



The Black Swan Academy  
Making the Exception...the Rule



**BLACK OUT FOR**

**BLACK POWER**

**2021 BLACK YOUTH AGENDA**





# BLACK OUT FOR

# BLACK POWER

## 2021 BLACK YOUTH AGENDA



There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

**AUDRE LORDE**



Youth with Black Swan Academy

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# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



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Simone Sawyer is a PhD student within the department of Prevention and Community Health at George Washington University, Milken Institute School of Public Health. She's also a Graduate Research Assistant at the Center for Health and Health-care in Schools. Simone's work and research experiences thus far have been dedicated to youth/young adult health and well-being, community engagement, implementation/dissemination science and the evaluation of

community and school-based programs. She regularly presents her work at local, regional and national conferences. Simone graduated from Spelman College receiving her Bachelor's degree in Psychology (C'17) and the Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health, where she received her Master's in Health Education and Health Communication (C'19). She enjoys cooking, sharing meals, experiences and talking with people. She is always honored and humbled to do work and be in spaces where humanity, love and action are at the core. Because of this, she was eager to have the opportunity to work with Black Swan Academy on this 2021 Black Youth Agenda report!



## **CHRISTIANE "CHRISSY" JACKSON**

Christiane "Chrissy" Jackson is a student at Virginia Union University. She's been involved in Black Swan Academy for over 4 years.

Chrissy has many short-term goals but the main one she's focused on is graduating college and a long-term goal she has is to be a middle school English teacher. Chrissy is interested in and passionate about being a great impactful leader for others, professional success, learning new things, and networking.



## **LONDON JONES**

London Jones is the co-author of the book "Man Up!", a determined activist, tutor, youth leader, and future journalist. He attends Anacostia High School and is 16 years old.

Longon joined Black Swan Academy when he was in the 8th grade. London enjoys journalism, advocacy, and writing, and hopes that one day he can own his own media outlet.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**CEON, 2020 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE**

**JESSICA, 2020 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE**





# INTRODUCTION

This report highlights the voices, experiences and expertise of Black youth living in Washington, DC.

The idea for this report was developed in partnership between Black Swan Academy and a PhD Student at the George Washington University Milken School of Public Health, through a service learning course entitled “Community Psychology II”.

This report serves as a supplement to the 2021 Black Youth Agenda, developed by Black Swan Academy youth leaders and staff.

The goal of this research and report is not to generalize the findings to all youth, or youth in other Urban cities, but rather to provide a deep and rich understanding to some of the complexities that come with living and growing up as a Black person in Washington, DC.

We hope this richness and deeper level of understanding will encourage and inspire local legislators to change their policies and practices to better serve Black youth in the District.



# THE AGENDA

**QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES**



**COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN!**



**HOPE & HOMES**





31%

of DC middle and high school students are LGBTQ



# QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES



I'm just learning about the Stonewall Riots...it's a part of who we are, and a part of how far we've come. Although we still have a long way to go.

CEON, 2020 high school graduate

## MAKE SCHOOLS A SAFE SPACE FOR ALL STUDENTS BY SUPPORTING AND INVESTING IN QUEER AND BLACK YOUTH.

In the District, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning young people make up nearly 31% of the students in middle and high schools combined.

We know that for Black students, the intersections of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and race often compound to result in violence or discrimination.

One in five queer youth in D.C. Public School System (DCPS) reported being physically assaulted in the past year because of their gender expression. The proportion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth who said they attempted to commit suicide in the past year was nearly four times larger than heterosexual youth.

Ultimately, schools fail to provide mental health resources that would allow youth to cope and maintain their mental health. Instead schools

often replicate the same harms that many queer youth experiences at home and in their larger communities.

The trauma young people may carry as a result of being denied access to places in which they feel emotionally and physically safe needs to be addressed, especially as young people are asked to continue navigating spaces that are not always affirming in their gender or sexual orientation.

20%

of DC queer youth have been assaulted in the past year

Despite young people spending most of their time in schools, schools fail to provide students opportunities to engage with people, resources, or literature that reflect sexual and gender minority youth and families.





- 1** Increase the number of gender affirming bathrooms in schools and within community spaces
- 2** Hire more Queer and Black staff personnel in local schools
- 3** Require that educators and adults who interact with youth be trained to respond to harm as it relates to one's gender identity or sexual orientation.

- 4** Increase access to mental health support services to ALL youth in schools and communities.
- 5** Expand local school's social studies curriculum requirements to include the histories and experiences of Queer and Black people

# QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES: OUR GOALS





**Ward 7**  
**Ward 8**

experience the highest rates of poverty and violent crime in DC because of divestment



## COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN!



It's like teaching mediation and healthy coping mechanisms so they can communicate how they're feeling to each other.

LONDON, 1 1th grade

## ADDRESS VIOLENCE BY INVESTING IN THE COMMUNITY AND MOVING BEYOND POLICING.

Real public safety requires that investments be made into funding schools, public housing, healthcare, transportation, and living-wages.

nity continues to carry. Calls to end gun violence have only resulted in increased surveillance and violence at the hands of the police.

As a result of structural continued divestments, Ward 7 and 8 currently have the highest percentages of households who are economically insecure and also have the highest ratio of violent crime.

**25%** of kids nationally have witnessed violence in the past year

Many young people in the District, particularly Black youth, have lost two to three friends to gun violence.

Addressing intra-community violence will require community-based interventions and mental health support services outside of the realm of policing.

Nationally, more than 25% of children have witnessed an act of violence in their homes, schools, or community over the past year, and more than 5% witnessed a shooting.

Young people who witness violence repeatedly can be mentally and emotionally impacted, yet the community remains ill equipped to address the trauma and PTSD the Black commu-

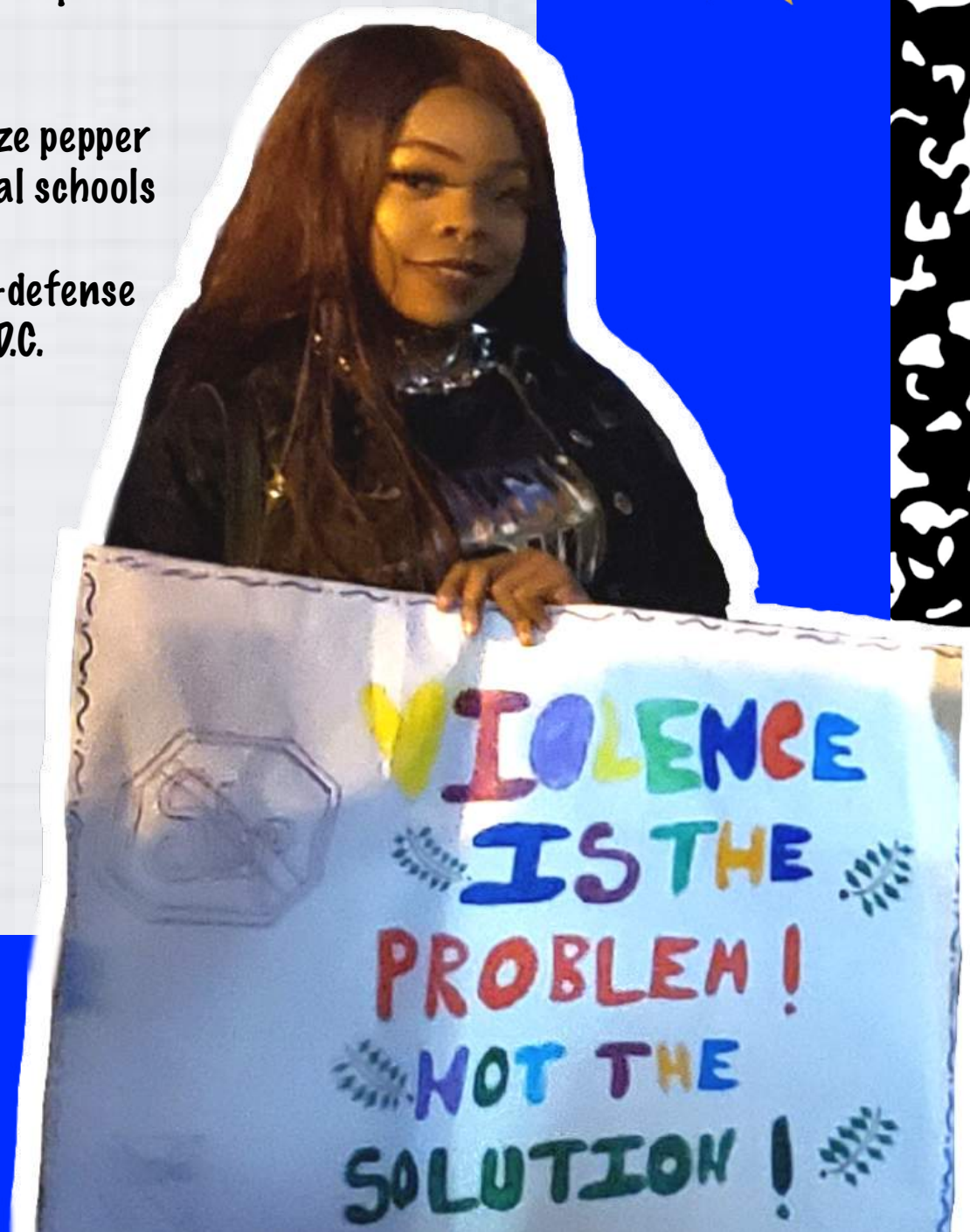




- 1 Increase the number of “violence interrupters” across the district and on school campuses.
- 2 Increase access to mental health support services in schools and communities.
- 3 Provide community- led trainings to strengthen our community’s skills and capacity around mediation, conflict resolution, de-escalation techniques, and healthy coping mechanisms

- 4 Increase the frequency in which community led peace walks happen
- 5 Decriminalize pepper spray in local schools
- 6 Provide self-defense classes for D.C. residents

# COMMUNITIES GROUND, GUNS DOWN: OUR GOALS





1,117

youth experienced homelessness in DC in 2017



# HOPE & HOMES



How can we help people versus having all these people on a street... They get treated like crap because they have no control over what's going on.

JALEN, 12th grade

## ENSURE YOUTH, ESPECIALLY THOSE FACING HOUSING INSTABILITY, HAVE THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO BE SAFE, SUPPORTED, HEALTHY AND TO THRIVE.

On any given night there are 6,308 people experiencing homelessness in the District.

The 2017 youth census counted 1,117 unaccompanied youth and youth heads of households experiencing literal homelessness or doubling up with friends or strangers. While any number of people experiencing homelessness is too large, this count likely underestimates the true number of people experiencing housing instability.

Many Black families, queer people, and young people are simultaneously navigating housing instability alongside structural barriers to healthcare, childcare, education, transportation, and employment opportunities. The saturation of systemic violence that Black and Brown people experience influences youth of colors' ability to get the support they need to cope with housing instability.

Government based housing programs need to take proactive measures in preventing homelessness and supporting houseless people. Often, financial support is not offered to people experiencing housing instability prior to utilities being turned off or residents receiving an eviction notice.

Furthermore, this type of financial support is for singular instances or once the amount people owe is out-sized. Access to housing should be available without barriers like sobriety requirements or participation in mental or physical health treatment programs.

Providing housing that is safe and affordable is the first step to stability and any longer-term goals like sobriety or improved mental and physical health.







- 1 Expand childcare options for people who have or are supporting children living in the district
- 2 Expand funding to better support young people with emergency needs like toiletries, food, or clothes
- 3 Require that schools give young people access to laundry machines and showers

- 4 Mandate that rapid rehousing not be terminated until new housing options are identified and secured
- 5 Expand funding for utility assistance programs
- 6 Remove the "one-time payment" stipulation from rental assistance programs



## HOPE & HOMES: OUR GOALS

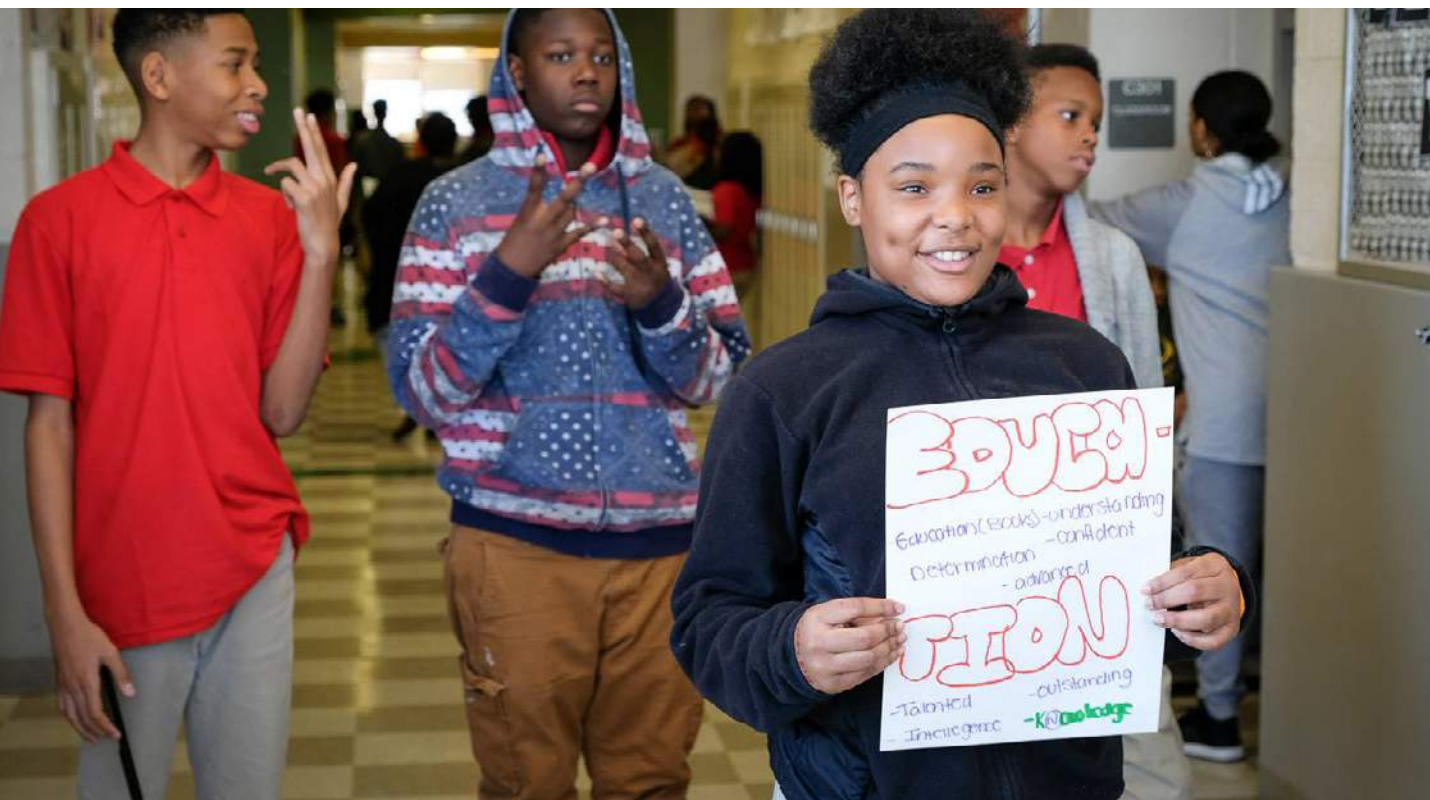




# BACKGROUND

Moved by the events of the 2015 Flint Michigan Water Crisis, youth from Black Swan Academy traveled to Michigan to do their part to help Flint citizens recover from the harmful effects of lead poisoning in the community's water. It was disheartening to come back to Washington DC, only to find out that a water crisis was happening in their community too.

It was reported that dozens of Washington D.C. Schools tested for high levels of lead in the school's water system. Youth leaders in Black Swan Academy decided that enough was enough; their voices needed to be heard and their concerns addressed. This was the seed that grew the annual Black Youth Agenda from Black Swan Academy.



The annual agenda provides leaders in the Washington DC area a pathway to truly hear and address the concerns and demands of youth growing up in the city.

The Black Youth Agenda is created in partnership with middle and high school youth in Washington DC. The agenda raises the

unique concerns of Black youth living in the District of Columbia and aims to create positive systemic change through public policy and youth organizing at the local level.

The Black Youth Agenda is developed annually through a retreat. Youth and adult leaders in Black Swan Academy meet to solidify topics areas that the youth later commit to organize around.

The retreat affords youth the opportunity to not only think about the topics impacting the entire community, but also the solutions they know are best, based on research and their own personal experiences.

This year, the retreat concluded with the youth identifying three key focus areas to be incorporated into the 2021 Black Youth Agenda:

- 1. QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES,
- 2. COMMUNITIES GROUND, GUNS DOWN, AND
- 3. HOPE & HOMES.







Following the retreat, youth were engaged in smaller groups (consisting of roughly 3-4 youth and 2 adults) to hone in on what the specific goals were for each topic and what new demands might emerge.

Regardless of focus area, the goals of the Black Youth Agenda often overlapped and highlighted the various ways failed systems and racial injustice compounded the trauma young people are holding.

The report is a reminder of the complexities and interconnectedness of the issues facing Black youth.

**"THERE IS NO THING AS A SINGLE-ISSUE STRUGGLE BECAUSE WE DO NOT LIVE SINGLE-ISSUE LIVES."  
- AUDRE LORDE**

Due to COVID-19, virtual fatigue, and limits on the number of people that could gather for in-person meetings, less youth were involved in the organizing of this year's agenda compared to past years.

This highlighted the need and importance of doing in-depth interviews with youth to document their concerns, priorities and experiences during these ever-changing times.





# METHODS

20 youth were interviewed from late March, 2021 to the middle of June 2021 for this report. Participants ranged from 8th graders in middle school to college students in their freshman year.

average amount of time the youth have been engaged in Black Swan Academy activities was 2 years, ranging from people who had just started to young people who have been involved since the inception of the organization.

Out of the 20 interviews completed, 18 participants identified as female and 2 participants identified as male. The

Participants for the interviews were recruited through Black Swan



Academy and United Leaders for Freedom in Washington D.C. Youth were given a brief overview of the purpose of the interviews and were asked to complete a google form for Simone Sawyer to reach out to them for next steps.

Ms. Sawyer contacted interested youth leaders through the Google



Form and scheduled them for interviews according to the days and times they were available. Simone, Chrissy and London conducted interviews with the youth leaders that signed up. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, as well as recorded and transcribed via Zoom.

During the interview's youth leaders were asked to review the 2021 Black Youth Agenda and discuss deeply what agenda points resonate with them the most, which goals they saw as essential to making action towards the agenda points, other ideas they had for solving the issues describe in the agenda and overall how their lives and advocacy have been impacted by COVID-19, racial reckonings, increased mental health stressors and more. Each participant was compensated \$50 for their time.

Simone, London and Chrissy took notes after each interview session as well as picked out main themes and quotes across the 20 interviews.

The results will highlight the voices of youth of color in Washington DC who are ready to see positive change taking place in their communities.





# RESULTS

The following results will highlight main themes from the interviews conducted with youth. Emerging themes will be displayed in bold text. Direct quotes from participants will be included.

The first emerging theme highlighted the first point in the 2021 Black Youth Agenda: **Queer Affirming Learning Spaces**, followed by the second: **Communities Ground**. **Guns Down**, the third: **Hope & Homes**, and finally the other topics that have been on young people's mind.





## QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES

**LGBTQ+ Education/Awareness is needed because**  
"ignorance leaves people in the dark."

As stated in the 2021 Black Youth Agenda, youth acknowledged the need for more queer affirming spaces and education about how to create those spaces as a good step towards making this agenda point happen.

Youth stated that if there were more discussions, education, and awareness around LGBTQ+ affirming spaces, it would help people to be more understanding and supportive and ensure that LGBTQ+ youth know that **they are not alone** and that they can **express themselves** and **be who they are**.

I want everyone to know that their voice matters, everything that they do matters. I want them to keep advocating and keep organizing because although it seems like nothing's happening, things are happening, things are moving... it's taking time but it's going to always take time. so just keep fighting and keep pushing and never give up."  
- ceon, 2020 high school graduate.

Having these spaces for education and awareness can lead to more supportive environments that can be an critical step towards saving lives.

**12%** of those who reported having at least one in-person LGBTQ-affirming space attempted suicide in the past year compared to **20%** of LGBTQ youth without an in-person LGBTQ-affirming spaces.

Transgender and nonbinary youth who report having their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at **half the rate** of those who did not have their pronouns respected.

Queer affirming learning spaces are wanted by young people and they describe ways that we can create them.

I feel like we think we help us by just not talking about stuff or trying to hide it. And it's like now like, we need to be talking to you all about what's going on whether it's queer affirming learning spaces or other LGBTQ+ topics. Those conversations, hearing voices about what you think, talking about guns and why they can be good why they can be bad, how it can impact you and other people like I just think we gotta talk about stuff more.  
- samaria, 10th grade



## QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES

People want to be themselves and feel safe just like everyone else

Young people described how they themselves and their peers wanted to be **accepted**.

Youth discussed that everyone just wants to be **heard, seen, and valued**. They discussed how hard it was for themselves and their peers who identified as **LGBTQ** to be understood.

Youth wanted people to know that the **judging and bullying must stop**.

i will just say be yourself, like live your life cause you only got one to live, YOLO. and don't be out here, trying to follow after people just be yourself don't try to impress or going around a crowd which don't fit for you, instead build the crowd that's for you...



...go with people that genuinely see you, that really care and don't be so pressed over people like, be yourself, have your own style, you know, like basically be yourself.

- Ericka, 10th grade



## COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN!

Community Violence makes you feel like...

"It could be me,"

During discussions around community violence, young people rightfully noted feelings of not being safe.

Compared to other high-income countries, American children aged 5 to 14 are **21 times more likely to be killed with guns**, and American adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 are **23 times more likely to be killed with guns**.

We know the rates of gun violence are impacting certain communities in Washington DC more than others and that Black youth mostly bear the burdens of gun violence.

Have time where some people go sit down and talk things out of the origin of the issue.

- Audriauna, 10th grade

Even with police presence in their communities there was still violence so it made young people feel a **constant and underlying sense of vicarious trauma** that they themselves or people they knew could be lost to violence within the community or from police entering their community.

This resulted in a number of the young people suggesting that guns should be banned all together. They described how guns take away the opportunity for redemption or for people to have a second chance.

They were saddened by the number of children that were being lost to violence in Washington DC. and suggested strategies such as **self-defense, conflict resolution training, mentorship** and more **mental health programs** as some of the main ways to address the issue of violence in their communities.

I don't think police are helping, they're supposed to be helping the community, they say and think they can just do what they want, because they are police but they're actually increasing the deaths, instead of reducing like they're supposed to, so I think police need to know what their jobs are in the community, like people should not have to be scared of police

- Tyiah, 10th grade



## HOPE & HOMES

### Homelessness "in DC should not be as high as it is"

Over the last five years, the number of temporary housing beds (Emergency Shelter, Safe Haven, and Transitional Housing) has **decreased by 9 percent**.

Through these interviews, youth are well aware of these **divestments**. There was an overwhelming consensus that more needed to be done to address the issue of homelessness in Washington DC.

The youth highlight several convincing points surrounding the issue of homelessness that ranged from homelessness during COVID-19 to the **criminalization** of homeless people living in the District.

The young people described homelessness as a

I think you know not having a home to stay in during covid, it's kind of like it's kind of scary because, um you know everybody's supposed to be social distancing and stuff. And if you're outside all the time, you know where everybody is at then it's kind of hard to do that so there's higher risk of getting the virus and stuff like that.

- Tamika, 10th grade

**systematic issue**, but also had personal stories and experiences of homelessness themselves. Their perspectives and solutions towards this issue warrant an urgent need for real change.

### COVID-19 and Youth Homelessness

The participants articulated that, for young people facing homelessness, they would be at **greater risk for getting COVID-19** because of their inability to stay in stable housing.

Youth also noted that and that if there were able to stay in a shelter, they would have limited opportunities to social distance.

Youth empathized with the complexities that come from being in multiple unfortunate circumstances and still trying to **press forward each and every day**.

Just to give more resources to people who need them, that is not that hard to provide resources and support because I feel like [when you don't] that makes people you know look for other methods or ways or do other things in order to get what they need.

- carla, 2020 high school graduate



## HOPE & HOMES

You never really know what someone is actually going through

Within their empathy and personal experiences with homelessness, the youth described the importance of acknowledging that you never really know what someone is going through.

A lot of youth mentioned stories of the first time they found out their close friend was homeless or how they themselves were homeless but still involved in school. Extra curricular activities, taking longer than usual bus rides in order to get to school from wherever their current place of residence would be, and being worried about who would be able to watch their younger siblings if they had to stay after school were some of the

There are times when kids come to school and they don't want to, but they end up not smelling good, but like they can't do anything about it because their laundry machine is broken... they can't just keep buying clothes. And then people make fun of them and i'm just like these kids are in situations where they really have no choice over what they do.

- Tionna, 11th grade

common themes shared by youth.

Young people also talked about how they kept going on with life but were always reminded to remain humble when talking to others because you truly do not know what someone is going through.

More access to laundry machines, showers and toiletries is a MUST

Because so many youth go through issues of homelessness but try to keep pressing forward, the young people discussed the need for universal access to showers, laundry, and other essentials as foundational services in schools throughout Washington DC.

Young people noted that those services should be available for youth but also for the general homeless population.

i feel like if someone just up and offered me deodorant, i'm going to feel like i stink or something, so i don't know. i think the first day of school, mid way of school, and end of school, they should just go buy care packages like to all students. it don't matter if you need it, if you don't give it back, but if you need it you should take it. But i feel like just pointing out one student, that wouldn't sit right with me.

- Chrissy, 2020 High School Graduate



## HOPE & HOMES

### Criminalization of homeless people

Youth were avid about describing the contradictions of not wanting homeless people in the streets, but also not providing spaces and resources for them to use to take care of themselves.

They described how homeless people can be criminalized for things like staying on the bus for too long, trying to go to the bathroom in public spaces, or using the bathroom on the sidewalk.

There's nowhere for people to go so what do we expect them to do?

How can we help people versus having all these people on the street, because then as soon as a homeless person pees on a driveway they end up in prison... They get treated like crap because they have no control over what's going on.

- Jalen, 12th grade



even if it's not done to you, but it's done to someone else it takes a toll and it affects you personally, because, like this can happen to me or someone around my age. you have us killing each other and then you have the police killing us. so it's like where do we stand, what can we do.

- Tykirah, 12th grade



## HOPE & HOMES

### Why are homelessness rates so high?

The young people state that the issue is two-fold. Some issues have obvious solutions: we need to create more spaces for people to go and get the resources they need.

Other issues require deeper solutions where leaders will have to ask questions that get to the root of the issue. Youth believe that city leaders are not getting to the root of the issue. "We need to be asking "why" because people are more than numbers", stated one youth. From youth homelessness to adult homelessness, it is all intertwined.

Like police making homeless people move somewhere else, even though they literally have nowhere else to go so i'm just like just give them some necessities, give them a place to be...

- Tionna, 11th grade

Parents might not have stable housing which impacts youth. People should be asking why do parents not have stable housing?

If youth do have a place to live, is the place actually livable?

If youth homelessness rates are high, do we see differences in sexual preferences or sexual orientation because youth get put out of their homes for various reasons but identifying as LGBTQ+ is definitely one of them.

How do we prevent that?

The homelessness in DC should not be as high as it is, especially because of all like these empty places that we have like these unfinished projects that we could use at least do like a storage unit for people.

- Jalen, 12th grade



## Other issues on young people's minds

### COVID "is a lot"

A reoccurring phrase that came up consistently when discussing the current COVID-19 pandemic was that, "COVID is a lot".

Young people noted that people are really stressed: stressed with family, school and life overall. Youth felt as though there were **less supports** for them in school and life since they were not able to be in-person. Youth discussed the stress that COVID-19 has caused and how it's left themselves and people they know **jobless and even homeless**.

because some my family got sick from the virus and stuff too, so they're home sick and stuff like that, and then i have to deal with school and extracurricular activities and stuff...i have to get credits and community service and do all that, so it's a lot.

- Tamika, 10th grade

The overarching theme was **a sense of loss**.

Young people not only recognized their **loss of normalcy, family members, and friends**, but also their **hopes and expectations** for some of the most important events in their lives.

it was kind of difficult just because i didn't get a graduation the way that i had dreamed of and the way that i wanted to.

- carla, 2020 high school graduate



## Other issues on young people's minds

### Bullying

Bullying was a theme that emerged through young people sharing their experiences and their friends' experiences with wanting more **Queer Affirming Learning Spaces** and **Hope and Homes**.

Youth talked about the fact that people say things without thinking about the **consequences of their words on people's lives**.

They suggested that educating youth about what's going on in people's lives and ensuring people have someone to talk to could be good

I was really honestly getting bullied...it was because I didn't want to share my Gatorade with the girl, and she just kept making it a point to bother me and it got so bad..the school wouldn't do anything, then I had to stick up for myself and that happened [a fight]....

solutions to **reducing the judgement, embarrassment, and cycle of bullying** that happens when young people don't have someone they can vent to.



...now that I'm older, I know how to deal with certain situations different, and I know how to walk away and what to do if I see someone getting bullied because when I was in middle school I didn't.

- Imani, 12th grade



## Other issues on young people's minds

### Mental Health Supports

Mental health supports are essential because "people need someone they can talk to, someone that can relate to them."

Youth described how essential and crucial mental health supports are for **All students**.

The youth described how mental health supports were needed before the pandemic and how the need intensified as the pandemic came and continues to change lives.

Youth described not only having mental health supports, but support from **people who they could**

we need more mental health supports. some people are afraid to speak up and be proud of who they are, or what they want to be. some people are judged so they just take a step back and don't say anything, so getting more health supports, if it's people a part of the LGBTQ that could be mental health support or just someone that understand the world and feelings of that child to get them to explain and express themselves.  
- **chrissy, 2020 high school graduate**

**really trust** or someone they could relate to. Youth suggested ideas such as a **peer-to-peer counseling** program to **weekly check-ins** with mental health professionals that genuinely care about the well-being of the youth they serve.

Young people described that mental health supports were **essential** because everyone needs someone to talk to but not everyone has people.

Finally, the youth advocated for **preventative** mental health services, acknowledging that right now mental health services are usually provided mostly when bad things happen.

Youth feel as though **we shouldn't have to wait until things get severe**, such as a death within the school community, in order to provide mental health services.

during the pandemic, i learned a lot. i learned so much. i learned to be a better me. i learned that it's ok. you're ok. you go through tough times but you get through them. it's ok to cry. its ok to take breaks. self care is so important.  
- **Jessica, 2020 High School Graduate**

## Other issues on young people's minds

### Why is all of this happening in Washington DC?

#### City leadership

When we asked young people why some of the issues listed above namely, homelessness, mental health resources and community violence were happening in Washington DC., young people named a variety of sources.

From city leadership, statehood, generations dealing with racial injustice that leads to poverty and now young people seeing gentrification taking over their city right before their eyes.

They could clearly see who or what has been a priority in their city and who or what is has not.

I feel like some of the stuff that we need more help on, like right now I don't think they like doing their best job at helping out.  
- Tamika, 10th grade

When youth brought up the city government, there were strong feelings that city leaders were not meeting the needs of people who needed the resources and supports the most.

They acknowledged that leaders would take the time to visit their neighborhoods and listen to their concerns but never actually addressed them. Young people felt that their leaders weren't fully there to support their community's needs.

The frustration of advocating for their needs and not having them met was a generational and ever-present theme that emerged from young people.

everywhere it's just like there's so many things they can do it's just like they keep saying their hands are tied and it's like it's not really tied, they just fail to realize that's what the government is supposed to do, cater to us. but is not helping us, although we're supposed to be the people, supposed to be for the people is not really for the people.  
- ceon, 2020 high school graduate



## Other issues on young people's minds

Why is all of this happening in Washington DC?

History of racial injustice and poverty

Young people connected their **current conditions** to **generational patterns** of the racism and poverty they experienced in their communities.

Young people understood and communicated that the systems that are currently in place **were not set up in their favor**. They understood that at the core of this country, Black people are not valued the way they should be, which manifests in the economic investments that are not made in their communities and that directly impacts their personal lives.

I think it goes, all the way back to white supremacy that's just the basis of everything and it's just white supremacy. They denied us resources in our communities to make us have to fight tooth and nail in order to thrive or survive...

- London, 11th grade

Young people see the clear differences in their neighborhoods that have **more liquor stores than groceries stores** and how the **lack of resources** has caused people to do more negative things in order to **survive**.



I see too many homeless people on the street, and I feel like they need the support. And so, like it's time for a change, I feel like it's time for people to incorporate housing new housing and for them they are building all these apartments and stuff and bringing in, no disrespect to the white people, but you know white people are taking over our communities and they are contributing to the homelessness, instead of helping it.

- Jessica, 2020 High School Graduate

## Other issues on young people's minds

Why is all of this happening in Washington DC?

Gentrification prioritized over  
underserved communities

Young people described their experience of seeing the city they grow up in spend time and resources in areas where it's not needed. They could see and articulate the clear **inequality**, **inequities**, and **double standards** in their city.

Black people and Black neighborhoods **need resources** but instead get **abandoned homes**, **run-down play grounds**, **liquor stores**, and **corner stores**. White people and neighborhoods get not only grocery stores but organic ones,

we need to find a solution so that we can uplift the community and make things better because it's all about the data and the facts, and when I be looking up the percentage of how many people died from gun violence or how many people are abused for [being] gay or trans, part of the LGBTQ, or how many people are living outside their homes or are homeless or have no place to go...they all deserve attention and need to be handled.

- Tykirah, 12th grade

renovated buildings and green spaces for their leisure.

Not only do young people see no investments in their communities but also feel as though they could be pushed out at any moment.

The young people knew that the issue might not be solely about race, but also socioeconomic status.

Despite the root causes, the differences remained very clear for them to see.

Just down the street from my house is a big complex being built and it's right across from this bay area and I'm like, why did you build this? It's like no reason for you to have built this and now it's going to have more gentrification. And now half the buildings down the street are going to be gone because they're going to be white people and other types of people that are rich moving in.

- Tionna, 11th grade



# CONCLUSIONS

## THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS THAT SHOULD BE GETTING A LOT MORE ATTENTION

Young people in Washington DC understand the issues they face. Their voices need to be amplified and their

solutions taken into serious consideration. The Black Youth Agenda is one way in which young people are advocating for change in their communities. They ask that others join them in their advocacy so that they can see the positive change.



## WE DON'T LIVE SINGLE ISSUE LIVES

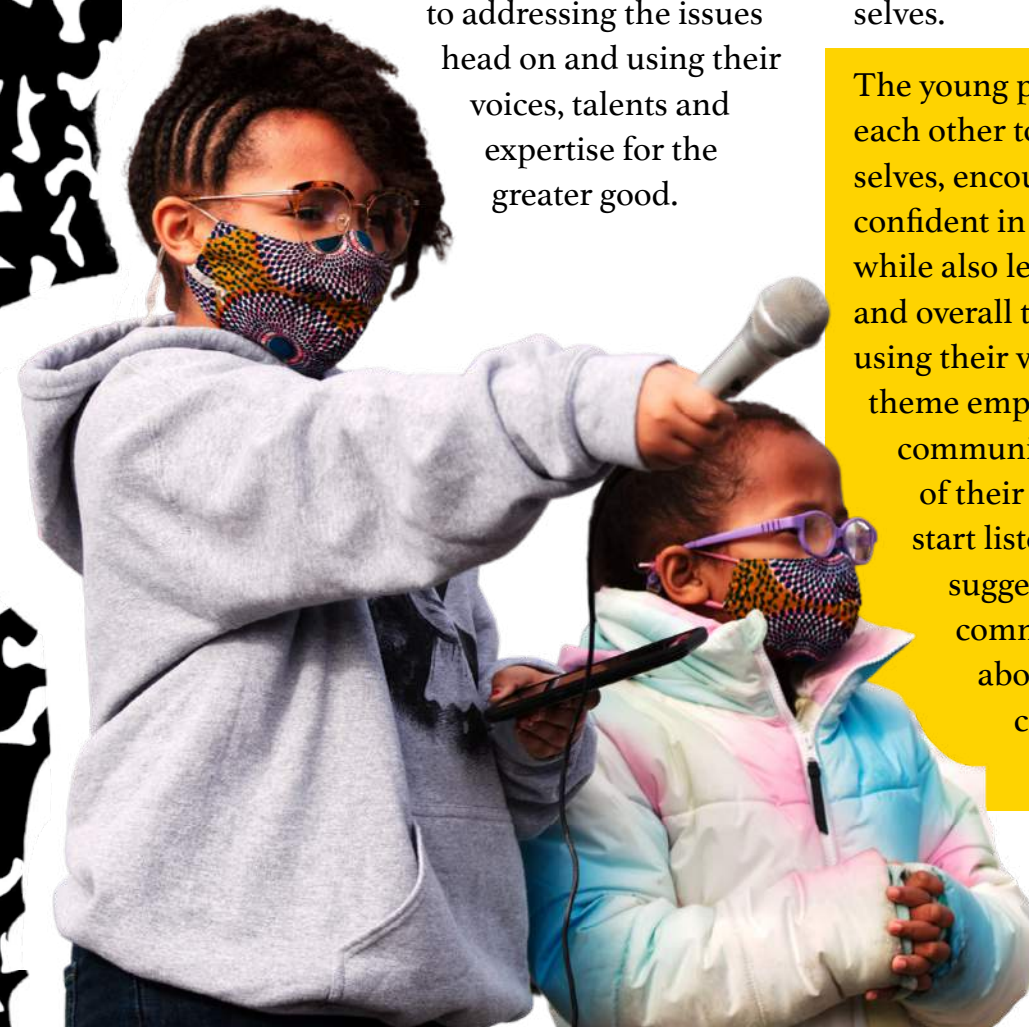
When talking through the 2021 Black Youth Agenda, a lot of the young people described how the agenda points are all connected to one another. For example, living in poverty and not having what you need can cause mental health issues that can turn into violence in the community. They described how it can be frustrating to know where to start when there are so many things that need to be changed. Despite these struggles,

young people are committed to addressing the issues head on and using their voices, talents and expertise for the greater good.

## WE KEEP US SAFE

At the end of each interview, a Black Swan Youth Leader suggested that we ask youth what their “call to action” would be. A reoccurring theme from the young people was a sense of the coming community coming together to help each other. There were themes of looking after your neighbor, treating people the way you want to be treated, checking on your loved ones, ensuring people in your life were okay and getting involved with more community-based organizations like Black Swan Academy where young people can have a safe space to just be themselves.

The young people also encouraged each other to be confident in themselves, encouraged adults to be more confident in young people’s abilities while also letting them just be kids and overall to keep organizing and using their voices for good. This theme emphasized that people in the community know how to take care of their community. It’s time to start listening and acting on the suggestions youth and other community members have about how to improve their community. They truly know best.





# LIMITATIONS

While this research is rigorous in its uses of youth participation and youth voice throughout the research process, it's important to acknowledge that this research is mostly from the perspective of youth who identify as female.

Further interviews should be done with strategic recruitment of young people with different identities and

experiences to gather more voices and perspectives on these issues.

Nevertheless, the interviews were meaningful and rich with lived experiences, knowledge and expertise on what it's like growing up as a young person in Washington D.C. during these difficult times.



# RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

It is important to note that the evidence provided in this report is not only evidence but real-life stories and experiences.

It is unacceptable to make oppressed people have to recount their stories of struggle and trauma over and over again in hopes that someone will have enough emotional capacity to care, listen and act.

It is the hope that everyone reading this report, sits and reflects with themselves on how they can contribute to solutions instead of being complacent or being part of the problem.

How many times, how many years, how many generations, will we keep having to fight for the same issues that manifest from oppression?

For more information on how to help move Black Swan Academy's work forward please visit:

**BLACKSWANACADEMY.ORG/  
ABOUT-US**

For more information on the 2021 Black Youth Agenda please visit:

**BLACKSWANACADEMY.ORG/  
BLACK-YOUTH-AGENDA**





# RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

Here are the three main points for this year's Black Youth Agenda.

In addition to the goals in the agenda, some of the youth added or further described how each goal within the agenda could be actualized:

## QUEER AFFIRMING LEARNING SPACES

Normalize the use of pronouns in schools. Attendance sheets should include pronouns so teachers know on the first day. Students should be encouraged to introduce themselves on the first day using pronouns.

More social workers and mental health professionals in schools not only when crisis happens but before, as a basic and key element of school functions

## COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN!

Mentorship programs

## HOPE & HOMES

Create youth friendly and youth only shelters

Implement budget and financing classes in schools





# APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A: TESTIMONY ON QUEER AFFIRMING SPACES FROM CEON

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee of the Whole Budget Hearing on the Education Agencies.*

Hello my name is Ceon. I'm 19 years old, and a 2020 graduate. I am also a youth ambassador with the Black

Swan Academy. I am here to talk to you about queer affirming learning spaces. Did you know according to the 2009 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), nearly 9 out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) students reported experiencing harassment in the past year.

Nearly 19% reported being physically assaulted in the past year because of their gender expression. Having queer affirming learning spaces makes schools a safe space for ALL students by supporting and investing in queer and Black youth. **This issue is very important to me because I am queer. While in school I wish I had more black history teachers as well as more queers teachers. I only had 1 black history teacher throughout my school career.**

I think if schools had more diverse teachers and staff and catered to different learning styles it would limit the amount of school-related incidents. This can also help develop better relationships between teachers and students. You should care about this issue because it affects a lot of youth, and one of the youth affected could be your own child. In the district, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning young people make up nearly 31% of the students in middle and high schools combined.

I also would have loved to learn more black history as well as queer black history. I am just learning about James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin, and Audrey Lorde. These are people I should've learned about in school. 8th grade wasn't the best year for me. If being a part of the LGBTQ community was normalized in our schools I think I would've felt more secure in who I was becoming and who I am now.

- I demand that you:**
- 1. Put more gender affirming bathrooms in schools and in the community**
  - 2. Hire more Black LGBTQ staff**
  - 3. Train staff on how to better engage with young people**
  - 4. Incorporate histories and experiences of queer Black people into all lessons**

So! Here's what needs to happen in schools now so our LGBTQ students can also have a good experience.

As a council, I hope that you will seriously consider and implement these demands into the budget or future legislation. Thank you for your time.





# APPENDIX B

## APPENDIX B: TESTIMONY ON QUEER AFFIRMING SPACES FROM SAMEYA

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee of the Whole Budget Hearing on the Education Agencies.*

Hello my name is Sameya and I'm a youth organizer with Black Swan Academy and a youth ambassador

with DC Girls Coalition. I am 16 years old and I go to Eastern Senior High School. I'm here to talk about LGBTQ+ issues. When I was attending school in person there was a girl who was transitioning. She was constantly bullied by our peers and mistreated by staff because of her gender identity. Students physically and verbally bullied her and even

after she transferred schools they found a way to cyber bully her.

1 in 5 queer youth in DCPS reported being physically assaulted in the past year because of their gender expression. For people with different gender expressions, public bathrooms can also be a source of abuse.

At my school, this classmate didn't have access to a bathroom that she felt safe or that she could use regularly. People should care about this because it was traumatizing to witness. It dehumanized her and violated her basic rights to her bodily functions.

At my school there are staff bathrooms and break room bathrooms. I would like for 2-4 (depending on the school size) bathrooms to be gender friendly.

As a council, I hope that you will seriously consider and implement these demands into the budget or future legislation. Thank you for your time.

**Black Swan Academy's demands from our 2021 Black Youth Agenda is to**

- 1. Increase the number of gender affirming bathrooms in schools and within community spaces**
- 2. Require that educators and adults who interact with youth be trained to respond to harm as it relates to one's gender identity or sexual orientation.**





# APPENDIX C

## APPENDIX C: TESTIMONY ON COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN FROM ANNISHA

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee on Health Budget Hearing on the Department of Behavioral Health.*

Hello, my name is Annisha, I'm here with Black Swan Academy. I'm in the

8th grade at Sousa Middle School. I'm 14 years old and I'm here testifying against gun violence. Growing up in Maryland and living in DC since 2011, I live through gun violence on a regular basis. Just last year, a regular family outing turned into a murder scene. Me, my grandma and two of my siblings were on our way to get something to eat.



When we were on our way to Bailey's, my grandma went inside to get our food. While she was inside, we heard gunshots. A car that was driving by got hit. It pulled over and the father, who was driving, and one of the kids got out of the car. But there was a baby in the backseat who was killed by the bullet.

On November 10 of that same year, I was almost a victim of gun violence myself.

I live in Simple City and sleep with my bed right near the window. While I was sleeping, a bullet came straight through the window in my room. Although it missed me, it went straight through my room and into my closet door. Thank God my dad was able to fix the door, because our landlords would have charged our family an excessive amount to fix it. The door was an easy fix, but the trauma that comes with it is not.

My experiences with gun violence in my community are way too common. As stated in Black Swan Academy's Black Youth Agenda —

“Many young people in the district have lost two to three friends to gun

violence. Nationally, more than 25% of children have witnessed an act of violence in their homes, schools, or community over the past year, and more than 5% witnessed a shooting. Young people who witness violence repeatedly can be mentally and emotionally impacted, yet the community remains ill equipped to address the trauma and PTSD the Black community continues to carry”.

It is easy to blame gun violence on hood beefs and members of the community, but the real source of the issue is a lack of resources. In order to be safe, families need access to food, household supplies, and other basic necessities. We also need to address the reality of gun violence and the trauma that it causes.





# APPENDIX D

## APPENDIX D: TESTIMONY ON COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN FROM JAYLA

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety Budget Hearing on MPD.*

Good Afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council as it conducts this budget hearing on

Education in the District of Columbia. My name is Jayla and I currently attend IDEA public charter school in Ward 7. I am in the 9th grade, and I am speaking today in my capacity as a member of the Black Swan Academy, a non-profit organization in the District of Columbia that concentrates its efforts on empowering Black youth through Civic Leader-

ship and Engagement. Our motto is pride, purpose, and power.

Before I get into my testimony, I would like to state that Violence is like a tree, and gun violence is a leaf on the tree of violence. You have to cut the root off before the tree continues to get bigger.

Gun violence is a part of a bigger story. There is a big impact that gun violence has on Black communities in Washington, DC. As a result of gentrification and other forms of economic exclusion, Wards 7 and 8 currently have the highest percentages of households who are economically insecure and also have the highest ratio of violent crime (source). Before we invest in more policing and more forms of punishment, we must first attempt to understand the root causes of violence and the conditions that people are living in that lead them to resort to violent means.

Many of you would likely agree that affordable housing, good paying jobs, and healthy food choices are essential to living a good life in DC, but why is it that only some people have access to these things? For

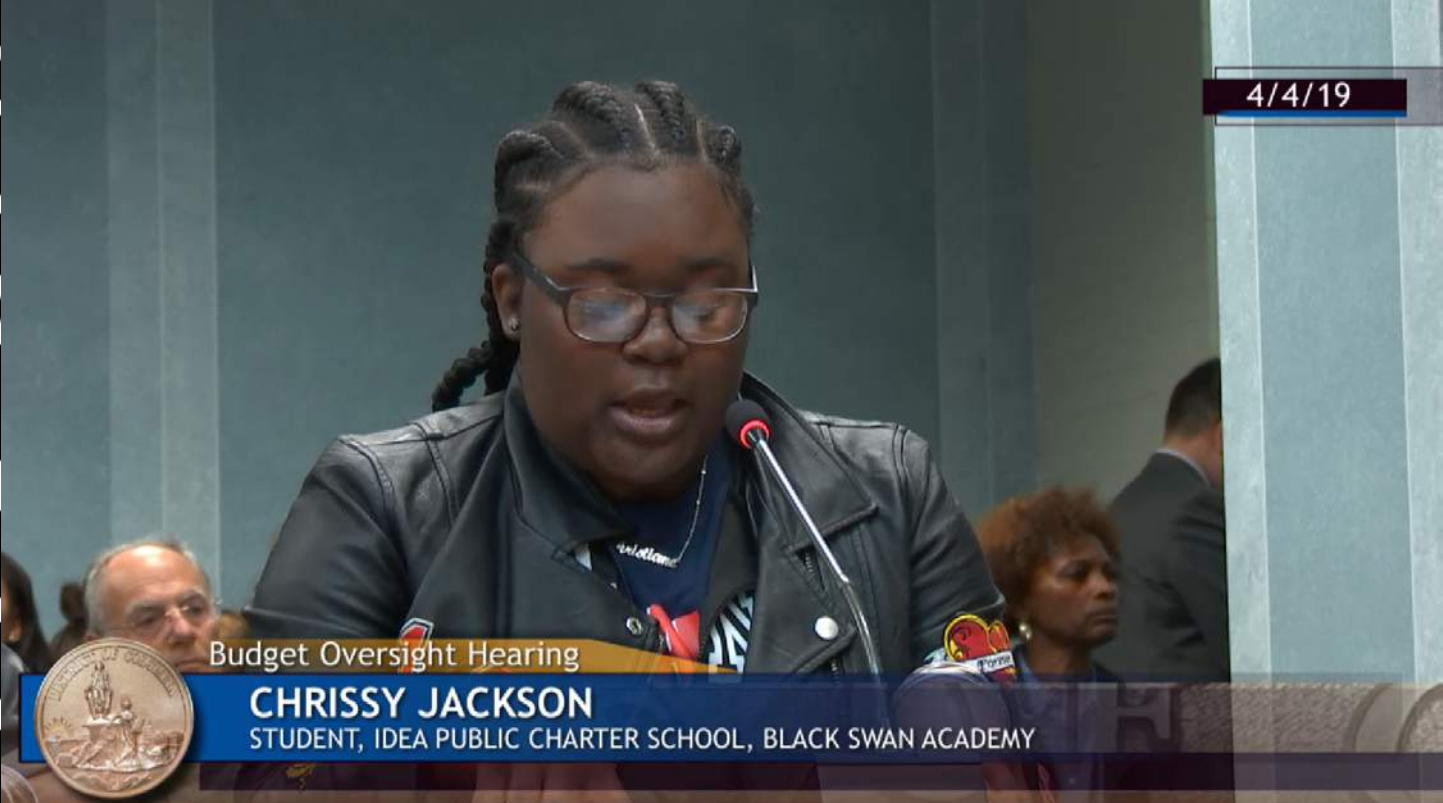
many Black families living east of the river, systemic racism and structural inequality have made it near impossible for everyone to access these essential resources for them and their families.

Many young people in the district, particularly black youth, have lost two to three friends to gun violence. Nationally, more than 25% of children have witnessed an act of violence in their homes, schools, or community over the past year, and more than 5% witnessed a shooting. Young people who witness violence repeatedly can be mentally and emotionally impacted, yet the community remains ill equipped to address the trauma and PTSD the Black community continues to carry.

Gun Violence Is Part of My Story. In November 1992, my grandmother's sister Lavetta Epps was shot in the head by her significant other. This devastating loss shook up my family and left a lasting impact on our ability to trust new additions to our family. Even to this day, when I ask questions about the story my close relatives prefer not to talk about it to avoid reliving the experience.







There are many things that DC can do to support the Black community when a life is taken. We can create spaces to allow justice for families in the community without violence or the police being involved. Addressing violence within our communities will require community-based interventions and psychological support services outside of the realm of policing.

There's also many things the council specifically can do to stop gun violence. First, People need things to do. There is a limited amount of resources available to support young people. Youth also need places where they can socially interact with each other. Young people shouldn't be criminalized when hanging out in big groups. Black kids don't have spaces where they can be social without getting

the police called on them. If police are patrolling communities, pepper spray and tasers is enough. Police really shouldn't have guns in places where there are young people (such as schools and parks)

- I am demanding that we**
- 1. Have tighter rules around gun use and purchasing**
  - 2. We need counselors or therapist in community centers and spaces that people can access for free**
  - 3. Fund programs to build skills up in the community so youth can talk about their problems with each other**
  - 4. Increase job opportunities for youth**
  - 5. We should be talking to shooters more and not be automatically going to forms of punishment for shooters.**





# APPENDIX E

## APPENDIX E: TESTIMONY ON COMMUNITIES GROUND. GUNS DOWN FROM LA'GEORGIA

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety Budget Hearing on MPD.*

Hi, my name is La' Georgia. I'm a youth organizer with Black Swan academy. I'm 13 years old and in the

7th grade. I go to Kramer Middle School.

I'm here to talk to you guys about my experience with gun violence. I'm qualified to talk about this issue. It's something that I live through every day. One day, my cousin was walking home with her 10-month-old baby brother and my aunt. Peo-

ple started shooting and my cousin was hit with a bullet. She did not know that the bullet hit her, so she kept walking. When she got home, her dad saw blood and then they found out that she had the bullet in her. Then, they went to the hospital. The doctors said that she cannot have the bullet taken out until she gets older, so the bullet is still in her.

Gun violence changed my cousin's life because she is now traumatized, and she will never forget that day. She doesn't want to talk about what happened. This affected me because now I think that if I was there, could I have been shot or could I have stopped that bullet from going into my cousin. I also think what if my baby cousin got shot, and what if somebody died.

I know other people experience these issues. I see violence every day in my neighborhood. At night I just hear gun shots all night long. Nationally, more than 25% of children have witnessed an act of violence in their homes, schools, or community over the past year, and more than 5% witnessed a shooting. Young people who witness violence repeatedly can be mentally and emotionally

impacted, yet the community remains ill equipped to address the trauma and PTSD the Black community continues to carry. What would have prevented my cousin from getting hurt, would have been to Increase the number of "violence interrupters" across the district and on school campuses. As a council, I hope you'll do something to address gun violence in the community.

I hope you'll work on policies and funding to help with this. Thank you for your time.





# APPENDIX F

## APPENDIX E: TESTIMONY ON HOPE & HOMES FROM SAMEYA

*This testimony was written for the FY2022 Committee on Housing Budget Hearing.*

Hello my name is Sameya Mcconneyhead, I am 17. I got to Eastern Senior High School, I am youth organizer with Black Swan

Academy and a youth ambassador with DC Girls Coalition. And I am a victim of homelessness.

Since 5th grade of elementary school, my mom and I have lost our home due to family issues. Luckily my grandma took us to her one bedroom apartment in Ward 7. It was really hard making friends during



those years because kids that age were very hostile. I had two friends and we all became close because we all used to live in homeless shelters. During the six years of living with my grandma, her mental health worsened.

When Corona came to our home, my mom lost her job and my grandma got sick. I took care of her for 2 weeks while my mom was at the hotel quarantining. From the end of December we were homeless. We had no local family, besides my grandma, and were forced to live in hotels from January to February.

After that my mental health worsened everyday, I stopped attending school and cut all contact with my friends and family. My mom called different places for her and I to be able to move. Finally she found a transitional place and we were there from March to April. In the second week of April we finally moved into our apartment here in Ward 3.

Here are our demands for the BSA 2021 Black Youth Agenda:

1. Expand childcare options for people who have or are supporting children living in the District
2. Expand funding for utility assistance programs
3. Mandate that rapid rehousing not be terminated until new housing options are identified and secured.

When I was younger I wished I was able to do simple things like have my friends spend the night or have my own room and bed.

Since middle school I've been fighting for change for other youth, I constantly wondered when will it my turn to have a better life.

It was always hard to open up to my friends and adults to confide in them. As someone who brings joy wherever I go, it would be hard for them to understand.

Thank you for your time.

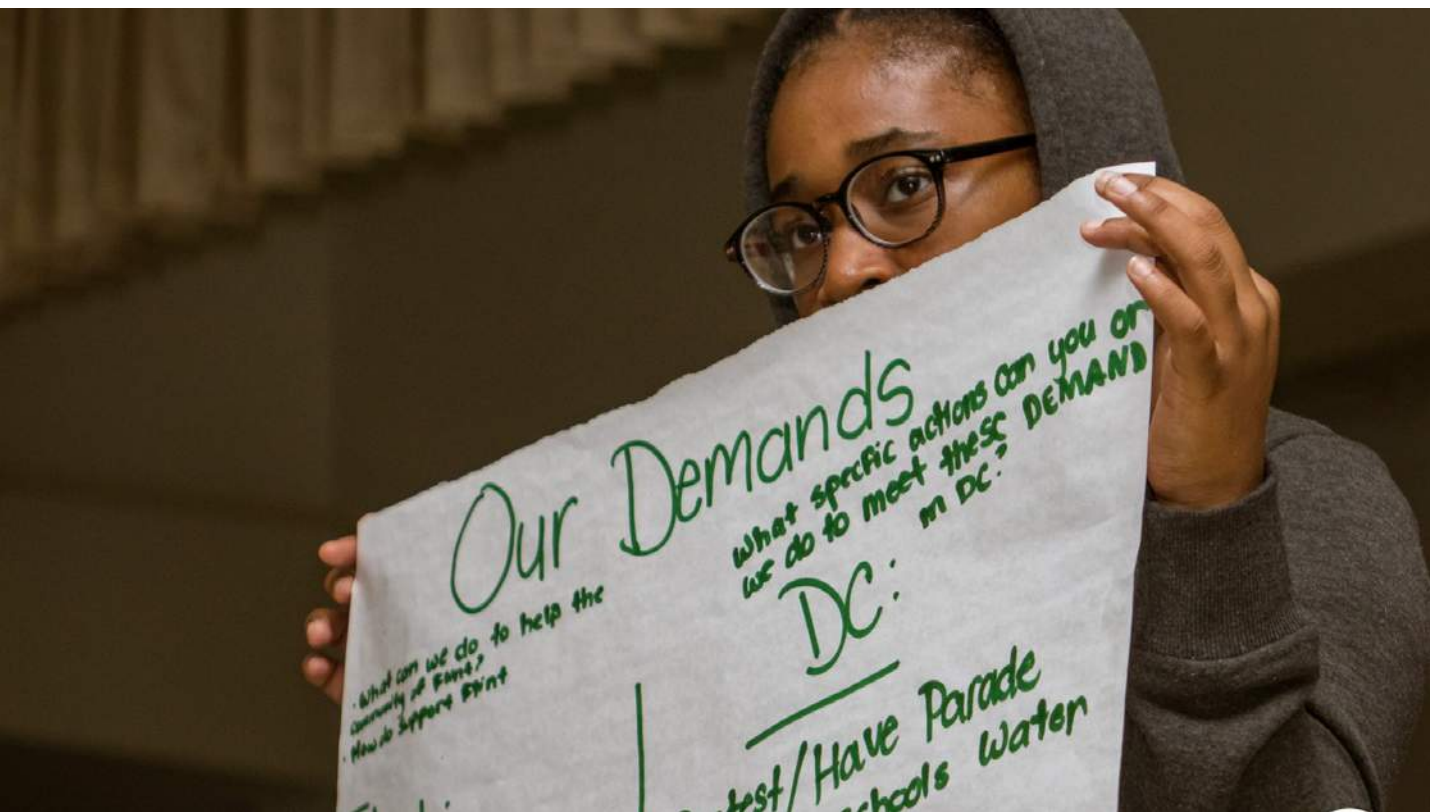




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