



## REAL RITES RESEARCH:

# YOUNG ADULTS' EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND DREAMS OF COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS IN RED HOOK, BROOKLYN

## A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

REAL RITES RESEARCHERS

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



JANUARY 2019



# RESEARCHERS' NOTE

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We are a group of young adults from Red Hook.

We grew up in this community witnessing violence, disinvestment, and over-policing.

In the summer of 2017, we came together because we were tired of being ignored and harassed and because we were ready to make a change.

We took matters into our hands and launched a research study about violence and community-building for young adults in Red Hook.

The research was conducted by us, with us, and for us.

This report is what we found.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In July 2017, Red Hook Initiative (RHI), in partnership with the Public Science Project, formed a participatory action research team of young adults to examine issues of violence in Red Hook, Brooklyn and to develop a proposal for violence prevention. **The team determined two research questions driving the work: What contributes to young adults' experiences of violence in Red Hook and what are the roots? What are young adults' experiences of and dreams for community-building activities?**

The team collected data through 1:1 interviews, participant observations, focus groups, and data collection events which involved over 150, 18-24 year olds from Red Hook. The research team conducted participatory analysis of the data and compiled the findings in this report. In addition to the findings, the team developed a set of recommendations. **These recommendations have led to a new anti-violence initiative at RHI and are making up the components of an emerging organizing campaign.**

While the findings of this study include young adults' reports of persistent and traumatic experiences of police violence and over-policing, **the heart of the findings point to young peoples' desire to define issues, determine and lead action, to have ownership over their own spaces, and to have opportunities to be leaders in their community.** We recognize that issues of police violence are deeply rooted, widespread, and that we are not in a position to solve policing issues alone.

We acknowledge and respect the work of local and citywide organizers who work on policing and the gains that have been made with regard to reducing police violence and decreasing youth interactions with the criminal justice system. Many organizers met with us along our journey to share their expertise. We will look to these partnerships and to community partners in Red Hook to move toward a safer community for young people, a goal we all share.



## FINDING #1:

A **loss of community-led social support, connectedness, and mentorship** contribute to violence in Red Hook.

## FINDING #2:

**Police interrupt community-building for young adults.** Police harassment and police violence were witnessed or experienced by nearly all the young adults who participated in the study.

## FINDING #3:

Peer-related violence, like fighting and shooting, is often defined as "**unnecessary**" and is fueled by **petty disputes**.

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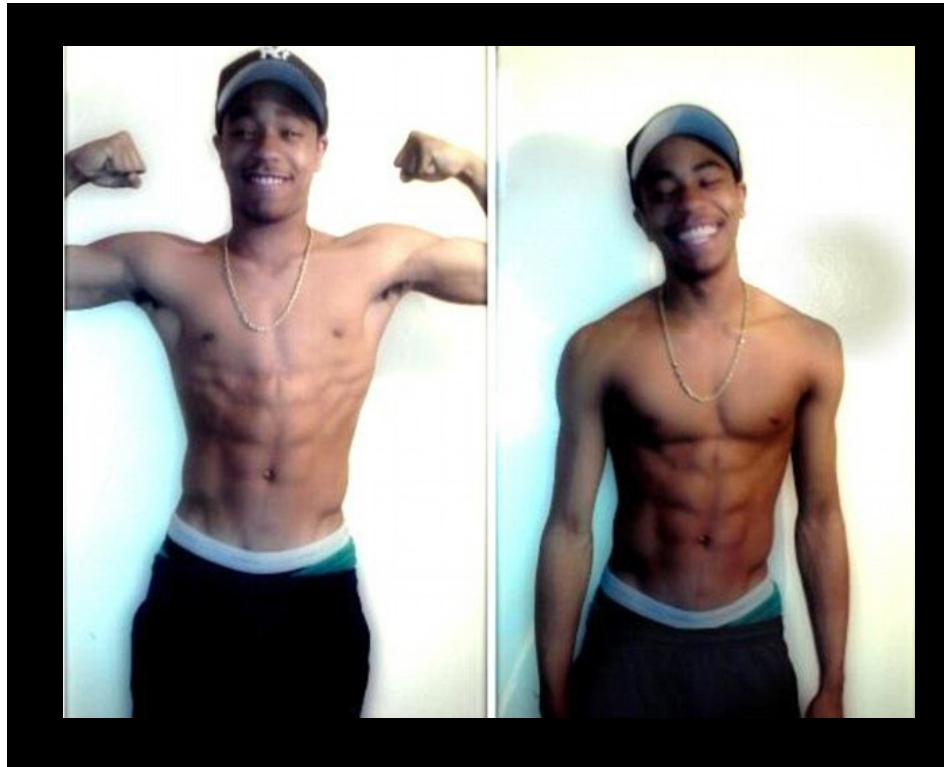
## RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Youth-led community building is violence prevention. Young adults need opportunities to lead, mentor, contribute their expertise, and build unity in their communities. **Our research suggests that effective approaches to violence prevention lie with young people and from within the community itself.** To reduce experiences of violence in Red Hook we need community programs and support for young people as leaders, mentors, and experts.

**We must separate police from community building.** Young people report policing as a major cause of violence in Red Hook. Police harassment inhibits young people's ability to interact with others and to feel free within their own community.

In response to this research and findings, RHI will launch a youth-led violence prevention initiative. The program will include youth-led activities and events to promote community building, healing, and interconnectedness.

# DEDICATION



**THIS PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO  
DEION FLUDD, FRIEND  
AND BROTHER TO THE REAL RITES TEAM, WHO WAS  
KILLED AS A RESULT OF POLICE VIOLENCE IN 2013.**

# INTRODUCTION

In July 2017, following several instances of violence in Red Hook, youth and adults turned to RHI to respond. Throughout our 17-year history, RHI has been a cornerstone for the community to gather in times of both celebration and recovery from trauma.

RHI formed a team of staff and young adult community members, and partnered with the Public Science Project to examine the issue of violence in Red Hook. We set out to develop a response to local violence and a proposal for prevention. Our strategy was to utilize a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.

PAR is an approach to research where those most impacted by the research question are leaders of the research including framing the research question, determining design, leading data collection, analysis, and figuring out how to use the results to impact change. Included in this report are our process, methods of research, findings, and recommendations that developed over a ten month period.

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## OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study we wanted to better understand issues of violence in Red Hook as understood and experienced by young people. Once the research team was convened, we spent one month honing the research questions. The research team worked through a collective process that pulled from our own experiences and community knowledge to craft research questions.

Collectively we determined that the research questions driving our work were:

**What contributes to young adults' experiences of violence in Red Hook and what are at the roots?**

**What are young adults' experiences of and dreams for community-building activities?**

# PROCESS AND METHODS

The study used multiple methods to investigate young adult experiences of and perspectives on violence in Red Hook including cross-community analysis, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and community events. The study sample was made up of over 150 18 - year old youth of color (Black and Latinx) across gender. The research team specifically sought experiences from young people from Red Hook who reflect the population of Red Hook.

## CROSS-COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

The research team met with representatives from throughout New York City to learn about existing models of and approaches to violence prevention. The research team visited or met with representatives from: 696 Queensbridge, Common Justice, H.O.L.L.A., Center for Anti-violence Education, SOS Bed-Stuy, Dr. Alex Vitale, Policing and Social Justice Project, Just Leadership, and NY Peace Institute. In addition, the team participated in events in other communities to learn about existing community-based interventions to reduce violence, including a community block party and a healing justice conference organized by H.O.L.L.A. The team also drew from trainings they participated in including a Speakers Bureau Training by Common Justice, Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, and Mental Health First Aid.

## 1:1 INTERVIEWS

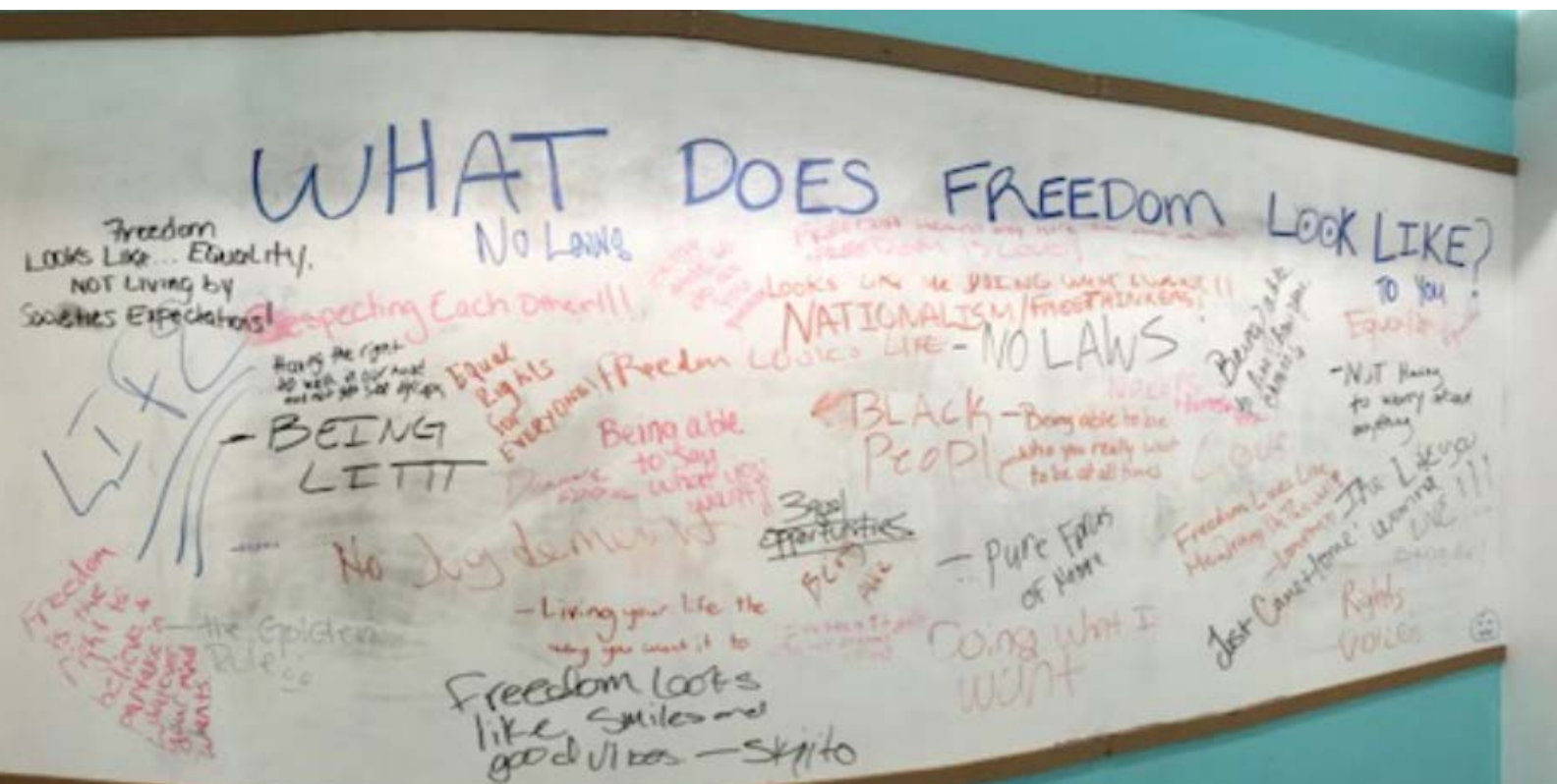
The research team conducted 35 in-depth interviews with 18-24 year old Red Hook residents. Research team members audio-recorded interviews if consent was given, and if not took extensive notes. The interviewers asked questions about community programming, current experiences with violence and policing, and perspectives on the Red Hook community as a whole.

## FOCUS GROUPS

The research team conducted three focus groups with a total of 18 participants. Focus groups were audio-recorded and included questions on community programming, current experiences, and perspectives on Red Hook as a whole. The focus groups had two parts, in the first part the researchers asked questions about young people's experiences in Red Hook and what they think can reduce violence. The second part of the focus groups were data-driven, in which the research team shared preliminary findings from the study for focus group participants to respond to.

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

The research team conducted observations in Red Hook of community gatherings, community building events, and existing efforts to reduce violence. During observations, the researchers documented behavior, affect, and interactions of youth, community members, and police as well as use of community space.



## HEALING JUSTICE COMMUNITY EVENTS

Data was collected through two community events with over 100 18-24 year old attendees. The team designed these events as opportunities to gather evidence from 18 - 24 year old Red Hook residents while simultaneously enacting moments of community-building and healing justice. The events were developed and hosted by the research team and included rapid research approaches to data collection such as question-cards and writing on data walls. Events were themed for Halloween and Thanksgiving.



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## FINDING #1: A LOSS OF COMMUNITY-LED SOCIAL SUPPORT, CONNECTEDNESS, AND MENTORSHIP CONTRIBUTES TO VIOLENCE IN RED HOOK.

We define community-led activities as events or programs designed for local community members, created by local community members, and with local community members in the lead. Interviewees and focus group participants identified the years 2008 - 2010 as a time when community-led activities and programs decreased. Study participants reported that the removal or end of these activities produced a sense of loss in relation to feelings of community unity and community building.



“2008 WAS WHEN A FEW COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES CAME TO AN END”

WHEN DID THINGS CHANGE? “WHEN THEY STARTED TAKING THINGS AWAY FROM US.”

WHAT HAS CHANGED? “PARADISE CLASSIC WAS GOOD FOR EVERYONE TO COME TOGETHER AND TAUGHT UNITY, RESPECT, AND HOW TO BE SOCIAL. OLD TIMERS DAY JUST SEEMS TO BE FLOODED WITH POLICE NOW. RED HOOK DAY ON COLUMBIA STREET. POW (CARNIVAL) FOR KIDS IN COFFEY PARK ALSO HAD A TALENT SHOW. BROOKLYN TITANS AND FLAG FOOTBALL.”

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Loss of community unity and support as respondents got older: The community-led activities of the past, as described by study participants, provided scaffolded mentorship for young people. The loss of those community-led activities occurred just as many of the study participants were entering adolescence and needed it the most. In addition, heavy police surveillance in public spaces resulted in a feeling of loss of access to those spaces for young people. Study participants reported that spaces such as parks and public housing courtyards were no longer as available to them.



“THINGS WERE BETTER WHEN I WAS A KID”

“WHEN I WAS 11 YEARS OLD, I  
STARTED SEEING THINGS CHANGE--  
HOW PEOPLE ACT AND IT ALSO  
CHANGED RED HOOK.”

“IN 2008, PEOPLE I KNEW WERE IN AND OUT  
OF JAIL.”

We noted that intergenerational relationships within the community are a concern. Young adults reported that there are tensions between older adults in the neighborhood and youth because some older adults think that young people are the cause of violence. This (mis)conception is one dynamic that contributes to violence, for instance when older adults from within the community call the police on younger members of the community or request an increase in police presence.

## FINDING #2: POLICE INTERRUPT COMMUNITY-BUILDING FOR YOUNG ADULTS.

Police harassment and police violence were witnessed or experienced by nearly all the young adults who participated in the study. When we asked how violence shows up in Red Hook, policing was a recurring response. We noted that young adults' reports of heavy police surveillance is not disconnected from young adults' descriptions of petty youth-to-youth disagreements that begin on social media (as discussed in Finding #3).



“VIOLENCE IN RED HOOK? POLICE BRUTALITY.”

“THE POLICE MAKE ME FEEL LIKE I CAN'T DO ANYTHING.”

POLICE ARE “CONSTANTLY RIDING BY, INTENSE STARING, SHUT DOWN MY AUNT'S COOKOUT DUE TO NOISE.”

### We found that police obstruct community building through:

**Harassment:** Our findings indicate that a significant majority of young adults in Red Hook experience or witness police harassment (for instance, at least 25 interview participants directly mentioned policing, and many interviewees mentioned police negatively several times in one interview). Harassment was described by interviewees as “intense staring,” surveillance, calling young adults by name, and provoking arguments.

**The loss of community space by over-policing:** Police harassment and police violence were noted as major contributors to community violence. Police presence and intervention in relation to gathering spaces for young people are a contributing factor to violent incidents. In addition to the physical presence of police, the young people who participated in this study were acutely aware of the ways they are being watched and monitored by police on social media. Police surveillance contributes to a sense of distrust among young people in the community. (see Finding #3)

“POLICE MAKE ME FEEL LIKE EVEN THOUGH WE ARE FREE WE STILL DON'T HAVE OUR RIGHTS. IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE WE ARE JUST TARGETS AND ANIMALS.”

“THE POLICE MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE DON'T BELONG. I FEEL THE POLICE VIEW THE YOUTH OF RED HOOK AS BAD AND THE CAUSE OF A LOT OF VIOLENCE THAT'S GOING ON.”

POLICE MAKE ME FEEL LIKE...  
“THIS ISN'T OUR HOME”  
“THIS ISN'T OUR COMMUNITY”  
“CRIMINALS”



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## FINDING #3: PEER-RELATED VIOLENCE, LIKE FIGHTING AND SHOOTING, IS OFTEN UNNECESSARY AND FUELED BY PETTY DISPUTES.

Unnecessary Violence: Many of the respondents referred to fighting and shooting that takes place between community members as "unnecessary". The research team interprets this as an expression by young people of a desire for alternatives to violence among their peers and community.



"UNNECESSARY VIOLENCE IS A WAY I VIEW RED HOOK. EVERY DAY SOMETHING VIOLENT CAN HAPPEN. [THESE ARE] REGULAR THINGS THAT GO ON IN THE HOOD."

"RANDOM POINTLESS SHOOTINGS"



"STOP JUDGING EACH OTHER. STOP TRYING TO BE LIKE EACH OTHER AND BE YOURSELF."

Petty Disputes: Petty disputes and conflicts were frequently referred to in relation to peer-related violent incidents in Red Hook. When the team further examined this pattern, we determined that some arguments start on social media over what study participants refer to as small, petty, or "childish" issues and then escalate into physical fights in person. Arguments that start on the screen can become fights on the street. The research team also noted that young adults report police surveillance on social media. We documented a strong desire to end conflict and disputes on social media and a recognition that young people are uniquely qualified to develop effective strategies. The research team is currently conducting further research to better understand the intersection of social media, violence, and surveillance.



VIOLENCE IS...

"PETTY ARGUMENTS AND FACEBOOK BEEF"

"SHOOTING, FIGHTING, SOCIAL MEDIA"

"RUMORS THAT LED TO FIGHTS"

"PETTY FIGHTS, RANDOM POINTLESS SHOOTINGS"



# RECOMMENDATION #1

Youth-led community building is violence prevention. We need to create opportunities for young adults to lead, mentor, contribute their expertise, and build a sense of community unity.

## TO REDUCE VIOLENCE IN RED HOOK WE NEED...

**YOUNG PEOPLE AS LEADERS:** Young people need to have more opportunities to be in leadership of positive spaces that are developed and implemented by them. In many ways, the process of research itself has been an enactment of what that leadership can look like through opportunities to engage their peers, be in leadership, and shape the narrative of young adults' experiences in their own community. Community-led spaces and activities to promote a sense of community unity are necessary to reduce violence.



**YOUNG PEOPLE AS MENTORS:** Youth desire space and support to strengthen peer relationships and foster a support network for youth entering adolescence. Young adults can provide guidance and support to peers and younger community members through their own lived experiences. Platforms for young adults to mentor younger people, especially those transitioning into adolescence, will reduce violence.

**YOUNG PEOPLE AS EXPERTS:** Through this project, young people have been leaders in a collective research process that centered the lived experiences and expertise of young residents. When young people are recognized as experts of their everyday experiences, given opportunities to contribute their expertise, and a platform to develop their knowledge and understanding, then the whole community benefits. Further, knowledge produced by and for Red Hook community members is vital for the social change RHI enacts.

# RECOMMENDATION #2

Separate Police from Community Building and establish ways of improving safety without police.

Our findings reveal over-policing and police violence as major contributors to violence for young adults and locate police as a source of harm and disruption for youth in public spaces. As Red Hook is geographically isolated and with a concentration of public housing, these police interactions are further heightened and contribute to a sense of persistent criminalization of the every day for young people.

Young adults perceptions of police as documented in this report are particularly relevant as Red Hook was identified in 2014 as one of the 15 highest-crime public housing developments and targeted in Mayor De Blasio's Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety initiative (MAP). The community has since seen an increase in the number of Neighborhood Coordination Officers deployed and precision policing implemented through "police/resident joint problem solving" as outlined in the MAP strategy. We have found that on the ground, the increase in police presence is working against a neighborhood environment where young people can feel safe, free, and a sense of belonging. Tactics such as floodlights, security cameras, and increased police involvement in youth spaces like schools and community centers can cause harm.

While the NYPD is putting resources and effort into increasing collaboration between police officers and community residents, our study shows that young adults in Red Hook are calling for a very different approach.

***Instead of seeking solutions that involve more policing, we recommend investing in strategies that equip young people to build the communities they desire.***



This study has reframed how we understand what is needed to achieve a healthy, safe, and just community and provided us with ideas of how to build from here. In the following section, we describe the next steps we're taking towards doing the work of supporting community-led approaches to safety.

# NEXT STEPS

In partnership with the research team, Red Hook Initiative will utilize the findings of this report in order to look beyond policing toward community-led violence prevention and community-based safety initiatives. In 2019, RHI will seek to reduce violence by promoting community-building, healing justice, and interconnectedness among youth. We are currently seeking funding to support:

## Youth Anti-Violence and Community-Building Work

- Establish a young adult (ages 18 – 24) leadership team to plan and host a series of monthly youth-led activities that seek to promote community building, healing, and interconnectedness within the digital and physical places that youth congregate.
- Strengthen peer relationships among youth in Red Hook ages 12-24, especially reinforcing neighborhood support networks for youth entering adolescence.
- Use a participatory research approach with 18- 24-year-olds in order to identify, investigate, and generate a deeper understanding of the relationship between social media and violence.

## Addressing Over-Policing and Community Safety

- Organize and participate in citywide campaigns in order to reduce police presence and end police actions causing harm.
- Explore the current sources of government investment in community safety in order to better understand how resources are being allocated and establish opportunities for advocacy.
- Create opportunities for young people to bridge relationships with older residents, and for older residents to gain an understanding of youth perspectives on policing.
- Establish strategies for community safety, including developing programming to increase the capacity of community members to keep each other safe. In 2019, RHI will expand offerings of Mental Health First Aid training for youth participants and adult residents.

**For more information about this project or our future work, contact:**

**[RealRitesResearch@rhicenter.org](mailto:RealRitesResearch@rhicenter.org)**

*In addition to our local work on this issue, we support organizing that is happening to reduce police presence and to end harmful practices by the police. Some of the initiatives we support:*

**CLOSERikers and #buildCOMMUNITIES:** We support the #CLOSERikers campaign, centering the leadership of people harmed by Rikers to demand the closure of the notorious jail complex. More information: [www.closerikers.org](http://www.closerikers.org)

**End the NYPD Gang Database:** We support the organizing work to end the gang database in New York City. More information: <http://www.policingandjustice.org/gang-policing.html>

**Communities United for Police Reform:** campaign to end discriminatory policing practices in New York, bringing together a movement of community members, lawyers, researchers and activists to work for change. <https://www.changethenypd.org>

# ABOUT US

## REAL RITES: ABOUT OUR NAME

*We chose the name Real Rites because we know the meaning of participatory research and one of the key factors is being representative of the neighborhood. Most of our team members have 10+ years in the community. The term 'Real Rites' is known among Red Hook youth as meaning genuine and true; our team and our work represents this.*



**Joseph Alston** is a 23 year old aspiring rapper who has been living in Red Hook for 16 years. Joseph was first introduced to PAR work in 2016 when he worked on a MIT research project on how technology can build communities. What tied him to this project is his prior knowledge of PAR but also being an advocate for the youth in Red Hook. Joseph hopes this research will reset the mindset of upcoming youth and also bring the community closer than previous years.

**Malik Brown** is a 22 year old born and raised Red Hook resident. Malik has been participating in community events for youth and is committed to working in the New York City community to make a change. He is also an employee of the New York City Parks Department. Malik holds a high school diploma and is currently looking to further his education. He hopes this project will change the circumstances for youth and bring the community together.



**Devine (Von) Fludd** is a 23 year old Red Hook resident, born and raised in the neighborhood. Von brought to this project life experience of police brutality through the police murder of his brother Deion Fludd in 2013. Von hopes this project will spread worldwide and create awareness about the issues in our community and inspire others to make a change.

**Maddy Fox** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Children & Youth Studies at Brooklyn College, City University of New York and a founding member of the Public Science Project. Maddy engages in participatory action research with young people to investigate everyday injustices and re-imagine what could be. It's been a great honor to collaborate on this project with this team!





**Nisha Howard** is a 21 year old Red Hook resident, born and raised in Red Hook. When Nisha was growing up in Red Hook, she was a part of the local track team. Nisha contributed her skills of planning and organization to this project. Nisha joined the PAR team to become more involved in the community and hopes that this project will help make steps toward that happening. She sees bigger and better things happen and will try everything to make a better future come true.



**Catherine McBride** is the Director of Community Building at Red Hook Initiative. Catherine participated in this project because she believes in participatory research as a tool for the community to tell their own story. Catherine hopes that this research provides a platform for the young people involved to have their voices elevated and will lead to increased safety among Red Hook youth.

**Savon Sims** is a 20 year old lifelong Red Hook resident. Savon brought with him experience from a previous PAR project and deep roots in the neighborhood. Savon joined this research team because he has seen the way police harassment has affected his community and he wants to end police violence. When he was 14 years old a police officer told him that by the age of 16 he would be on Rikers Island. He was wrong.



**Tyneisha (Ty) Williams** is a 21 year old originally from Brownsville, Brooklyn and has been living in Red Hook for 11 years where she grew tons of love and friendships. Tyneisha can't walk down the street in Red Hook without hearing her nickname, 'Ty Berza', yelled out to her. Ty brought to this project her deep roots and community connections in the neighborhood and stepped into a leadership role as Research Assistant. Ty hopes this project will bring community unity and less violence to the neighborhood.



# OUR ORGANIZATIONS



**Red Hook Initiative (RHI)** RHI is non-profit organization serving the community of Red Hook in Brooklyn, New York. At RHI we believe that social change to overcome systemic inequities begins with empowered youth. In partnership with community adults, we nurture young people in Red Hook to be inspired, resilient, and healthy, and to envision themselves as co-creators of their lives, community and society.

We envision a Red Hook where all young people can pursue their dreams and grow into independent adults who contribute to their families and community

[www.rhicenter.org](http://www.rhicenter.org)



Based at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, **The Public Science Project** works in solidarity with communities conducting social science research for making social justice claims. Allied with feminist, critical race, and indigenous theory, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research that positions those most intimately impacted by research as leaders in shaping research questions, framing interpretations, and designing meaningful research products and actions. We are committed to the principal and practice of, "No research about us without us."

[www.publicscienceproject.org](http://www.publicscienceproject.org)



Funding for this project was generously provided by **The Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation**



## THE RHI MODEL CREATING CHANGE FROM WITHIN



To read RHI's additional participatory action research reports and learn more about our model visit:  
[www.rhicenter.org](http://www.rhicenter.org)



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