

## Fighting For A Future: Millennials Tackle Criminal Justice Reform In Dallas, TX

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May 2016

*In late 2015, Generation Progress convened Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtables in four American cities: Columbia, SC; Baltimore, MD; Phoenix, AZ; and Dallas, TX. This is one of four columns Generation Progress will issue on the Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtable series. These columns will culminate with the release of a full-length report that discusses the common themes that emerged from these roundtable conversations, and the solutions that Millennials are calling for to address our broken criminal justice system.*

Millennials are coming of age in a time of great uncertainty. Widespread attention regarding cases of police brutality, including the murders of Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Freddie Gray, and more, have thrust criminal justice reform to the forefront of national consciousness. Young people face significant challenges and grapple with issues such as: mass incarceration, sentencing reform, recidivism and re-entry, police brutality, and community policing. It is clear that young people are fighting for a future where the criminal justice system works equitably for people from all walks of life. For these reasons, Generation Progress embarked on a Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtable tour of four American cities, with a goal of identifying a Millennial agenda for criminal justice reform.\

Between September and December of 2015, Generation Progress traveled to Columbia, SC; Baltimore, MD; Phoenix, AZ; and Dallas, TX. Each city was selected based on its unique demographics and diversity of perspective on criminal justice issues. An organizing committee of local leaders within the criminal justice reform movement compiled the invitation list for each roundtable. Attendees included local, state, and national activists, organizers, policy experts, law enforcement agents, elected officials, academics, entrepreneurs, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

On December 2, 2015, Generation Progress hosted its fourth Millennial criminal justice roundtable in Dallas, TX.

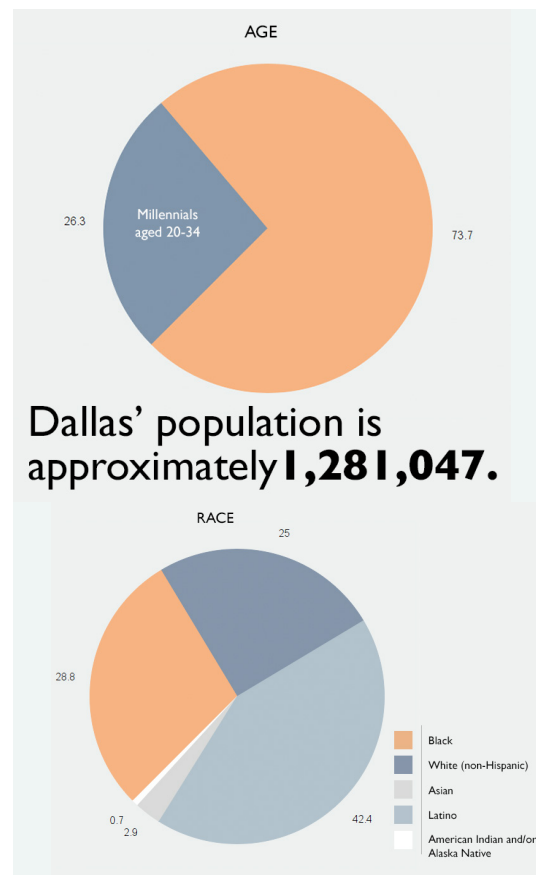


Figure 1<sup>1-7</sup>

Like many American cities, Dallas has an unfortunate history of discrimination on the basis of race. This dates back to the first decade of the city's existence, when in 1860, a drugstore was burned down and officials presumptively accused and punished slaves and abolitionists.<sup>8</sup> A more recent example, 15-year-old Dajerria Becton was slammed to the ground by a police officer while attending a pool party in nearby McKinney, TX in June of 2015.<sup>9</sup> Her attorney, Hannah Stroud, attended and spoke at the roundtable.

Several senior-level officials from the Dallas Police Association, Dallas' largest police union, also attended the event and spoke about their experiences as police officers. One official expressed a belief that most of his officers do not see race and therefore enforce the law without bias. A number of the young attendees challenged these views, and argued that if the police do not see and understand race, then it will be difficult to make progress in preventing racial bias and racially driven police misconduct.

In addition to the criminal justice issues directly related to race, attendees also called for addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, improving transparency of police reports, improving mechanisms for reporting police misconduct, and dedicating resources to diversionary programs.

Although attendees discussed a wide range of topics, two policy recommendations were particularly striking:

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**States, cities, and municipalities should invest in mentoring programs at all levels to provide youth with successful role models that come from similar backgrounds and lived experiences.**

Millennials at the roundtable explained how mentor figures can play an important role in helping young people stay on a positive track, avoid getting involved in illegal activity, and ultimately help them find positive opportunities and success. In Dallas, young people proposed developing mentoring programs in the communities that are most impacted by the criminal justice system. They discussed how their friends and family members did not always have successful figures to look up to and learn from, and had they had mentor figures, academic and economic success would have been more achievable.

One particular issue that Millennials in Dallas referenced was the lack of mentoring programs that exist for young people with incarcerated parents. A recent Center for American Progress report estimates that, "between 33 million

and 36.5 million children in the United States—nearly half of U.S. children—now have at least one parent with a criminal record.”<sup>10</sup> The report explains that if a parent has a criminal record, it compounds the numerous challenges low-income families already face.<sup>11</sup> Given these findings, it should be clear to states, cities, and municipalities that investing in mentoring programs will pay dividends in terms of community wellbeing, economic opportunity, and ultimate success.

Though emphasized by Generation Progress roundtable attendees, the idea of challenging states, cities, and municipalities to create mentoring programs is not new. Recognizing the momentous value in mentoring programs, President Obama launched the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative in 2014. The MBK initiative implores local levels of government and businesses to connect young people to mentoring programs, support networks, and develop the skills they need to be successful.<sup>12</sup> The White House reports that over 200 government leaders across 43 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to participate in the initiative.<sup>13</sup> However, this is not enough. More leaders should work to create mentoring programs in their communities, working directly with the young people who are most affected in order to ensure the efficacy of these programs.

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### Police departments should provide safe spaces for officers to report wrongdoing observed of other officers.

The Dallas roundtable featured several law enforcement officials, who communicated that police departments are not always safe spaces for officers to report wrongdoing. They alluded to the “blue wall of silence,” an unwritten code where police officers claim ignorance when asked about the wrongdoing of another officer.<sup>14</sup> This led to discussions surrounding the internal politics of police departments.

Millennials agreed that internal barriers to the successful prosecution of police misconduct are a huge problem that needs to be addressed. Problematic police culture is a real concept that permeates throughout police departments around the country. While mechanisms for police officers to report police misconduct exist, a number of the officers in Dallas communicated that this type of behavior is widely discouraged. For police reform to be successful, departments must modify their policies to promote reporting of misconduct within their departments, and implement severe consequences for officers who do not comply.

It is clear that young people in Dallas are determined to make progress on criminal justice reform, both from working within the system, and working outside it on the grassroots level. As they continue to advocate for reforms that will benefit their community, decision makers should take seriously their policy ideas and earnestly allow them a seat at the lawmaking table.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau State & County QuickFacts, "Dallas, city Texas," available at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4819000.html?cssp=SERP> (last accessed February 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Author's calculations are based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, "S0101. Age and Sex," available at [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_14\\_5YR\\_S0101&prodType=table](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_S0101&prodType=table) (last accessed January 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Texas State Historical Association, "DALLAS, TX," available at <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdd01> (last accessed January 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Diana Ozemebhoya Eromosele, "Texas Teen Slammed by Cop Speaks Out: 'The Officer Getting Fired Is Not Enough,'" *The Root*, June 9, 2015, available at [http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/06/mckinney\\_texas\\_teen\\_dajerria\\_becton\\_slammed\\_by\\_officer\\_speaks\\_out\\_and\\_says.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/06/mckinney_texas_teen_dajerria_becton_slammed_by_officer_speaks_out_and_says.html).

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Vallas, Melissa Boteach, Rachel West, and Jackie Odum, "Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents With Criminal Records and Their Children" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09060720/CriminalRecords-report2.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The White House, "My Brother's Keeper," available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper#> (last accessed March 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel J. Chin & Scott Wells, "The 'Blue Wall of Silence' as Evidence of Bias and Motive to Lie: A New Approach to Police Perjury," (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Law Review, Vol. 59, p. 233, 1998), available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1810012](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1810012).