

December 2022

The Police Civilian Oversight Board community Conversations on Policing



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An Important Moment in Madison

The people of Madison want change. Communities impacted by systematic law enforcement failures have taken steps to investigate, evaluate, and address how police departments and private citizens can work strategically together. While breakdowns in policing have long existed, the national conversation is galvanized over patterns of poor policing practice across the country and the city of Madison is not exempt from these discussions.

In response to these urgent needs, the newly formed office of the City of Madison's Independent Police Monitor (IPM) under the supervision of the Police Civilian Oversight Board (PCOB) partnered with Cortico Corporation's Local Voices Network (LVN) to host 10 conversations featuring 50+ participants across neighborhoods in Madison.

The voices heard in these community conversations support the development of policies and practices by which the IPM office will engage with the community, process complaints and report findings.

This report summarizes insights and emergent themes arising from a wide variety of powerful first-hand accounts of encounters with law enforcement officers voiced by the civilians that experienced them.

Participants also offer recommendations to the PCOB committee and the Office of the IPM with the intention their stories provide the blueprint for rational, actionable, and equitable change for the future of Madison's public safety programs.

The goal for all stakeholders is not *only* to reduce crime across the diverse array of communities but to increase the *quality of living* for all citizens throughout the city of Madison.

A Powerful Partnership

Cortico Corporation was established in 2016 and collaborates closely with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication (CCC) with the goal of building positive civic engagement through technology designed for people to hold better conversations, create more meaningful encounters, and surface usable insights over time.

To support community-powered understanding, Cortico draws on its work in AI, computational social science, and speech-content analysis.

The City of Madison's Police Civilian Oversight Board, the first of its kind in Wisconsin, hired Cortico in June of 2021 to support the development work for the office of the Independent Police Monitor. Board members serve as the watchdog body over police activities in the community including and gives direction to the newly hired independent monitor to dive deeper into improving policing practice. Board members want to hear directly from people most impacted by police interventions.

In partnership with Cortico, conversation guides were co-designed to encourage people to share their experiences and stories with their fellow participants in small groups of 4-8 individuals online or in-person. From November of 2021 through April 2022 facilitators convened these small groups in Madison and the recorded conversations are uploaded onto the LVN platform that also serves as the repository for conversation audio and written transcripts and can be found here.

cortico



LVN Conversation Collections

THE LOCAL VOICES NETWORK

The LVN platform enables partner organizations to understand their communities' lived experiences, amplify typically under-heard voices, inform public understanding, and drive better policy and decisions.



MADISON POLICE CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT BOARD X

Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #10

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board • Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board

April 30 • 🧑🏽🧑🏻🧑🏿

Hosted by Shadayra Kilfoy-Flores

Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #9

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board • Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board

Madison • March 26 • 🧑🏽🧑🏻🧑🏿

Hosted by Guest

Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #8

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board • Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board

Madison • March 22 • 🧑🏽🧑🏻🧑🏿

Hosted by Jacquelyn Hunt

Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #7

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board • Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board

Madison • March 22 • 🧑🏽🧑🏻🧑🏿

Hosted by Jacquelyn Hunt

Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #6

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board • Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board

March 17 • 🧑🏽🧑🏻🧑🏿

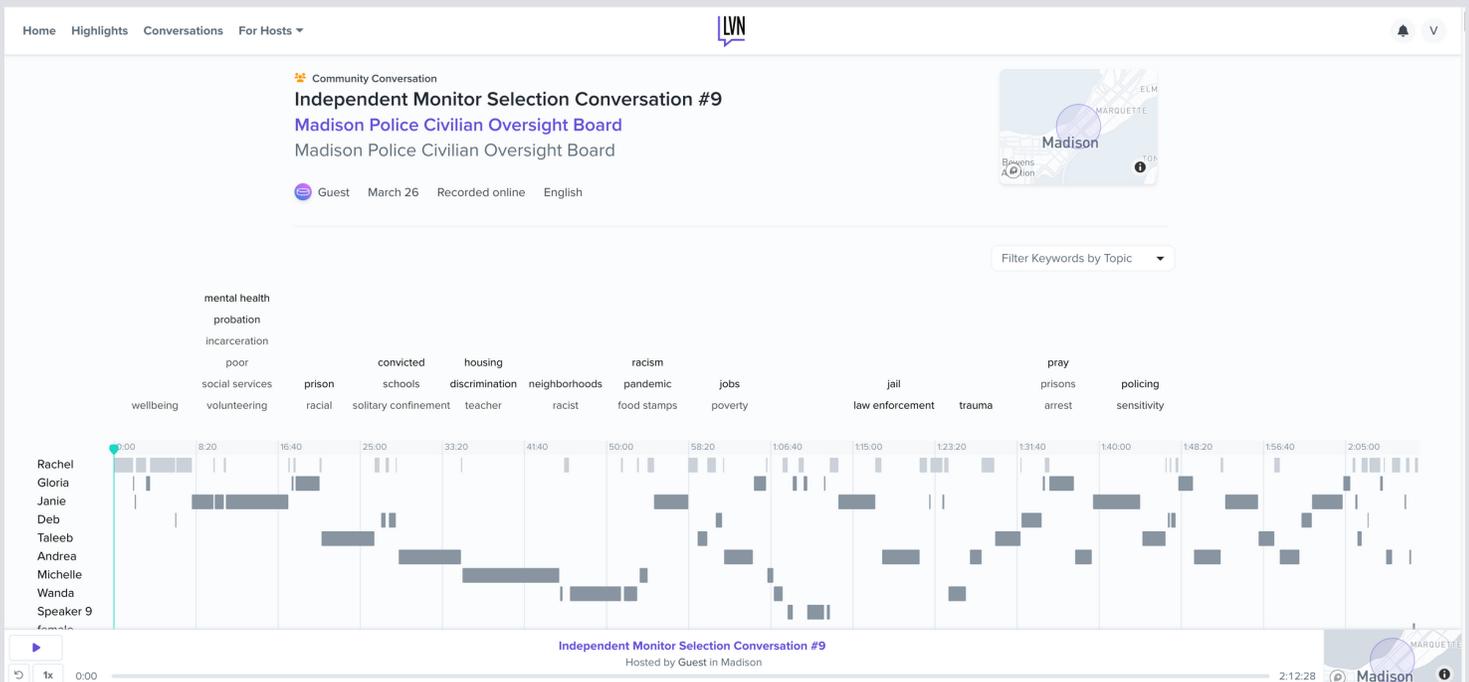
Hosted by Keetra Burnette

PCOB Conversation Collections page on LVN

LVN Conversation Collections

THE LOCAL VOICES NETWORK

LVN is a unique “human listening + machine learning” system that combines the ancient techniques of human dialogue and deep listening (through facilitated small-group conversations) with the analytic power of modern AI (through tools for identifying patterns/themes across conversations).

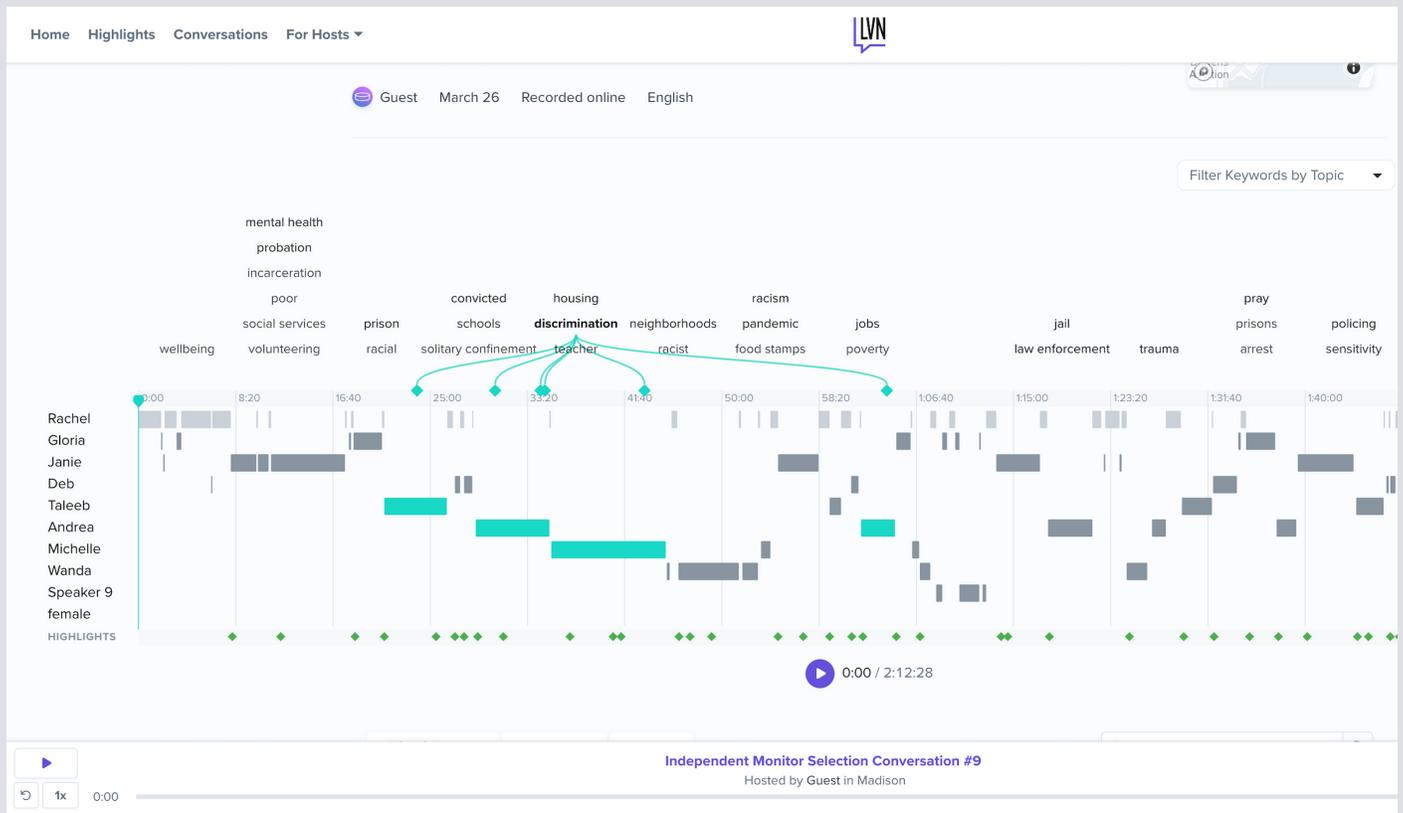


Audio ribbon of Conversation #9 with 10 participants

The result is a system that captures, at scale, public sentiment with a level of authenticity and nuance that surveys and focus groups cannot match.

LVN Conversation Collections

THE LOCAL VOICES NETWORK



The LVN platform enables participants to find significant topics that emerge from the conversations.

LVN Conversation Collections

THE LOCAL VOICES NETWORK

A screenshot of a web interface for a transcript. At the top, there is a play button icon and a duration of 3:36 / 2:12:28. Below this are three tabs: 'Highlights (47)', 'Transcript' (which is selected), and 'Admin'. To the right of the tabs is a search box labeled 'Search within...'. The main content area is titled 'Transcript' and has a 'Font Size' control with minus and plus buttons. The transcript itself is a list of entries. The first entry is from 'Rachel' at 4:00, with a 'Listen' link and a 'Highlight' button. The text of the entry is: "So this says we're inviting you to have a different type of conversation. These conversations are focused on sharing our personal stories from our lived experience, rather than the bringing of the conversation with our positions on issues. We are doing this in order to help build connections and to foster conversations that will improve our understanding of one another. Okay. So, as a part of this conversation, you are providing consent to the Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board to use the recording in accordance with its mission. You also understand that conversations will be a part of the collection of Cortico's Local Voices Network, whose mission is to foster conversations in communities and in the media that improve our understanding of one another. Cortico will collect, retain, and analyze these conversations in keeping with that mission. If you understand and agree to this, please say, 'I agree.'" The second entry is from 'Gloria' at 4:41, with the text "I agree." The third entry is from 'Janie' at 4:43, with the text "I agree." The fourth entry is from 'Deb' at 4:43, with the text "I agree." Below the transcript, there is a title 'Independent Monitor Selection Conversation #9' and a subtitle 'Hosted by Guest in Madison'.

Transcripts, full-voice audio, and highlighting tools creates a fully interactive and transparent listening experience for all.

A screenshot of a web interface for a transcript, similar to the one above. At the top, there are tabs for 'Highlights', 'Conversations', and 'For Hosts'. Below the tabs is a timeline visualization with a play button icon and a duration of 0:00 / 1:48:42. The main content area is titled 'Transcript' and has a 'Font Size' control. The transcript shows several entries. The first entry is from 'Keetra' at 13:26, with the text: "In general. This is not specifically ... It's about public safety, so we are talking about a public space. But it doesn't necessarily have to be within the very tight limits of the city of Madison. Just somewhere you were in public and you didn't feel safe. And why didn't you feel safe?" The second entry is from 'Quincy' at 13:42, with the text: "Well, I got pulled over with a car full of people a week ago, and my mother was in the car. She was in the backseat, but my windows is tinted. And so, I guess the police, them not being able to see in, they came to the car quite aggressive. They had their guns drawn. So I rolled all my windows down before I even said a word." The third entry is from 'Keetra' at 14:16, with the text: "And then, did your safety concerns, were they eased at that point or did you still feel unsafe?" The fourth entry is from 'Quincy' at 14:26, with the text: "And then, did your safety concerns, were they eased at that point or did you still feel unsafe?"

Madison Voices Loud & Clear

A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Drawing from the audio transcripts, Cortico analysts listen to and create extended excerpts known as highlights from the conversations. With the support of our technology platforms, the analyst leads cycles of listening, highlighting, and reflection to reveal themes and insights in this report.

418 highlights across 9 conversations were used to inform this summary report and highlights are organized in tandem with the questions posed to participants in the conversation guide.

The following categories contain powerful findings told in story moments:

- Police community interactions
- Feelings of personal safety in public spaces
- Experiences with decisions made for the community
- Accountability of police engagement in community
- Hopes for differences in the community within 5 years

In addition to findings related to the categories above, emergent themes coalesce around three significant themes:

- *Social identities frame every situation*
- *Policing practice - the failure to protect and serve*
- *Beyond police - serving the whole community*

In this report we draw upon what participants have discussed in their conversations referencing their own experiences and stories. We conclude with a summary of recommendations based on conversation analysis.

Police + Community Interaction

A MIXED HISTORY OF ENGAGEMENT

Participants were asked to share stories of encounters with police officers in their community, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Most revealed experiences of being pulled over in their [vehicles](#), calling upon police for [assistance](#), or witnessing officers interact with others. Others discussed negative experiences of [profiling](#), excessive [aggression](#), or [unprofessional conduct](#), while others related mixed or more [positive](#) experiences.

One of the most common scenarios relayed by participants is the experience of being approached, questioned, and ultimately released, but not after a period of confusing tension.

[Jeremiah](#) shares his story of being approached while sitting in his car outside his apartment with a friend: “When they pulled up, immediately my heart starts thumping because I'm like, I can't envision this situation happening. And so, we're sitting there. I call my partner, have her on the phone. Luckily enough, where we're parked, my apartment window is right there. I'm like, “I live right here.” You know? “Me and my friend are just having a conversation.” When police queried them further, Jeremiah felt bewildered, “We didn't do anything. Am I a wife beater in pajama pants, for crying out loud? That's what they made it sound like.” Ultimately, the police took no further action but the confusion and frustration left an enduring impression.

Some participants like [Mya](#), find that for some groups, police assume guilt until proven innocent while others point out a two-tiered treatment that favors affluent citizens. [Alex](#) details how police will harass the homeless on State Street where patrons are regularly seen walking while consuming alcohol despite ordinances against doing so. They found this treatment as not only bullying but also hypocritical on the part of the police.

This two-tiered treatment will be a recurring theme in other stories of interactions with police. [Eugene](#) describe the causal assumptions harbored by police about Black citizens that frames ordinary behavior as potentially criminal: “they assume if you're a person of color, if you got the windows, you got music, your car is clean for once, and you're going down the street, they think you're doing something wrong.”

Few Public Spaces Feel Safe

CIVILIANS FEEL VULNERABLE IN PUBLIC

For some participants, the experience of feeling unsafe is not situated in any particular space, but rather as a constant state of being associated with their identified race. [Harry](#) states that by simply living as a Black man he feels unsafe the moment he walks outside his home: “I don't feel unsafe in any one particular instance, but I think I have an air of unsafety about me because I'm a black man. And so I think that goes with me everywhere.”

According to civilians, public spaces are unsafe partly because of the aggressiveness of the police response. Listen here as [Denise](#) recounts what she observed living downtown at the YWCA while participants like [Erica](#) detail disturbing incidents experienced by their neighbors, friends, and community networks in which violent confrontations from police officers are not adequately explained in reports and by department officials.

Some participants point out that in addition to the threat of violence that can happen at any point, in any given interaction with police, those who are young, homeless, or have children with special needs are made even more vulnerable to poor outcomes.

Younger participants like [Amarriana](#) share that school was not a safe space for them due to bullying not only from other students, but failed by the adults and authority figures, tasked with protecting them. The presence of police on campus had been disconcerting for some, like [Sirena](#) who notes that “when I would go to high school and see a police car every single day in front of my school, that actually triggered something in me to not be as happy when I showed up to school every day.”

[Cary](#) shares her experience of having a child on the spectrum and their worry about the potential interaction with the police who may not be trained to manage these high-risk situations. She says that despite his being relatively high functioning so that police may look at him, “as somebody that is safe and somebody that is respectable. Somebody he can go to if he's scared,” she wonders if police would exercise the crucial judgment necessary in an emergency situation.

Decisions For My Community

BRIGHT SPOTS AND POSITIVE STEPS

Participants were asked to discuss their experiences with decisions made for the communities. In reflecting on how community based organizations (CBOs), civic groups, and nonprofits worked, sometimes in tandem with local government, many were able to recount positive initiatives and deliverables for their neighborhoods.

Participants like [Erica](#) and [Davita](#) praised the variety of initiatives that have been implemented in the community such as mental health assistance, drug overdose awareness, and food pantries.

Overall, residents treasured the modest projects or evolving indicators of racial respect, awareness, and equity, Examples include [Harry's](#) observations that over time, seeing the development of Black history month and more multicultural student unions built on college campuses.

On a larger scale, such as for housing and the environment, [Alex](#) appreciated how the tiny home community was founded when their agency partnered with the city to help transition the homeless toward consistent sheltered living. [Andrea](#) shares a positive experience with finding an uplift in her housing situation through program assistance: "I feel blessed to have that because housing is really difficult to attain at this day and age. Just the price of housing, it's just increased phenomenally...it's been a challenge finding affordable, nice, decent housing in decent areas. Today, she and others in Madison have found stabilization with the help of these programs.

For [Amarriana](#), even modest initiatives that focus less on large-scale social issues and more on localized and uplifting projects make a big difference. The advent of community gardens and other beautification efforts is seen as taking positive steps in the right direction for the environment and the community. She describes where she lives is, "not the cleanest neighborhood when it comes to littering and stuff like that, because you'll see garbage everywhere coming down the streets. But clean-up and planting programs create not just a boost for the mood and morale in neighborhoods, it is also that people are, "coming together to clean the community."

Accountability and Oversight

HOPES FOR BETTER OVERSIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY

In some of the most crucial points of community conversations, participants link the stories they have shared with discussions on what accountability and oversight of the police in their communities may be enacted. The most significant point agreed upon is that there should not be separate rules for officers as there are for citizens. [Deb](#) makes this point bluntly that, “When they do wrong...the system has to punish them like they do everybody else.”

For some, that engagement may require community policing as [Tisha](#) offers the observation: “Just like they watch us, we need to watch them also. Getting the community involved in policing. Y'all policing us? We're going to police y'all.” Many in the group shared this sentiment that a movement toward systemic accountability is needed. [Larissa](#) observes, as she looks to her fellow participants in the conversation, “that's why most of us here in this room...because we have been affected directly by their actions.”

Some members, like [Gloria](#) emphasize that accountability and oversight cannot be achieved through policies alone but are dependent on equal treatment regarding service. There is a distinct impression that the police serve only one group, mainly white, affluent populations. Therefore, “being accountable would be to make sure that you are looking through your lens at everybody and what's going to work out best for the whole group, not just one set of individuals.”

This speaks to a change in police culture. Listen to [Janie](#) describe how the role of culture should evolve within police departments. To her, she makes the case that officer training creates a homogeneity that overrides the ability for an individual officer to challenge closely held beliefs in biases they may hold. [Quincy](#) suggests that this movement toward accountability requires steps toward appointing those who can create systematic oversight: “for that to become a reality it's going to have to start with the public officials. You got to stop supporting these people that allow the police to do what they do.”

Hopes for a Better Future

WHAT DO CIVILIANS HOPE TO SEE IN THEIR COMMUNITY?

Participants held a variety of hopes and wishes for the future. [Erica](#) hoped for a difference in police procedure and training but also that as individuals, people would feel less inclined to call the police because their [communities felt stronger](#).

Citizens want policing to look and feel different in 5 years with more [sensitivity](#), service, and acumen in telling the difference between what is dangerous, vs. what is simply different. “Five years from now I hope that policing looks like individuals working their beat or their area have more sensitivity...just because they might be wearing baggy pants, don’t assume they are a criminal.” In essence, police should be there even when there isn’t a problem to [protect and serve](#). And while [Davita](#) believes that the goal of eradicating racism is lofty, yet she still feels this is the ultimate goal.

[Jackie](#) points out an example of how small improvements can make great strides including a simple change by the sheriff in language where the term “inmate” is replaced with “resident”—signaling a move toward imparting a dignity within the criminal justice system that too often dehumanizes people inside and outside of correctional centers.

Some have placed their hopes in the election of the new police chief who will prioritize [racial justice](#) and take seriously the threat to Black citizens from officers. Additionally, positive relationships could work both ways and many participants shared their concern for the alarming amount of [pressure](#), stressors, and danger bearing down on police officers.

[Amarriana](#) shares that, “We understand not all officers are bad. Officers are just humans in a uniform.” Citizens do feel sympathy as to the day-to-day pressures placed on public safety officers with several like [Jeremiah](#) noting that “they are individuals too” with their own personal lives, concerns, and most importantly mental health issues. [Lashonne](#) believes that police should receive regular counseling, a view echoed by [Kaziah](#) observes that both civilians and police would benefit from trauma-informed mental health care.

Social Identities frame every police encounter

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BOARD

One of the most powerful points that conversation participants voice for public officials and police officers is that those who are given the privilege to carry out public initiatives and laws should recognize existing bias against racial and social identities.

Participants note that police have lost sight of serving and protecting their communities, relying on surveillance as their primary practice and resorting to aggressive and lethal tactics to maintain order. [Denise](#) describes the extra steps that Black children must take to ensure their safety, such as putting their hands out the window, during encounters with police. [Jamatta](#) recalls the trauma of how a relatively benign incident can spiral when an officer misreads or is inclined to react first and think later.

And, it is not solely the experience of Blackness that drives the probability for poor interactions with police, but any degree of social difference as noted earlier such as being homeless, or a parent of a special needs child, or even being young. [Taleeb](#) shares the demoralizing intersection of being Black and an ex-felon as well as poor, and at one point, homeless. Even for those who have felt support for the difference such as [Tyson](#) who is Black queer recalls that he's seen very positive initiatives for LGBTQ initiatives, "if something is a problem and I call or I am reaching out to the city... they're usually very receptive when it comes to that. I wish it would be the same for Black folk."

The fear and anxiety that participants feel engaging in ordinary behaviors such as working, parenting, driving, or socializing outside their homes is an example of [day-to-day](#) criminalization. Participants express frustration of being [dismissed](#) or not believed when they engage with police and voice concerns.

[Jamal](#) shares that it is essential that diverse civilian groups, particularly of the marginalized, should be listened to. "I think that they could hold panels with different groups of people, marginalized people who are not heard." [Harry J.](#) would like to see more officers out in the neighborhoods as if they were part of the community rather than there in response to an incident, thus reducing the division between citizens and officers.

Policing practice - the failure to protect and serve

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BOARD

It is important to note that many civilians recognized that every citizen can take responsibility to stand up for themselves, such as [Siobhan](#)'s story of being in a bar as a Black trans woman in an affluent part of town and realizing that she must help herself when harassed. [Jamatta](#) shares that, "I always wanted to know my rights and want to help others when it comes to dealing with policing." However, the role of police is to protect and serve and the [professionalism](#) of policing is to focus on their job so that members of the public won't be hurt.

[Eugene](#) and [Andrea](#) both want to convey to the board that systematic accountability is of paramount importance where police should be held accountable for their actions and not abuse their authority. But [Gloria](#) makes an important point that reiterates cooperation, "it's not us against them, that we want to work together so that everybody's safe, everybody feels safe."

[Taleeb](#) points out that law enforcement without accountability will end poorly every time. He suggests that recruiting qualified non-traditional applicants, may result in a paradigm shift in the training of future officers: "If we can send in qualified people in our community, to work in our community, people who look like us... you can really open up both sides of this thing."

Participants were asked if they could say one thing to the board, what would they voice? Several offered parting comments that focus on the importance of communication, [Gloria](#) points out, "Let's have communication. That's key." A sentiment echoed by [Jackie](#) and [Eugene](#) (1852) who sums it up succinctly: "Closed mouths don't get fed, closed mouths don't get justice." In addition, more than just talking, a [genuine effort](#) must be more than a cursory effort to evaluate ideas, especially if young people are asking questions.

In addition to better outreach from police departments, [Jonathan](#) comments on the shared responsibility of creating better neighborhoods through networks. "I think at the end of the day, we all got to be involved, we all got to care about our community. We got to take care of other people's kids too, because sometimes they need a check. It takes a community to build the things that we want."

Beyond police - serving the whole community

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BOARD

Civilians wish to see an increasingly positive police presence in their communities rather than a militaristic one. [Harry Sr.](#) reminds us that police officers can and will do good by identifying priorities of building trust beyond [symbolic gestures](#) such as police picnics. As he points out, “people who have issues with the police are not coming to the park to have a police day. You got to do some real people work.”

And, police do perform good work. [Jamatta](#) describes a story illustrating how an officer was able to skillfully defuse a volatile situation in which youth are involved, observing that it can be done. Several participants like [Janie](#) and [J'nae](#) hope to see more policing practice reform and a trend toward restorative and transformative justice in their communities, especially in [partnership](#) coalitions and [community policing](#). [Jeremiah](#) emphasizes how public safety officers should make efforts to get to know community members. In the end, he notes that “We just have to learn how to adapt and continue fighting the [good fight](#)

This “good fight” involves regularly engaging with local officials, city employees, and representatives even if they do not feel their voices are heard. [Alex](#) describes clashes with people in power where at city meetings it seems their voices as community citizens are not heard. That is why participants like [Fawna](#) exhort their fellow community members to speak up and speak out: “So you have to be part of the solution. Sit on the board meeting, voice your opinions about things that are affecting your community or your children.”

In this vein of addressing wider issues of community wellbeing, [Justice](#) points out the relationship between quality of life matters and policing practice: “if I call the police today and I say that, hey, there is substandard housing that is stratifying our families... which is denying them equitable access to democratic processes and institutions, which is illegal under the Commerce Clause of the Constitution, will you please go arrest them? They can't show up.” [Wanda](#) hopes for better leaders placed in roles, but notes that, “one white woman can't lead a city. One white man can't lead a city. It takes a village. It will take all of us.”

Appendix

APPENDIX A:

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION GUIDE COVER PAGE

APPENDIX B:

TOPIC SNAPSHOT BY CATEGORY



Appendix A - Community Conversation Guide

Conversation Guide

Conversations should be planned for 4-6 people and 90 minutes of conversation with an additional 30 minutes for pre-meeting and post-meeting settling in and exiting. The total time is 120 minutes.

Instructions for Speakers	Script
<p>Pre-Meeting Greeting + welcoming (15 min ahead of posted meeting time)</p> <p>Click here if you need support trouble-shooting technical difficulties on Zoom.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome people as they join. • If this is a virtual conversation, let participants know that if they plan to use a pseudonym or if they do not want their name to appear on the screen, they can hover over their name and change it or delete it.
<p>Start Recording</p>	
<p>Introduction of Purpose & Housekeeping (5 min)</p>	<p>Welcome to this conversation of Cortico's Local Voices Network. Thanks for agreeing to participate in this conversation!</p> <p>I have begun recording at this time, and I need to share a little information with you before we begin our conversation. Following our conversation today, the video recording will be discarded, and the audio will become part of the LVN Collection.</p> <p>There are three main purposes for this conversation: First, we want to create a new space for community members to listen and learn about each other's lives. Second, we want to connect across groups and build our relationships with one another. Third, we want to create a unique listening channel through which we will lift up the voices and needs of the community in order to build a healthier public sphere.</p> <p>To this end, we are inviting you to have a different type of conversation. These conversations are focused on sharing our personal stories from our lived experience, rather than beginning the conversation with our positions on issues. We are doing this in order to help build connections and to foster conversations that improve our understanding of one another.</p>

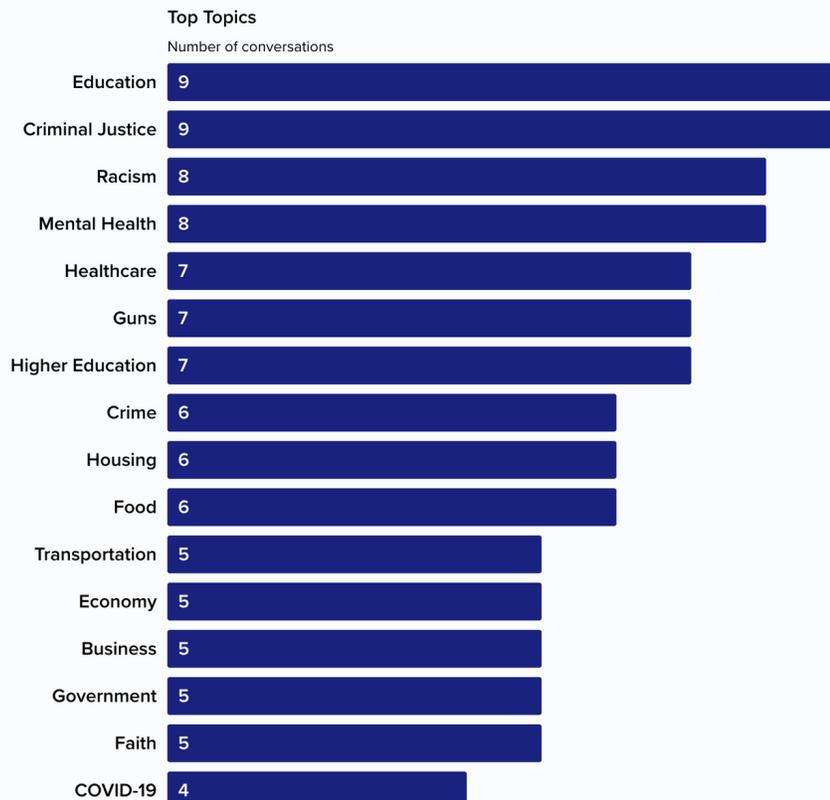
Appendix B - Topic Snapshot by Category

Topic Insights

Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board ▾

This page helps you understand topics and keywords in Madison Police Civilian Oversight Board .

- Education
- Criminal Justice
- Racism
- Mental Health
- Healthcare
- Guns
- Higher Education
- ▾



THE IMPACT OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

"With the progress that has been made recently, it's not impossible for us to get back or to reach a point where more officers are serving the community first."

Harry J.~

Contacts

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS REPORT CONTACT:

