BEING BLACK IN

PUBLIC SURVEY

REPORT

As it turns out, like everyone else, Black people want to freely <u>belly laugh</u> in public.

SUMMARY
Here's What We Heard

These high-level survey findings are framed in affirmative statements, reflecting our asset- and solutions-based survey approach. Stats are intentionally excluded from this summary, as they fail to independently provide the nuance and human-centred context for understanding complex and sensitive placemaking topics. We encourage you to delve more deeply into this report.

First, to help you understand the need for such a survey, we provide you with a summary of unprecedented pre-survey research undertaken by our team. We gathered over 300 data points spanning eight public space categories—from homelessness to green spaces to public transit and cycling. These and other data points corroborated what we heard from the Black-identified individuals who generously extended their insights and experiences through powerful survey responses.

Within the central section of this report, the following high-level BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY findings are accompanied by statistics, ranked responses and, most importantly, direct quotes from survey respondents.

1. **As it turns out, like everyone else, Black people want to freely belly laugh in public.** The prevalence of survey respondents either feeling like their laughter was being policed or aspiring to find more public spaces where they could freely express joy in this particular way emerged in response to every survey question. This was both poignant and disturbing because of the history of laughing barrels—where enslaved people were made to stifle their laugher for fear of reprimand or harm.

2. **Black people want to feel safe in public.** Survey respondents ranked spaces perceived to be most and least safe. They explored safety issues related to law enforcement, citizen policing and psychological safety in particular spaces and circumstances. Also, many positive safety-related responses were focused on enjoying public spaces with family, children and public space users of all identities.

3. **Black people want to experience mental wellness and peace in public.** Survey respondents indicated that they would like to relax their shoulders and be more present when navigating public spaces. While parks, good public transit, bike lanes and other public spaces enhanced their mental health, constant concern for personal safety and hypervigilance compromised an overall sense of wellness while navigating public spaces.

4. **Black people want to express their cultural swagger and perspectives in public.** Survey respondents frequently expressed a desire to have their essential humanity recognized and the ability to just be their whole selves, without fear of judgement, stares or policing. They specifically highlighted the freedom to: wear culturally inspired or natural hairstyles; adorn themselves with brightly coloured clothing and "bling;" be loud; and again, to belly laugh. They indicated that they adjusted clothing and hairstyles and code-switched to mitigate safety risks and/or to access opportunities. Freedom of expression also included being able to voice contrary opinions without being labelled a "threat" or "angry."

5. **Black people would like a healthy level of acknowledgement in public.** Survey respondents reported either experiencing hypervisibility—excessive attention or scrutiny—in public or invisibility—overlooked, disregarded and unheard—in public. These behaviours ranged from overt forms of verbal and physical violence to unwanted stares and questions about their presence in particular places and spaces. Conversely, respondents shared positive experiences involving people of all identities, demonstrating how simple gestures such as a smile, greeting and invitation to share spaces significantly increased their sense of belonging.

6. **Black people would like to access more opportunities in public.** An alarming number of survey respondents indicated that they'd missed out on economic or educational opportunities due to discomfort or safety concerns in public spaces. Examples included: not attending certain universities for fear of being othered; feeling the burden of tokenization at work; and not going places due to not feeling comfortable on transit or driving at night.

7. **Black people want belonging, joy and safety to be built into policy and public spaces.** Survey respondents' built environment priorities were not radical; they prioritized placemaking interventions like safe streets, clear wayfinding, and clean parks and amenities. Policy approaches geared towards municipalities and public space operators included: establishing strategic priorities for addressing historical place-based inequities that have resulted in fewer trees and green spaces in Black (and racialized) communities; examining biases in noise by-laws; conveying expectations for kind and equitable conduct; and addressing overpolicing at public events and in neighbourhoods where there are large Black demographics.

IMAGE COURTESY OF MITCHELL SILVER

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to every survey respondent across 100 cities who took the time to share critical, and sometimes vulnerable, insights. Their valuable voices shape this survey report.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THEODORE WALKER ROBINSON

Contents

IMAGE COURTESY OF ANTHONY TAYLOR

INTRODUCTION

Imagine sharing an inside joke with a friend on the subway or playing with your young nieces in the park and not feeling like you are able to laugh—like, *really laugh*. The kind of laughter that punctuates moments of pure joy and human connection. While reviewing the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY, one of the things I was struck by was the fact that being able to freely laugh in public was a theme, interwoven throughout every single question. The prevalence of Black people either feeling like their laughter was being policed or aspiring to find more public spaces where they could freely express joy in this particular way was both poignant and disturbing.

In 1985, Ralph Ellison, renowned scholar and author of *Invisible Man*, wrote an important, lesser-known essay titled "An Extravagance of Laughter." Ellison talks about how Black laughter—like most elements of Black public life—is restricted and, rather than strictly being a beautiful expression, is bound to ideas of survival, defiance and performance. When exploring these political aspects of laughter, Ellison and other reputable authors, including Maya Angelou, reference something called a laughing barrel. Apparently, during slavery and, by some accounts, extending post-emancipation to the Jim Crow-era segregated South, Black people used barrels to muffle their laughter in public to avoid harm.[1,2]

Ironically, in the book *Laughter as Politics*, author Patrick Giamario asserts that laughing barrels were considered a "civic necessity" to protect others from an "insanity suffered exclusively by Negroes," whose laughter was believed to be irrational, given their social status and history of servitude. Sadly, this stigma and the risks experienced by Black people laughing in public persist. For example, far-right pundits characterized former Vice-President Kamala Harris as "crazy" and "weird" for her irrepressible laugh; moreover, a group of laughing Black women was removed from the Napa Valley train tour by an employee who deemed them "disruptive" and "out of control." Survey respondents shared their own disheartening and discriminatory experiences resulting from laughing in public. Yet, many of them also advocated for their right to express joy, humour and delight in this manner. This is the type of complexity—evidence connected to lived experiences, history connected to today's context and challenges connected to aspiration—that defines the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report.

As an award-winning, binational practice leading projects related to public space design, policy and advocacy, we believe that there is enough space, joy and justice for absolutely everyone. This particular initiative was conceived amid the George Floyd civil rights uprising. It was my goal to ensure that conversations continued and productive steps were taken after the corners of protest placards were worn out and media headlines shifted to other matters. To achieve this sustainable goal, I created a dedicated space for Black people to process what it's like BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC in terms of public space discrimination and barriers and, equally importantly, insights and positive experiences.

---

1   https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf200396c/the_laughter_barre
2   https://books-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks7/degruyt
    er7/2022-09-22/2/9781474491563

I conducted exhaustive pre-research with the expert support of my senior practice consultant and interns. This process enabled us to bring together public space data about Black people's public space experiences—previously documented in separate silos such as policing, homelessness, parks and green spaces, etc.—beneath a unified umbrella. It also enabled us to validate and provide broader context for the survey respondents' experiences. **Here are a few examples of what I mean by this:**

Pre-Research Data: In a 2020 survey in the United States, a third of Black 2SLGBTQ+ people reported encountering discrimination that meaningfully impacted their lives.

Survey Response: "Walking with my gal pals and gay friends and getting harassed and threatened by a group of men on a night out. They hurled homophobic slurs to the group and made threatening advances. We had to rush out of the area in order to feel safe."

Pre-Research Data: Black (and Latinx) people are disproportionately profiled by the police—for example, out of 1.6 million stops made by New York City Police through the Stop and Frisk program, 80% were Black and Latinx people.

Survey Response: "Being interrogated, accused, belittled, dehumanized and yelled at on the 501 Queen Streetcar to Neville Park going East on my way into the beaches by transit enforcement last year, February 2023. I was wrongfully accused of not paying and asked to shut up and stop talking and to get up and prove myself by the machine. Most awful and demeaning experience in my life. No one stood up for me and once the transit authority left, witnesses apologized that I had to endure the experience."

Pre-Research Data: Black people have less access to parks and green spaces. According to the Trust for Public Land, majority non-white neighbourhoods in the 100 most populated cities in the United States have 44% less park acreage than majority white neighbourhoods.

Survey Response: "Design more parks in historically Black neighbourhoods or areas tied to Black histories with a theme that honours Black culture and history."

Showing the correlation between the existing empirical evidence and the lived experiences expressed through the words and ranked responses of survey respondents adds souls to statistics, empathy to the evidence and nuance to the numbers. We also introduce pre-research data covering topics such as an overrepresentation in homelessness populations and proximity to public spaces that pose environmental health risks. As pointed out by several of our esteemed report reviewers, undertaking this rigorous pre-research prior to our survey gives credence to complaints often dismissed as being divisive or a terrible one-off occurrence.

Following the pre-research, I developed a trauma-informed survey framework and survey questions. Again, I intentionally balanced the sharing of difficult experiences, insights and aspirations. Then, together with my long-time practice advisor, Professor L. Anders Sandberg (my co-investigator at York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change), I fostered an agreement with the Institute for Social Research to have them administer the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY. Later on in the process, Professor Sandberg integrated the survey into his class syllabus and we were joined by Paul Kulig (Principal, Perkins&Will), who assembled a small team of architects and planners. Together, we translated some of the survey themes/findings into actual design renderings to demonstrate how the data we've gathered can create positive change in the real world.

This BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report is informed by 300+ pre-research data points,1800+ responses to open-ended survey questions and seven ranked questions completed by 600+ respondents residing in over 100 cities across 23 states and eight provinces. Through the powerful and insightful voice of survey respondents, it tells a story of disproportionate public space challenges faced by Black people—but it doesn't stop there. Again, insights and hopes are shared, which is why all of the report findings are framed positively and proactively rather than as problem statements. As you review this document, it is my hope that the data—both qualitative and quantitative—will help to build understanding, empathy and better public spaces.

In service and solidarity,

Jay Pitter

IMAGE COURTESY OF ANTHONY TAYLOR

IMAGE COURTESY OF ANTHONY TAYLOR

SURVEY Q&A

What were the timelines of this initiative?

The pre-survey research took place in the first three quarters of 2023, followed by the development of the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY—a 10-question survey with both ranked and open-ended questions—during the fourth quarter of that year. The survey was launched online in early February 2024 and concluded in late May 2024. The partnership with York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Studies and Perkins&Will commenced in September 2024 and concluded with an in-studio presentation in December 2024. A select group of students and designers are continuing to collaborate with the Practice on initiatives such as an exhibit of the collaborative design and policy recommendations at Toronto City Hall and co-authorship of academic and Practice articles to further amplify specific aspects of this initiative.

What were the methods and approaches used to develop this survey?

► **Pre-Research:** Before undertaking the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY, the Practice conducted pre-research to both validate the need for the survey itself and to help inform the survey questions. Over 300 data points, from both Canada and the United States, pertaining to Black people and public spaces were gathered and analyzed.

► **Trauma-Informed Survey Development:** The BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY employed a trauma-informed approach by including: asset-based questions, allowing respondents to share positive public space experiences and perceptions, not strictly concerns; research that contextualizes and validates those experiences and perceptions; freedom for self-identification; space for storytelling; anonymity; real-world data translation; and explicit benefits to stakeholders from the respondent groups.

► **Intersectional Approach:** The survey explicitly invited Black-identified individuals to explore other parts of their identity—gender, sexuality (2SLGBTQ+), ability, class, religion, etc.—which concurrently intersected with their race and informed their public space experiences and perspectives.

► **Institute for Social Research:** The Practice identified a third-party institution, experienced in administering numerous empirical surveys (academic and large institutions), to professionally administer the survey.

► **Academic and Practice Collaboration:** Understanding the importance of pragmatic knowledge transfer—in simple terms, translating data to everyday realities—the Practice collaborated with Professor L. Anders Sandberg (co-investigator), urban designers and Perkins&Will to translate some of the data to the built environment and public space policy.

► **Reviewers:** In keeping with the collaborative spirit of the survey, we enlisted reviewers of all identities and professional backgrounds—from urban planning professors to land use practitioners to grassroots advocates—to review and provide feedback on the almost-final version of the survey report.

Why is the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report important at this moment?

It's been almost five years since the George Floyd protests and the institutional promises that followed, yet Black people continue to experience disproportionate public space challenges, exemplified by incidents such as the public space murders of Jordan Neely, Jayland Walker, Tyre Nichols and Jean René Junior Olivier. In addition to these egregious incidents, there are countless unreported daily threats and indignities that impede Black people's safety in public spaces, ultimately impacting their physical and mental health, sense of belonging and access to economic prosperity. Our unprecedented pre-research data and survey findings clearly demonstrate that Black people have disproportionately faced, and continue to face, public space risks.

Who completed the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY?

The BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY was geared toward a diverse range of individuals who identified as Black. We received responses from 600+ respondents residing in over 100 cities across 23 American states and eight Canadian provinces. These respondents represented a range of age, class, education and professional backgrounds. A concerted effort was made to reach Black-identified individuals who identified themselves as disabled and/or 2SLGBTQ+ as they face even greater public space barriers both within and beyond Black communities.

Who is the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report for?

This resource is for anyone committed to learning more about Black people's experiences and/or acting to contribute to positive change as a part of a broader vision of creating public spaces where everyone thrives; specifically:

► Land use, design and policy professionals who contribute to shaping public spaces and/or establishing guidelines for how they are governed who are interested in embracing placemaking practices and principles that create more equitable outcomes;

► Public space operators responsible for the management, maintenance, security and programming of public spaces who are interested in ensuring that their venues are safe, comfortable and welcoming for all;

► Philanthropists and funders managing and directing public space funds who are interested in making evidence-based investments and/or helping to build the capacity of their grantees;

► Black community stakeholders engaged in community-based education and/or advocacy efforts who are interested in building capacity and bolstering approaches with data;

- ▶ Teachers, scholars and students who are interested in accessing empirical evidence—both from the survey and pre-survey research—to fill gaps in current syllabuses, add rigour to assignments and expand public space discourses;

- ▶ Media professionals reporting on relevant public space issues who are interested in adding data that helps readers/listeners understand context and patterns and support the claims of featured "subjects";

- ▶ Elected officials at all levels, including school trustees, city councillors, members of Parliament and senators responsible for creating by-laws, legislation and motions that "legislate" places and bodies.

How will the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report benefit individuals and communities?

The survey benefited Black individuals and communities by creating dedicated space, outside of trauma and the labour of public protest, to process and share their public space experiences. The survey did not strictly focus on police violence or harassment; it included other challenges—social attitudes, design, programming, etc.—thus comprehensively characterizing, and therefore creating the conditions for comprehensively addressing, a wider range of challenges. Relatedly, unlike the vast majority of research on this topic, the survey created space for asset-based inquiry, eliciting respondent insights and positive experiences while also creating space for storytelling. This approach surfaced more nuanced, textured data, which can be used to: validate and add context to individual experiences; prompt community conversations; build capacity pertaining to public space discourse and design; and function as an advocacy tool.

How will the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report benefit municipalities, land use and design professionals and other institutions?

Municipalities and other stakeholders shaping the design, policy and programming of public spaces are all mandated to create equitable and dignified spaces where everyone thrives. Also, numerous stakeholders such as funders and non-profits are mandated to do the same. Achieving this mandate has numerous collective benefits, including economic prosperity, increased safety, reducing fear of the other and overall greater social harmony. The findings in this document are intended to support a wide range of professionals to build their capacity, support their decision-making and more effectively respond to Black communities.

How will the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report benefit other groups that face disproportionate public space risks?

The pre-research summary and lengthier report intentionally highlight when Black people and other groups such as Latinx people and Indigenous Peoples also face disproportionate public space risks. Also, while distinct in terms of history, severity and frequency, numerous challenges are faced by other individuals and groups and, as such, many of the recommended placemaking interventions would benefit a wide range of communities. Moreover, this survey model has been unpacked in a manner that is extremely transparent, in part to invite other groups to borrow (with respectful attribution) from its approach.

IMAGE COURTESY OF DEMIESHA DENNIS, FOUNDER BROWN GIRL OUTDOOR WORLD

Pre-Research Summary

Before undertaking the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY, we were challenged with the question: why have a survey focused on Black people's experiences in public spaces? Given the reporting on issues ranging from police brutality to the weaponizing of noise by-laws to the harassment of Black people deemed "out of place" both by mainstream media and through social media testimonies, the answer seemed obvious. However, operating at the intersection of academia and professional practice public policy, we appreciate the importance of grounding projects in evidence and rose to the challenge of conducting extensive pre-research to validate the need for such a survey—which is, in some ways, indicative of our rigorous standards and, sadly, the apathy that exists around the issue itself.

Most research addressing the Black experience is framed within systems and social services, such as health care, education and the judicial system—crucial areas of study. Of course, there are overlaps between this spatially focused research and the more traditional social and systems-level research lenses used—for example, research related to discrimination within the judicial system often includes disturbing discrepancies in terms of longer sentences and higher execution rates for Black men, as well as the disproportionate police profiling they face on streets. Additionally, the vast majority of spatial studies tackle Black people's experiences in public space silos—parks, transit or streets—rather than taking a comprehensive approach.

Consequently, these two factors created a process challenge, requiring us to comb through hundreds of research papers, published in both Canada and the United States, to quite literally "locate" public space statistics. We also sought to gather intersectional data, meaning data that addressed multiple aspects of Black identity such as gender, class and sexual orientation. **Keeping these priorities and nuances in mind, we established the following research buckets/themes based on our practice expertise and real-time learning during the process:**

Police Profiling and Violence

Homelessness

Sidewalks and Streets

Community Spaces

Public Transit and Cycling

Environment and Infrastructure

Parks and Green Spaces

Other

What we found was stark, but unsurprising. The statistics gathered from both United States and Canadian sources clearly show how, in multiple public spaces, from the street to the community centre to the bus, Black people have historically encountered, and continue to encounter, disproportionate harm. These harms are then compounded further by differences in age, ability, gender and sexuality. **Here's a brief pre-research overview:**

When looking at Black people and police, the story is overwhelmingly one of disproportionate violence, often occurring in public spaces. We found Black people were much more likely to be shot by police, even when unarmed, and to be killed. In the United States, data shows that while Black people make up 13% of the population, in some states they account for 60% to 85% of police shootings. Black people were also disproportionately the victims of "stop and frisk" style police programs in both the United States and Canada—for example, Black people were 3.25 times more likely to be stopped by police in a street check by the Toronto Police Service than white people between 2008 and 2013.

As pedestrians walking on public streets, Black people are disproportionately ticketed and killed in traffic accidents compared to white people. For example, Black and Latinx people received 90% of jaywalking tickets in New York City in 2019, while the figure was similar for other cities such as Ferguson and Atlanta. Data from Smart Growth America for the period between 2016 to 2020 found that Black pedestrians were twice as likely to be killed in traffic accidents than white pedestrians.

Cycling and public transit research showed a familiar story of Black people being stopped and ticketed far more than white people. In Toronto, a study looking at transit officer stops found that 19.3% involved a Black person, particularly Black men, while Black people make up less than 9% of the city's population. When cycling, the story was no different. In Oakland, Chicago and Washington, D.C., data showed Black cyclists were disproportionately stopped and ticketed. In Oakland, for example, between 2016 and 2018, Black cyclists were stopped three times more than white cyclists.

Within parks and green spaces, a history of racial segregation, both at the national and municipal level, has had long-standing impacts on who has access to parks, who feels welcome in parks and the quality of those parks. Research shows that in both Canadian and U.S. cities, neighbourhoods that have more racialized and Black residents are ones with less access to green spaces, less park acreage and less tree cover. For example, in New York, the average park size in predominantly Black neighbourhoods is 7.9 acres, while in predominantly white neighbourhoods it's 29.8 acres. In Canada, an Ontario study found that tree planting—both by municipal teams and non-profits—was less likely to occur in poorer, Black neighbourhoods than richer, white ones.

Neighbourhoods with higher percentages of Black residents are also more likely in both Canada and the United States to be located near hazardous industrial sites, energy facilities and noisy infrastructure. One U.S. study found that 68% of Black people lived within 30 miles

of a coal-fired power plant, while Toronto-based researchers found poorer, racialized and new immigrant communities were disproportionately hurt by soil contamination and waste sites. The proximity to these types of facilities leads to serious health concerns, including higher risks of cancer, brain damage and birth defects.

Turning to housing, in both the United States and Canada, the story of who ends up living in public spaces and on streets is one where marginalized groups, particularly Black people, are disproportionately represented. In the United States, Black people make up 40% of the homeless population, and for Black youth it's even more disproportionate, with one study focusing on six cities finding they comprised 78% of the homeless population. The story is similar in Canada. In Vancouver, a 2020 study found that Black people were four times more likely to experience homelessness. Nationally, Black people make up just 4% of the Canadian population but 8% of the homeless population.

Black people's perception of and use of community spaces, such as community centres and recreation facilities, as well as privately owned community spaces, such as shops and restaurants, also reveal signs of disproportionate harm and discrimination. In the United States, Black children die at higher rates than white children from drowning in swimming pools—5.5 times more for children aged five to 10. This alarming statistic cannot be decoupled from restricted access to swimming pools during segregation and amenity inequities in poor Black and racialized communities. Black people in both the United States and Canada, especially 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, were also likely to note that they avoid certain community spaces, such as stores, restaurants and religious institutions, out of fear of discrimination.

Diving deeper into the data along identity indicators such as age, gender, sexuality and ability makes it clear that within the Black community, there are variations with respect to how people experience harm and discrimination. For example, in the United States, 40% of Black people with disabilities live in poverty, while only 22% of Black people without disabilities do. For Black 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, particularly Black trans women, rates of discrimination and violence are high—for example, a third of Black 2SLGBTQ+ people reported experiencing discrimination that impacted their daily life.

Finally, after reviewing more than 300 different data points from both the Canadian and United States research, we found that most of the data points, including the most recent data, were related to police profiling and homelessness. We were also struck by how the emerging area of research into the Black 2SLGBTQ+ experience showed even more disproportionate harm in many cases. And while we were able to find data in Canada for each research bucket, there was less volume compared to the United States, which highlights a gap with respect to race-based data collection in Canada. This extensive pre-research enabled us to validate the need for the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY while helping to inform some of the survey questions.

NOTE: All data presented in this summary, along with numerous other data points and corresponding citations, can be found in Appendix A of the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY report.

IMAGES COURTESY OF CRAIG WELLINGTON, HAFSA ABDULSAMED, ANTHONY TAYLOR, PASHA MCKENLEY, SHEREEN ASHMAN-HENDERSON

Here's What We Learned

"What are the design approaches, policies and social attitudes that inform—both negatively and positively—Black people's public space experiences?"

The following section includes seven BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY findings. In keeping with our asset-based approach, all of our findings are positively framed, outlining Black people's public space aspirations, desires and priorities versus problem statements. This is in no way an erasure or sanitation of the data. Every single section contains both positive and challenging survey responses. We use an asset-based approach in the interest of uplifting the aspiration as a way of moving toward meaningful action.

Each section is organized as follows:

▶ Asset-based statement exemplifying the theme/finding;

▶ Brief introduction broadly contextualizing and analyzing the theme/finding; and

▶ Survey respondent quotes and/or highest-ranked responses to support the theme/finding.

Again, this survey was issued by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) to ensure confidentiality, which is why names do not accompany quotes. The data shared within this section of the survey report is powerful, insightful and sometimes vulnerable. We are immensely grateful to the survey respondents who shared their experiences with us.

Note: For ranked questions, total percentages may exceed 100% because survey respondents were permitted to select multiple options.

IMAGE COURTESY OF CHASE CANTRELL

1. As it turns out, like everyone else, Black people want to freely belly laugh in public.

The desire to freely laugh in public spaces was interwoven throughout every single question of the survey. This theme was referenced in survey respondents' positive experiences of public joy, their negative experiences of being restricted or policed in public spaces and their desire for more public spaces where they can more fully express themselves. Related to the theme, but distinct, some incidents referencing laughter pertained to being laughed at in public situations, which created a sense of humiliation and exclusion.

Laughter is not a culturally specific expression and its multiple benefits, such as increasing dopamine and endorphins, boosting the immune system and relieving muscle tension, apply to all people. However, laughter is, in fact, tied to specific social, cultural and class norms, which dictate how certain expressions are judged or deemed inappropriate.

Within the context of Black history, the restriction of laughter is especially insidious and restrictive. Again, the laughing barrel—a practice where enslaved Black people and, later, Black people navigating the segregated South, were said to muffle their laughter in barrels to avoid reprimand or serious safety risks—is indeed emblematic of culturally specific judgement and restriction, which persist today. This is especially concerning because survey respondents most often associated laughter with broader ideas of self-expression and freedom, two central tenets of public spaces.

The following quotes exemplify the range of responses connected to this theme/finding:

"Being able to laugh loudly and express myself authentically in any space that I'm in without the worry of it being deemed disruptive, as I had heard often in my elementary public school days, or disorderly conduct, as I've heard in my early adulthood. As a child navigating the public school system in the South, I quickly learned that the person I could freely be in my grandmama's house was frowned upon in the classroom."

"A sense of joy, safety and belonging in public spaces would mean less double-consciousness, code-switching and whistling Vivaldi. It would mean being carefree, yet courteous. Laughing with a sense of ease. Standing and walking tall in all my Blackness. It would mean feeling it's acceptable to be walking and gathering as a group of Black men. It would mean lifting my gaze from the sidewalks to take in the world around me. It would mean knowing the next generation will experience safety, belonging, joy and so much more."

"Affordability, accessibility, freedom. Freedom to be, to laugh aloud, to disagree, to use my voice, share my opinion, have a choice. Freedom to walk or run at a pace I choose, to bring food and drink including booze. Being helped if and when needed. Being trusted. Being believed. Being perceived in the most positive light—perceiving others the same."

"In Algonquin park I was told to be quiet as I was laughing with friends. It felt targeted since others were not asked to be quiet."

"For me, this means not having to be so introspective about my appearance because I'm Black. This looks like having a great time, celebrating Black music, walking my dog without the need to put a responsibility politics hat on. This looks like laughing loudly and being able to go on runs in the evening without feeling like a potential threat to someone just because I'm Black."

"I like to wear bright colours and funky clothing! I love my hair and have worn it in many styles over the years. I love music, to laugh and sing and dance and play out loud! I love to explore new areas, to go on long walks in the city. When I go to new places I love to wander, to take photos and, if the opportunity presents itself, to strike up conversations with new people. Joining a pickup basketball game (or other sport I guess) with new people—joyful."

"Being accosted by the Toronto Police Service for laughing too loudly with friends in a car that was lawfully parked on the side of a main street. Being indefinitely caged in and surrounded by 12+ foot fences alongside multiple festival goers without access to an exit. This practice was facilitated by the Toronto Police at the summer Caribbean Carnival Festival unduly."

"For me, part of an important part of joyful experience is one that is shared. For me, joy is a collective, communal experience. I am often happy and content by myself and in small groups with friends and fam, but joy? Joy has an exuberance to it that can create a positive feedback loop with others. It's contagious laughter, an impromptu dance battle. Joy is physical; you feel it, you hear it, smell, touch & taste it!"

"Oh my goodness, I just want to be able to laugh loudly without being looked at or feeling like I need to look around to be sure I'm not offending anyone."

"Belonging in public spaces involves experiencing a positive emotional connection and a sense of comfort, security and acceptance within the community or environment. It's about feeling welcomed, respected and included, being able to laugh loudly and not afraid to be out late at night."

"It involves the freedom to express happiness, laughter and joy without feeling self-conscious or judged. It means being able to enjoy the company of friends and loved ones, engage in conversations and share moments of happiness openly in public spaces."

"Being able to walk around and explore without the feeling of judgement from others. Being able to laugh loudly without feeling like I'm disrupting the peace. Not an overbearing presence of law enforcement."

"Let us be loud, let us laugh and sing and make music - let us play!"

The following are a couple of related but distinct examples of laughter being referenced within the context of public humiliation and exclusion:

"But really anytime I find myself to be the only, or one of few, Black people in a room. I am always nervous and in my head. Back when I was in university, I went to Hamilton to visit my friend at her school and a bunch of us went to a house party and I was the only Black person there. A group of white guys walked by, pointed at me and said, "oh shit, look, a Black girl!" and laughed. My friends and I left."

"I have had bad experiences that are close to that here in Canada back in the 80s and 90s. Small town Canada is really racist. I have had a situation where a friend and I went to The Beer Store. A man inside made a comment that made several of my former high school classmates laugh. When I entered the store, he said "goodday coon!" and the people in line suddenly went silent and were pretending to have not seen it. They were fine with the racist joke when I was outside, but not with open racism right to my face when I entered the store."

IMAGE COURTESY OF NEIL "LOGIK" DONALDSON

2. Black people want to feel safe in public.

Everyone wants to feel safe in public spaces. Oftentimes, safety is narrowly framed as physical safety, when in fact there are other important dimensions to safety, including psychological and historical. Within the context of this survey, feelings of unsafety were often coupled with statements about interactions with police or other security figures as well as physical or violent abuse in the form of racial slurs. However, feelings of unsafety also extended towards the general public as a result of unwanted stares or attention in public spaces as well as feeling unwelcome or uncomfortable in a space.

The top three things that survey respondents did to increase a feeling of safety and belonging were related to modifying their own self-expression, including changing how they spoke or avoiding wearing certain items of clothing. Indeed, "sense of safety" was most often coded alongside "self-expression" in the qualitative data, demonstrating how important being able to confidently and authentically express oneself is to feeling safe and comfortable in public spaces.

A common thread when asked about negative experiences in public spaces was related to witnessing verbal or physical harassment of other Black people in public spaces. This aligns with the fifth most common thing Black people indicated doing to increase a sense of safety and belonging in public spaces, which was to remain silent when an unfair or racially motivated incident occurred for fear of being framed as aggressive or as a perpetrator of conflict.

The top design features that contribute to a sense of safety aligned with the design features mentioned most often in the qualitative data across multiple questions, which included: good lighting, well-maintained spaces, clean and accessible washrooms, green space and signage/plaques that showcase the history and positive contributions of Black people.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to this theme/finding:

"Just having the experience to fully be myself without any strange, disturbing, alarming looks from others."

"One thing that can be done to make public spaces safer is by making these spaces center around nature. When we are removed from nature, public spaces can feel like open air prisons."

"I smiled. I was able to sing or chant aloud. I was able to move to the music. It was a block party celebration on Lake Michigan. I felt completely safe. Food and beverages were affordable. People from all backgrounds and of all ages were present and enjoying themselves fully."

"Being able to let my kids play in a public space as loudly and joyfully as they would like while I enjoy a podcast with no concern for their well-being."

"It's hard to choose one thing as making public spaces safer and more joyful for Black people will require a multitude of solutions. I think having more Black people everywhere is important. It is important to have Black people working in policy, planning, design, and it is also important to have Black people out in the streets being able to exist freely and happily and feel safe to do so."

"A place that isn't too crowded, which allows an ample amount of 'body buffer' space for individuals, would be ideal. A location that is well-lit, with security features (i.e., emergency call boxes) and multiple egress options would also be optimal."

"I would like to navigate any neighbourhood regardless of my race, gender and sexuality. I would like to allow my younger loved ones to roam around without me and not feel nervous. I would wish I felt safer in predominantly white neighbourhoods. I prefer a diversified demographic due to such discomfort."

Survey respondents indicated that the top five most safe spaces were as follows:

- ▶ Libraries (96%);
- ▶ Outdoor fresh food markets and community gardens (94%);
- ▶ Recreation and community centres (94%);
- ▶ Museums and art galleries (91%); and
- ▶ Mom-and-pop shops, small coffee shops and bodegas (89%).

Survey respondents indicated that the top five least safe spaces were as follows:

- ▶ Buses and subways (49%);
- ▶ Streets, sidewalks and front stoops (34%);
- ▶ Urban hiking trails and other green spaces (27%);
- ▶ Malls, strip malls and plazas (22%); and
- ▶ Outdoor arts venues and concert stadiums (21%).

Survey respondents indicated that the factors that most contributed to their sense of safety were as follows:

▶ Being in public spaces with other Black people or a diverse demographic (88%);

▶ Being in public spaces with good lighting and sight lines (87%);

▶ Being in spaces where a staff person or community member warmly greets visitors (74%);

▶ Being in spaces where Black history and contributions are recognized through statues, plaques and place names (70%); and

▶ Being in public spaces that clearly convey expectations for conduct and values with respect to sharing the space with others (65%).

Survey respondents indicated that the factors that most contributed to their sense of unsafety were as follows:

▶ Being in public spaces where you are on the receiving end of unwelcoming glances and/or overt unwelcoming comments (92%);

▶ Being in public spaces where a Black person has been harmed or where the space is rumoured to be unsafe for Black people (91%);

▶ Being in public spaces that tolerate gender-based harassment, transphobia and/or homophobia (74%);

▶ Being the only Black person or group in a public space (74%); and

▶ Being in public spaces where Black history and contributions are unrecognized or have been erased due to neighbourhood change (62%).

Survey respondents indicated that the actions they took to increase their sense of safety and belonging were as follows:

▶ Trying to behave in an extra respectable or careful fashion to counter anti-Black stereotypes and/or redeem the entire Black race (73%);

▶ Changing the way they spoke to individuals outside of their racial or local community to fit in or be listened to (66%);

▶ Avoiding wearing a piece of clothing that may be considered racially stereotypical or threatening (61%);

▶ Missing out on a public space activity or event that they felt was not intended for them or members of the Black community (59%); and

▶ Remaining silent when an unfair or racially motivated incident occurred for fear of being framed as aggressive or as a perpetrator of conflict (53%).

Survey respondents indicated that the design features that most increased their sense of safety were as follows:

▶ Clean facilities, such as public washrooms with a regular maintenance schedule, trash cans and sanitary supplies (85%);

▶ Green space: street trees, gardens and flowers (84%);

▶ Good lighting and clear sight lines that contribute to visibility within, and outside of, specific public spaces/places (84%);

▶ Comfortable seating (79%); and

▶ Spaces that celebrate the contributions of Black people (79%).

Also, a large number of survey respondents framed safety concerns and positive experiences around parenting and the well-being of their children. Many positive public space experiences that respondents wrote about centred around their children's enjoyment of a space, feeling safe or comfortable with their children being in a public space with other kids, or witnessing children enjoying themselves through play and laughter. Conversely, some negative experiences people reported were people touching their children's hair or offering unsolicited parenting advice. Positive experiences were also often about spending time with family in public spaces or seeing other families (often Black families) in public spaces, which helped instill a sense of comfort and ease.

Here are a few examples of survey respondent experiences:

"When my kids and I moved to a new neighbourhood we visited the local park and the kids there were welcoming to my kids, leading to them playing with each other. These types of interactions have been replicated at local recreation centres and during summer camps etc. What is most important to me is that my children feel a level of entitlement to being in public spaces and feeling a sense of belonging because they were born here. As much as they have ties to our ancestral country of origin (in our case Jamaica) they were not born there."

"Strangers commenting on my children's behaviour or dress, making assumptions on my abilities and knowledge as a parent and imposing their racist or biased views. For example, being told to put gloves on my kids because 'in Canada it gets cold' as if I am not a Canadian and not capable of caring for my own children."

"Freedom for my children to not feel like being quiet, inhibited and compliant is required even while other children who are part of the majority may not. A place to not have to represent my entire race but still be fully embraced and respected in my Blackness."

"I think the spaces where I have the most positive experiences have been at the Science Centre and AGO where my children were encouraged to participate in tactile activities. Also, in a public square in Paris where the City funded a community group that does a pop-up play centre outdoors. This included books/graphic novels, kid-sized games like Jenga/Connect 4, building toys and balls. It ran for four hours and families poured into the square from surrounding buildings. It would be great to have that sort of kid-focused street activities."

"I was at the Belle Isle Park last year and visited a trail that I had never seen. As I navigated that trail, I ran across other really pleasant visitors (all races). I was so happy to see Black families hiking and exploring the beautiful scenery with my family. I felt safe, happy and at peace."

IMAGES COURTESY OF CRAIG WELLINGTON, DUG CLAXTON, ELI MADAYAG BAWUAH

3. Black people want to experience mental wellness and peace in public.

Survey respondents indicated that they would like to relax their shoulders and be more present when navigating public spaces. Although many respondents suggested that public spaces like parks, good public transit, bike lanes, trails and plazas facilitated both individual and collective experiences that they deeply value, they indicated that they were not experiencing full health and mental health benefits. As an example of this imbalance, survey respondents indicated that they only access public spaces they are familiar with and avoid the use of particular public spaces at certain times or if other Black people are not present. Also, there was a sense of resignation about bad experiences, with survey respondents noting that to enjoy public spaces they needed to let unpleasant comments and behaviours roll off their backs, or show that they were strong and resilient and could handle the discrimination.

Survey respondents indicated that they could let their guards down and be less vigilant if municipalities and other public space owners and operators assumed responsibility for creating spaces where no group that faces disproportionate risks or exclusion in public spaces, whether women, racialized individuals or individuals from the 2SLGBTQ+ community, had to protect themselves by being hypervigilant or extra resilient. A top suggestion for addressing this issue was to clearly convey expectations for conduct and values with respect to sharing the space with others. This aligns with another recurring survey respondent suggestion related to the institution of more public space education programs that highlight the ways Black people and other groups have been historically discriminated against and excluded in public spaces; demonstrate the impact of microaggressions; and incorporate awareness campaigns pertaining to sharing space with others.

Of those that directly responded to the question, 54% of respondents in the qualitative data said that, overall, their experiences in public space enhanced their mental health; 24% said their experiences were harmful to their mental health; 16% said their experiences both enhanced and harmed their mental health; while 5% remained neutral or indicated their mental health was neither enhanced nor harmed.

Survey respondents who said public spaces enhanced their mental health often noted going for walks or hikes, bike rides and visiting green spaces as activities that helped boost their mood or helped them relax. However, again, it's important to note that even when people indicated public spaces were largely good for their mental health, some of them qualified that by saying that it was because they were vigilant about where they went or because they let negative experiences roll off their back.

A common theme related to public spaces supporting good mental health was having a shared experience with another person or a group of people—this could be something as small as a friendly interaction with another person in a park or experiencing music or art with a crowd of people. The combination of place, people and interactions (both formal and informal) worked together to create positive mental health outcomes.

Factors that contribute to Black people's hypervigilance in public spaces are as follows:

▶ Being in public spaces where they are on the receiving end of unwelcoming glances and/or overt unwelcoming comments (92%);

▶ Being in public spaces where a Black person has been harmed or where the space is rumoured to be unsafe for Black people (91%);

▶ Being in public spaces that tolerate gender-based harassment, transphobia and/or homophobia (74%);

▶ Being the only Black person or group in a public space (74%); and

▶ Being in public spaces where Black history and contributions are unrecognized or have been erased due to neighbourhood change (62%).

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to this theme/finding:

"The challenge to my mental health/well-being is never knowing when the next negative experience is going to happen and just how devastating it will be and my system being on guard seemingly permanently."

"They have harmed my mental well-being. As a child having people cross the street to avoid me, staring, and in one case threatening me messed with my view of the world and myself. As an adult, having to be aware that people fear me and can react in ways that could lead to my arrest or injury or death still messes with my mental health. Also, just constantly feeling out of place and feeling people's hostility makes me angry. You can only take so much negative treatment before you lose it, and I get a steady diet of negative treatment."

"I was in the same park another day and it was an eclipse. Another park goer, white female, lent me her eclipse glasses so that I could see it. We connected over the natural things that happen in this universe we live in; those are my kind of connections that support my mental health."

"Public spaces definitely help my mental health, no question. If I need to think, go for a walk. Need inspiration, go for a walk (somewhere new). Feeling stuck, go for a walk. I ride my bike everywhere it gets me where I need to be."

"Most public spaces I enjoy are green or peaceful in some way which are both good for my mental health and well-being."

"When navigating public spaces as a Black person, you learn to alter who you are in order to experience and enjoy public spaces. It's exhausting but it hasn't harmed my mental health."

"Most of the experiences enhanced my mental health as it taught me to be more resilient. I also learned how to spot genuine connections and understanding who honestly wants you in their space."

IMAGE COURTESY OF RITCHIE HARRISON & CLARINDA BARNETT-HARRISON

4. Black people want to express their cultural swagger and perspectives in public.

Self-expression, similar to laughter, was significant across all survey questions. Survey respondents frequently expressed a desire to have their essential humanity recognized and to have the ability to just be their whole self, without fear of judgement, disparaging looks or policing.

They specifically highlighted the freedom to: wear culturally inspired or natural hairstyles; adorn themselves with brightly coloured clothing and "bling;" be loud; and, again, to belly laugh. Freedom of expression also included being able to voice contrary opinions without being labelled as a "threat" or "angry."

Self-expression was also largely tied to restriction. Numerous survey respondents indicated that they modified their clothing, code-switched and changed their hairstyles or style of dress to mitigate alienation, reduce safety risks and access opportunities. Many of the survey respondents' personal stories and reflections illustrate the evidence-based impacts of not being able to freely express oneself in ways that are self-affirming, while being respectful to others. These impacts include cultural bereavement, anxiety and a diminished sense of identity. Conversely, their responses also point to positive impacts and demonstrate an appreciation for experiences that foster self-expression.

Interestingly, despite a large number of survey respondents indicating that they restricted their self-expression—again, to mitigate risk of harm, alienation and barriers to opportunities—in the following ways (listed in order of occurrence):

▶ Being hypervigilant in presenting as respectable and/or countering anti-Black stereotypes in an effort to redeem the entire Black race (73%);

▶ Changing their speech when communicating with individuals outside of their racial or local community, in order to fit in or be listened to (66%);

▶ Avoiding wearing a piece of clothing that may be considered racially stereotypical or threatening (61%); and

▶ Remaining silent when an unfair or racially motivated incident occurred, for fear of being framed as aggressive or perceived as a perpetrator of conflict (53%).

They widely opted to unpack the definition and positive experiences of self-expression.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify this latter finding, clarifying and focusing on the positive elements related to this theme:

"Wearing whatever political activism shirt I want without fear of repercussions. Wearing my dreads in a fun and unique style without repercussions."

"Being in a community of Black people, allies and supporters where the focus is on celebrating through music, food and fun, rather than a continuing conversation about our suffering. Balance the energy. To be able to wear the bold designs of Black creators without side-eyes or a comment about the 'costume.' To be free to laugh, move and play as an adult Black woman."

"Attitudes need to adjust to accepting and welcoming the fact that Black people are communal and hype (expressive), we enjoy music and laughter and should be able to enjoy public spaces without white people policing us."

"Expressing myself through dance in public along the waterfront and in open green spaces or parks without interrogation and being smiled at in general in public or during my public dance expressions."

"It feels liberating to be able to express who I am. It feels like I am self-actualized when I can travel where I want to be, it feels so joyful that I can relax and not feel any anxiety. It feels like my body and mind can rest, which allows me to live a positive and a fulfilling life."

IMAGE COURTESY OF NICOLE DONAWA WALDRON

5. Black people would like a healthy level of acknowledgement in public.

Survey respondents reported experiencing either hypervisibility—excessive attention or scrutiny—in public or invisibility—being overlooked, disregarded and unheard—in public. Within the context of hypervisibility, survey respondents indicated that they were frequently on the receiving end of unwelcome glances or overtly hostile comments in public spaces. Indeed, aside from overt forms of verbal harassment and physical violence or police interactions—which were commonly discussed—respondents articulated strongly in the qualitative data that unwanted attention in the form of stares, glances or comments was fundamental in making them feel unsafe, unwelcome or uncomfortable in public spaces. A common example given was being asked why they were in a particular public space by ordinary people or being singled out by security guards or shopkeepers because they were Black.

In terms of invisibility, having a staff person and fellow attendees in public spaces smile at, greet, extend a compliment or acknowledge one's presence in a routine and friendly manner significantly increased survey respondents' sense of safety and belonging. These simple gestures ranked as an extremely high safety indicator in a couple of the open-ended qualitative questions. Regrettably, a number of survey respondents noted negative public space experiences such as people avoiding eye contact, not greeting them while greeting others, crossing the street to keep their distance and refusing to have any skin-to-skin contact such as when placing change in their hands following a transaction.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to hypervisibility and invisibility:

"I constantly feel like I'm being watched, evaluated and found lacking by colleagues. And because there are so few Black Americans where I live, or even any other Black people period, I feel isolated."

"The most negative experience I've had in a public space was feeling like I was being watched and/or having all of my behaviours shamed (e.g., being told 'everything you're doing is wrong')."

"Going to a gas station for snacks in a VERY white, sundown town kind of area. Being followed. I wasn't sure if they were following me because they thought I was a threat or to be a threat themselves. I remember immediately walking in and knowing that I needed to get out but also knowing that I couldn't just run out… It was just terrifying."

"Being able to walk into certain stores and not be followed around. Being able to discuss what is bothering me without being made to sound angry or ungrateful."

"I feel most free when I am not worrying about if someone is watching me and my behaviours. Often, I may get a sense that I am being judged on whether or not I offer enough value to the space, if I fit in based on any number of my physical characteristics. I feel most free when that thought doesn't even cross my mind."

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to being positively acknowledged by others:

"I feel a sense of joy, safety and belonging in a public space when I feel I have been CONSIDERED. And when I feel everyone is being considered. I feel safe when the people behind an event or space have made it clear that all are welcome. And I am more inclined to genuinely feel safe when I know the committee who has curated said public space reflects the diversity of the people who will occupy the space. When I feel that my Blackness and my womanhood (and everything that comes with both) have been considered, THEN the whole of who I am feels safe to come out. THEN I laugh with ease. I dance. I wear whatever I want. I connect. I share."

"When I first started travelling to new cities for work, people of all races would say good morning or ask if they could help me with directions when I looked lost. This immediately made me feel safer and like I belong. In places where this happened, I tended to go on more walks and explore parks and galleries more."

"Smiling at a stranger on the street as I ride by on my bike and having them be surprised and smile back without thinking."

"People say good morning to me when I walk to work in the morning and they smile!"

"Once, a small group of white people were bullying me in a public setting and a small group of other white people spoke up on my behalf. It was more than allyship. I felt like they really saw my humanity and respected my right to feel belonging and ease in the space."

"I cried on the subway when I was sad one day and a Black woman offered to hug me. I accidentally went to the wrong house and a white man offered to drive me to the correct house. In both instances kind gestures made me happy. Also in nature, people tend to smile and greet each other, unlike in urban environments."

Another aspect of acknowledgement that emerged was less about people, in terms of interpersonal relationships, and more about the place itself, the built environment. A significant number of survey respondents indicated that they wanted to see more depictions of Black people's place-based contributions, culturally significant sites and overall positivity and beauty within Black communities.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to being positively acknowledged in the built environment:

"We can talk about and commemorate the pain, but also focus on the joy, the pride and the importance of what we've brought to the country and culture."

"Be sure that all promotional materials have diversity in them. Seeing non-white bodies, seeing bodies of varying abilities, seeing other languages written gives me a level of security and comfort."

"This feeling is represented in the full expression of Black individuals and Black culture within public spaces (not relegated to alleys, parking lots and unused areas) in a way that is safe, uplifting and allows people to feel joy."

Finally, when it comes to acknowledgement, some survey respondents resisted notions of being acknowledged that might be insincere or of doing the labour of identifying what suitable recognition and representation might look like. There was sometimes a sense of frustration and fatigue in contemplating what basic decency and public acknowledgement would look like, paired with the inclination to instead lean entirely into self-sufficiency and place-based organizing, as exemplified in this response:

"I almost feel like this question should be the burden of the non-Black person to fix. But, quite honestly, I don't know really. I feel like at this point I'm beginning to see more and more Black people create our own spaces specific to our people. I'm not sure we have a desire to be in spaces we know aren't celebrated anymore. We have our own public spaces, our own museums, our own dance halls, barbershops, hair salons, our own farmers markets, etc. We don't need to be in the spaces of others. We're good on that now."

IMAGES COURTESY OF JILL ANDREW, CLARINDA BARNETT-HARRISON, BRENT SMITH-PHOTOGRAPHER AR

IMAGE COURTESY OF KARLYN PERCIL

6. Black people would like to access more opportunities in public.

From connecting to community members, job opportunities and pockets of respite, public spaces provide all of us with numerous opportunities. Alarmingly, when asked if they'd ever missed out on an economic or educational opportunity due to discomfort, 37% of respondents said they had.

They provided specifics which fell into the following key reasons: not attending certain universities for fear of being othered; feeling the burden of tokenization at work; limited networking opportunities due to not feeling comfortable/welcome in white-dominated spaces; not applying for certain jobs or missing out on jobs; feeling uncomfortable at majority white conferences/work events; feeling unwelcome or invisible; and not going places due to feeling uncomfortable on transit or with driving at night. This aligns with qualitative responses related to survey respondents' most negative public space experiences, which included limited use and avoidance of specific spaces. Thus, if they had a negative experience in a particular public space or, conversely, were unfamiliar with a space and feared feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, they would opt to miss out on the opportunity occurring in said spaces.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to limited access to opportunities in public:

"Many times, I have to work up the courage and energy to be in unfriendly public spaces. More often than not I opt out of going. The constancy of being surveilled all the time is tiring and emotionally exhausting. This is why I choose to stay at home most of the time."

"After high school my dream college was Northern Michigan University (NMU). It specializes in environmental sciences and engineering. This university is a PWI and located in rural Michigan. During my sophomore year an acquaintance who'd graduated before me and was attending NMU conveyed their feelings of unease, being othered due to their hair, skin colour and questions on why a person from Detroit would come to that university. Suffice to say as a young person growing up in a predominantly Black community, I did not attend NMU. Now, as an adult that frequents rural northern Michigan, I know I made the right decision, for my safety and mental well-being."

"I wanted to attend a ULI (Urban Land Institute) event but decided to no longer attend as, at events that I had attended previously, I was the only Black woman and would frequently get stares; no one would want to speak or interact with me. And if I didn't speak the 'language,' they would correct me mid-sentence, making me feel inferior. Events are typically held at meeting centres or outdoors."

"I've missed many in-person City Townhall meetings to speak out on the conditions of my community being under-resourced due to the fact that previous Black people who had gone to the meeting and spoke out were most times kicked out, invalidated and, in some cases, arrested."

Another aspect within this theme that survey respondents prioritized was having the opportunity to shape public spaces:

"If you are going to do something for my good, speak with me, engage meaningfully and give me the opportunity to be part of the creation, should I like to participate."

"Ask Black people what they'd like to see, invite them to the table and design space and policy that reflect what is being asked."

"Hire more Black and/or Indigenous Landscape Architects, Artists and Urban Designers to guide design and redesign of public spaces."

IMAGE COURTESY OF NICOLE ANATOL

7. Black people want belonging, joy and safety to be built into policy and public spaces.

Survey respondents had very clear ideas about the types of policy-related approaches and design interventions that are required for enhancing their experiences in the built environment. Policy-related approaches referenced include: establishing strategic priorities to address historical place-based inequities that have resulted in fewer trees and green spaces in Black (and racialized) communities; examining biases in noise by-laws; and addressing overpolicing at public events and in neighbourhoods with large Black demographics. Aligned with the freedom of expression data, respondents also wanted to ensure that policies are flexible enough to facilitate culturally responsive programming and activities in public spaces such as large, intergenerational cookouts and sidewalk pop-up events and small businesses.

In terms of design interventions, survey respondents championed tangible representations of Black presence such as murals and the marking of culturally significant sites in public spaces. There were also a number of pragmatic priorities such as keeping sites well-maintained and well-lit and providing comfortable seating, gender-neutral washrooms and wayfinding. Aligned with safety-related data, there was also a lot of emphasis placed on both policies and design interventions related to how spaces were regulated, such as through the use of cameras. Preventing overcrowding through both policy and design was also referenced as a priority.

The following quotes—some of which have been taken from longer stories and anecdotes—exemplify the range of responses connected to policy and public space design:

"Less signs about by-laws (no noise, no skateboarding, no tents...) and more signs/art about NO BIGOTRY tolerated in parks and plazas. More art and imagery of Black people so we are VISIBLE; Tackling misogyny and homophobia in Black neighbourhoods too—because Black queer/trans people have always existed and Black women deserve safety!!; Policy and FUNDING for more and better green spaces, plazas & streets in Black neighbourhoods; Gentle lighting and natural community surveillance—NOT COPS."

"I ride a bike so having accessible parking for bikes is a huge plus."

"Accessibility; culturally competent designs; clean washrooms for all genders; signage that's welcoming of nursing mothers; laughing children; creative spaces that youth can reimagine themselves; art that pays homage to the keepers of the land and educates about the treaties that govern the land the space is on. Fresh water and lots of plants and accessible seating and/or resting areas for all."

"Upgrade areas where we live, work and play with streetscaping that is clean and pleasant with greenery; areas to sit for older people and those with mobility issues; and art reflecting Black history, culture and joy."

"Better amenities including green space, cultural spaces and public transit access."

"Invest in the sustainability of more public spaces. White folks left suburbs and public pools and there hasn't been investment in them since; it's especially surprising given the number of Black people/children that we lose to drownings. Why are there more public parks in white neighbourhoods than in Black ones? Why are Black communities absent of sidewalks but have more liquor stores compared to white neighbourhoods? Finally investing in public spaces has implications for home values, with Black homeowners again getting the short end of the stick."

"Design: more seating, more sightlines, wayfinding signage that reinforces BIPOC presence. Policy: less surveillance, more investment in public spaces in our segregated neighbourhoods."

"Black and First Nations art in the form of murals, paving colours and patterns; sculptures at a very large scale; way more use of curved and organic features and forms; more natural species of flowers, shrubs, trees, grasses; the availability of safe public toilets and their specific design in all of our public parks and spaces."

"Commemorate more Black histories. Design more parks in historical Black neighbourhoods, or areas tied to Black histories with a theme that honours Black culture and history. More Black public art!"

"Regular maintenance so the spaces don't look run-down and regular engagement programs so people feel that it is utilized at different times of day. Make them multi-use with activities that cater to BIPOC interests."

"Include more visible art, colour, poems and contributions of Black folks—when I'm walking a trail and I come across a plaque sharing Dionne Brand's work I walk taller and I'm inspired by the many many contributions. More photos shared online of Black people enjoying spaces—and including the contributions of Black folks through policy and design and sharing this knowledge will increase multiple senses of psychological and cultural safety for Black people."

"I think making Black people key stakeholders in the Design Process is required to make spaces safer and more joyful. We must be present at the outset of every project design phase and not just expected to be present after the project design is complete. We cannot be a meaningful part of something that we did not design. Second, I think that we must be permanent fixtures in the feedback loop of designed spaces. Having our voices intentionally sought after for feedback is important to test the design of space and continue shaping space."

"Address systemic racism and promote equity and inclusion in both design and policy. Incorporate principles of anti-racism into urban planning and design to ensure that public spaces are accessible, welcoming and safe for people of all racial backgrounds. Involve Black people, as well as people of all racial backgrounds, communities of inclusion, Indigenous Peoples and stakeholders in the planning, design and management of public spaces to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed. This can help build trust, foster collaboration and promote ownership of public spaces among communities."

IMAGE COURTESY OF ORLANDO BAILEY

TRANSLATING THE DATA
Grounding Survey Findings in Public Places
This section is written by Jay Pitter, Professor L. Anders Sandberg and Aaron Joseph

TRANSLATING THE DATA
Grounding Survey Findings in Public Places

Translating survey findings into tangible built environment interventions is a critical next step for the BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY. In order to demonstrate how this can be done, Jay Pitter Placemaking partnered with students from York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change. Using select park and green space related data from the survey, students explored practical interventions intended to enhance specific public spaces for the Black community (as well as for wider community use).

Students engaged in this translation process were enrolled in the Environmental Planning course (ENVS6131) developed and taught by Professor L. Anders Sandberg. The course is underpinned by the principle that environmental planning is not merely a technocratic activity but is also shaped by historical context and political and economic constraints. One concept relevant to the data the students were using is green gentrification, where parks and green spaces both shape and are shaped by political power and economic privilege. Additionally, the students were encouraged to think of planning as "all our relations' deliberations," an Indigenous concept that encourages communication, interaction and empowerment of all actors in the planning process, including racialized and marginalized groups and non-human actors.

The course proceeded by reviewing literature that explored green cities, injustice and sacred civics informed by Indigenous philosophies. Other relevant topics included Black perspectives on environmental planning, critical disability and planning and the position of non-human actors, such as flora and fauna, in planning practice. This included a consideration of the role of invasive species as foes, there to be eradicated, but also their position as legitimate and respected actors and potential friends that can be of help in ecological restoration. These topics all aimed to incorporate the voices of those seldom listened to in the planning process. The students were then divided into four small groups and assigned site locations relatively close to the York University campus, which is located in Toronto, Canada.

All four groups went on site visits to perform site observations, to gather found objects and to take photos. They also conducted research focused on the site's Indigeneity, current demographics and governing land use-related policies. They then identified specific BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC SURVEY data they were most interested in translating. **A few examples include:**

> ▶ Survey respondents indicated that urban hiking trails and outdoor sports fields were among the least safe public spaces (ranked 9/13 and 12/13, respectively), yet both the Mount Dennis and Ajax teams observed that these spaces were still heavily used by Black residents. This prompted redesigns that included safer pedestrian crossings, increased lighting and the reintroduction of community-specific amenities like public soccer fields.

► Survey respondents indicated that green spaces with trees, gardens and flowers were one of the top five design features that contributed to feelings of safety and wellness, which directly shaped the Ajax group's decision to install hibiscus flower beds and informed the Mount Dennis group's nature stewardship recommendations.

► Survey respondents indicated that clearly articulated expectations for conduct and shared use ranked among the top five safety features, which inspired revised public space signage recommendations in all briefs—from Ajax's affirmation of large family gatherings to Firgrove Park's Afrofuturist wayfinding systems.

Understanding the importance of responding to the rules regulating public spaces, each of the student teams grounded their design interventions in formal plans and policy frameworks, including:

► The Firgrove Park group rooted their work in the Jane-Finch Initiative: Parks and Public Realm Master Plan, as outlined in the City of Toronto's official planning materials, which details long-term strategies for greening, trail expansion and culturally grounded placemaking in the city's northwest.

► The Mount Dennis group referenced the City of Toronto's Mount Dennis Secondary Plan, which explicitly calls for the protection of Black-owned businesses and intensifying social equity outcomes through public realm improvements.

► The Ajax group engaged By-law Number 23-2022: A By-law to Regulate and Control the Use of Parks and Park Buildings (Town of Ajax), identifying its vague behavioural clauses as barriers to Black joy and proposing signage and cultural accommodations to rectify those exclusions.

► The York University—Stong Pond group grounded their intervention in the York University Secondary Plan and the City of Toronto's Official Plan, addressing stormwater, accessibility and public realm design. Also, they critically engaged York's framework addressing anti-Black racism, noting a growth opportunity when it comes to incorporating powerful place-based strategies for creating belonging.

All of this information was incorporated into a design brief template developed by Jay Pitter Placemaking and shared with designers at Perkins&Will, who created simple renderings and sketches. All collaborators contributed to final placemaking interventions, which were presented at the Perkins&Will downtown Toronto studio. The following site summaries are not comprehensive; they are high-level examples of this translation process. Further knowledge translation will continue and be published beyond this survey report milestone.

Rendering/Sketch: EUC Students & Perkins&Will

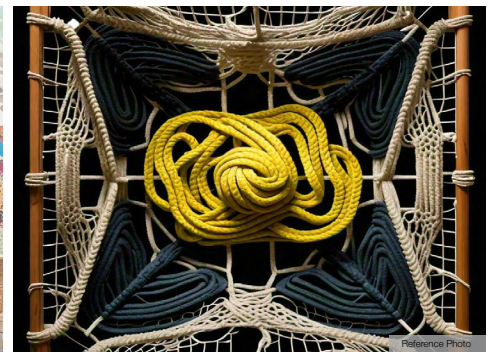Site Photo

Site Photo

Site Photo

Located in Toronto's Mount Dennis neighbourhood, Eglinton Flats is a sports-focused park that includes multiple outdoor recreational amenities in a large space that abuts the Humber River. The proposed design for Eglinton Flats seeks to open up gated amenities and seating while creating safer access to green spaces, which would make the park more accessible to Black people, other racialized people and/or low-income residents.

Specific design interventions include, but are not limited to:

- » Altering policies that currently prohibit barbecues to allow for their use and installing designated barbecue areas to facilitate family and community gatherings around food;

- » Transforming parts of the current parking lot area into spaces that can host community events, markets and seasonal activities;

- » Replacing current signs that emphasize what is not allowed in the park with signs that encourage park use and highlight available amenities and activities in the park;

- » Implementing traffic-calming techniques and tactile painting at the crossing between Fergy Brown Park and Eglinton Flats to promote safe access and enhanced connectivity;

- » Removing the locked seating area to create more accessibility and adding more seating along trails to enhance both comfort and accessibility.

BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC

Translating the Data to Ajax

Rendering/Sketch: EUC Students & Perkins&Will

Reference Photo

Presentation Collage

Reference Photo

Located in the town of Ajax's Audley North neighbourhood, Imagination Park is a large natural space that sits within the Carruthers Creek watershed. The proposed design is inspired by weaving patterns found in many African textiles, extending to weaving patterns in Black, braided hairstyles. This design inspiration also aligns with the cultural expressions and practices of numerous ethnic and racial groups, including Indigenous and South Asian communities (of which the latter is a significant demographic in the area). Also, the site lacked placemaking prompts and clear activity zones. Accordingly, this design addresses these issues, proposing flexible, year-round interventions.

Specific design interventions include, but are not limited to:

» Designing shade structures and seating areas that use woven designs as an homage to traditional artistic practices from African cultures, fostering a sense of belonging and safety;

» Including more flower gardens in the park, specifically hibiscus flowers, which are common in Jamaica (a large portion of Ajax's Black community is of Jamaican origin);

» Improving signage and maintenance of trail systems in the park to ensure they feel safe and are accessible so more people can appreciate the mental health benefits of walking/rolling in nature;

» Installing more LED lighting along walking trails and perimeter streets to enhance safety and supplementing/replacing the outdated fluorescent street lights around the park's perimeter.

Survey Report:
BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC
Translating the Data to York University—Stong Pond

Rendering/Sketch: EUC Students & Perkins&Will

Site Photo

Reference Photo

Reference Photo
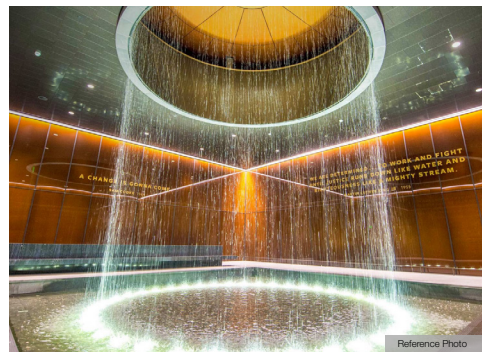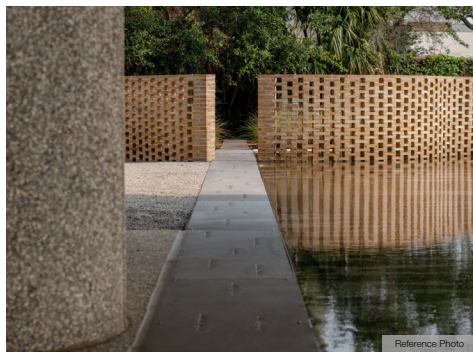
Located on Toronto's York University campus, Stong Pond is a green space with a history as farmland that is now open for public use and to help manage stormwater. The proposed design for Stong Pond is grounded in installing design interventions that respond to findings pertaining to anti-Black racism on campus and an audit that indicated numerous opportunities for more explicit informal placemaking activities. This, in turn, will help create a space that is welcoming to people of all racial groups as well as to women, the 2SLGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities.

Specific design interventions include, but are not limited to:

» Improving the quality of the trails around the pond for greater accessibility and safety, and adding warm-toned, ground-level lighting to minimize disruption to wildlife;

» Revitalizing and regularly maintaining the Robotics Pavilion (abandoned by its original users) with garbage cans, clearly posted guidelines for use and the possibility for cultural activities and arts-making;

» Installing a community garden inspired by the region's agricultural heritage, which includes the Wendat's Three Sisters crops, the Hoover family's farming history and contributions from recent local immigrants, including recent Black immigrants. The garden could also harbour some recognition of the Wendat's support for the enslaved Black people who sought refuge in Canada through the Underground Railway.

The background information for this site is based partly on a decades-long participatory research project called the Alternative Campus Tour, conceived by Professor L. Anders Sandberg. Reference the York University Alternative Campus Tour (https://alternativecampustour.info.yorku.ca) for information on the function and history of the site.

Rendering/Sketch: EUC Students & Perkins&Will

Site Map

Online Reference Rendering/Sketch

Reference Photo

Located in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood, Firgrove Park features several recreational amenities, including the Firgrove Dreams Big outdoor basketball courts, which link the neighbourhood to the African diaspora through similar basketball courts across Africa. The proposed design responds to the need for multifunctional spaces that can support activities for all ages and also builds on this newly launched basketball court. The design is inspired by Afrofuturism, which seeks to transform public spaces into places that celebrate Black cultural heritage while reimagining a future where Black communities can thrive.

Specific design interventions include, but are not limited to:

» Creating a "Dream Warriors Garden" which acts as a hub of multigenerational activity, including children's nature and gardening programs, a community orchard and opportunities for elders to share knowledge;

» Designating a space for, and amending policies to allow, a weekend community marketplace inspired by African and Caribbean markets where local vendors can sell food and handmade crafts;

» Adding sculptural, warm lighting and wayfinding to the park that is designed to draw on African art and culture and foster a sense of both safety and belonging;

» Including signage within the garden referencing African patterns;

» Including digital "soundwave icons" throughout the park that, through a smartphone app, create an interactive element for people to learn about the cultural history of the area as told by neighbourhood residents.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Listen, some of the findings in this survey are not radical. People of all identities want to travel through well-lit pathways and have access to green spaces. A lot of the survey respondent feedback wasn't culturally specific at all; many priorities and aspirations, such as well-maintained spaces, wayfinding markers and safe street infrastructure, are simply good design practice and could be considered mundane. What's radical is that survey respondents face so many challenges to accessing these design approaches and that they need to articulate their desires for safety and belonging when navigating public spaces. BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC should be far easier than it currently is.

This isn't to suggest that, in the face of these challenges, Black people's public space experiences aren't extraordinarily fulfilling and joyful. Black cultures—from streetwear to contemporary dialect to placemaking rituals—which have significantly shaped the character and rituals of public space, particularly in cities, are inherently expressive, communal and creative. It's just that there are far too many challenges—hypervigilance, hyper-resilience, inadequate infrastructure, etc.—required to access the full benefits and promise of public spaces.

Moreover, these challenges are, quite literally, by design (and policy) and have been long-standing. The historical deep dive, dating all the way back to auction block and plantation sites, shows that restrictions, such as the ability to simply laugh aloud, still persist today. This correlation between historical discrimination and contemporary challenges extends to survey respondents' stories and comments related to police profiling, poor street infrastructure and lack of green space access. These and other findings can be directly traced to "slave" catching, redlining, segregation and other place-based policies that either distinctly target Black people or disproportionately impact Black people.

The pre-research, which brought together data across public space topics such as homelessness, parks and green space, public transportation, cycling and more, was unprecedented. Also, employing an intersectional lens that specifically sought to analyze data on Black people who are also women, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and/or disabled marks another unconventional approach within this project. It should be noted that previous research did not, in fact, contain substantial data specifically on Black 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, Black women or Black disabled people, which is a gap, given that Black people living at the intersection of these identities face escalated public space barriers and risks.

Regrettably, despite specifically seeking to engage Black people living at these intersections, we did not gather as much data from self-identified Black 2SLGBTQ+ individuals or from Black disabled people as desired. While specifically referenced and carefully considered in this survey, it is important to acknowledge that a broader range of perspectives would have been ideal.

In addition to intentionally making these connections and striving to respectfully recognize Black identities previously omitted from mainstream and even Black-focused research, another radical aspect of this work was creating a safe(r) space for vulnerability. Both the content and length of the personal stories shared were unexpected, given today's attention economy and the emotional labour inherent in revisiting difficult experiences. We were also moved by the manifold references to mental health, which isn't explicitly highlighted enough when discussing safety, belonging and joy in public spaces. It's one thing to report on the experiences of Black people or, for that matter, any group of people that experiences heightened distress or alienation in public spaces, but rarely do we ask: How do particular fears or situations impact their mental wellness? What are the residual impacts on individuals and communities? How do we actively heal? I got the sense that, for some survey respondents, the space to share their stories—both challenging and positive—was a part of the healing process.

They wrote, "Thank you so much for asking this question!" and "Continue the work of this survey," and indicated that surveys such as this one contributed to change because the only way forward is to "get out and ask us." I also got the sense that kind public space encounters were also healing. Along with policy, design and programming, the impact of everyday kindness was clearly an important factor shaping survey respondents' experiences in public.

Finally, when asked to describe a great public space, survey respondents indicated that it was: a space where people are consulted on the design, policy and programming; a space that is accessible (physically, economically and socially) and where there is good wayfinding, lighting and comfortable seating; a space where there are trees, flowers and food gardens; a space where there is a connection to water; a space where a diverse range of stories are told and histories are celebrated; a space where there is great music and even better food; a space where safety is established through community care and engagement rather than the criminalization of people; a space where generations can interact with each other; a space that doesn't judge or limit healthy, playful and audacious self-expression; a space that is well-maintained and stewarded by everyone; a space where Blackness isn't narrowly defined; and a space where everyone is safe, welcome and celebrated.

I wasn't particularly surprised by the responses to the question above but I was encouraged by the number and depth of responses we received. Clearly, their recommendations would mitigate current challenges of BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC and are concurrently aligned with how the vast majority of individuals of all races, genders, abilities and other identities would describe a great public space. While each of us experiences public spaces differently as individuals, and some communities collectively face disproportionate challenges and fraught histories, it's clear that we have some shared public space values and aspirations.

STOLEN FROM AFRICA

Jay Pitter Placemaking

jaypitter.com