
‘Keep Showing Us That You’re Here for Us’

Rockaway Youth Talk About Safety, Justice, and Programming

By Rachel Swaner, Darya Zlochevsky, and Suzanne Boswell

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‘Keep Showing Us That You’re Here for Us’: Themes and Findings

The Rockaways, Queens is a geographically and socially isolated community. Located on a peninsula at the easternmost point of New York City, it has limited community resources, and residents travel great distances for work and services. It is surrounded by bodies of water on two sides. Jamaica Bay, to the north, was once a dumping ground for raw sewage. The ocean shorefront, to the south, is under constant threat from hurricanes and other storms and was decimated by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 when ten feet of storm surge flooded the area. Residents went without heat for months, and many had to deal with mold in their homes from the water damage. The Rockaways are home to five major public housing complexes, and even before Sandy, much of the public housing was poorly maintained, a victim of years of institutional neglect.

In recent years, the Rockaways have experienced a wave of gentrification, particularly along the Atlantic side of the peninsula. This side received significant infrastructure reinvestment post-Sandy, rebuilding to cater to a summer crowd of wealthier New Yorkers who come to enjoy the beach and trendy food options. The bay side—equally damaged by the hurricane and just as vulnerable to future storms—is home to predominantly Black and Latinx residents and did not receive the same attention.

Institutional neglect and lack of investment in the Rockaways community have led to other negative outcomes, especially when compared to both the borough of Queens and New York City (NYC), as reported by the NYC Department of Health.¹

- **Education indicators:** A higher rate of elementary school absenteeism and a lower on-time high school graduation rate.
- **Health indicators:** A higher rate of expectant mothers receive late or no prenatal care, a higher infant mortality rate, a higher obesity rate, and a higher rate of psychiatric hospitalizations.

¹ See Rockaway and Broad Channel Community Health Profile at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-qn14.pdf>.

- **Crime indicators:** a higher jail incarceration rate and a higher rate of assault-related hospitalizations.

In 2021, the Center for Court Innovation (the Center) began to lay the groundwork to address some of these injustices—particularly around crime, public safety, and supports for young people—by opening a new project site: the Queens Community Justice Center: The Rockaways. Its first year has focused on securing and renovating a community space, hiring staff, building relationships, and beginning to design programming. Once fully up and running, the Justice Center will be a local hub for alternatives to incarceration, activities for youth, community safety services, and safe spaces to discuss questions of safety and justice.

To inform the development of future youth programming, in March 2022, Center researchers conducted four focus groups in three of the Rockaway New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments: Ocean Bay, Redfern, and Beach 41st Street. Fifty young people (36 ages 13-17, 14 ages 18-24) participated in the groups held at community centers within the NYCHA complexes. Researchers recruited participants through flyers (see Appendix A for a sample recruitment flyer), in-person outreach at the developments, and word-of-mouth. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary, and all participants received pizza and \$30 cash afterward as a thank you for their time and insight.² The research team conducted the groups in English. Questions focused on participants’ thoughts about safety and justice, strategies for keeping safe, needed programming for young people, and suggestions for how a new community organization could build trust with Rockaway residents.

This report summarizes the major themes from the groups and concludes with suggestions for future youth programming.

Safety

The focus groups opened by asking the youth about safety: what comes up when they think about it, locations considered safe or unsafe, local organizations that help ensure safety, and how the youth keep themselves safe.

² The Center’s Institutional Review Board approved the study.

“It’s just very dangerous”

Participants almost exclusively talked about physical safety—staying alive; protection; and concern about guns, shootings, gangs, and opposition—when asked about safety. Their feelings of being unsafe were high when large groups, drug users, and people who were unhoused and presenting with mental illness were present; during the summer when more people were outside; and on their commutes home.

Participants feared getting jumped, robbed, or caught in a shootout—“even in broad daylight”—though many youth felt particularly unsafe at nighttime. They stated that the threat of physical harm was not only for people involved in gangs, but for everyone. They felt that young people were especially vulnerable to both perpetration and victimization. As one young man noted, “Nowadays of shootings, when you come to think about it, it’s kids who are aged 16, 17, 15, 19, 18. So it’s like, it’s not even older people anymore. It’s just our generation now.”

Safety in the Rockaways Researchers asked about areas in the Rockaways that were safe and unsafe. Nearly all youth agreed that the higher numbered streets—above 100th Street on the peninsula where most of the white people live—were significantly safer because there were “no projects” and “no poverty.”

It was deemed unsafe to go to a NYCHA development other than their own. However, sometimes even movement within their development was problematic: “There’s two sides of Edgemere, and both sides got problems with each other.”

Parks were not seen as areas where the youth could spend time. Numerous participants recounted stories of people they or their family members knew who had experienced violence while in Bayswater Park, which kept them away. One young man said that Bayswater Park was “too mixy”—meaning that there were a “whole bunch of people” with “too much going on,” increasing the chance of tensions escalating and leading to conflicts. Another agreed that the park was “not really too safe” because “everybody who goes to that park is coming from like Redfern, Pinkfern, OB [Ocean Bay], Edgemere. So, like, they usually all beef with each other.”

While Rockaway is known for the beach in the summertime, most of the youth in the focus groups did not use it. They felt it was safe from violence—“I don’t really see anything like

popping off [around the Boardwalk]”—but they preferred to stay away because of high-profile drownings. They also pointed out that the beach in the higher-numbered streets—where they do not live—is “all nice and pretty, but it’s not how it is down beach.”

Many participants also felt unsafe in and around the subways and subway stations—“the MTA in general.” They mentioned the Mott Avenue train station as particularly concerning. They explained that there was no police presence there, “so people are doing things that they wouldn’t do publicly.”

Police and Surveillance Discussions of police in each group were nuanced. Some participants felt there were not enough police in their neighborhood addressing serious offenses and that officers were only around after a crime happened instead of beforehand to prevent it. One young person stated, “When a close friend nearly got killed in the building over there, that’s when police is around more, and then they start coming around when more people getting shot.” Others—almost exclusively young Black males—felt that their neighborhood was overpoliced for minor offenses or no offenses. They recounted their experiences of being harassed, threatened, and detained by officers when they had done nothing wrong, making them feel less safe. One young man stated, “Stop and frisk never ended here.” Another told of the multiple times he had gotten stopped and concluded that “the cops out here just really don’t care. They really don’t.” Most focus group participants did not hold favorable views of the police, stating things such as, “Not all cops are bad. I’m not talking about all cops, but I generally try to stay away from them. I want nothing to do with them.” A limited number of participants were able to identify one specific community affairs officer whom they knew by name and felt was doing a good job. They said this officer was someone they trusted to help when they found themselves in challenging situations.

Some young people talked about non-police forms of surveillance, saying that cameras and lighting were helpful. Others felt they were ineffective: “There’s lights and cameras around here, and they still be up and down shooting each other. So that doesn’t really help nobody.”

Signs of a Safe Community Participants talked about safe communities as those that looked in many ways opposite to how they described the Rockaways. They said that safe neighborhoods had low crime rates, no shootings or robberies, and no poverty or drugs. They also mentioned a lack of police: “When there’s no cop cars patrolling [you know it’s a safe neighborhood]. Everywhere you turn [in the Rockaways], you see a cop somewhere. I feel like [not seeing police everywhere] would make it safe because there’s no need for cops to be

around if it's safe." They pointed to other positive signs of a safe community: people—friends and family—coming together, community centers, and clean spaces.

Local Organizations The youth identified some organizations they felt were working to keep Rockaway safe. One that nearly all the youth praised was Rock Safe Streets, an organization working on violence prevention. They spoke of the Rock Safe Streets staff as respectful, responsible, trustworthy, and caring. One participant explained, "I trust them a lot. They're passionate about what they do. They focus on stopping violence and bringing peace, but they also do fun stuff." Other organizations that participants identified as addressing safety issues included Queens Law Associates (public defenders) and Rockaway Ropes (boxing).

"Can't be caught lacking"

Researchers asked participants what **safety strategies** they employed. Many talked about moving quickly "in and out" of places, such as going from school to home. One young man stated, "Get your groceries, whatever. Get from Point A to Point B. Don't be hanging out too much in places you're not supposed to hang out in." They tended to avoid spending time in outdoor locations like parks, feeling safer staying home and entertaining themselves with indoor activities like playing video games. One participant stated that because Rockaway youth "live in such dangerous areas that they don't even want to go outside and all they want to do is just stay in the house and just, like, go online most of the time." Participants felt that keeping to themselves helped mitigate risk, stating things such as, "mind your business, ain't nothing going to happen" and "stay away from Far Rockaway." Sometimes parents or guardians placed restrictions on their being outside.

When they are outside, however, they believe they must always be "on point" and "stay focused," watching their surroundings. As one young man put it, "Keep your head on swivel ... you always got to keep an eye on the show because you never know what's going to happen." When possible, they walked home in groups and did not hang out too long in any one place. Some carried pepper spray and weapons to ensure their safety. A few participants purposefully avoided areas where they had done "stupid things" when they were younger or where actions by their parents or older siblings made it unsafe for them to be on certain blocks.

Even with these strategies of sheltering and vigilance, participants still felt unsafe, stating that “everybody’s a target” and “there’s no right way to be safe.” One participant summed it up like this: “You can do everything right. You could be walking, broad daylight, no headphones, looking around and still get shot, stabbed. Anything can happen.”

Justice

When asked how they thought about justice, participants’ responses centered around two themes: accountability and equality.

“If the person doing the crime get caught”

They defined justice as **accountability** mainly in the context of the criminal legal system—“people going to prison when they do something wrong.” However, most of their examples were explicitly forms of *injustice*, given that, as one participant stated, “As far as I’ve seen with my own eyes and heard about it, justice, it doesn’t really happen often.” One young man spoke of a time he did not receive justice: “I’m incarcerated, being in a cell for mad long, I didn’t do nothing, can I be compensated for my discomfort? ‘Sorry’ isn’t gonna do anything.” Another had a similar experience at the local police station: “When you get arrested or incarcerated for a crime you probably didn’t do, or you were just in the area, they do that to wear you down. And you’re saying the same thing, ‘I didn’t do nothing,’ that’s a form of injustice, a violation of my rights.” Others pointed to injustice seen on the news when the police shoot an innocent Black person—“don’t just give the cop desk time!”

“There’s white justice, and there’s Black justice”

When they defined justice as **equality** and “making sure you have rights,” they mostly spoke of injustice. For them, they perceived injustice—differential access and treatment—as being racially motivated. They longed for being treated fairly, and as one young person put it, “I don’t know how to say it in a nice way, as equal as the white folks. Having the same opportunities as them.” They talked about the injustice between the “white areas” of the Rockaways and where they lived. Some participants connected racial inequality to the criminal legal system and differential sentencing practices. One Black participant stated, “If [a white person] was to kill me, she’d probably [get] like 15 [years]. If I was to kill her, I probably get life plus two consecutive sentences. It’s different forms of justice based off the color of your skin.” Finally, some participants talked about this injustice at school, where

they felt that “some teachers ... treat you by the color of your skin” and that there was unfairness in whom teachers punish.

Youth Programming

To inform future programming at the Queens Community Justice Center: the Rockaways and to highlight potential gaps in services that other organizations might also fill, we asked the participants about the things that stress them out and the things that bring them joy, the programs they wanted to see offered, and how a new community organization could build trust with the young people in the Rockaways.

Stress When asked about significant stressors in their lives, participants identified numerous sources, with school, home life, and lack of safety as three of the most prominent. In speaking about school, they highlighted the stress of schoolwork (homework, the need to perform well) and the stress of the school atmosphere, with teachers, racism from staff, and general drama as contributing factors. One young woman stated that her “principal shows so much microaggression, it’s sick.” Some had responsibilities to care for younger siblings at home, which added stress. “[When] I was only 12, I was still a kid too, taking care of like a four-month-old baby.” Lack of safety was also a source of concern. A significant number of participants take public transit to get to school. They pointed to violence on the MTA and worries about violence from unhoused people in the subway or near the subway stations as another source of stress.

Joy The participants found joy in a wide variety of activities, including art (writing, reading, drawing, music), sports (basketball, football), entertainment (video games, watching TV shows), and social interactions (talking to friends, helping people). Money was considered a source of stress *and* joy.

“Nothing to do around here”

The youth in the focus groups had concrete suggestions for future programming, given that they felt that they “had nothing to do around here.” This was particularly true in winter, when there is need for more safe indoor spaces. Mostly they wanted programs to provide tangible skills development and support, opportunities for sports and arts engagement, fun activities, and space for healing.

Skills and Support Participants were eager to see programming that would provide concrete training in life skills related to financial security—creating savings accounts, applying for jobs, or starting a business. One participant suggested having successful professionals share their skills with youth, such as “investors coming in to teach about investments and stocks.” Many also highlighted the importance of help with school, with several calls for tutoring and homework help. Some participants also mentioned assistance with finding and applying for higher education scholarships. “I think there are one or two [programs that offer help with scholarships] out there, but not many. Like, they wouldn’t be known to us.”

Sports and Arts The youth want opportunities to play sports. Most males specifically mentioned basketball and football, with a couple of people also saying gymnastics. Some talked about swimming, though not in the context of it being a sport, but learning how to swim, given their proximity to the beach and concerns over the rough ocean waters and drowning. Others talked about martial arts—particularly in the context of self-defense and safety. They also called for art classes—drawing, music recording and production, crafting, and cooking.

Fun In each of the focus groups, it came up that any programming for youth must prioritize fun for its participants rather than solely focusing on skills development or safety. They believed fun helped them avoid boredom and provided them a reprieve from the constant “worry about being safe”—a time and space where they could just be kids. They said that any programs focusing on “giving peace” and “stop[ping] the violence around the Rockaways” should include opportunities for fun, such as team-building events; video games; block parties; and day trips to places like Coney Island, Six Flags, and Aviators. They warned against doing “boring” icebreaker activities (like “what’s your favorite color”) or field trips, calling out museums, parks (“the only fun thing to do in parks is the swing”), and “movies [kids] don’t want to see” as activities they would not be interested in.

Healing Researchers asked participants how they felt about activities focused broadly on healing, with room given for the young people to define it however they wanted. The participants made specific suggestions such as meditation, counseling/therapy, and safe spaces for conversation (“sometimes I just need to vent”). For several participants, “healing” went beyond conventional mental health care. They were particularly interested in opportunities for young people to discuss their experiences with safety, violence, and trauma in the Rockaways and to plan for action: “At least once a month, all the young kids can come

and talk about with one mind what can be good for the community. What has been done since our last conversation?” Finally, the youth also spoke about having space to learn and talk about issues like systemic racism, police brutality, discrimination, and women’s rights.

“Keep showing us that you’re here for us”

When asked what a new organization could do to build trust with the community and encourage program participation, participants were frank about the potential challenges. However, they also gave concrete suggestions, including considering location and time, meeting young people where they are, collaborating with trusted groups, and prioritizing consistency and results. Several also emphasized the difficulty of creating trust in the Rockaways, where institutional actors have let young people down in the past.

Location Participants emphasized that location would be critical to think about because of safety concerns. They stated that many young people in the Rockaways could not move around between neighborhoods: “You’re not going to see them really moving around between Channel and Redfern.” They felt that any program based only in one area—even if it is doing good things—would de facto become unusable to youth living in other Rockaway areas. As one participant explained, “I know of organizations. I know others. I just don’t feel safe around them. Because the areas that they’re in are the areas it’s more dangerous in.” Several participants suggested that programs should provide transportation to overcome this challenge—something that other programs have not been able to do in the past. “The programs are mostly missing like transportation. ... Like, where if you join this program ... you have to wait for transportation. Then it takes you straight to the program.”

Time Several young people also mentioned the importance of time to a program’s success, recommending a period after school but before nightfall. “If ... there’s an active gang or something like that, I can’t be outside too late at night, or something can happen. But probably daytime or something.” Additionally, one young man mentioned that some charter schools end later than the non-charter public schools, so programs need to be mindful of that when deciding afternoon start times.

Meeting Young People Where They Are Many participants emphasized the importance of listening to young people and preparing for the specific problems they might bring to programs. These include things like needing mental healthcare (“Y’all gotta keep in mind that we’re coming to y’all for help, so there might be drama”) and wanting a sense of

security that is not achieved through aggression and punishment (“We’re gonna have our problems, but don’t treat us like [the police do]”). Some also expressed a need for space to come to where they have unstructured time when they can just be. “We want ownership of space and use it how we want.”

Collaboration To build trust, the youth recommended a new organization develop relationships and work with existing institutions like churches (e.g., Full Gospel Tabernacle on Beach 42nd Street), local community centers (e.g., run by the Child Center of New York), and anti-violence organizations (e.g., Rock Safe Streets). Additionally, participants recommended working with trusted individuals from the Rockaways. The latter could serve as credible messengers about new programming: “It seems like Officer Henry is a pretty good guy and a pretty big figurehead. So probably getting in touch with people like that and showing that you are helpful and then they can either like relay your message or like try and help you be better, in any way they can.”

Consistency and Results For these young people, consistency is critical for trust-building and program success. One participant provided a definition: “Consistency. It means keep showing up. Keep showing us that you’re here for us. Keep showing up.” Several youth felt it was nearly impossible to build trust in the Rockaways (“out here that’s tough”), while others pointed to consistent results (i.e., delivering on promises) as a metric they would rely on. One participant specifically asked the researchers, “When does the action come in?” They described community-based organizations coming to the Rockaways in the past and promising resources that they did not deliver on. One young man put it this way, “Seeing some kind of progress. Say we ask for this indoor pool. If they bring it, then I’ll believe it. But there needs to be consistency because they can build a pool but then leave it and not take care of it.”

Additional Recommendations

The above describes the types of programming that youth want to see—sports, arts, and fun activities. Given the deep concerns that the youth have about safety in the neighborhood and their experiences of racial injustice, when designing the programs to address their desires, we also offer the following recommendations for organizations seeking to work with Rockaway youth:

- **Have Multiple Locations or Provide Transportation** The Rockaways covers a long, narrow stretch along the peninsula and most youth do not feel safe traveling around there. In the past, young people have rejected programs not in the immediate area of their NYCHA development. Accordingly, organizations could create multiple locations in different areas to serve the young people in different housing complexes (e.g., Redfern and Ocean Bay are not very close to each other). Alternatively, if that is not feasible, organizations could supply transportation to and from the program site to facilitate participation and ensure safety.
- **Collaborate with Credible Organizations** An additional way to address the location and safety issue might be to partner with already trusted organizations working in housing developments to use their space to offer additional programming. For example, a program could hold events (e.g., basketball tournaments, discussion forums) at different NYCHA community spaces on weekends for residents of those houses.
- **Critically Engage with Social Issues and History** Many young people expressed feeling unsafe around people experiencing homelessness or substance use disorder. Programming could create space to critically engage and help youth better understand the roots of these social issues. Additionally, the youth talked a lot about racial injustice. Some participants were frustrated that “each year in school I learn the same thing about Black history. I’ve been learning the same thing since elementary. You make me write the same essay about the same people.” They expressed a desire “to be taught more about our culture.” Programming could include unique ways to incorporate this history within arts and sports activities.
- **Offer Stipends and Food** Some youth specifically stated that they participated in the focus group because they would receive \$30 and food. They mentioned that similar rewards would motivate them to participate in programming. Given that lack of money was also a source of stress, program participants could be provided with a regular stipend, which could be combined with the requested financial literacy training.

Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Flyer

Queens
Community
Justice
Center

**Rockaway youth, we
want to hear from you!**

Date: Wednesday March 9th
Time: 6:00 - 7:30pm
Place: Beach 41st
Community Center
Ages: 14-24 years old

**To sign up, email
swanerr@courtinnovation.org
or text 917-445-7219**

Join us for a focus
group discussion on
safety and youth
programming in the
Rockaways and
receive \$30 cash
and dinner!

