



# GROWING UP IN OAKLAND: A STUDY OF GIRLS' EXPERIENCES

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alliance for Girls (AFG) is a membership association of 130 organizations and independent practitioners serving more than 250,000 girls and young women annually in the San Francisco Bay Area. AFG is the largest alliance of girls' organizations and girls' champions in the country. AFG programming includes the areas of advocacy, collaboration, and professional development. AFG is where girl-serving professionals go for trainings, workshops, resources, referrals, and collaborations.

Alliance for Girls (AFG), in partnership with the Mayor's Office of the City of Oakland, commissioned this study to learn more about the lived experience of girls and young women of color in Oakland. The aim is to help inform Oakland's approach to creating policies, practices, and services that support young women of color in the city. Funding for this report was provided by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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This report was written and prepared by Bright Research Group. All methodology was designed and conducted by Bright Research Group. Bright Research Group is a cutting-edge women- and minority-owned consulting firm based in Oakland, California. Bright Research Group's mission is to help public system and social impact efforts become more responsive to the needs, preferences, behaviors, strengths, and voice of consumers and communities. This report was authored by:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION .....3**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....3**

**METHODOLOGY .....4**

**KEY FINDINGS .....6**

**FEELING SAFE IN OAKLAND.....6**

**FAMILY AND COMMUNITY.....7**

**GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS.....8**

**RECOMMENDATIONS.....9**

**CONCLUSION.....10**

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### Introduction

Alliance for Girls (AFG), in partnership with the Mayor's Office of the City of Oakland, commissioned a series of focus groups to learn more about the lived experience of girls and young women of color in Oakland. AFG is the largest alliance of girls' organizations and girls' champions in the country. AFG programming includes the areas of advocacy, collaboration, and professional development. AFG is where girl-serving professionals go for trainings, workshops, resources, referrals, and collaborations.

In 2015, AFG received a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The purpose of the grant was to develop protocols or policies within local government agencies that are informed by the lived experiences of at-risk girls and gender-specific, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strength-based, and developmentally appropriate (GCTSD) approaches. AFG was also funded to develop coordinated community responses to at-risk girls by helping youth-serving government agencies implement GCTSD approaches. AFG engaged Bright Research Group to learn more about the lived experiences of young women of color in Oakland. This report provides a summary of the key findings on the basis of a series of focus groups and pop-ups that were conducted from June through August 2016 with African American, Latina, and Asian / Pacific Islander young women of color. The aim is to help inform Oakland's approach to creating policies, practices, and services that support young women of color in the city.

### Executive Summary

The key themes refer to the experiences of African American, Latina, and Asian / Pacific Islander young women of color who participated in the focus groups and pop-ups. The term "young women of color" and "participants" refers to these groups, unless otherwise noted. Among the key themes and findings are the following:

#### FEELING SAFE IN OAKLAND

- Young women of color reported that the biggest concern that they and their friends face with being a teen in Oakland is feeling safe. The girls expressed a range of fears related to safety on topics such as police violence, gun violence, sexual violence and exploitation, and harassment—all issues that are currently part of national and local conversations on community safety.
- The participants shared diverse perspectives about which neighborhoods were safe in Oakland, though they all agreed that they felt most safe in their own homes and with their families.
- There was a general consensus that Oakland lacks safe spaces for teens to gather and that young women in particular need to be on high alert when they are walking, using public transportation, or hanging out in public spaces. The participants reported going to Alameda, Emeryville, or San Leandro to hang out, describing those areas as safer, more affordable, and more interesting for teens. The participants longed for more safe, fun spaces for teens in Oakland.

### FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

- For African American, Latina, and Asian / Pacific Islander girls alike, there was a near consensus that their families are a source of strength, safety, community, and happiness. For many, community was defined by their extended families, religious affiliations, neighborhoods, or other extracurricular activities.
- The participants shared that they feel proud to live in Oakland and appreciate the cultural diversity and artistic expression that makes Oakland unique. Oakland's diverse neighborhoods—West Oakland, Downtown, Fruitvale, Lakeshore, and Chinatown—and the diversity within girls' schools provide them with the opportunity to interact with, make friends with, and learn about people from backgrounds different from their own.
- There were no unique differences on the basis of race, though African American young women were more likely to mention police violence as an issue of concern. Many participants described themselves as bicultural or multiethnic, or shared aspects of their personal identities that they felt defied societal expectations or stereotypes. Young women of color who participated view Oakland as a city that is divided along socioeconomic lines. They see that white girls enjoy privilege and freedom from the types of concerns facing girls of color and African American communities in particular.

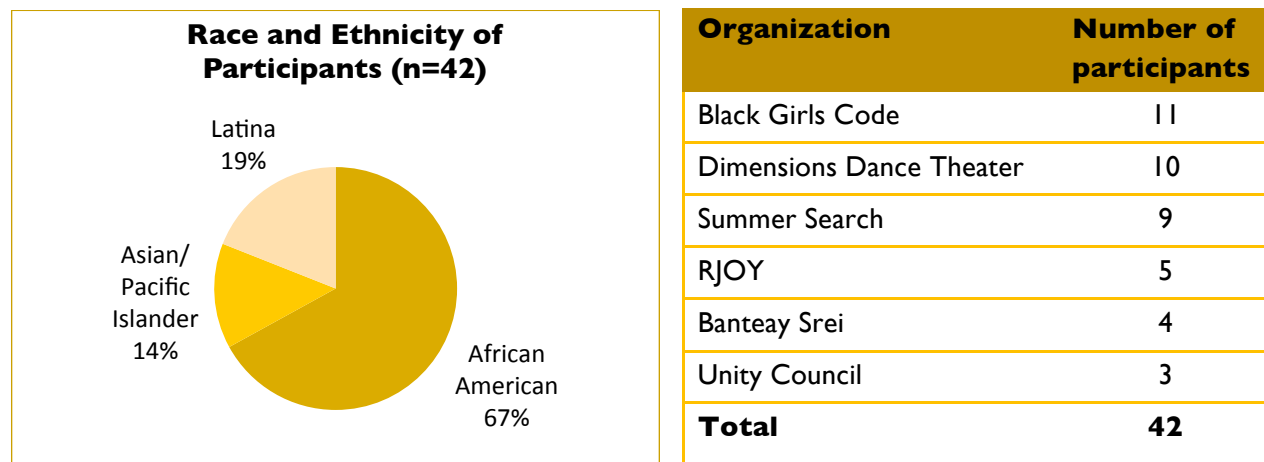
### GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

- There was agreement among participants that girls and young women in Oakland receive mixed messages about female sexuality. On the one hand, they experience significant pressure to conform to their families, communities, or societal expectations—to act responsibly, to look a certain way, and to not be “fast” sexually. On the other hand, they feel hurt and disappointed by the low expectations that society holds for them, i.e., that they might drop out of school or become a teen mom (for Latina girls in particular). As a result, the participants experience considerable pressure to “act right” to prevent their own future failure. At the same time, they long for a more carefree life.
- Young women of color described two types of harassment: boys their age calling them sexually derogatory names or interacting with them in a disrespectful way and older men trying to talk to them when they are in public. The participants felt that they understand where their male peers' behavior is coming from, noting that community and societal norms promote misogynistic relationships between men and women. They felt confident about handling this type of behavior in a social situation. On the other hand, they felt concerned for their safety when older men asked them if they wanted a ride or followed them on the streets.

### Methodology

A series of five focus groups and one pop-up were conducted with 42 girls and young women of color ages 11–19 years old. The focus groups were one-hour-long facilitated conversations about key topics with 6–12 participants. The pop-ups were brief 10- to 15-minute conversations with one to three participants. Pop-ups were facilitated during a time when young women are already meeting at community-based organization or other service organization. Most of the participants attended a focus

group (75 percent). The participants were girls from Oakland who were attending a community-based program during the summer. African American girls were oversampled on the basis of an analysis of risk data (i.e., higher dropout rates and rates of criminal-justice involvement); Latina and Asian / Pacific Islander girls both represented less than 20 percent of the participants. White girls were not represented among the focus-group participants.



**Ages of Girls in Focus Groups and Pop-ups**

Age	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Number of Participants	2 (5%)	3 (7%)	10 (24%)	2 (5%)	8 (19%)	7 (17%)	3 (7%)	6 (14%)	1 (2%)

The participants were recruited through community-based organizations that serve young women of color. The organizations are located throughout the city, with many serving girls of various income levels. The participants were recruited by staff from community-based organizations. The girls live in neighborhoods throughout the city and come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The focus groups and pop-ups were held during or immediately after regular summer programming. Participation was voluntary, but girls were required to sign up in advance. Letters were sent to parents in advance of the focus groups or pop-ups, informing them of the purpose and providing them with instructions for opting out. A snack and a \$10 Starbucks gift card were provided to each girl to incentivize participation. The focus groups were held in a private and confidential format and facilitated by staff from Bright Research Group. The programming staff were not in the room. The topic of the questions included participants' perceptions of Oakland and their communities, feelings of safety, access to recreation, what it's like for girls and young women in Oakland today, access to services and supports, and key issues facing young women of color. Notes were recorded on a computer during the session and then analyzed for key themes.

## Key Findings

## FEELING SAFE IN OAKLAND

**Fear of Becoming Victims of Violence:** Feeling safe on the streets or in the community was a major area of conversation and the most prevalent theme in all the focus groups and pop-ups. Young women of color who participated are concerned about witnessing issues related to police violence, gun violence, sexual exploitation, and crime in their neighborhoods and schools, and throughout the city. Most of the participants concurred that they don't feel safe in Oakland but shared a variety of perspectives on what that means. Some young women feel safe in their neighborhoods but recognize that other areas of Oakland are unsafe. Others live in crime-ridden neighborhoods, and their parents don't allow them to walk freely about their neighborhood or go outside. Overall, participants agreed that they feel most safe at home and with their families, regardless of what community they live in. Young women of color long for access to safer public spaces and places for teens to gather for socializing and fun.

The participants shared that they are always cautious when they are outside their homes in Oakland because they are afraid of being the next victim of violence. Young women of all socioeconomic backgrounds shared these fears. When asked what they were most worried about, almost all the participants cited being shot (accidentally, as an innocent bystander) or being raped/kidnapped by men (as opposed to boys their age). Some girls also worried about being captured and becoming commercially sexually exploited.

**Coping Tactics:** This fear has led many girls to develop tactics and coping mechanisms to protect themselves. In general, girls feel that they have to have tactics to “watch their back.” Girls feel that they need to be careful all the time—at school, waiting to get on buses, in their communities, and in public. Their tactics include walking only in pairs or groups, looking behind them continually, having emergency numbers to call, and having a safe space to go to if they get nervous. In addition to feeling unsafe, many girls do not feel that the police are there to protect them if they get into trouble. Among African American participants, there is a fear and mistrust of the police. Many shared concerns that a loved one might become the next victim of police brutality.

*“You don't want to go outside by yourself. I want to go with my brother. I grew up with both my parents. I have four brothers; they protect me. They tell me a lot of things. I'm very aware of myself. When I'm walking outside, I pay a lot of attention. I don't like walking by myself.”*

*“I don't want to be in fear for my own life because of something that doesn't involve me. I don't want to be the next Reggina Jefferies. She was at a funeral, and now she has had her own funeral. They were fighting over \$5. I don't want to be her.”*

*“When we got older, my parents started letting me walk to school with my friend—never alone. But we had a rule called the ‘five-second rule.’ We took turns looking behind us every five seconds to make sure no one was following us.”*

*“It's hard to be carefree when you need to always be calculating and planning for your safety. Guys can just go out. Girls have to worry.”*

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

**Families as a Source of Safety and Strength:** Young women of color in Oakland experience their families as a source of safety, strength, and protection. When asked to pick an image from a series of cards, participants consistently chose images depicting family relationships and described their families as loving, caring, fun, strong, and protective. For many, the best times were times they've spent with family, including their extended families.

Like many teens, young women of color who participated found their families to be overprotective at times. They described their parents as extremely concerned about their safety. Most said that their parents do not allow them to be alone or walk around Oakland without them out of fear that they will not come home safely. They understood why their parents have these fears but expressed sadness that they are not allowed to be more independent at 16 or 17 years of age. Young women of color long for safe, fun spaces outside the home in which they could gather and socialize with their peers.

**Culture and Diversity:** Despite these concerns, young women of color are proud of being from Oakland. Oakland feels like home to participants—many of them have lived their whole lives here and have parents who are from here. They are proud of the cultural diversity of the city and feel that as young adults, they knew how to communicate with and appreciate their peers of other races and ethnicities in a way that adults in their lives have not yet figured out how to do. However, they still recognize the gap that exists between young women of color and their white counterparts when it comes to accessing enriching opportunities in Oakland. Some participants noted that in their social world, people tend to stick with people who share their ethnic background, while others appreciate the level of diversity in their peer groups and neighborhoods. Some suggested that Oakland needs more opportunities for young people of different races to come together in school and other social atmospheres. There was general agreement that Oakland is an exciting city because of its people.

**Identity:** Many young women of color shared that they are bicultural and that their identities represent an intersection of multiple races/cultures, income levels, and/or religious

*"I feel that Oakland is exciting because there are a lot of people. There are a whole lot of different cultures. Each part of International [Boulevard] is a different culture."*

*"My family is very protective of me and my older sisters. I'm curious about a lot of places that I haven't been to. I mostly come to Lake Merritt. I feel happy and at peace because my family is here."*

*"I have dance. That is one part of my community. And I'm Muslim, so I also have that community."*

*"Being at a private school, I am one of the only black kids there. I am there on a scholarship. But the biggest difference between us is not just our race; it's our income and families. It separates two different kinds of people at the school. It makes me feel bad because white girls get all opportunities, and they don't appreciate them. I wish I had the opportunities and knew about things the way that they do."*

*"White girls my age have this feeling that they are the best, that they can do anything. Black girls don't feel that way all the time. We are put down or teased just because of our race."*

*"Community is everyone working together and accepting each other. Community is the people we rely on."*



backgrounds. The participants feel that it is difficult to isolate females' experiences by race, even though they did recognize the existence of unique cultural experiences or expectations. Across ethnic groups, participants shared that they experience cultural pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. For example, Asian participants identified cultural expectations, e.g., getting married young, starting a family, taking care of the house, and being smart and successful at school; Latina participants identified family expectations around caring for their siblings, cleaning the house, and making sure dinner is on the table; African American participants identified family expectations around their safety, how they interact with the police as well as teachers and other adults, and where they are allowed to hang out. Young women of color feel that there are many stereotypes and standards related to race/ethnicity and gender that intersect.

**Community:** The participants were able to identify and define the value of community as people whom they could depend on to support each other or a place where they could form trusting relationships outside their families. For some, community is defined by their family and includes their extended family, friends, religious groups, people in their neighborhoods, and others who they meet through community activities. Some feel that Oakland doesn't have enough community, whereas others said that they have a strong community in the city. Many young women experience community in the space of the girl-serving organizations that helped to organize the focus groups or pop-ups.

### GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

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**Stereotypes:** The participants shared that they feel that young women are consistently judged by their peers, boys and men, and adults when it comes to their behavior and presentation. Young women of color experience significant pressure to act, dress, behave, and simply be a certain way to meet societal, familial, and cultural expectations. On the one hand, young women feel pressure to do the right thing for fear of being judged. At the same time, they feel that society and some adults in their lives, such as teachers, hold low expectations for young women of color in particular.

Key areas of concern around stereotyping or judgment include the following:

- Body image, style of dress, and self-presentation
- Style of talking, e.g., slang, diction or curse words
- Being "fast" or "easy" sexually
- Expectations to be more responsible, provide support in the form of childcare, and take care of the house
- Expectations to fail or to not achieve academically or professionally. Latina participants in particular felt that they are constantly up against people who expect them to become pregnant.
- Pressure to be feminine
- Cultural pressures

**Relationships with Boys and Men:** The participants described feeling sexualized by boys and men—both those whom they know and those whom they don't know. Although they did not like being called “fast” or to have their sexual behaviors discussed by boys, many participants shared that they have empathy for boys their age, who, they suggested, are under peer pressure to prove their masculinity or express their sexual prowess. However, they also attributed this behavior to a lack of education for young boys around how to act in respectful ways with girls and women, as well as a hyper-sexualized culture. Some pointed out that boys are being taught to be “men” in manhood classes, but that those classes don't include instruction on how a man should treat or respect a woman. However, participants generally feel like they know how to manage boys their age.

Their biggest areas of fear or concern are with men who are older than they are, and who harass them or follow them on the streets. Several participants shared stories of strangers offering to drive them to school or drive them home when they were waiting at bus stops.

*“We are all hyper-sexualized by society in general. Every male that you have some type of relationship with will think that they are entitled to you because society sexualizes you. You are here as a girl of color for that reason: to be sexual. That's the worst stereotype.”*

*“You have to be cautious about what you wear. I can't wear shorts. It's not safe. If you don't dress right, people will blame you if something happens to you.”*

*“The only word I can think of is 'harassment.' It doesn't matter where you are or how you look; they are always hollering. It happens everywhere in Oakland. It's hard to avoid.”*

## Recommendations

Young women shared a number of recommendations for how the city and other girl-serving organizations could make Oakland a city that better supports young women and girls.

- Expand the number of safe public spaces for teens to socialize and engage in recreation. The participants are excited about the possibility of having a skating rink, dance halls, places to record music and have rap battles, and other opportunities like bowling that are affordable.
- Sponsor community events and celebrations that are safe and youth friendly.
- Keep offering programs like the ones that young women are currently participating in that support girls and offer them the opportunity to learn something new.
- Expand opportunities for mentoring and linking young women to positive female role models, and lift up positive, diverse female role models who have made a difference in Oakland—through public art and statues, community events, and other celebratory occasions.
- Teach girls how to be safe in Oakland through safety training and self-defense.
- Support male-focused education that emphasizes caring and respectful relationships with women.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this inquiry was to learn more about the lived experiences of young women of color in Oakland. The focus groups and pop-ups revealed that young women of color (African American, Latina, and Asian / Pacific Islander) enjoy the diversity, culture, art, and people in Oakland and feel proud to call it home. They find their families to be a source of strength, safety, and comfort. Their biggest concern, regardless of race/ethnicity and background, is around personal and community safety. They experience Oakland as a city divided along socioeconomic lines and feel that white girls enjoy a greater level of privilege than they do. In their families and peer groups, they have to combat stereotypes and expectations around what girls and young women should and shouldn't do. They expressed excitement that the city is considering how to better support young women and long for more public spaces that are safe and designed specifically for teens.



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