

Cultivating Young Leaders  
in the Fight to End  
Gender-Based Violence

**BIDEN**  
FOUNDATION



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# INTRODUCTION

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From the #MeToo movement to the activism of the Parkland students, we are at an inflection point in our society. In the past 18 months, powerful dialogues have turned our attention to the pervasive threat of gender-based violence. These conversations have entered every space — from Wall Street to Hollywood to the media — and are beginning to center around those least protected among us.

In many cases, young people are leading these conversations. From the confrontation of systemic sexual harassment in our institutions to the student-led movement to end gun violence, we're witnessing an urgent and energetic moment where young people are using their voices and demanding to be heard — and people are paying attention.

At the beginning of 2018, the Biden Foundation saw the growing need to include young voices in the emerging conversations happening around gender-based violence. That's why we launched Youth LEADS (Leverage, Energize, and Define Solutions), a nationwide project to engage in honest discussions with young people about their experiences with gender-based violence and their ideas for creating change. Youth LEADS looks to young people to drive the solutions that will change the culture and end violence in their communities. Over six months, we facilitated 15

listening sessions across the country to hear from young people with diverse backgrounds, recognizing the importance of incorporating perspectives that differed in race, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and other facets of identity that affect individuals' experiences with violence and inequality.

Throughout the Youth LEADS project, we encountered inspiring young leaders who engaged critically with the world around them, responding to the fast-moving political, news, and entertainment landscapes of 2018. Students organized walk-outs or demonstrations at their school, used art to bring awareness to gender-based violence, and led educational workshops for their peers and teachers to change their school culture.

Since before he wrote the Violence Against Women Act, Vice President Joe Biden has been fiercely committed to promoting the safety, well-being, and civil rights of women by addressing the scourge of gender-based violence. To this day, he supports prevention efforts that work to end violence among youth. We are proud that the Biden Foundation continues his work, and grateful for the opportunity to let the voices of young people lead the efforts to create a future with greater equality, opportunity, and dignity for all people.

We hope you read on to discover more about the initiative, explore our findings, and most importantly examine our recommendations, so that we can continue to move this critical conversation forward.



# ABOUT YOUTH LEADS

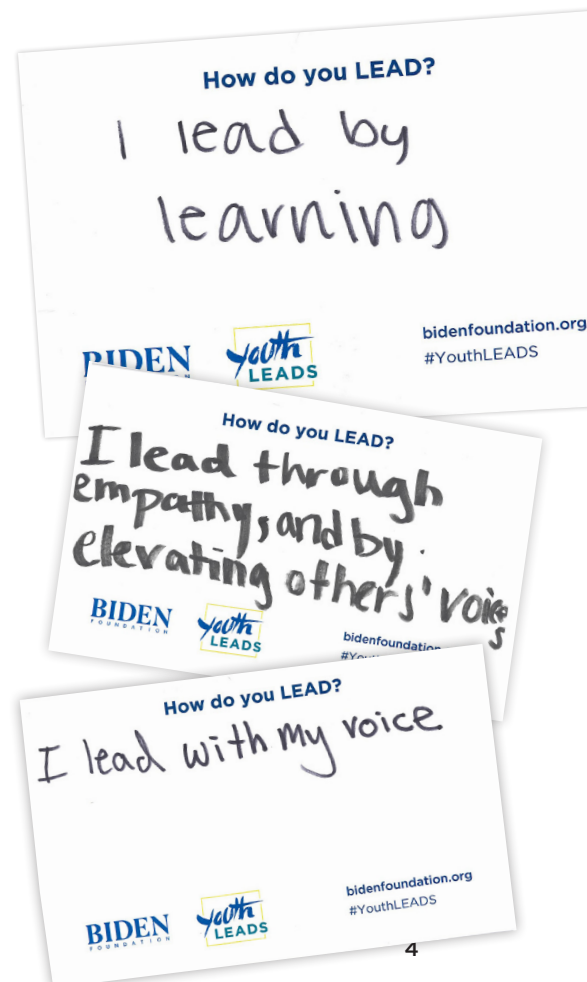
## Gender-Based Violence Among Youth

Gender-based violence is a national public health problem and global pandemic.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the Youth LEADS project, we defined gender-based violence as any form of physical, psychological, or sexual harm, or threat of harm, directed against a person on the basis of their gender.

Some examples include: sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, dating violence, stalking, online harassment, and domestic violence by partners or family.

While the majority of reported instances of gender-based violence are experienced by women, we know that this issue affects individuals across the gender spectrum as well. In fact, one in six men<sup>2</sup> and nearly one in two transgender individuals<sup>3</sup> are victims of some form of sexual violence in their lifetimes.

Teens and young adults experience among the highest rates of sexual violence but are too often left out of the broader conversation and development of intervention and prevention programming. Approximately 80 percent of sexual assault survivors experience their first assault before the age of 25<sup>4</sup>. The rates of sexual violence are even higher for black, brown, queer and transgender youth,<sup>5</sup> yet resources are rarely culturally specific or accessible.







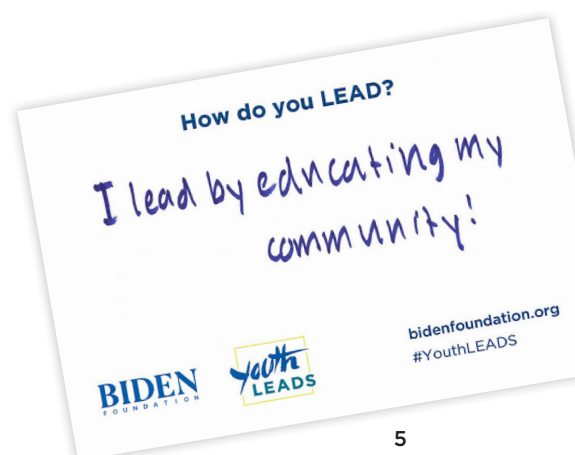
# Youth LEADS Listening Sessions

From May 2018 to November 2018, the Youth LEADS team facilitated 15 listening sessions in cities across the country and met with approximately 200 youth and young adults with a diverse range of experiences. We intentionally prioritized marginalized communities — including youth of color, queer and transgender individuals, those experiencing homelessness, and youth with disabilities — whose voices are often silenced in the broader conversation. To that end, the foundation partnered with the YWCA, Men Can Stop Rape, ALSO Chicago, Casa de Esperanza, Impact Boston, the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania, Maine Boys to Men, the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Peace Over Violence, the Ruth Ellis Center, and Tewa Women United, to host these sessions.

No two sessions were the same, and we learned so much from each of them. Our team identified several trends, themes, and gaps that affected youth across all social identities and geographic locations. One of the most striking things we found was that youth often feel silenced or ignored by adults. Many felt incapable of creating change at their age, that their voices did not matter, or that adults would not listen to them if they encountered forms of gender-based violence.

Through this process, we also found that by simply listening to youth and asking them about their experiences, we were helping to combat feelings of disempowerment. By centering youth voices, we offered a platform that amplifies their voices while also disrupting systems that silence them.

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## METHODOLOGY

The Youth LEADS team used a qualitative design with a focus on community engagement to explore how gender-based violence impacts youth communities. We used semi-structured listening sessions to engage in conversations with participants and learn about their perspectives. Twelve of the 15 sessions were recorded. At the beginning of each listening session, facilitators administered an anonymous survey to collect demographic and other relevant information, which can be found in Appendix A. About two-thirds of participants completed the survey. Youth participants ranged in age from 12 to 23 years old. The average age of the participants was 16 years old.

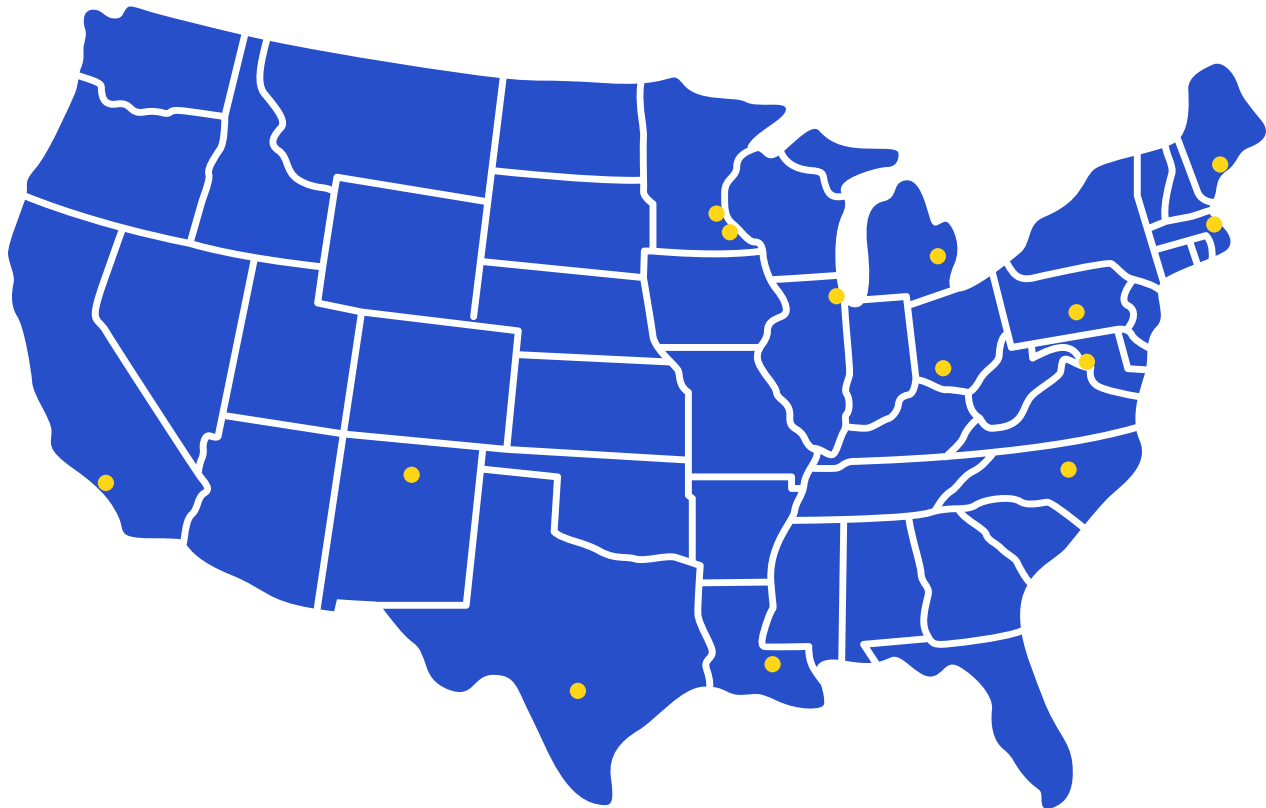
Five core questions served as the framework for each discussion. Because the project was semi-structured in nature, questions were tailored or added to fit the needs of each specific group.

### Listening session questions:

1. What keeps gender-based violence going and how can it be interrupted?
2. How do other aspects of your identity (race, gender, class, etc.) interact with gender-based violence?
3. What resources would you recommend to a friend who is a victim of gender-based violence?
4. If you could say one thing to adults (teachers, government officials, parents) about this issue, what would you say?
5. What type of advice would you give to other youth experiencing gender-based violence or working to change the culture in your community?

## Listening sessions were held with partner organizations in:

- Portland, ME
- Washington, D.C.
- Los Angeles, CA
- Española, NM
- Raleigh, NC
- Chicago, IL (two sessions)
- Harrisburg, PA
- San Antonio, TX
- Minneapolis, MN
- St. Paul, MN
- Baton Rouge, LA
- Hamilton, OH
- Boston, MA
- Detroit, MI



When choosing partner organizations, we took into consideration a variety of factors, including the youth they worked with, the kinds of programming they provided on this issue, and geographic diversity. Because program coordinators already had well-established relationships with the young people in their community, they were responsible for recruiting

participants to attend a Youth LEADS listening session. Most participants regularly engaged with the host organization through trainings, clubs, or youth-specific programming. Occasionally, host organizations recruited participants from the community or collaborated with other local youth-serving organizations.



Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the Youth LEADS team worked with program coordinators prior to each listening session to ensure participants had community support available, and to tailor the questions so that they were accessible and fit the culturally specific needs of the participants from each group. Trained advocates or counselors were present on site as a resource to participants. The team also provided sensory objects and coloring books as self-care options during

the conversation. Most listening sessions had between 10 and 15 youth participants, though it varied based on location. In the future, we recommend smaller groups for this kind of conversation. To give youth the space to speak openly and honestly, the number of adults in each session was limited to one or two facilitators and a note taker. When possible, designated advocates or counselors were located just outside of the room so that participants could easily access them in case they needed support.





Throughout the 15 listening sessions, the Youth LEADS team identified 11 consistent themes of youth perceptions and beliefs about various aspects of gender-based violence. This section discusses each theme and its implication for future efforts.

This section also provides direct quotes from youth participants that give voice to these topics. We have removed identifiable information to protect participant confidentiality.

## THEME 1

# Violence Is the Norm

**"Sometimes the community is your predator!" —MINNEAPOLIS, MN**

Youth participants reported experiencing and witnessing high levels of gender-based violence in their communities throughout their daily lives. We found that young people are exposed to violence in many forms — verbal, emotional,

physical, and sexual — and in countless circumstances — on the walk to school, in a gas station, at home. This chronic exposure means youth live in constant awareness of violence and use significant energy to keep themselves safe.

The stories we heard in listening sessions were multifaceted. Students disclosed personal experiences as well as the experiences of friends, acquaintances,





and family members. Discussions revealed an awareness not only of how gender-based violence plays into the daily lives of youth, but also how community members — from friends to trusted adults — respond to, tolerate, and even perpetuate violence.

In one instance, a participant discussed the helplessness of a friend who had been abused by their father and felt she couldn't report the violence because it meant risking taking her father out of her friend's life. In another instance, a participant recounted how an acquaintance reported a rape, "but her mom wouldn't believe her, because she got raped as a child, too."

Every participant's story was unique, but the overwhelming consensus was that violence, both actual and potential, was everywhere and inevitable.

"I also think that there's this idea that, like struggle is just something that we're going to go through. Like, it's [sexual assault] inevitable." —ST. PAUL, MN

"When I was younger, somebody that I knew. I was sleeping, and he would touch me when I slept. I don't know how long he was doing it. It felt uncomfortable. I didn't think about it after it happened, but it hit me a couple of years ago."

—SAN ANTONIO, TX

"I know someone who got raped by someone she didn't know. She felt sparkly inside her. Felt like she was drunk. She went to lay down and fell asleep. Woke up cold and naked. Went home and took a shower. I told her to get a rape kit."

—SAN ANTONIO, TX

"One of my friends, she came to school with a bruise on her face and she said it was because her dad hit her. And she was like, 'I'm a girl so I can't do anything, especially cause he's older and bigger than me.' And she's like, 'And my mom's too scared to say anything,' and she's like, 'I have younger siblings, and I can't call the police 'cause they need their dad around.' And so, she's like, 'I can't do anything.'" —CHICAGO, IL

"To me [violence] can mean swearing, hitting, harassment, fighting, being touched in an inappropriate way, racist, sexual assault, and other things."

—BOSTON, MA

"But like, it really creeps my out when like old guys look at me." —DETROIT, MI

"He came to me, we was hanging out or whatever and he had sex with me and I told him like he basically raped me."

—HAMILTON, OH

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## THEME 2

# Traditional Gender Roles Are Still Hurting Young People

"A man is supposed to be hypermasculine and a woman is supposed to be hyperfeminine and those roles are set to them."

—CHICAGO, IL

As society grapples with changing notions of gender, youth still live in a world where traditional male and female roles lay the groundwork for power



dynamics and violence. Young women and female-identifying youth express feeling pressure to conform, and the threat of violence if they do not. Young men contend with restrictive expectations of masculinity that often exclude them from discussions of victimization and healing.

Many youth demonstrate a keen understanding of the double-standards placed on men and women from a young age, and how these imbalances directly contribute to the continuation of gender-based violence. One participant raised the “boys will be boys” maxim, saying, “girls just have to deal with it.”

Efforts to prevent gender-based violence cannot merely treat individual incidents of violence. We must address cultural expectations of gender, for both men and women, and fundamentally change those norms. Many youth have already expressed a desire to change the expectations their communities have of them.



“Because in this society, men feel like the only emotion they can express is anger for some reason. Don’t y’all agree? They refuse to cry, they’re refusing to admit when they’re sad, they don’t even like to be happy, don’t even like to smile, really, you know.” —CHICAGO, IL

“That sometimes rape is only defined by like women and like men don’t want to come out like that, because they’re supposed to stay like strong, or supposed to be like the main ones that they have to like... they can’t cry, like men don’t cry.”

—RALEIGH, NC

“Teaching everybody that they’re responsible for their actions instead of being like, ‘Boys will be boys,’ and, you know, girls just have to deal with it.”

—HARRISBURG, PA

“Ballroom is essentially where the LGBT people of color mainly, um, participate in. As far as like, um, categories like she said... And sometimes it is gender-based violence because they, they stigmatize how we look to a category that we did not feel like we belong, too.” —DETROIT MI

“Like you would tell them, ‘Oh you can’t talk to me like that,’ or, ‘It’s not like that.’ And they will still say that men is supposed to do this role and women is supposed to do that role. Like, no, no, no. You know? They will still say that, they will still go by that narrative, you know? That a man is supposed to be hyper-masculine and a woman is supposed to be hyper-feminine and those roles are set to them.” —CHICAGO, IL

### THEME 3

## Solutions Must Be Intersectional

**"If you're not including a group that has been like systemically, like literally oppressed or like with violence against them, who are you even doing this work for?" —ESPAÑOLA, NM**

Efforts to prevent gender-based violence must include a robust intersectional framework, one that requires us to think critically about the ways in which different aspects of identity — race, ethnicity, gender, class, geography, sexual orientation, ability, religion — interact with each other to uniquely shape individuals' experiences of gender-based violence.

For example, black girls will experience violence differently because of their multiple intersecting identities as black people and as women. This means that one-size-fits-all approaches are not always effective or culturally relevant because they do not take into consideration the nuances of one's identity.

In this study, young people's perceptions of and experiences with gender-based violence varied based on the intersecting and compounding variables of their identities. When we asked participants about how gender-based violence looks different for people of other identities, they highlighted the need to understand the unique experiences of marginalized youth. Youth of color, particularly queer and trans youth of color, were acutely aware of how racism, sexism, and violence were tied together. Young women of color in particular expressed concern about not being believed or supported as victims.

LGBTQ-identified youth also discussed how their gender identities might put them at greater risk of experiencing violence, and of being discredited if they chose to report incidents of violence.

Youth with disabilities discussed feeling uniquely vulnerable to gender-based violence. They highlighted the need for comprehensive sexual education and violence prevention programming that is specific to students with disabilities.



"Society tries to hide that black women are also being raped, just because like it's considered that they don't matter."

—RALEIGH, NC

"I kind of feel like as a woman of color, I kind of have it twice as bad. I kind of worry like, 'Oh if I'm walking down the street at night, am I just going to disappear and never be seen again?'"

—HARRISBURG, PA

"And we don't really see black women victims in the media." —RALEIGH, NC

"Yeah, I get called Asian bitch all the time. Well, I feel like they don't say it to be offensive, even though it is offensive. They just say it because they socialize bitch with female, so, they just trying to describe what kind of bitch you are. But it's still offensive and abusive in every way, even though men feel like it's not from a bad place, it's just how they talk."

—CHICAGO, IL

"I think that also talks about the way that like black women's bodies are viewed. We are a lot more sexualized." —RALEIGH, NC

"And then when the trans people, trans men come out as being victims they're like, people always just misgender them and they're like, 'Oh, but you're just a girl in disguise.' I'm like, 'First of all, no.' So... whether you're cis or a trans man, you're just always gonna be like ridiculed for it, and you're definitely gonna be victims."

—HARRISBURG, PA

"If someone who's of a higher class, or is white and of a higher class, it's kind of, like, 'It's my word against yours.' What resources do you have? You have money for a lawyer, you have money for this. It's like, a lot of people, like lower class, they don't have that kind of money. So, it just goes unsaid." —ST. PAUL, MN

"Sometimes I feel like I'm being made fun of about my disability." —BOSTON, MA

"Everybody know it's easy to be a man, like anywhere, like in the world, like in a business world so, it's like easy to be a man... it's hard to be a woman, especially a black woman, because you're not socially accepted." —BATON ROUGE, LA

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## THEME 4

# Social Determinants Shape Experiences with Violence

"I think it's how people are raised, and like, the culture in which they're raised in." —ST. PAUL, MN

Social determinants, or the conditions in which we live, grow, work, and

age, shape youths' understanding and conceptualization of gender-based violence. Participants' experiences of violence varied throughout this study based on the environment they lived in. Youth identified social determinants like access to education and resources; familial wealth and class; geographical influence on cultural norms; intergenerational experiences and



narratives; and experiences based on racial, ethnic, or cultural identification. We found that indirect exposure to gender-based violence, like witnessing violence or knowing someone who is a victim, had significant impacts on the well-being of youth. One participant shared the discomfort and anxiety she felt going home every day, because she could hear her family members and neighbors fighting. She explained that her neighborhood has notoriously high crime rates. This indirect experience of violence due to her environment greatly affected her mental health.

Youth identified poor living conditions, economic instability, and immigration status as community risk factors that increased their vulnerability to gender-based violence. In one instance, a young person who had experienced homelessness shared a story of being sexually assaulted by someone who offered them a place to stay. Another participant shared an experience of their single mother being assaulted at her low-wage job by her employer but feeling silenced because as an immigrant she couldn't risk losing her job.

Examining these social determinants is essential to understanding the many different ways in which communities experience violence and provides context for how young people think about

gender-based violence. In considering social determinants, it is also important to consider how different communities develop different strategies and approaches to address violence; there is no single solution to ending gender-based violence.

**"I'm Chicana, I'm not indigenous, but I'm Chicana. I've been thinking a lot about like, the inherited trauma and the legacy of gender-based violence on the women in my family." —ESPAÑOLA, NM**

**"Because they were sexually assaulted and abused when they were younger, and then they grew up knowing that was okay, and now they do that to other people." —CHICAGO, IL**

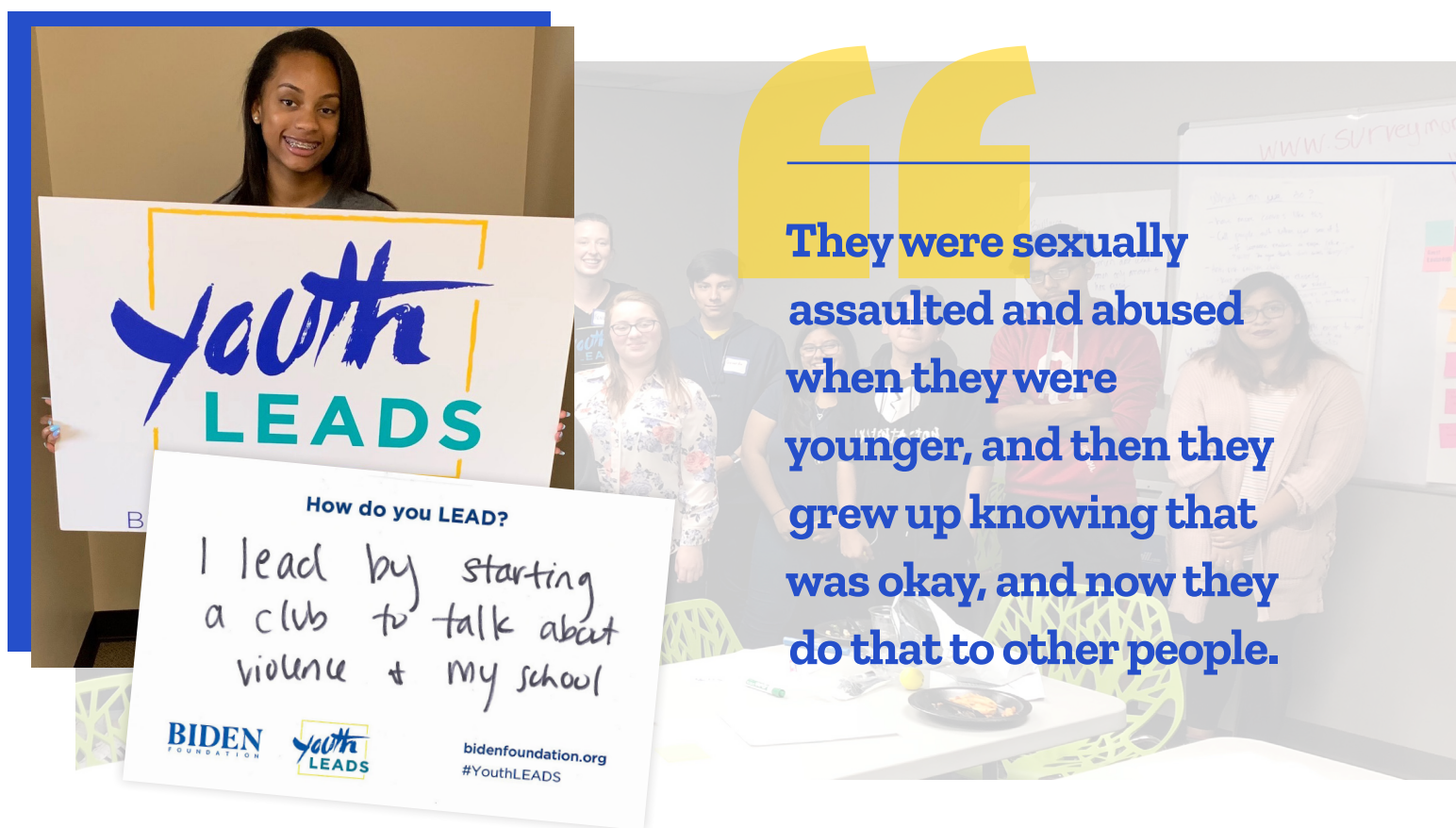
**"They be saying 'I'm doing this because I saw it in my childhood.'" —MINNEAPOLIS, MN**

**"I think it's very hard to change someone's mind, especially when they're older, and they're Hispanic and they're male. It's kind of like, set in stone." —ST. PAUL, MN**

**"And another thing, like some of the older generation is like they went through like Jim Crow and everything. So they're still stuck in like that time..." —RALEIGH, NC**

**"And then like the black community don't have all the same resources the white community does with dealing with mental health issues and the sexual violence." —RALEIGH, NC**





**They were sexually assaulted and abused when they were younger, and then they grew up knowing that was okay, and now they do that to other people.**

## THEME 5

# Violence Affects Physical and Mental Health

**"How are you supposed to heal when you can't do that, like, first step? When the culture isn't letting you do that first step?" —ESPAÑOLA, NM**

Gender-based violence can be devastating for victims. There are numerous health implications and long-term mental, physical, and/or sexual and reproductive health consequences associated with exposure to it.

Youth talked openly about psychological effects and health risk behaviors resulting

from sexual violence, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Multiple participants shared their experience of engaging in self-harm after being assaulted because they did not have access to the necessary mental health resources needed to help process their trauma.

Some youth shared their success with therapy and mindfulness practices, but that was uncommon. Far more participants expressed frustrations with the lack of available resources and the barriers they faced to accessing the mental health care they needed. Some youth discussed the stigma around mental health in their communities. The stigma often served as a barrier to

those who wanted to seek mental health care but chose not to because of potential judgment from others in the community. It is essential to conduct a thorough examination of health implications of gender-based violence on young people to better recognize signs, symptoms, and behaviors associated with trauma. This will equip youth-serving organizations with the resources required to support youth.

**"I was in therapy and it helped me stay away from him and you know, I also started focusing on myself. I was doing what I was doing before I met him, 'cause he was a big distraction. Therapy really works... I always encourage people to go to therapy. When I was in an [abusive] relationship, I stopped doing a lot of the things that I love to do, like read. I loved to read, but I stopped. I didn't read a whole book for a whole year. And... I just knew I was just like deteriorating myself."**  
—CHICAGO, IL

**"I know my perp has not done any work for himself. I have been doing work ever since I was 12 years old."** —ESPAÑOLA, NM

**"It [sexual violence] is like the same way with mental health in the black community, like everyone thinks it's like a sickness."** —RALEIGH, NC

**"So like, I said how I wanted to take my life a year ago. And all that stuff. Like, I'm not that person now. At that time, my life wasn't shit, I didn't care about it, whatever. And now I look back and I'm just like, see that your life is really valuable. To see that you are worth that 100 percent. To see that, you know, men should not be treating you that way, and to see like, what your true worth and what your true value is."** —CHICAGO, IL

**"I feel like, with me, when I was dealing with toxic people I just, you know, I came to a point where I saw that my mental health was suffering and that I enlisted in therapy because of the toxic people I was dealing with."** —CHICAGO, IL

**"Can you ever leave your trauma?"**  
—CHICAGO, IL

**"I think also, because a lot of that trauma isn't dealt with, so then it just continues."**  
—ST. PAUL, MN







## THEME 6

# Education and Intervention Must Start Early

**"We need to start education in elementary school." —HARRISBURG, PA**

While Youth LEADS participants reported experiencing and being exposed to gender-based violence at early ages, they also said that education to understand and address the problem was lacking. They agreed that prevention programs should target youth at earlier ages to have the most impact.

Early education efforts should be age-appropriate. Ideally these begin in elementary school, but should start no later than middle school when youth are more at risk of witnessing or experiencing gender-based violence.

Participants also felt that resources developed solely by adults often lacked cultural relevance and effective learning techniques. Instead, educational efforts should be multifaceted, offered in multiple settings, and delivered by both youth and adult teams.

Early education and intervention are critical components of effecting the cultural change necessary to end gender-based

violence. By listening to young people who tell us their educational needs are not being met, and by working with them to develop effective early education, we can begin to make lasting positive impacts on their experiences with gender-based violence.

**"Also, rather than trying to intervene and directly intervene, you should start having these types of conversations in schools with young men and women. These conversations need to be in school at an earlier age and at home. It is prevention." —LOS ANGELES, CA**

**"They [my parents] are both really busy. And so, normally, I keep stuff bottled up. I don't really speak well. I don't really eat well. I just stop talking to people whenever I feel stuff, I just vent out to my bear [stuffed animal]." —CHICAGO, IL**

**"I did an orientation on drug and alcohol and consent stuff for my college and they mentioned sexual assault happening to women, but not happening to men, and I was like 'Whoa whoa whoa whoa, you are missing a BIG thing here and contributing to a huge problem in society.'" —HARRISBURG, PA**

**"I feel like having these conversations, but with adults... in Spanish." —ST. PAUL, MN**

**"I think my school is very reactive vs. proactive. Wait until something happens." —PORTLAND, ME**

## THEME 7

# Social Media Can Be an Agent for Violence or Change

**"It all looks great, but it's very abusive and pervasive!" —PORTLAND, ME**

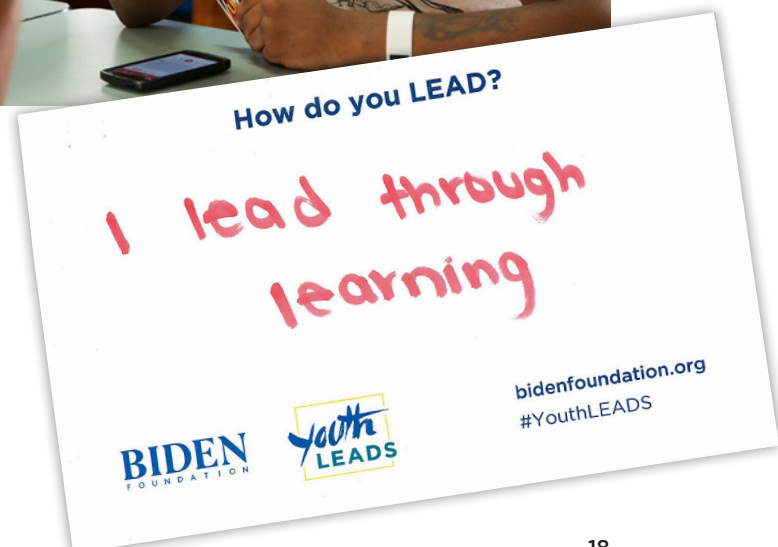
Youth LEADS participants viewed social media as both a gift and a curse: Participants understood that social media is a tool of engagement to discuss important issues, particularly for those who are marginalized. However, they also acknowledged that some forms of social media engagement can be harmful and have long-term effects on their well-being.

Participants acknowledged the risk of gender-based violence through social media engagement. In almost every listening session, youth participants shared experiences with revenge porn, online bullying, stalking or predatory behavior through dating applications, or harassment on photo-sharing applications. Youth also discussed at length the way social media platforms model dating behaviors and healthy relationships — many participants mentioned *#relationshipgoals*, a hashtag people use to indicate an ideal relationship or dynamic, as a source of conflicting and sometimes negative information.

Despite the dangers of social media, youth acknowledged it could be used as a positive tool for specific communities. For instance, participants identified the importance of social media as an outlet

for those who don't feel safe engaging in the criminal justice system or more formal methods of reporting violence. This was particularly salient among youth of color.

It is important that youth-serving organizations fully appreciate the role of social media in the lives of young people, and its complicated effects on mental-health and social mobilization. Programs that significantly incorporate action or education around social media will be able to address key elements of young people's experiences with — and response to — gender-based violence. Young people use social media differently than adults, so programs need to engage on the platforms that work best for youth.



"Social media is an outlet for marginalized communities."

—WASHINGTON, D.C.

"I used to be one of those girls who let a guy do whatever. Um, so one time, one of my ex-boyfriends, he asked for pictures [nudes]. And I sent him some. And after, I found out his friend got some... So I felt really embarrassed, 'cause then, now they're everywhere now. Like, you can't really, once you send it to someone, if he sends it to someone else, it's everywhere. You can't like, just stop it." —CHICAGO, IL

"I've also seen, like, people kinda use it as, like, an outlet to express, like, all their emotions. And that can kind of be dangerous, because some people have, like, very dark things that they're going through that should probably be dealt with like, professionally." —ST. PAUL, MN

"We have to be careful of who you meet online [dating apps]. It could be a catfish profile or it could be someone who's not, who's inappropriate." —BOSTON, MA

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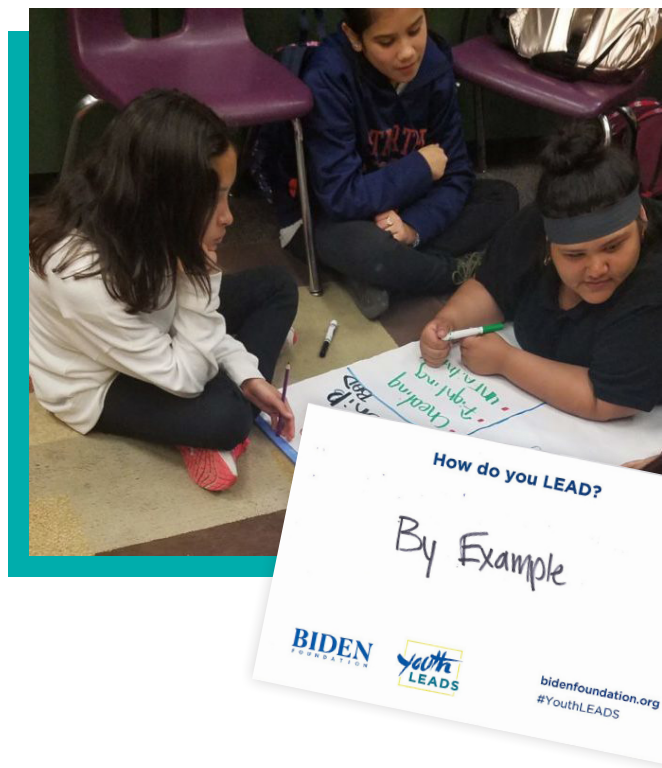
## THEME 8

# Safety Is a Constant Concern

"I'm scared to go anywhere by myself."

—RALEIGH, NC

Youth LEADS participants identified safety planning and self-care as important components of their everyday lives. Youth reported that they thought about personal safety multiple times per day, and many developed daily



practices of protecting themselves from violence. Unfortunately, the burden of strategizing for safety is one that many young people carry alone.

Safety planning was raised most by youth of marginalized identities, specifically youth of color, queer and trans-identified youth, and youth with disabilities. This is consistent with national data that shows these youth typically experience sexual violence at higher rates. Common safety planning practices identified by youth included: traveling in a group in public, making conscious choices about their wardrobe, carrying weapons for self-defense, mapping out specific routes to school, and avoiding certain areas or events where they know they will be a target.

We found that many of the youth participants have developed self-care and healing practices to restore from



the tremendous effort needed to keep themselves safe. Self-care strategies ranged from coping mechanisms like watching TV and listening to music, to investing in healing practices like meditation or therapy. Some practices youth described were healthy coping strategies, while others were less positive. Common practices included using or abusing substances, fighting with others, screaming to themselves, asserting boundaries, writing, reading, carrying meaningful objects such as crystals, and learning how to recognize triggers.

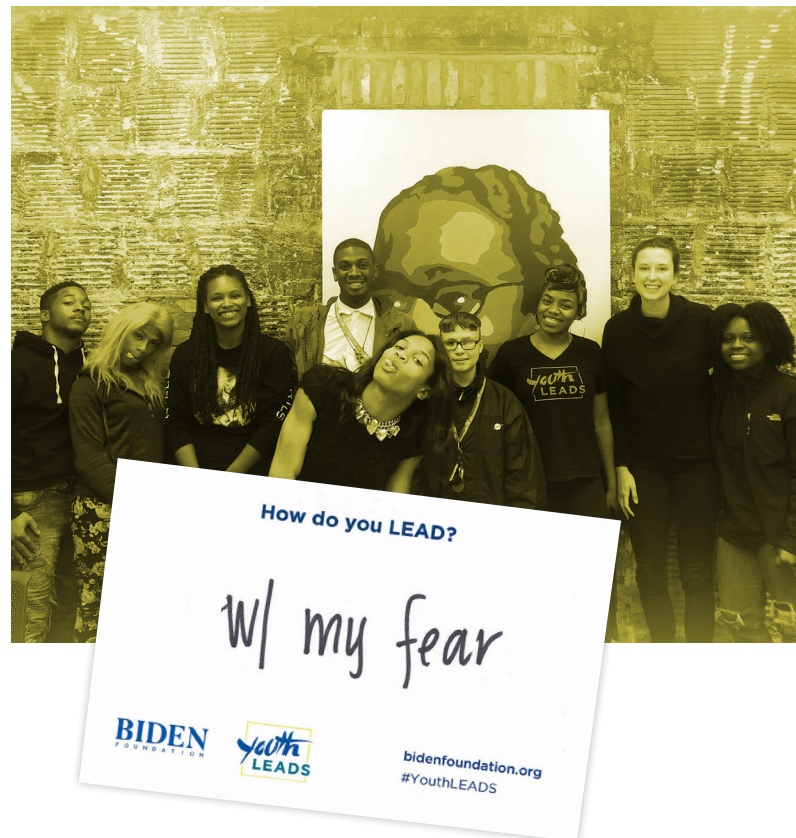
Developing sustainable approaches to safety and self-care is critical, especially in communities of color. Youth-serving organizations and providers can do a better job of helping youth alleviate this burden.

**"In any social, public gathering almost like, I can't be a single native woman at Indian markets 'cause I know I will get violated. It's just a fact." —ESPAÑOLA, NM<sup>6</sup>**

**"There is no safety. People can catcall you, people can grope you. You have this in your own community and outside as well. The safety for women is totally hard to come by. In sweats, outside, people still make comments. There is no safety."  
—ESPAÑOLA, NM**

**"I used to be so scared, that I kept a knife under my mattress." —RALEIGH, NC**

**"I'm literally terrified of walking alone at night, one, because people still view me as a woman, so that's one thing, and two, if people know I'm trans, that's a double whammy." —HARRISBURG, PA**



**"Weapons —pepper spray. We weren't allowed to have it in school, but I kept it because I walk home." —SAN ANTONIO, TX**

**"Uh, sometimes I like to put both of my headphones in, but I learned to, like, keep one out from a personal experience to make sure, like, I can hear if someone's, like, behind me. Or, like, even sometimes I use my phone and pretend I'm taking a picture, just to see if they're still following me, but I don't wanna look behind, because, like, it just looks noticeable." —ST. PAUL, MN**

**"It's just like, when I was in school, I didn't really tell nobody about my sexuality. I didn't really want nobody to know...I didn't even want my family to know. Because I knew how it was, like, I see my whole family like bash my whole cousin, both of them, and they basically in the gay scene." —DETROIT, MI**

## THEME 9

# Young People Feel Invisible

**"Because we're afraid we won't be believed. It's hard to talk about."**

**—SAN ANTONIO, TX**

Listening session participants noted that they often felt invisible in their communities' efforts to prevent gender-based violence. They reported that they were often dismissed by adults, or simply not asked about their experiences, opinions, or beliefs regarding the topic. Youth also feared that their stories and experiences would not be believed, leading them to feel discouraged and disenfranchised.

Feeling invisible and dismissed by adults often led youth to believe that they were not able to make a valuable difference in the fight against gender-based violence. Young people can play critical roles in gender-based violence prevention efforts, and they want to be involved in the development and organization of community education and activism on this issue. Establishing effective communication and collaboration with youth is key to developing lasting change.

**"Sometimes when I speak up people tell me to calm down."** **—PORTLAND, ME**

**"You have to have trust in us... we have potential. Youth are not people you should look past."** **—PORTLAND, ME**

**"Yeah, a lot of it is based on age, I feel like you have no opinion, like they're like, 'Oh, you're too young to understand.'"**

**—RALEIGH, NC**

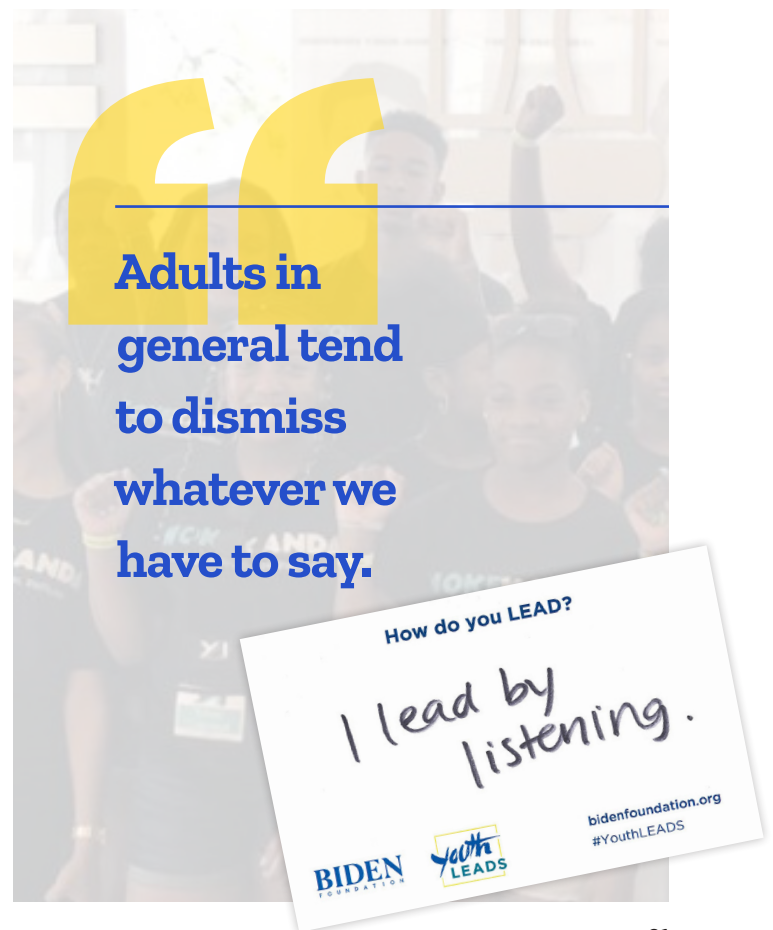
**"Part of adults tend to dismiss the opinions and thoughts of what youth have to say. Adults in general tend to dismiss whatever we have to say. At times it really matters."** **—LOS ANGELES, CA**

**"For me, the reason why people don't open up to nobody is because they feel like no one cares what they think."**

**—MINNEAPOLIS, MN**

**"A lot of people aren't coming out against people of power. They choose not to say anything because of power imbalance."**

**—WASHINGTON, D.C.**



## THEME 10

# We Need Youth Leaders

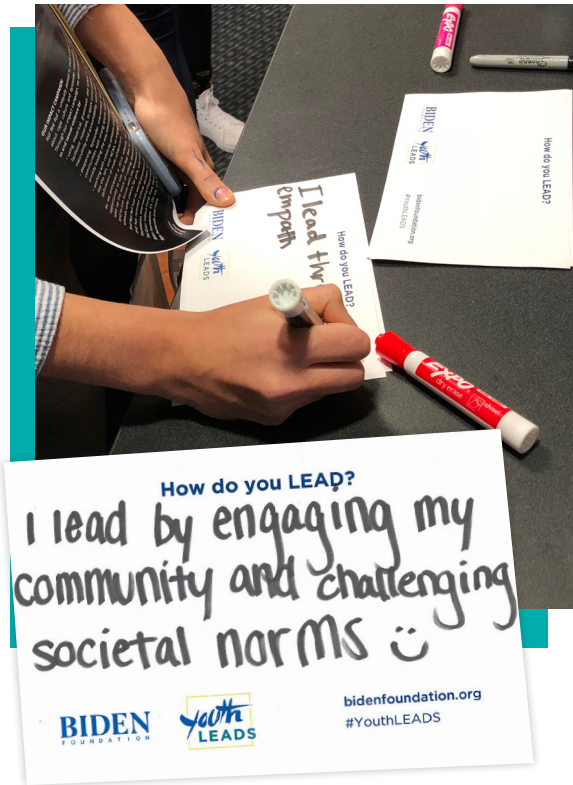
**"When we are the ones in power we can generate change." —WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Findings indicate that investing in youth leadership is critical to preventing gender-based violence. Youth LEADS participants agreed that organizations need to cultivate young leaders, specifically in their own communities, and to engage in peer-to-peer learning.

Participants expressed frustration that they are not already playing central roles in efforts that directly impact them. Youth often did not have ways to provide feedback or contribute ideas to existing curriculum or programming. They felt that their age served as a barrier when it came to earning the trust of adults and making decisions around how to organize and engage on this issue. Throughout the listening sessions, young people plainly stated that they want to create change. To be effective in addressing gender-based violence on a broader scale, we must center youth leaders in these conversations.

In many of the sessions, participants mentioned the new youth movement to prevent gun violence and described it as a potential model for youth engagement on gender-based violence.

**"The problem is institutional. That requires changing the demographic of who our policymakers are." —PORTLAND, ME**



**"We need open ears, like do not go ahead and speak and tell us your opinion, let us talk, and tell you what we feel, how we feel, and what we need from you all."**

**—RALEIGH, NC**

**"I feel like friends and peers should have more conversations like this more often. Um, or organize a lot more." —ST. PAUL, MN**

**"I don't personally think we [youth] are influencing the generation of now. I do think we are influencing our generation. It's opening us up to new ideas and new policies. When we are the ones in power we can generate change."**

**—WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**"Youth teaching youth is critical; if from adults, it's just another class, if it comes from a student, it is so much more powerful." —PORTLAND, ME**



## THEME 11

# Youth Leaders Need Adult Collaboration

**"But this conversation would be really nice to have with adults. We need this."**

**—ST. PAUL, MN**

While Youth LEADS participants often expressed frustration with adult leadership in their communities, they also recognized that they need the support of adults to effectively create change. Many participants described feeling a lack of trusted or "safe" adults in their lives. Many also felt they did not have an adult they were comfortable turning to if something ever happened to them.

To bridge the gap between young people who are experiencing high rates of violence and the adults around them who support them daily, it is critical we know what makes an adult "safe" to youth.

### **Youth described the following qualities as ways to identify a 'safe adult':**

- Acts as a validating witness in confidence
- Is nonjudgmental and believes me
- Takes time to build trust and is trustworthy
- Allows me to make my own choices
- Leads me in the right way and helps me solve problems

Without trusted adults in their lives, youth often feel isolated and take on the burden



of handling the violence, trauma, and recovery alone, which can be both isolating and detrimental to their well-being.

Youth-adult collaborations can play substantial roles in gender-based violence prevention. These collaborations require intentional work to build relationships between youth and adults and to educate all partners about gender-based violence. Many adults working with youth have themselves experienced significant trauma, and some reacted strongly to the content youth shared during these sessions.

Through these sessions, we learned that adults also need opportunities to discuss and share their personal exposure to gender-based violence so that they can work effectively with youth in their care.

Lasting, widespread cultural change requires multigenerational input. Efforts to address gender-based violence that take seriously our moral obligation to create a future without violence must include better communication with, understanding of, and leadership by young people.

**I always tell my dad to step down and just give me the reins, we are going to change the world, what have you guys done?"**

**—PORTLAND, ME**

**"Believe us and support us fully. And if you feel like you can't do that, get professional help for that person anyway, but like, find resources for your child or like, help your young adult find those resources."**

**—ESPAÑOLA, NM**

**"Respect my vulnerability and my boundaries." —ESPAÑOLA, NM**

**"I feel like it's [a safe adult], like, someone that can lead you in the right way. Like, if you go to them, like, I said I did this, or did that, they'll, like, tell you in a way what can be correct, or what can be done correctly." —ST. PAUL, MN**

**"Um, I don't know. It's easier for me to tell someone my age instead of, like, an adult."**

**—ST. PAUL, MN**



“

**You have to have trust in us... we have potential. Youth are not people you should look past.**





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Talk Directly with Youth

Listening sessions are an effective tool to explore gender-based violence among youth. They offer a safe and open space for youth to discuss issues they care about or circumstances they are currently facing. The experiences of youth today are different from the experiences of youth a few years ago. As such, we cannot assume the same methods and examples in educational programming will always be applicable to all students.

Listening sessions also provide useful information such as a landscape analysis. By talking directly with youth who receive educational programming, programs can identify strengths and gaps in existing programming and use information gathered from listening sessions to inform and tailor new programming.

- Host listening sessions at times and locations that are convenient to youth participants. Schedule listening sessions after the school day ends so that it doesn't interfere with youth's academic schedule. Meet youth where they already are, such as a school or community center.
- Work with established youth groups to simplify logistics such as recruiting participants and finding space. If you know a youth group meets at a certain time and location, ask to use one of their meeting times to host a session.

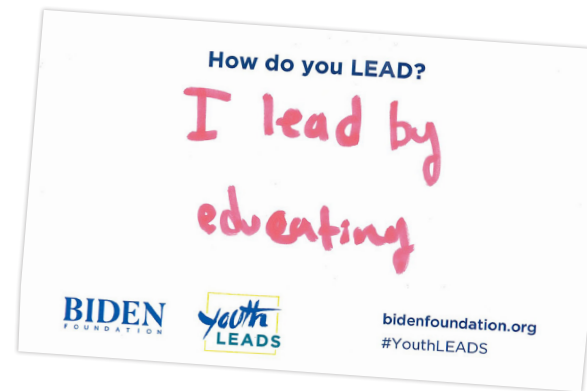
**Being a Youth Leader means taking a stand on certain things and being a good role model. It also means helping others to have the courage to be true to themselves and share how they feel.**

**—JASMINE, 14**





- Ideally, listening sessions should be kept small with 10 or fewer participants in each. This ensures everyone's voice can be heard during the conversation.
- Provide food and compensation for youth participants. Not only will it incentivize attendance, it is also standard best practice when conducting research focus groups.
- Always have a trained trauma-informed advocate and/or other professional staff members, like psychologists or social workers, on site in case the conversation becomes triggering for participants. This will help ensure emotional safety for participants before, during, and after the conversation. These are heavy topics that do not go away for participants after the listening session has ended.



## 2. Hold Space for Girls of Color

As we continued to host listening sessions to learn from young people about their experiences with violence, we found that these conversations also provided healing for marginalized youth, particularly girls of color. We received an overwhelming amount of support for more open and honest conversations around this topic from many of the black and brown girls we talked to.

Listening sessions offer girls of color a way to process the high rates of violence and trauma they experience and witness every day. They are also able to find community and solidarity with other girls of color who may have had similar experiences.

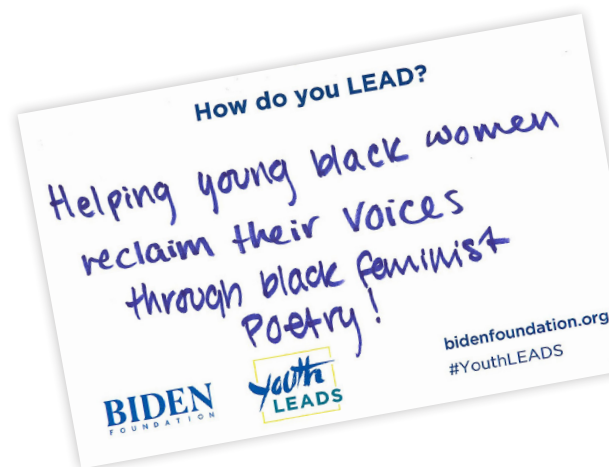
- Be intentional about who is in the room when holding a listening session for girls of color. Closing the group to youth of color only will help create the safe environment needed for an honest conversation between participants. The presence of white participants or facilitators can change the dynamic of the conversation as participants may not feel safe to speak about issues of racism while they are in the room.

- Tailor the questions to facilitate a conversation that allows participants to talk about their specific experiences as girls of color. Examining cycles of violence through an intersectional lens is key.
- Create spaces that are consistent and accessible to girls of color. Many of the Youth LEADS participants asked to have these conversations weekly or monthly. Find ways to engage in the conversation beyond one listening session to ensure that youth have continuous access to healing spaces.

### 3. Educational Programming Must Be Taught through an Intersectional Lens

Youth come from various diverse backgrounds, therefore there is no one-size-fits-all curriculum for students. It is important to recognize the additional barriers youth of color and other marginalized youth face and include this understanding in educational materials. Additionally, culturally relevant examples should be included so that students of marginalized backgrounds are receiving effective programming. Collaborating with organizations that center people of a particular background and/or asking the youth themselves are effective strategies to creating programming that is intersectional and culturally relevant. Collaboration is key to ensure that no one is left out of the conversation.

- Ask for feedback from youth, especially youth of color and youth with marginalized identities, on whether your current curriculum is relevant or helpful to them. Incorporate their feedback and continue to tailor your programming to better meet their needs.



**We help kids at my school understand the issues of healthy dating and equality by leading workshops to help them know how these issues impact them as well as their peers.**

**—GABRIELLE, 13**



- Research national and local organizations doing similar work with specific communities. Even if the organization's focus is not gender-based violence, it can still provide expertise on how to best work with a specific population. Ask relevant organizations to consult or collaborate on your listening session and fund them for their work whenever possible.

## 4. Adults Need a Separate Space to Process Their Own History with Trauma and Assess Their Biases

Many adults have personal experiences with trauma and it can affect their work with youth on this issue. In our listening sessions, we found that when adults remained in the room, they often took up a lot of space in the conversation by answering the questions we posed to the youth participants. It was apparent that many of them had not been asked these questions before or were ever given the space to process their own trauma in a safe environment.

Though unintentional, their contributions often silenced the youth voices in the room. To ensure that youth have a chance to speak freely in the sessions and that their answers are not influenced by adult participants, adults should plan to host their own listening sessions so that they can better understand their own trauma and identify ways in which their experiences might be influencing their educational programming.

- If possible, only have youth participants and facilitators in the room where the listening session is held. Have trained advocates and other professional staff remain outside of the room in a designated location until the session has ended. Tell youth participants where they can find advocates in case they need assistance during or after the session.



**I teach 5<sup>th</sup> graders in Peer IMPACT about team building, self-advocacy, discrimination, and how to stop bullying.**

**—NAIEER, 19**



- If an adult must be present in the room, have a conversation with them and the facilitator beforehand. Remind them that the goal of the session is to hear from youth and that the facilitator may ask them to refrain from engaging if their participation disrupts the flow of the conversation.
- Host a separate listening session for adults that runs concurrently with the youth listening session. This will give adults an opportunity to answer similar questions and begin their journey of unpacking their trauma and biases.

## 5. Youth-Adult Collaboration Is a Key Component to Addressing Gender-Based Violence

Adults often lead educational efforts for youth without their input or feedback. This leads to programming that is not culturally relevant or specific and does not capture the attention of young people today. Youth want to be asked their opinion about issues they're learning about. When youth are given the opportunity to contribute ideas to the design and development of programming, it is more likely to address their specific needs, thus making it more sustainable and effective.

- Many youth did not feel empowered to create change because they did not have supportive adults in their lives. Encourage youth to collaborate with each other and with appropriate organizations to build leadership and advocacy skills.
- Host brainstorm sessions with youth to learn about issues they are interested in. Prioritize them and find ways to incorporate them into existing curricula.
- Invest in youth leadership. Create a youth advisory council that allows youth to participate in curriculum development and provides opportunities for leadership development.



## 6. Community-Based Education Efforts Are Essential to Reaching Diverse Groups of Youth

We cannot rely on school-based educational programming alone to teach youth about healthy relationships and gender-based violence because not every young person stays on the traditional educational path. To reach non-traditional students and youth who may not receive programming in school, we can use community-based educational strategies to fill those gaps. These efforts can include curricula, events, and educational materials that take place in local community centers, churches, youth recreation programs, public libraries, and similar local, trusted entities. Educational programs should be multifaceted, delivered in a variety of settings, and provided to youth before they reach high school.

- Hosting workshops, classes, and listening sessions in spaces outside of the classroom is crucial for reaching all students.
- Either formally through a survey or informally through conversation, ask youth where they are learning about gender-based violence and healthy relationships. Ask them about what they have learned from specific places such as school, home, and social media.
- Educate yourself on the signs, symptoms, and behaviors of victims who have experienced sexual trauma. Make sure that other community members who engage with youth are educated about them as well. Being able to identify these traits within young people will help catalyze intervention efforts.

**I left [the listening session] feeling many things but mostly I feel motivated, powerful, and heard.**

**—JULIA, 18**



- Tailoring your curriculum to meet the developmental needs of specific age groups is important as well. When working with high school and college students, you can have conversations around sexual assault and dating violence. When working with elementary school children, you can teach them about healthy boundaries and friendships.

## 7. Use Social Media as a Tool to Counter Negative Influence and Promote More Accurate and Relevant Content

We heard from many young people that their parents and teachers tell them to simply get off social media. This is unrealistic: Social media is a key tool that young people use to connect and communicate with their peers. Rather than having access to social media restricted, youth want more education and guidance on how to use social media safely.

- Adults should form open lines of communication with young people about healthy boundaries and representation on social media. By being open, adults can make it easier for youth to turn to them if/when they witness or experience gender-based violence online in the form of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, harassment, or sexting.
- Youth can be vulnerable to sexting or being coerced into posting explicit content online. Education about this dynamic and strategies to avoid this can be helpful.
- Ask youth which social media couples they are following and why. Google #relationshipgoals to see a wealth of content — both good and bad — that shows what it looks like on social media to have a perfect relationship.

**We spoke on the role that us men, both young and old, must play in order to create a better environment for the generations to come, that is an environment filled with mutual respect between men and women.**

**—ALEXIS, 14**







## CONCLUSION

The Youth LEADS listening sessions provided rich knowledge and insight that can help adults, youth-serving organizations, organizations focused on gender-based violence, and youth leaders to work together to prevent gender-based violence. Our findings and recommendations aim to provide useful information that can be used to address the core questions that served as the foundation of this project.

Gender-based violence takes place every day in every community. High-profile cases have brought national attention to the issue; however, we must address gender-based violence on the local level and in our communities.

As we listened to participants, a clear picture emerged of the high levels of violence young people live with and the rigid gender norms that are still common today, which further perpetuate cycles of violence. Youth of color and other marginalized youth were acutely aware of the additional burden they carry because of how their race, level of ability, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity intersects with the violence in their lives. Ultimately, engagement with youth from diverse backgrounds is key to disrupting violence.

The Biden Foundation encourages youth-serving organizations and other stakeholders to consider the findings and recommendations outlined in this report when developing programming to prevent gender-based violence. Through Youth LEADS, we know that including youth voices is the key to achieving our goals of cultural and social change.



# ABOUT THE BIDEN FOUNDATION

The Biden Foundation officially opened its doors in February 2017 to continue Vice President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden's lifelong commitment to ensure everyone is treated with dignity and gets a fair shot at achieving the American Dream. That commitment includes protecting and advancing the equality and opportunity of all people, including those who have suffered from gender-based violence.

Since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, Vice President Joe Biden has continuously advocated on behalf of women. As vice president, he sought to prioritize reducing the high rates of violence against students, teens, and young adults ages 16–24.

After seeking input from young people across the country, Vice President Biden launched It's On Us in 2014 to combat sexual assault on college campuses. While reducing rates of sexual violence on college campuses remains important, experts agree that the younger we reach teens and young adults, the better. That is why we aimed to strengthen these efforts by expanding our work to include high school students and youth who are not on traditional educational paths. As the foundation, we are carrying on the important work Vice President Biden started in the White House by engaging a younger and diverse demographic in conversations about changing the culture to end gender-based violence.



**BIDEN**  
FOUNDATION





The Biden Foundation would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for their invaluable contributions, which helped to make the Youth LEADS project a success.

This project would not have been possible without our partnerships with Men Can Stop Rape and the YWCA USA.

Authors: Kassamira Carter-Howard, Kendall LaVine, Dr. Dionne Coker-Appiah, Lynn Rosenthal, Lauren Thurman, Melanie Fonder Kaye

Design and Production: ENWROSE LLC

Many thanks for their time and effort in reviewing this report and providing valuable insight:

Saida Agostoni, Director of Capacity Building, YWCA USA

Alicia Gill-Sanchez, Interim ED Collective Action for Safe Spaces

Alejandra Castillo, CEO YWCA USA

Diana Payton, CEO YWCA Greater Baton Rouge

Wendy Waters-Connel, ED/CEO YWCA Hamilton

Jennifer Achterman, Interim ED Center for Family Solutions

Chamina Smith, Assistant Professor Miami University & Girls with a Purpose youth group

Thank you to Silvia Zenteno and Anitra Edwards for their help in facilitating open and honest listening sessions with youth. We would also like to thank Caitlin Abrams for her work in assisting with data collection and analysis.

We are incredibly grateful to the program staff at the following sites for their assistance with listening session preparation and execution:

Maine Boys to Men

Men of Strength

Peace Over Violence

Tewa Women United

North Carolina Coalition Against

Sexual Assault

ALSO Chicago

The LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania

Casa de Esperanza

IMPACT Boston

Ruth Ellis Center

YWCA San Antonio, TX

YWCA Hamilton, OH

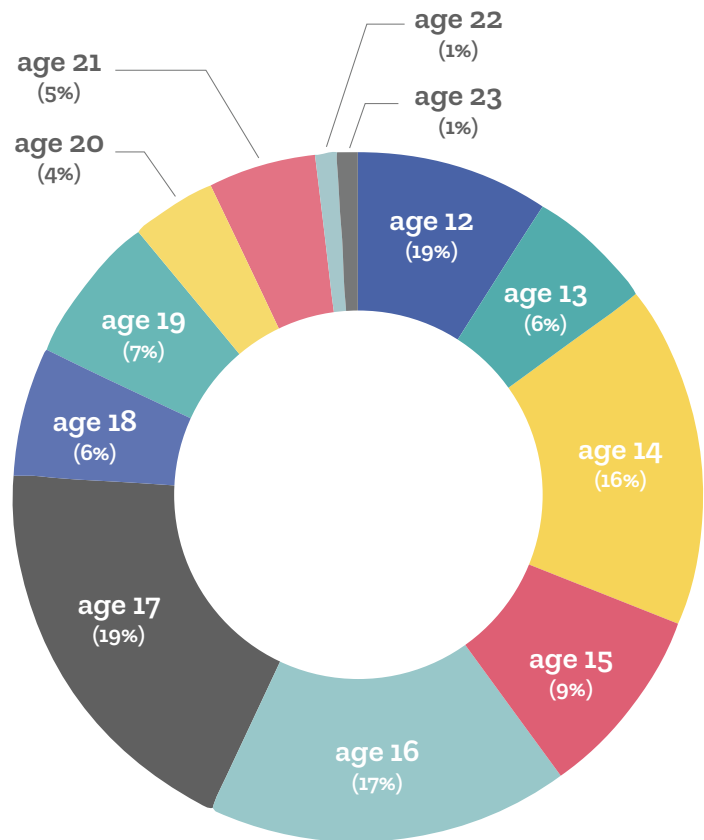
YWCA Minneapolis, MN

YWCA Greater Baton Rouge, LA

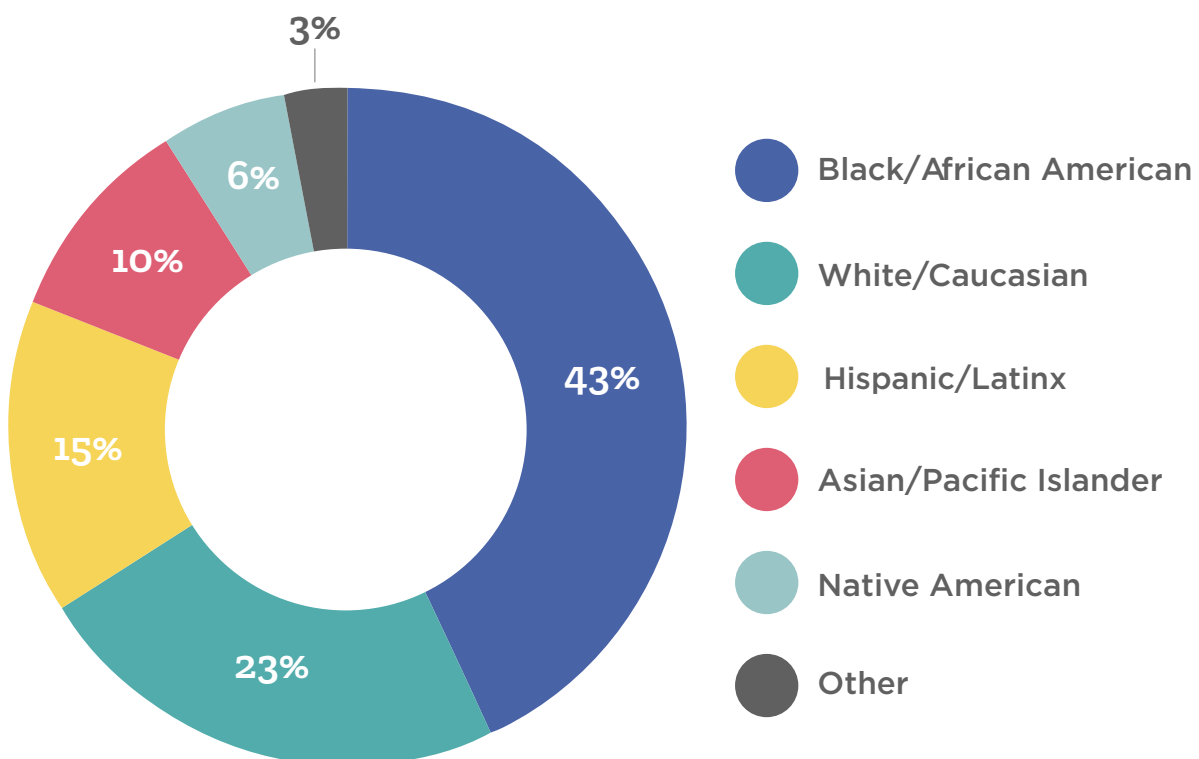


## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC (SELF-REPORTED)

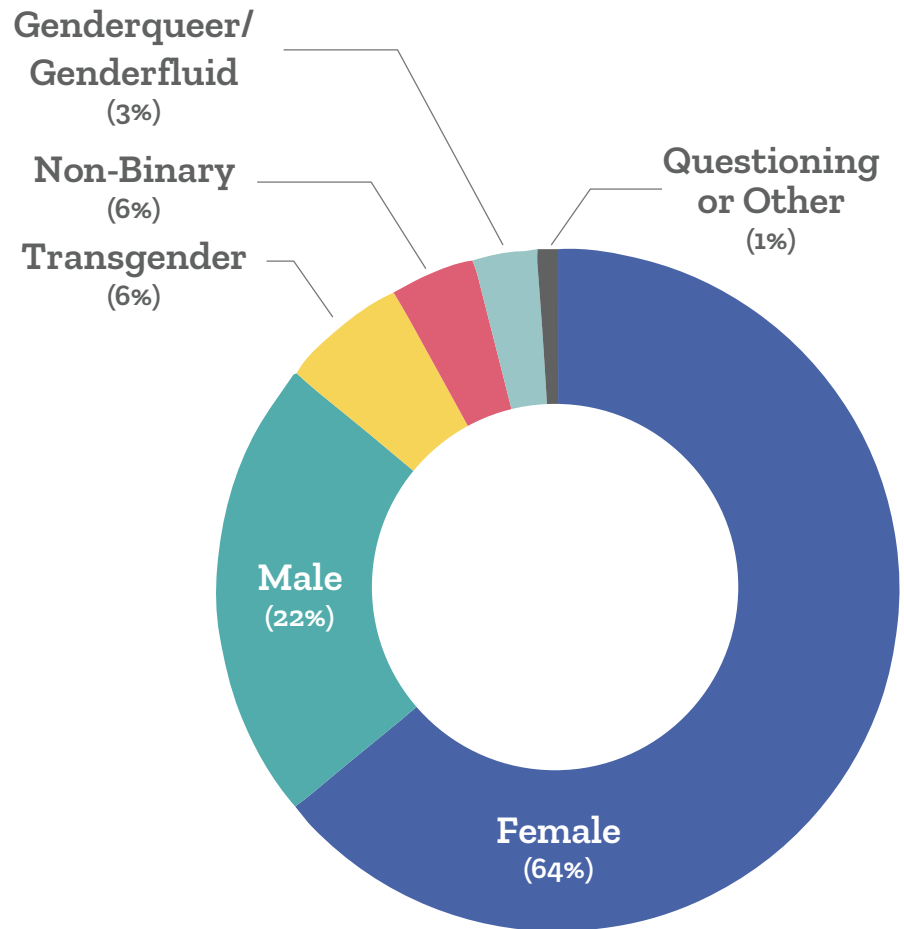
### Participant Age



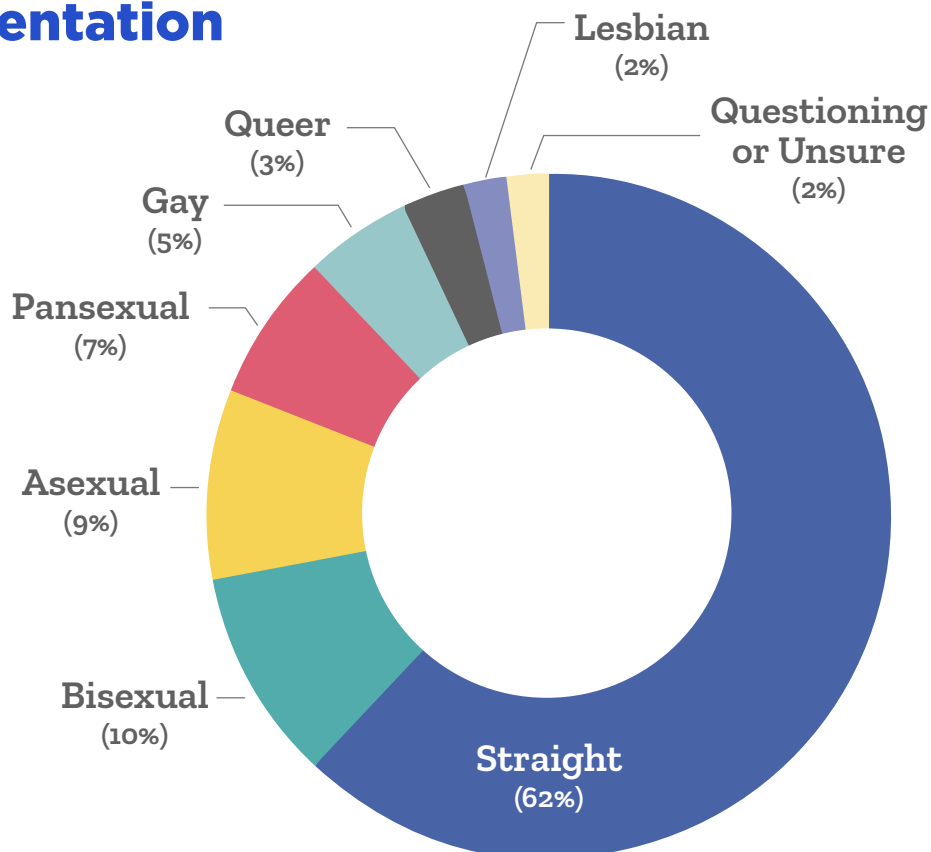
### Racial Demographics



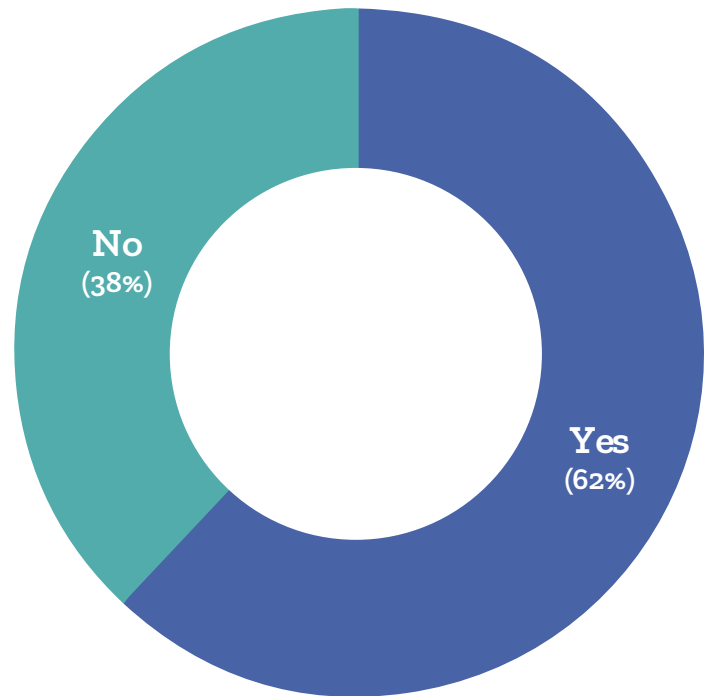
## Gender Identity



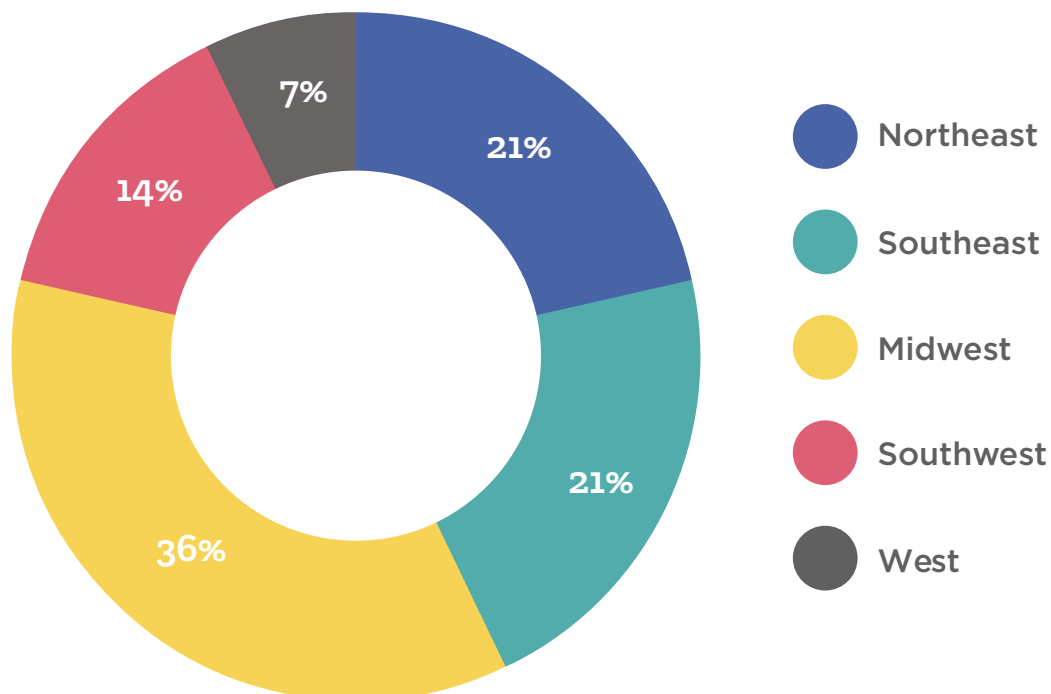
## Sexual Orientation



**Of youth surveyed, more than half answered yes when asked if they had taken at least one class focused on gender-based violence**



### **Sites Visited by Geographic Region**





## APPENDIX B: TEAM DESCRIPTION

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The Youth LEADS team comprises members of the Biden Foundation Violence Against Women Initiatives team: Kassamira Carter-Howard, Kendall LaVine, Lynn Rosenthal; experts in the field and consultants: Dr. Dionne Coker-Appiah, Anitra Edwards, Silvia Zenteno, and Caitlin Abrams.



**Kassamira Carter-Howard** is the Policy Associate for Violence Against Women Initiatives at the Biden Foundation. She co-developed the Youth LEADS concept, structure, and implementation strategy. She was responsible for partner outreach, facilitation of listening sessions, data collection and analysis, product development and future development of the Youth LEADS initiative.



**Kendall LaVine** is the Policy Fellow for Violence Against Women Initiatives at the Biden Foundation. She co-developed the Youth LEADS concept, structure, and implementation strategy. She was responsible for partner outreach, facilitation of listening sessions, data collection and analysis, and product development.



**Lynn Rosenthal** is the Director of Violence Against Women Initiatives at the Biden Foundation. She provided oversight, strategic planning, and support throughout the Youth LEADS project.



**Dr. Dionne Smith Coker-Appiah**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. Her areas of expertise are adolescent dating violence prevention, adolescent mental health, adolescent sexual health, and community-based participatory research (CBPR). Dr. Coker-Appiah served as a consultant for the Youth LEADS project.



**Anitra Edwards** served as a contract facilitator for several of the listening sessions. She is an experienced facilitator who has worked with youth from diverse backgrounds.



**Silvia Zenteno**, former Biden Foundation Policy Fellow and current Director of Education and Training at It's On Us, joined the Youth LEADS team as a facilitator for two sessions.



**Caitlin Abrams**, of the Biden Institute at the University of Delaware (UD), assisted the Youth LEADS team with data analysis.

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6. Native women are some of the most at risk for experiencing sexual and domestic violence in their lifetime. According to the Urban Indian Health Institute, “The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls though the US Department of Justice’s federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women and that rates of violence on reservations can be up to ten times higher than the national average.” Lucchesi, Annita., Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), Abigail. (2018). Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls: A Snapshot of data from 71 Urban Cities in the United States. Seattle, WA: Urban Indian Health Institute.



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