, 2020), now Chief Erika Shields (Noble and Mitchell, 2020). Furthermore, Fischer announced that the city will also institute a civilian review board, for local citizens to take a more active role in managing allegations of misconduct within LMPD (Sylvestri, 2021). In regard to reform on the state level, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear signed Senate Bill 4 into law on April 9, 2021. This bill did not ban "no-knock" warrants, instead the bill restricted the use of no-knock warrants. It requires that law enforcement officers must wear body cameras five minutes prior to conducting the raid. Additionally, the law regulates the hours for which officers can conduct an unnotified entry. Unless necessary for the case, officers are only permitted to conduct a raid between the hours of 6:00am and 10:00pm. Lastly, the

bill would also require that an emergency medical technician be present in the event that someone needs medical attention (Treisman, 2021).

Legislative reform did create important changes for the city of Louisville and the state of Kentucky. As Beshear proclaimed, these new laws can indeed save a life (Treisman, 2021). Unfortunately, reform is only a temporary resolve. The implementation of police reform surged in 2014 following the fatal police shooting of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Pegues, 2017). Police departments across the nation have made efforts to implement policy change to reform policing practices. It is not effective long term. In fact, after the death of Mike Brown, although reform was already implemented, the United States Department of Justice ruled that the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department did engage in policing practices that were unconstitutional. Furthermore, even after acknowledging the unconstitutionality of their policing practices, the Department of Justice failed to take any direct action for the death of Mike Brown (Spruill, 2016). Depending on legal ramifications to discipline police officers has proven to be unreliable. In fact, historical trends reveal numerous unresolved occurrences of institutional violence within the criminal justice system. According to Spruill (2016), “The nation has become accustomed to watching, condemning and taking limited measures to correct unjustified police violence in the Black community” (Spruill, 2016, p. 44).

As previously mentioned, the United States of America has a long-standing history of racial disparities within the criminal justice system. This is accredited to the foundation of policing having been a means to exploit and control Black bodies (Douglas, 2015). As a result, the United States of America’s criminal justice system continues to



perpetuate violence against African American civilians. Legislative reform, or any reform for that matter cannot simply undue the effects that decades of racialization in the criminal justice system has had on the African American community. Therefore, in order to put an end to racialized policing practices, we must revolutionize policing practices within law enforcement. Police departments need to eliminate punitive-oriented policing and implement community-oriented policing practice. Police officers should take the initiative to develop a positive relationship with the communities that they serve. Additionally, it is imperative that we also revolutionize societal constructions of race

## CONCLUSION

Racialization in the criminal justice system has proved to be disadvantageous to African Americans civilians. Racialized policing practices exercised by LMPD, punitive-oriented policing, and poor community relations between African Americans and law enforcement has left many African Americans disenfranchised, severely underrepresented, and constrained to a racial caste system devoted to upholding white privilege and power (Alexander, 2010).

As I write this, yet another Black man was murdered by the police. Twenty-year-old Daunte Wright was fatally shot by Minneapolis police, only miles away from the courthouse where Derrick Chauvin at the time was on trial for the murder of George Floyd. African Americans like Daunte Wright, George Floyd, and especially Breonna Taylor deserved to have been protected not only by their community law enforcement but by the United States criminal justice system where justice should be carried out regardless of the individual's race. This begins with facilitating better relationships between police officers and civilians within the African American community. The only effective way to do so is to revolutionize the United States of America's criminal justice system into an institution that is truly equal and equitable for all people regardless of an individual's race. Racial biases permeate throughout every aspect of our society, it is our obligation to dismantle racialization and doing so starts here.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Objective

Pan African Studies masters student aspiring to further an education in African American studies. Motivated to contribute social justice related research to academia in social sciences.

### Education

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 2015-2019

B.S. Pan African Studies

B.S. Criminal Justice

GPA: 3.74

Frankfort High School, Frankfort, KY 2015-2019

High School Diploma

GPA: 4.0

### Professional Experience

Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, Louisville, KY

**Graduate Assistant** (September 2019 – April 2019)

- ❖ Coordinated University of Louisville campus and community programs to promote social justice awareness.
- ❖ Assisted professor with importing student grades and data retrieval for research projects.
- ❖ Maintained professional relationships with University of Louisville student organizations and organizations in the Louisville community.

Boys and Girls Club Kentuckiana, Louisville, KY

**Youth Development Worker** (September 2018 – May 2019)

- ❖ Worked with minority youth to help facilitate their personal, social, and educational development.
- ❖ Coordinated programming and activities aimed to promote empowerment in young girls.
- ❖ Enabled youth to gain a voice, influence, and a good standing place in society.

Upward Bound, Louisville, KY

### **Residence Counselor**

- ❖ Mentored low-income high school students as they adjust to living on a college campus, guiding them to make well informed decisions and develop self-discipline.
- ❖ Educated student participants on how to form healthy relationships with their peers and authority figures.

CONNECT Peer Mentoring Program, Louisville, KY

### **Peer Mentor**

- ❖ Provided guidance and mentorship to a caseload of 18-25 African American freshman students at the University of Louisville.
- ❖ Advised students on a weekly basis, helping them maintain scholarships and good standing grades.
- ❖ Provided students with campus resources to best fit their academic and personal needs.

### **Skills**

Program planning

Maintaining professional relationships

Conducting research

Mentoring adolescent youth

### **Professional Associations**

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated (Fall 2018 – Present)

### **Grants and Scholarships**

University of Louisville Pan African Studies Graduate Assistantship

Woodford Porter Scholarship

Kentucky Governor's Scholarship Program