

Strategies for Youth

Strategies for Youth Poll Finds Most Americans Wrongly Think Law Enforcement Is Equipped With Policies for Youth Interactions

SFY Finding Highlights Urgent Need for Change

WASHINGTON — Nov. 1, 2023 — Even though most U.S. law enforcement agencies lack any guidelines about how to interact, interrogate, or arrest young people, 56% of **Americans think agencies “probably” have written policies for youth interactions**, a disconnect that leaves police, citizens, and communities vulnerable, according to [Strategies for Youth](#) (SFY), a national nonprofit training and policy organization dedicated to improving interactions between police and young people. In addition, the SFY poll finds a plurality of Americans still believe that law enforcement should treat youth differently than adults.

The urgency of these issues has been highlighted in recent months by a number of high profile examples including a suburban Chicago officer shooting an unarmed 14-year-old; a Mississippi police officer shooting an unarmed 11-year-old in the chest; videos showing a officers in Alabama, California and Illinois slamming students to the ground; and many other disturbing incidents.

To address this need, today SFY issued **12 Model Law Enforcement Policies for Interactions with Youth** designed to remedy recurring problems in youth policing including escalation and use of force and is launching a social media effort to support them. The **12 Policies** are based on using developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and equitable approaches to interactions with youth. Law enforcement agencies can fit them to their needs.

SFY drafted the policies based on research, case law, statutes, and U.S. Department of Justice consent decrees. A diverse group of national, regional, and state experts provided input for the policies.

Poll Says Americans Want Law Enforcement Policies That Reflect Age Differences

Americans, despite a wave of claims that fault teens for rising crime, recognize there’s a difference between young people and adults. In the poll, **87%** say officers should be required to take additional steps to ensure youth understand their *Miranda* rights, an action that most law enforcement agencies don’t do right now.

SFY is calling for officers to “employ alternatives to arrest when appropriate and consistent with public safety,” and the public agrees. Survey results show that **67%** believe law enforcement agencies should indeed provide alternatives to arresting youth involved in

low-level non-violent offenses. In fact, [only 8% of youth arrests in 2020 involved a violent crime, according to the Justice Department.](#)

[Shelley Jackson](#), a long-time civil rights attorney who worked for many years at the Department of Justice, led this project and is a co-author of these policies. “As the Supreme Court has repeatedly stated, youth are different from adults. Their immaturity and impulsivity puts them at risk in interactions with law enforcement, especially when officers are not equipped to adjust their practices to take into account youth development,” says Jackson.

“Some youth, including youth of color and youth with disabilities, are especially exposed to short- and long-term harm from law enforcement encounters. SFY developed these policies to help officers better understand youth and protect public safety while respecting youth’s civil rights.”

“These policies are a win-win for law enforcement agencies and for communities who want their kids safe,” said Lisa H. Thurau. “There’s no better way to demonstrate a commitment to excellence in policing than by adopting policies that equip officers and agencies with strategies, tools and knowledge to work effectively with young people and their families.”

Got Policies?

The International Association of Chiefs of Police, [in its research](#), reports that many agencies lack policies focusing on youth interactions.

Agencies that lack policies for law enforcement agencies and officers’ treatment of youth, leave officers often unprepared to respond to youths’ behavior and reactions to authority, and risking the unnecessary escalation of encounters with youth. The absence of policies means some of the most vulnerable youth are not given the attention and support they need. And the absence of policies mean law enforcement agencies rely on officers’ discretion and common sense. Strategies for Youth argues this is insufficient.

A majority of survey respondents agree. They say law enforcement agencies should provide officers with **specialized policies and training** for:

- Responding to youth’s mental health crises,
- Responding to youth with special needs,
- De-escalation,
- Arrests, and
- Interrogations.

Americans Also Want Officers to Be Trained to Work with Youth

Overwhelmingly, (almost 9 out of 10) Americans believe police officers should undergo training before working in schools, with large majorities supporting training in effective

strategies for communicating with youth, skills for youth in crisis, protections for youth with disabilities, and the use of de-escalation. Nearly half (49%) think law enforcement officers working in schools should focus exclusively on preventing shootings and other acts of serious violence and should not get involved in discipline issues.

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Strategies for Youth

Strategies for Youth (SFY) is a nonprofit training and policy organization dedicated to ensuring the best outcomes for youth interacting with law enforcement. It was founded in 2010 to improve interactions between police and young people, with a focus on youth of color, and to promote alternatives to arrest and reduce use of force by police against young people. By providing training, education, and policy interventions and reforms, SFY seeks to build communities where (1) police and youth treat each other with mutual respect and dignity; (2) arresting a young person is considered the least desirable intervention and an officer's choice of last resort; and (3) at the end of the day, everyone goes home safely. <https://strategiesforyouth.org/>

Poll Conducted by Lincoln Park Strategies

Lincoln Park Strategies conducted the national survey among 1,000 American adults in September. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%. Additional poll results available on SFY's website.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Adam Shapiro

Adam.Shapiro@ASPR.bz

202-427-3603