

# Staying Engaged

Many young people remain hopeful on racial justice in 2020

## Introduction

By any measure, the year has been extraordinary. In addition to the profoundly disruptive economic and social impacts of the pandemic, many people are becoming more acutely aware of the manifestations of longstanding issues, like extreme disasters linked to climate change and tragic events of police brutality leading to protests for racial equality and justice.



Clearly, the generations before us have not pushed through the change yet that we need to see in the world, so it is now up to us to do so... I think that with social media we now have so much more power and voice to create change than previous generations had at our age.

— HISPANIC FEMALE, ONLINE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, AGE 21, LOWER INCOME, KANSAS

How are young people, particularly young people who face greater challenges to achieving career and financial stability, thinking about their futures in 2020? In a recent poll of 1) Black and Hispanic young people and 2) white young people from households with lower income, many respondents reported that they are experiencing significant disruptions to their lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these disruptions are causing some to reconsider their expectations related to education and work. At the same time, most of the young people polled say that they are paying attention to this year's conversations and events related to policing and racial justice. The poll results suggest that recent protests and heightened levels of civic engagement that began with the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 have captured and held the attention of many young people—and they are not passive observers. Instead, many young people report that they are engaged in conversations and in online and in-person activism on racial justice issues, and that these experiences are shaping how they think about their future goals and opportunities in life.

This year, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) is conducting a national youth poll with support from Equitable Futures, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The poll studies the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's perceptions about their futures and their goals and includes questions about racial

# Methodology: National Youth Poll on COVID-19

## Wave 1.

August 2020 survey respondents included:

- 209 white females, 204 white males
- 203 Black females, 205 Black males
- 204 Hispanic females, 220 Hispanic males
- 272 youth ages 15-16
- 390 youth ages 17-18
- 643 youth ages 19-21

The margin of error for n=1,305 is +/- 2.7 percentage points and higher for subgroups.

## Wave 2.

September 2020 survey respondents included:

- 209 white females, 207 white males
- 206 Black females, 206 Black males
- 208 Hispanic females, 203 Hispanic males
- 345 youth ages 15-16
- 264 youth ages 17-18
- 663 youth ages 19-21

The margin of error for n=1,272 is +/- 2.7 percentage points and higher for subgroups.

You can learn more about the survey methodology and review the full findings deck by visiting <https://www.equitablefutures.org/covid19>.

Parents/guardians provided written consent prior to minors being surveyed.

justice and policing—including the protests that have happened this year following the deaths of Black people caused by police officers.

This brief summarizes key findings related to young people's perceptions of recent racial justice unrest and protests. The analysis presented in this brief draws on results from waves 1 and 2 of the poll, conducted in August and September 2020 respectively. Wave 3 will be conducted in December 2020 and the final wave will be conducted in February 2021.

The findings from this poll highlight the adjustments, sacrifices, and changed perceptions about future goals Black and Hispanic young people and white young people from households with lower income are experiencing and anticipating as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents report that they are re-considering decisions on whether to attend college, and substantial proportions of Black and Hispanic youth respondents report caring for a family member, such as a younger sibling or older relative, at home. At the same time, the research shows that a majority of Black and Hispanic respondents are paying a great deal of attention to the ongoing conversations about racial justice and are engaging in these conversations and activism in different ways. Moreover, the impact of protests around racial justice are as far-reaching as are the impacts of COVID-19 on young people's thinking about their future education and career goals. While 69 percent of respondents say that the coronavirus outbreak has at least somewhat changed their thinking about their future education and career goals, a near equal 66 percent say the protests around police violence and racial justice have changed their thinking.

Why is attention to racial justice significant for these young people? Given the crowded and often polarized discourse taking place across social media platforms around politics, the pandemic, police brutality, and racial justice, one could reasonably expect that young people might be feeling overwhelmed with pessimism and struggling to make sense of what is happening in their immediate lived experiences. However, despite all of the disruptive impacts young people are experiencing from COVID-19, more than two-thirds (70%) of respondents report being supportive of protests around racial justice and policing, and more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents feel that being able to be engaged in promoting change about racial justice feels more like an opportunity than a burden. This sense of possibility feels connected to young people's strong sense of personal agency, observed in previous



**Illustration by Ladasia Bryant, age 19**

research conducted by Equitable Futures, and their belief that they are the most important changemakers in their own lives. The research suggests that this sense of personal agency is not deterred even by COVID-19's significant impacts and hurdles.

Finally, the poll suggests that racial justice has emerged from the noise of 2020 as a critical issue for Black and Hispanic respondents and for a majority of white respondents from households with lower income. A clear majority of all respondents report they have given a great deal or some attention to recent actions and conversations around policing and racial justice in this country, regardless of race or gender. A majority of respondents also report being engaged in these conversations, with some differences in the levels and types of engagement (e.g., online discourse versus protests) by gender.

## Key Findings

The majority of respondents (67%) are paying attention to recent conversations or actions around policing and racial justice in this country.

Prior research from the Equitable Futures project found that identity is experienced as an asset by many Black and Hispanic young people when it comes to career and educational pursuits.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, one could see how some young people might feel as if their race and identity are under constant assault, with the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color<sup>2</sup> and the violence against Black people perpetrated and seemingly excused by criminal justice systems. Given all that has happened in 2020, it feels important to understand how other events—in addition to the pandemic—are impacting young people's outlook on their futures.

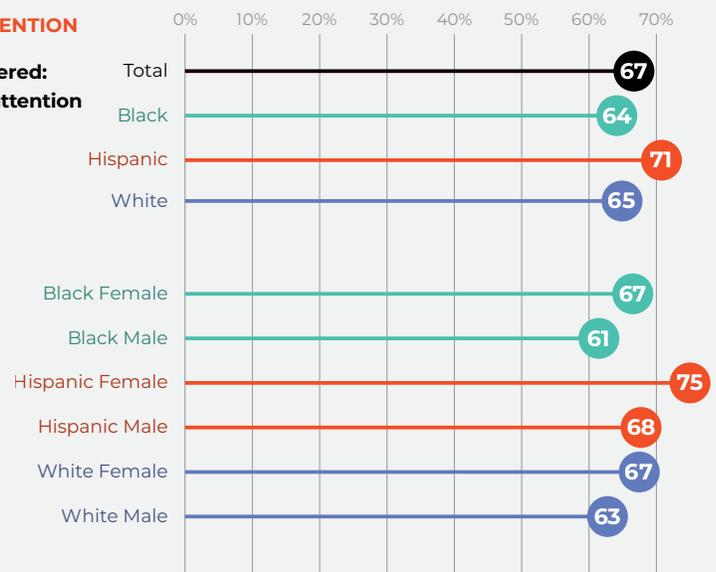
Across race and gender, two-thirds of respondents (67%) are paying a great deal of attention (36%) or some attention (31%) to events and conversations related to policing and racial justice. The proportion of Hispanic respondents who are paying either a great deal or some attention to racial justice issues is somewhat higher than the numbers of Black and white respondents (71%, versus 64% and 65%, respectively). Across race, female respondents report paying more attention than male respondents to racial justice issues.

### Attention to Racial Justice Protests

How much attention have you given to the recent conversations or actions around policing and racial justice in the country?

NET: PAYING ATTENTION

Those who answered:  
• A great deal of attention  
• Some attention



Across race and gender, many respondents are engaged in racial justice issues.

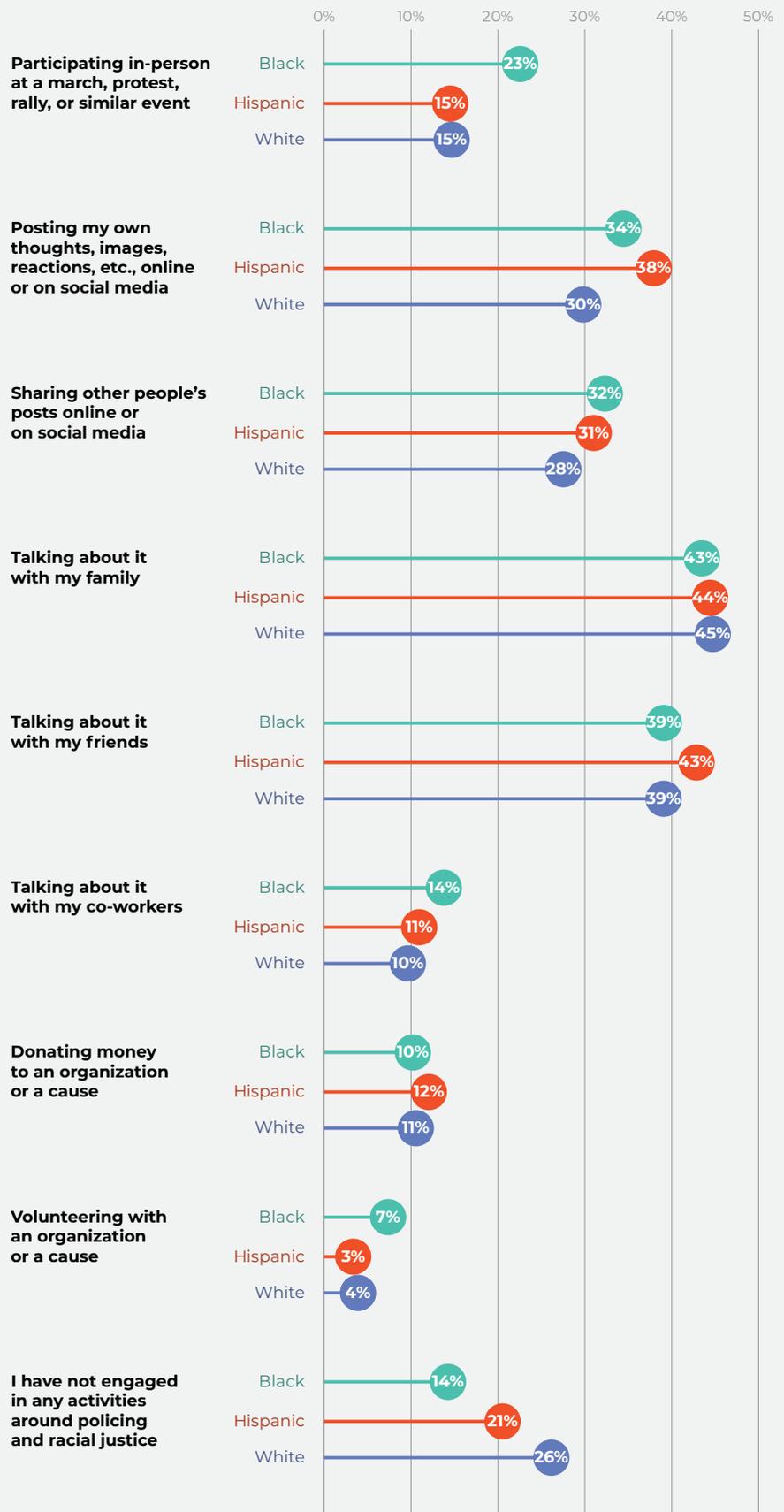
Not only are the majority of respondents paying attention to conversations and actions around racial justice and policing, but they also report high levels of engagement on these issues. This is particularly notable amidst the burden of COVID-19 and the increased uncertainty about the future caused by the pandemic. Many more respondents report engagement through amplification of their own or other people's ideas through social media and through conversations with their families than they do through volunteering with or donating to an organization or cause. The types of engagement, while consistently high across all respondents, vary by racial groups and gender. Hispanic, Black, and white female respondents say they are talking about racial justice with their families (51%, 45%, and 52%, respectively) more than male

respondents. Young Black male respondents report slightly higher levels of participation in marches, protests, rallies and similar in-person events (24%) than the sample average (17%). Future research could explore what motivates young people to engage in different types of racial justice activism.

That so many Black, Hispanic, and white respondents from households with lower income are indicating high levels of engagement in racial justice conversations and actions shows how important these issues are to these groups of young people. Moreover the survey results show a clear majority of respondents (70%) across race and gender either strongly (42%) or somewhat (27%) support racial justice protests overall (the poll did not ask specifically about any particular movement). And, as a result of these feelings of support, young people report that they are actively engaged in racial justice issues, with 81% of female respondents and 73% of male respondents reporting they have been engaged on these issues.

## Engagement with Racial and Police Justice

Which, if any, of the following activities have you engaged in around policing and racial justice?

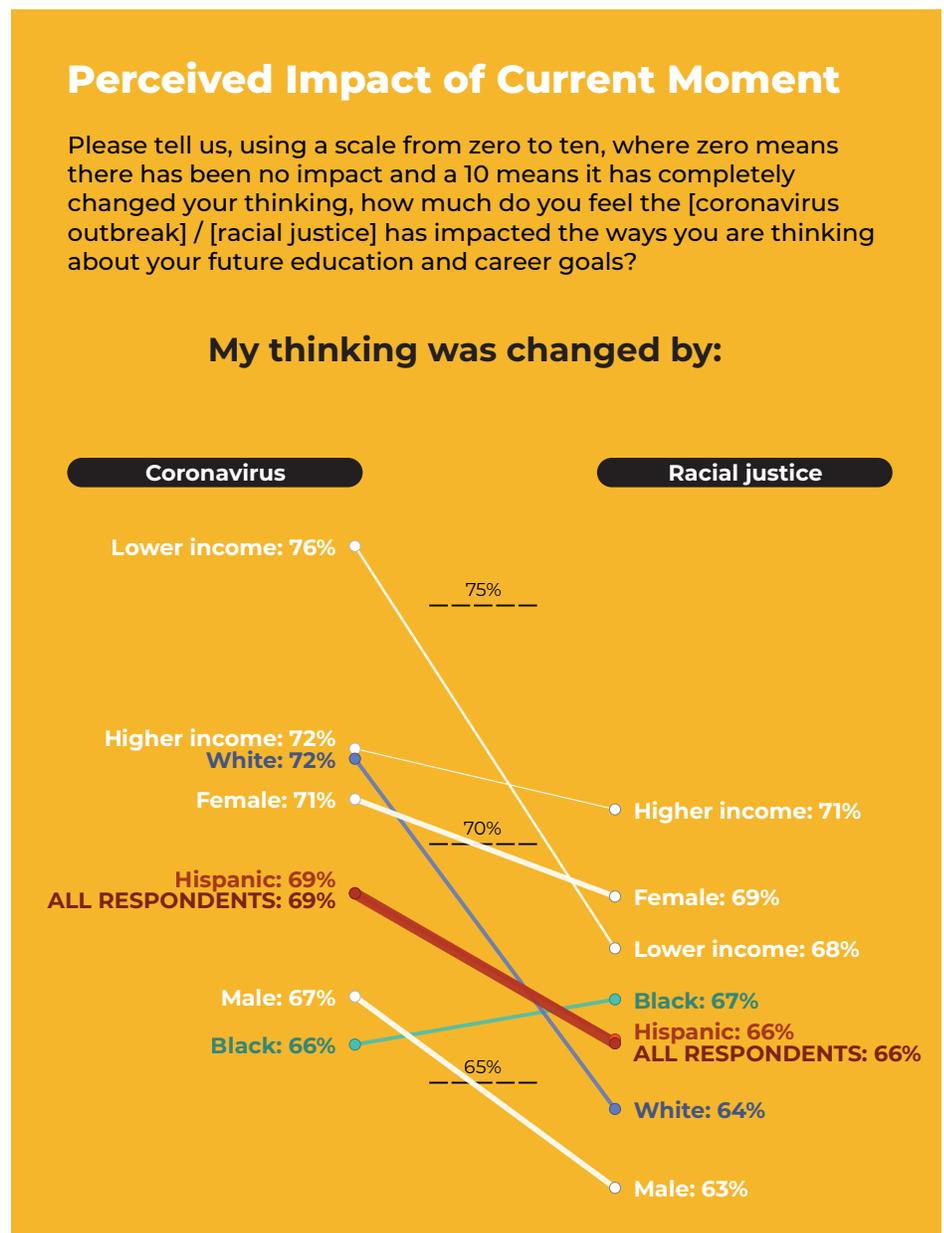


**While disruptions caused by COVID-19 may create feelings of uncertainty in young people’s lives, a majority of respondents view recent racial justice protests and uprisings as an opportunity and expect to see a positive future impact from these events on their communities.**

The poll suggests that young people’s lives and experiences, as well as their perceptions of their future, have been significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Young people are feeling less clear about their future goals; they are re-assessing the value of college; and they have been thrust into different responsibilities—many respondents (41%) are caring for other family members at home, and more respondents report working multiple jobs (33%) in this COVID era than did in the 2019 survey (23%).

Reflecting this, 69 percent of respondents say the way they are thinking about their future education and career goals is at least somewhat impacted by the coronavirus outbreak. Yet, a near equal proportion, 66 percent, say their thinking about future education and career goals is at least somewhat impacted by protests around police violence and racial justice.

Respondents see promoting change through the participating in racial justice actions as an opportunity, not a burden. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of all respondents either strongly (52%) or somewhat (16%) agree that being engaged in promoting change on racial justice issues feels like an opportunity, not a burden. An even higher 63 percent of Black respondents strongly agree this is an opportunity. Additionally, 56 percent of all respondents feel that the conversations and actions on policing and racial justice will eventually have a positive impact on their communities. A national poll conducted by NBC News and Quibi among 250 voters ages 18 to 23 supports these findings. It showed that while there is pessimism among young people about the future and coronavirus,<sup>3</sup> over 60 percent said they felt positively about the Black Lives Matter movement.

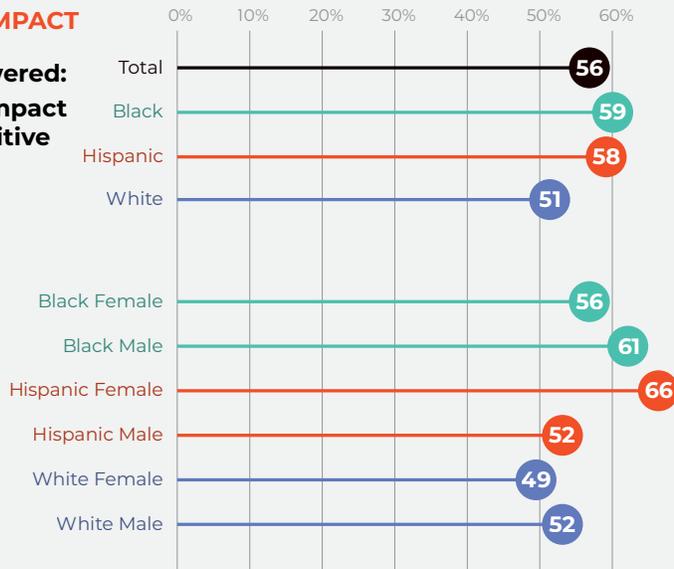


## Future Impact of Racial Justice Protests

Do you think a year from now the conversations and actions around policing and racial justice will have had a positive impact, negative impact, or no impact on the community you live in?

### NET: POSITIVE IMPACT

Those who answered:  
 • Very positive impact  
 • Somewhat positive impact

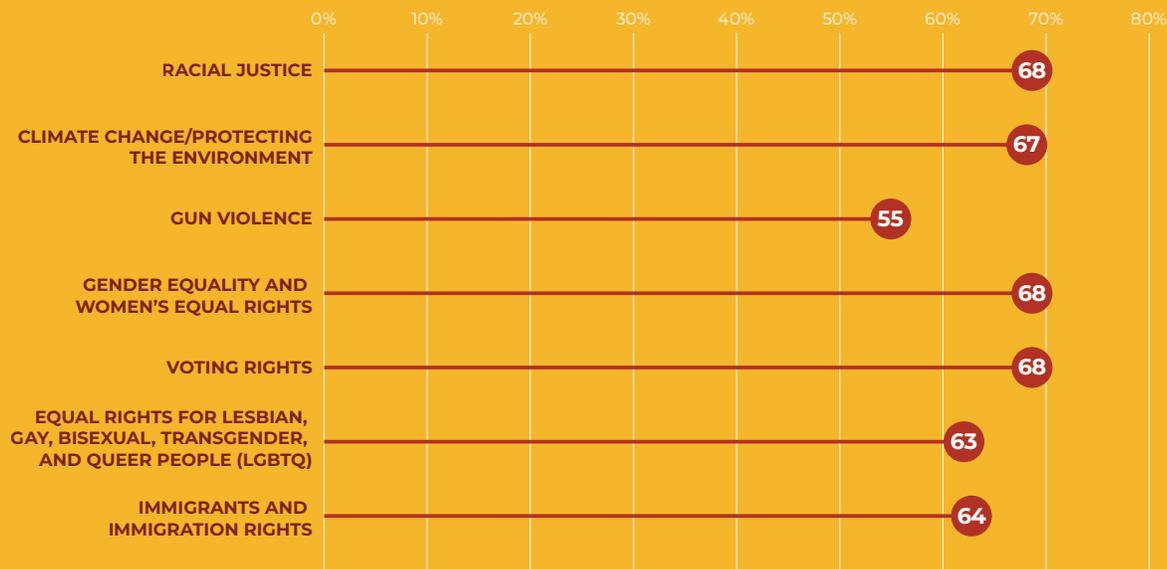


Regression analysis shows that there is a noticeable relationship between respondents' optimism about achieving the kind of future life they want and their feelings about the importance of racial justice, such that respondents with higher levels of optimism about their future are also more likely to feel that racial justice is more important to them now than it was before these conversations and protests. Importantly, this relationship exists even after accounting for factors like race, gender, and household income.

## An Opportunity Not A Burden

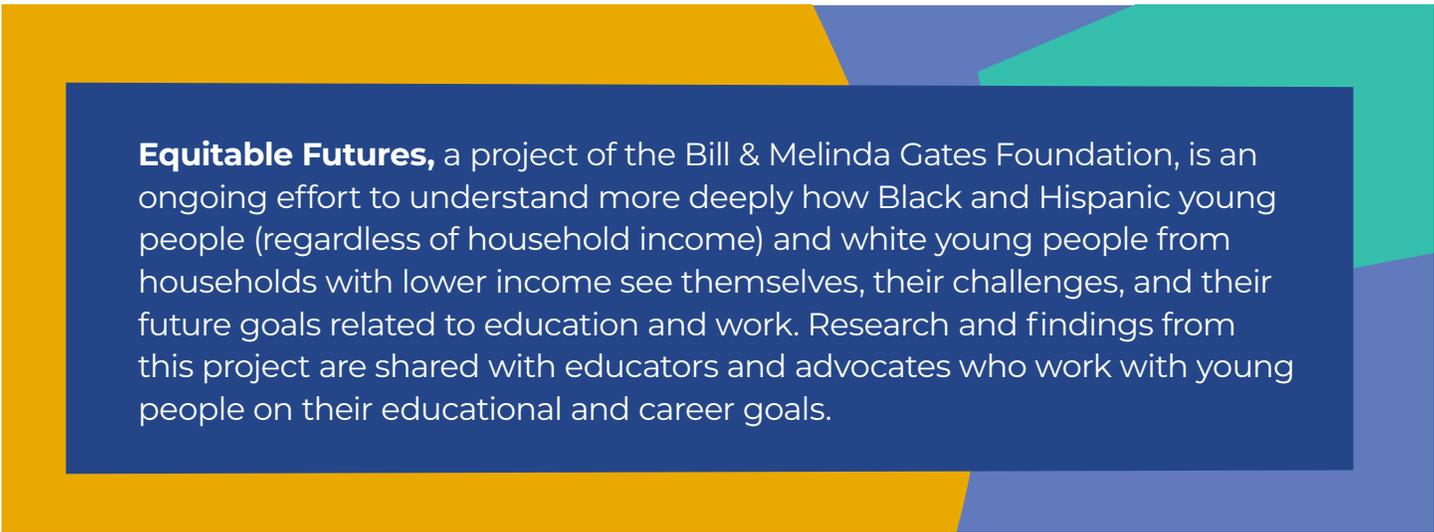
For each issue, please tell us whether, for you personally, being able to be engaged in promoting change feels more like an opportunity, feels more like a burden, or whether it is not something you want to be involved with.

Those that [strongly agree] / [somewhat agree] being able to be engaged in promoting change around [issue] feels more like an opportunity



In this poll, many respondents feel this sense of positive purpose—this feeling that being engaged in promoting change presents opportunities, not burdens—with respect not only to racial justice but also with other highly visible issues, such as immigrants and immigration rights, gun violence, and LGBTQ equality. These findings on social change align with earlier research findings from Equitable Futures, which found that young people see themselves as their own best change agents—and they seek and find opportunity in conversations and in creating positive visions of their futures.<sup>4</sup>

While educators and other youth advocates may find it more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic to directly engage and empower young people with the support they need to navigate their educational and career pathways, they need to know that on the issues that matter to them most, many young people are still present and engaged—even while navigating the pandemic.



**Equitable Futures**, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is an ongoing effort to understand more deeply how Black and Hispanic young people (regardless of household income) and white young people from households with lower income see themselves, their challenges, and their future goals related to education and work. Research and findings from this project are shared with educators and advocates who work with young people on their educational and career goals.

## Endnotes

- 1 Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. "Striving to Thriving: Youth Occupational Identity Formation." *Equitable Futures*, 1 Oct. 2020, [www.equitablefutures.org/striving-to-thriving/](http://www.equitablefutures.org/striving-to-thriving/).
- 2 Wood, Daniel. "As Pandemic Deaths Add Up, Racial Disparities Persist - And In Some Cases Worsen." *NPR*, NPR, 23 Sept. 2020, [www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/23/914427907/as-pandemic-deaths-add-up-racial-disparities-persist-and-in-some-cases-worsen](http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/23/914427907/as-pandemic-deaths-add-up-racial-disparities-persist-and-in-some-cases-worsen).
- 3 Murray, Mark. "Poll: Younger Voters Are Pessimistic about the Future, down on Trump." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 9 Oct. 2020, [www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/poll-younger-voters-are-pessimistic-about-future-down-trump-n1242653](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/poll-younger-voters-are-pessimistic-about-future-down-trump-n1242653).
- 4 Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. "Striving to Thriving: Youth Occupational Identity Formation." *Equitable Futures*, 1 Oct. 2020, [www.equitablefutures.org/striving-to-thriving/](http://www.equitablefutures.org/striving-to-thriving/).