

A Public Health Vision for Ending Police Violence

Bernal Hill is a scenic green space in San Francisco that overlooks the expanse of the Bay Area. It is a treasured reprieve from the noise and compact movement of the city. For Jade Rivera, it had been a space of pleasant memories: “Bernal Hill was a place where I saw a full moon eclipse, 4th of July fireworks, an owl in a tree, hiked, started a jogging routine, picked black berries and shared laughs and good times with friends.” However, she adds, it “is also a place where I was stopped by police as a teenager.” On the evening of March 21, 2014, Bernal Hill also became the site where 59 rounds were fired by four San Francisco Police Department officers at Alex Nieto, a young Latino community member who had just finished eating his dinner on the hill. At least 14 bullets struck his body killing him.



For Jade, Alex’s murder had “a sense of violation since it happened in public space, a beautiful hill top that I have always experienced as a safe place to reflect on life, a natural refuge from city life and just explore and have fun.” After the shooting, members of the community mobilized to demand justice, transparency and accountability. For many, his death brought the issue of police violence home and also highlighted its connection to gentrification in the local community.

It is common for us to think about gentrification in terms of landlords, speculative developers, hipster businesses, and wealthy newcomers that displace anchor communities. Law enforcement, however, is a big part of the equation. In 2013, for example, San Francisco introduced [Open311](#), a mobile app that seeks to reduce wait times for 911 emergency services by allowing residents to report non-violent and nuisance complaints from their phones. Yet once the app was introduced, [reports to law enforcement spiked in gentrifying neighborhoods](#) where new residents were using complaints to mobilize law enforcement against lower-income community members, effectively becoming a tool of gentrification. For Jade, this became pointed in the wake of Alex Nieto’s shooting: “When Alex Nieto was shot, a few things happened for me, one being, my understanding of police surveillance of people of color as part of the gentrification process became clear...I began to question my own understanding of public safety, most specifically for working class Latinos in SF.”

Framing the Issue

It is estimated that [1,166 people were murdered by police](#) in 2018. California is estimated to have among the highest rates of police shootings in the United States while many communities are currently fighting for transparent implementation of newly chaptered [SB 1421](#) and [AB 748](#). Alex Nieto, Mario Woods, Luis Góngora Pat, Amilcar Lopez Perez and Jessica Williams are all San Francisco community members who were executed by police between 2014 and 2016. During that time, Jade was getting her MPH at San Francisco State. For a group project in a program planning class, she collaborated with her colleagues Emma Rubin and Liz Kroboth to propose a Public Health intervention to address police violence San Francisco’s communities of color that were most impacted by the issue. The issue was pressing, as Jade explains that “in the middle of our project, 3 more people of color were shot and killed by SFPD,” while

nationally, a broader conversation was under way as the “Black Lives Matters movement was defining the issue of police violence in the context of anti-Black racism and proposing deep institutional interventions including the redistribution of public resources.” Local movements and grassroots activism in the Bay Area was spreading as well with organizational allies like [Critical Resistance](#), hunger strikes by the #Frisco5, CURB, and the [Anti Police Terror Project](#).

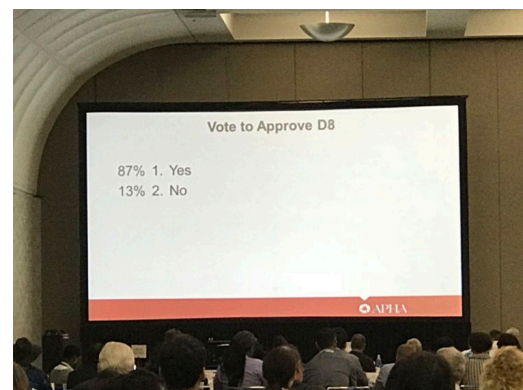


What started as a class project grew into a comprehensive policy statement put forward by Jade and allies who collectively formed the [End Police Violence Coalition](#). The statement, “[Addressing Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Issue](#)” was first proposed for adoption by the American Public Health Association (APHA) in 2015. It focuses on upstream, grassroots-informed and justice-oriented approaches to ending police violence that go beyond common recommendations for body cameras, conflict management and implicit bias trainings, or building community

relationships. Rather, as Jade explains, “in the face of systematic barriers to accountability...these health equity based solutions of ending police violence that we proposed were and are grounded in values self-determination and democracy.” The statement calls for solutions that address structural and root causes: reporting law enforcement use of violence, divestment strategies and diversion to support investments across the social determinants of health, and investing in alternatives to law enforcement. A wealth of research informed the statement, as did learning alongside grassroots leaders. Kathi Schaff, a Public Health professional and member of the collective, notes “like many areas of racial and health equity, the most innovative, creative, and inspirational work is happening in base-building, grassroots organizations and coalitions that are working for justice, true safety, and liberation.”

A Hard-Won Fight

As comprehensive and impactful as the statement is, the road to getting it adopted was not an easy one. When first presented, the statement was adopted for one year only. The following year, when the proposal was presented for renewal and permanent adoption, the resolution was voted down by APHA’s Governing Council. For the 2018 annual meeting in San Diego, Jade and her colleagues were determined to get the resolution adopted permanently. In addition to sharing resources about the statement, they coordinated a rally outside the convention center, activated social media, and educated APHA membership about the issue through a range of events. The End Police Violence Coalition also hosted a shadow conference during the annual meeting: “Health Equity Now: Ending Police Violence”. The event featured activists and grassroots leaders impacted by police violence. They shared their work, personal experiences, successes



and research to a packed room of national allies. Schaff explains “we developed the shadow conference as one way to bring attention to the issue as well as help public health folks feel prepared to speak out about the resolution in person at the APHA meetings and in social media.” Finally, after 3 years of action the resolution was passed with 87% of voting members in favor. Students, teachers, researchers, impacted community members and organizational allies had successfully influenced APHA, an institution of over 25,000 members nationwide.

Steady throughout the entire process, Jade and the End Police Violence Coalition never wavered. As Kathi Schaff reflects on the outcome, she notes that “they were so strong and so able to clearly articulate the need for a radical vision of ending police violence... which was a guiding force for us all.” For Jade, the adoption of the statement has brought optimism and gratitude: “When the statement passed I felt beyond joy, incredibly proud of the team and hard work everyone put in and I felt like if APHA could adopt a statement like this, then another world is indeed possible.”

So what is next? How will these successes be preserved and where can we go from here to support a radical vision for ending police violence as a Public Health community? Find out more in our next Stories From the Field feature in April, 2019!

Jade Rivera, MPH, is an educator and co-author of the APHA Law Enforcement Violence as a Public health Issue Policy Statement. She currently works at San Francisco State University supporting the retention and graduation of first-generation students.

Images:

[Memorial to Alex Nieto that overlooks San Francisco](#)

[Members of the Public Health Community Supporting the Statement at APHA’s Annual Meeting in 2018](#)

[The final tally in the vote to pass the statement](#)