

# THE ANTELOPE VALLEY COMMUNITY SURVEY: QUALITATIVE REPORT

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### ***About Leap & Associates***

*Leap & Associates, a UCLA-affiliated research and evaluation group, has focused on delivering culturally sensitive, participatory action evaluation research that both informs and facilitates systems change and social transformation. Led by Jorja Leap, Ph.D., Todd Franke, Ph.D. and Karrah Lompa, MSW/MNPL, Leap & Associates represents a multidisciplinary research team that draws resources and support from the UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families, the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, and the UCLA Social Justice Research Partnership. Leap & Associates engages a diverse team of researchers and community-members, all who possess extensive experience evaluating public agencies and non-profit programs. The team has a combined record of over 60 years of community-based research and evaluation, with most of those efforts in southern California and focused on examining various Los Angeles County departments, including the Department of Probation and the Department of Children and Family Services, as well as the Los Angeles Unified School District.*

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# Executive Summary

In August 2011, the US Department of Justice (DOJ), Civil Rights Division, launched an investigation of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) in response to complaints and allegations of violations of the Fair Housing Act in the Antelope Valley, California.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Settlement Agreement (SA), the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) agreed to engage and assist a Monitoring Team (MT) in conducting a reliable, comprehensive, and representative annual survey of community residents throughout the AV.<sup>2</sup> As follow up to the survey that was launched in January 2018, the MT also requested additional qualitative data collection that would supplement quantitative survey findings. Accordingly, an independent research team (Leap & Associates) conducted community focus groups in an effort to explore and document collective in-depth experiences and perspectives from Antelope Valley residents about their perceptions of the LASD within the region.

Five focus groups were conducted between July and September 2018, three with adult residents and two with youth residents. The groups ranged in size from four to 10 participants, with a total of 40 residents participating in qualitative data collection. Participants were recruited from four community-based organizations within the AV that were selected by the MT, DOJ, and LASD. On average, each focus group lasted approximately 80 minutes. Prior to the focus group, participants also completed a brief demographic survey. Questions asked during the focus group mirrored the quantitative AV community survey and centered on community safety, perceptions of and experiences with LASD, whether or not the relationship can or should be improved, and if so, suggestions for improvement. The results of the focus groups are not meant to be representative of the viewpoints all AV residents, but they nevertheless provide a valuable opportunity for gaining a deeper and contextualized understanding of the community-Department relationship in the AV.

The focus group participants were predominantly (87%) people of color, approximately two-thirds adult and one-third youth, and about half each from Lancaster and Palmdale. The results revealed that there were many cross-cutting themes between adults and youth, yet some themes were specific to each age group. Both adults and youth held similar beliefs about the purpose or role of LASD within their community (namely "*to protect and serve*" and "*keeping peace*") and overall provided positive feedback about deputies' ability to maintain public safety. While adults were overall more favorable in their assessment of LASD's job performance – and youth were on the whole more critical – both groups were also critical of LASD's treatment of residents of color and consistently noted perceived unequal treatment of Black and Latino populations compared to Whites. Adult participants consistently discussed the increased community engagement on the part of LASD that has occurred over the last few years and have welcomed

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory paragraph retrieved from NCCD's "Monitoring the Agreement" website and sourced from the December 2015 Semi-Annual Report (<http://www.antelopevalleysettlementmonitoring.info/>). Additional background information and detailed reports are also available within the cited web source.

<sup>2</sup> Settlement Agreement, No. CV 15-03174, United States v. Los Angeles County et al. (D.C. Cal. Apr. 28, 2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.antelopevalleysettlementmonitoring.info/>

these positive interactions with deputies within the community. Also, both groups offered meaningful ways in which the relationship between residents and the LASD could be improved.

While not generalizable to all residents of Antelope Valley, these findings – particularly when viewed in conjunction with quantitative survey findings – provide context and a pathway forward for both community engagement and future inquiry.

## Introduction

In August 2011, the US Department of Justice (DOJ), Civil Rights Division, launched an investigation of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) in response to complaints and allegations of violations of the Fair Housing Act in the Antelope Valley, California.<sup>3</sup> Upon completion of their investigation in June 2013, the DOJ issued a letter documenting their findings that the LASD's Lancaster and Palmdale Stations had engaged in a pattern and practice of conducting stops, searches, and seizures that were unreasonable and in violation of the Constitution and federal law. Additionally, the DOJ concluded there was evidence of discrimination against African Americans in the enforcement of the Housing Choice Voucher Program (commonly known as Section 8), which is a violation of the Fair Housing Act. The LASD and DOJ subsequently entered into negotiations regarding appropriate remedies and developed the Settlement Agreement (SA), which was ultimately signed and filed with the US District Court for the Central District of California in April 2015. The purpose of the SA is to ensure that the residents of the Antelope Valley (AV) are provided with police services that are lawful and fully consistent with the Constitution of the United States and contemporary policing practices.

As required by the Agreement, the LASD agreed to engage and assist a Monitoring Team (MT) in conducting a reliable, comprehensive, and representative annual survey of community residents throughout the AV.<sup>4</sup> The MT was tasked with oversight of the development of this community survey. The survey was intended to assess perceptions of the relationship between the LASD and the AV community and attempts to measure how, if at all, the SA reforms have affected that relationship. Per the SA, the community survey was projected to be administered annually and designed to allow for robust descriptive analysis of both baseline and subsequent years' data collection efforts.

In an effort to supplement and contextualize the quantitative survey, as well as provide in-depth responses from community residents about perceptions of law enforcement, the MT also requested qualitative data collection in the form of focus groups. Focus groups effectively uncover novel themes or patterns while allowing for a depth or dimensionality often difficult to achieve in survey research. A focus group methodology was selected because its interactive format typically provides greater opportunity for inductive inquiry, as participants feed off each

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<sup>4</sup> Settlement Agreement, No. CV 15-03174, United States v. Los Angeles County et al. (D.C. Cal. Apr. 28, 2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.antelopevalleysettlementmonitoring.info/>

other’s comments to explore topics in depth<sup>5</sup> and develop “collective conversations.”<sup>6</sup> This approach seemed particularly suited for the exploratory nature of the inquiry.

However, it is critical to emphasize both the purpose and limitations of focus group findings. Given the small sample size of the combined focus groups, the convenience sampling utilized (described in the methodology section below), and the extent to which these participants self-selected – researchers would caution against ascribing broader generalizability to the findings detailed within this report. Through the use of representative sampling, a survey is designed to generalize to a larger population of interest. Focus groups, on the other hand, aim to uncover in-depth themes that can be validated with additional exploration and examination.

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<sup>5</sup> Krueger, R. (1994). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (2nd ed.). New Bury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Kamberelis, G., & Dimitriadis, G. (2008). Focus groups: Strategic articulations of pedagogy, politics, and inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (3rd ed., pp. 375-402). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

# Methodology

The present qualitative research began with the development of an interview protocol created to document AV residents' experiences with and perceptions of the LASD. The focus group protocol paralleled the quantitative survey and was developed through a collaborative process that involved: the research team, MT, DOJ, and LASD. A protocol, including questions that would be asked of focus group participants, was generated for the adult groups and was slightly modified for the two youth groups (Appendix A and B).

Data for this report were collected between July and September 2018. A total of five focus groups – ranging in size from four to 10 participants – were conducted, two with youth attending Palmdale High School<sup>7</sup> and three with adult residents. The MT, DOJ, and LASD were tasked with identifying two community-based organizations from which participants would be recruited. Based on recommendations from the MT, DOJ, and LASD, four organizations were targeted: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)/Pueblo y Salud, South Bay Counseling Center (SBCC), and The Community Action League (TCAL). Participants from all four organizations were represented in the focus groups. Utilizing recruitment materials developed and approved by the research team, MT, DOJ, and LASD, each organization informed their respective members, stakeholders, or clients about the proposed research, and interested participants contacted the research team, who then provided detailed information about the focus groups and the informed consent process. Prior to the focus group, each participant was asked to fill out an anonymous, brief demographic survey.

The average length of the focus group was approximately 80 minutes. All participants consented to audio recording their respective focus group and therefore all discussions were transcribed by researchers. Transcriptions and research notes were subjected to an intensive process of data analysis, comprised of a three-stage coding procedure. The coders began their work with the process of *open coding*. Open coding allows each individual coder to develop categories of information based on the ideas expressed by the participants. The categories of information were then subjected to *axial coding*. Axial coding allows the coders to build the ideas into a narrative that connects the categories of information. Finally, the connections identified within the categories of information were subjected to *selective coding*, which led to the identification of 12 major themes divided into three major groupings: themes specific to adults only, themes specific to youth only, and cross-cutting themes identified by both adults and youth.

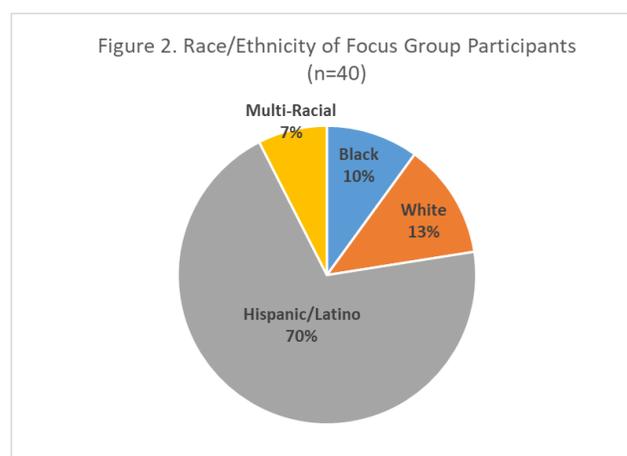
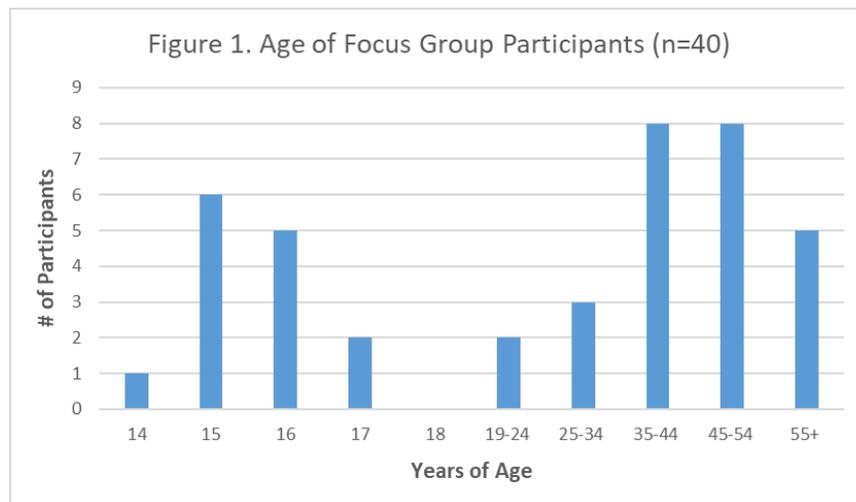
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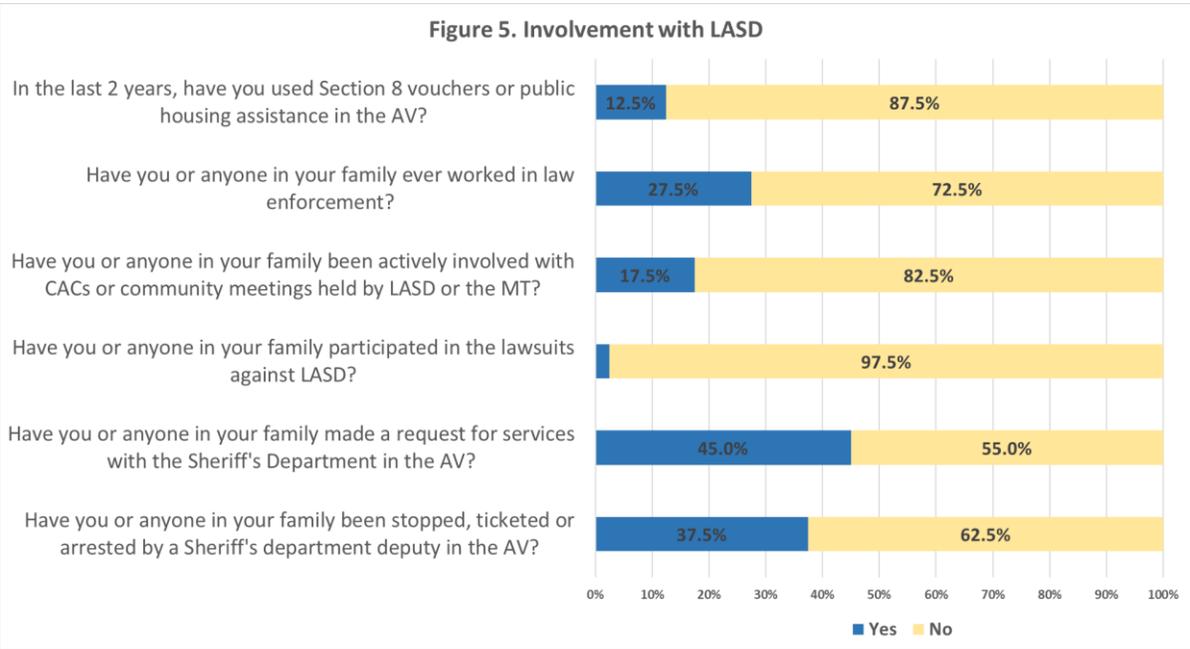
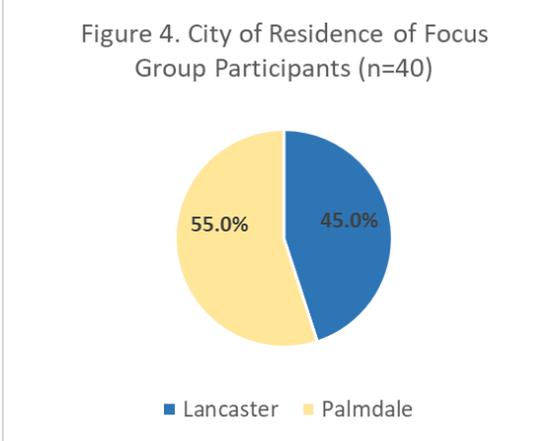
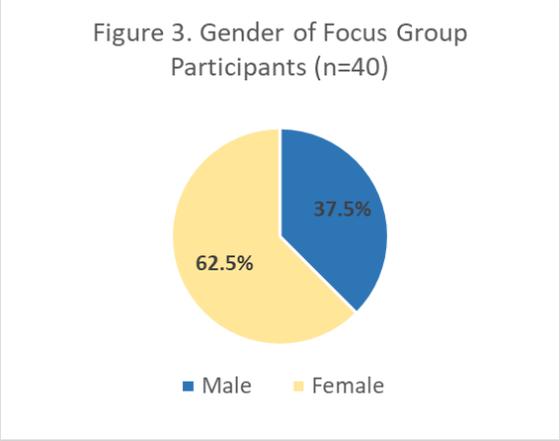
<sup>7</sup> Numerous efforts were made, in person, by telephone, and through email, to engage a second High School in Lancaster. Due to turn over in administration as well as concerns about students' limited availability during the summer school session, two focus groups were held at Palmdale High School.

# Findings

## *Demographics and Involvement with LASD*

Figures 1-5 provide results from the brief demographic survey (Appendix C and D) that participants were asked to complete prior to the focus group. While not collected in the demographic survey, based on responses from an initial “go-around” question, the vast majority of participants were long-term residents of Antelope Valley, with some having lived there more than 30 years. There were a total of 40 focus group participants, 14 youth (35%) and 26 adults (65%). Participants in youth focus groups ranged in age from 14 to 17 years-old, with an average of approximately 15.6 years-old. Adult focus group participants were skewed wherein the majority identified as 35 years-old or older. Approximately 87% of participants identified as persons of color, with nearly three-quarters (70%) indicating Hispanic or Latino, 10% Black, and 7% multi-racial. There was a robust mix in terms of participants’ prior engagement with LASD, with more than one-third (37.5%) noting either themselves or family members had been stopped, arrested, or ticketed and nearly half (45.0%) indicating that they, or someone in their family, had made a request to LASD for assistance. Participants were nearly divided in half in terms of their residence, with 55.0% indicating Palmdale, 45.0% selecting Lancaster.





***Qualitative Themes from Focus Groups***

Table 1 on the following page provides a brief overview of the 12 themes identified from qualitative data analysis. Following the table, each theme is described in detail and supported by de-identified direct quotes from focus group participants.

*Table 1. Twelve Themes Identified from Antelope Valley Resident Focus Groups*

	<i>Cross-Cutting (Adults and Youth)</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Youth</i>
<i>Perceptions of Public Safety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived safety within neighborhoods is highly variable (Theme One)</li> <li>Patrolling by LASD is also highly variable (Theme Two)</li> </ul>		
<i>Perceptions of the Sheriff's Department</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>No clear consensus among residents about the perceived benefit or detriment of LASD's visibility or patrolling (Theme Three)</b></li> <li>Shared belief about the role and purpose of LASD ("<i>to keep people safe</i>") (Theme Four)</li> <li>Mutual consensus that LASD was discriminatory toward racial/ethnic populations (Theme Seven)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledged a "<i>mix</i>" in terms of the quality of deputies, but overall they do their job well (Theme Five)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More critical of LASD and the job they are doing within their neighborhoods (Theme Six)</li> </ul>
<i>What the Sheriff's Department is Doing Well and Areas for Improvement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need for translation, culturally competent officers (Theme Ten)</li> <li>Continued and additional community engagement would improve community relations (Theme Eleven)</li> <li>Residents also have a responsibility in cultivating positive relationships with LASD (Theme Twelve)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Described and appreciated the LASD's increased community engagement (Theme Eight)</li> <li>Response time from LASD is slow (Theme Nine)</li> </ul>	

### ***Perceptions of Public Safety***

Both adult and youth focus group participants were asked to state their opinion about perceived safety within their respective neighborhoods. As evidenced by the following two, cross-cutting themes, there appeared to be consensus among all participants, regardless of age, that public safety overall was highly variable and dependent upon specific geographies throughout Antelope Valley.

#### **Theme One (cross-cutting): Residents’ perceived safety within their neighborhoods is highly variable.**

Both adults and youth provided widely varied descriptions, accounts, and indicators of perceived public safety within their neighborhoods. While this finding is perhaps unsurprising, it is an important theme nonetheless as it provides some evidence of the diversity of participants and serves as a reminder of the heterogenous lived experiences of the adults and youth who self-selected for the focus groups. The following statements from multiple adult and youth focus group participants highlight the range of perceived public safety within Antelope Valley neighborhoods:

*“I feel safe. Sometimes people go out on evening walks, and I go.”*

*“Palmdale is weird. All around the east side it’s good. And then over there it’s bad. And then it’s the west side and it’s good again.”*

*“The area that we live in, I don’t feel is very safe. We are out east in the major part, where there’s a lot of drug dealers. And we hear a lot of shooting.”*

#### **Theme Two (cross-cutting): The frequency of LASD’s patrolling – and overall visibility of the Department generally – within neighborhoods is also highly variable.**

Similar to the previous theme, both groups of participants also described considerable variability in terms of the extent to which LASD patrols, or is present, within neighborhoods. Nearly all participants described one of two extremes, either a constant presence (“*every day*”) or near absence (“*never*”) of deputies or patrol cars. These two brief accounts demonstrate the range of responses provided by both adults and youth: “*You never see them!*” and “*I have to say the opposite, because we see the sheriffs here almost every day.*”

### ***Perceptions of the Sheriff’s Department***

Four of the questions asked of both adult and youth residents clustered around their perceptions of LASD within Antelope Valley. Focus group participants were asked their opinions about the role of LASD within their neighborhood, confidence that crimes are fully and fairly investigated, experiences with LASD, and how well overall the Department is “doing their job.” A number of themes emerged that were cross-cutting or specific to either adults or youth and are detailed below.

**Theme Three (cross-cutting): There was no clear consensus among residents about the perceived benefit or detriment of LASD’s visibility or patrolling within neighborhoods.**

Both adults and youth were somewhat mixed in terms of whether or not LASD’s presence was positive, useful, or intimidating. One Palmdale High School junior frankly stated that they felt “safe...they’re doing their job” when LASD was present in their neighborhood. Though another student followed this comment with a differing sentiment:

*“There’s no reason you should be paying attention to my business. I understand you’re a police officer, but I’m not doing anything to harm anyone around me. So they shouldn’t be paying attention to me like that. Just keep away.”*

Another exchange between three adult participants also highlighted the lack of consensus about residents’ response to the presence of LASD within communities. One adult Palmdale resident disclosed: “if the police were here more often, then we would feel more safe.” This was trailed by another participant who added: “Most of the people, when they see cops they are afraid, because they are afraid that they are coming to arrest somebody.”

**Theme Four (cross-cutting): Among both adults and youth there is general agreement about the role and purpose of the LASD, which centers on protecting and serving the community.**

Responses to the question asking participants to describe the “role of the Sheriff’s Department within your neighborhood” yielded similar findings from both adults and youth. Narratives were overwhelmingly positive and did not revolve around potentially negative associations, such as policing, incarcerating, or punishing. Rather, nearly every description centered on protecting, helping, and serving. For example, characterizations of the law enforcement role included: “to protect and serve,” “keep the people safe,” or “keeping peace.” One participant further articulated the overarching sentiment, but also provided a more nuanced explanation of the role of LASD:

*“Going back to the question about what you think the role of the officers is to me, it’s for them to have skills to mediate, or have resolutions when crises happen. Or you know, any conflict that happens.”*

**Theme Five (adults): Adults acknowledged that there is a “mix” in terms of quality of law enforcement, but conceded that most deputies are satisfactory and do their job well.**

Adult participants were more likely than youth to volunteer the opinion that there is some variability in terms of the overall quality of deputies serving the Antelope Valley. However, there was also a perception that overall, officers for the most part, are trying to do their job well. The statement by one Palmdale resident articulates the theme:

*“There’s so much crime, where would we be without them [deputies]? Although we have some bad ones, but most of them are pretty good.”*

Another Lancaster resident declared:

*“And you’ve got good cop, bad cop. Anytime you have an organization of that size you can have some bad apples.”*

Taking this one step further, another participant from the same focus group later expounded upon this concept by stating:

*“I have complete confidence they would investigate. And do their job effectively. Of course there’s bad apples. Unfortunately, what often happens is it only takes one or two people to destroy the image of a whole department. We don’t hear the positive stories, the media focuses on the negative. And that’s what we get, and I think that’s where a lot of the perception comes from.”*

In addition to this acknowledgment that there is a mix of law enforcement, many adult participants provided testimonies of positive interactions with LASD throughout the Antelope Valley. Reinforcing the idea that there is a mix of law enforcement, one participant noted: *“So that’s why I said on the west side—we lived on the west side before, in Lancaster. Beautiful police officers over there!”* Another resident shared their experience seeking assistance from the LASD:

*“I went to the station because I keep getting these people who come to my house because they know I live alone. . . You can tell when someone doesn’t belong. They say they’re from ADT. But I didn’t call ADT. And immediately I just call the Sheriff’s Department and they said you need to tell your neighbors what’s going on so that they know so that they can watch. And the Sheriff’s department has been very courteous, they’ve come through and gone through and talk to people when I’ve asked what we can do to make our house a little more secure.”*

While adult participants provided accounts of many positive experiences with LASD, it should also be noted that some described contradictory experiences. After explaining their position – *“And I understand both sides of the sword. Most officers become officers because they want to protect and serve. But that doesn’t always end up happening”* – this participant went on to describe incidents of the *“borderline harassment”* and *“aggressive”* treatment of disenfranchised communities. In another group, one participant voiced frustration about the dismissive nature of LASD officers in handling cases of theft and assault.

### **Theme Six (youth): Youth were as a whole more critical of LASD and the job they are doing within their neighborhood.**

When compared with adults, youth were more likely to be critical of law enforcement and vocal about their negative experiences. However, while a smaller number of youth expressed some degree of ambivalence – *“they’re not doing a bad job, they’re not doing a great job. They’re doing an okay job”* – the majority of reports were negative and stemmed from personal experiences with LASD or their families’ experiences. Several young individuals described and were critical of a perceived excessive use of force. For example, incidents of *“unnecessary violence”* that resulted in family members being *“pinned”* and multiple people handcuffed were detailed. One youth described LASD who *“raided”* their house, using a *“big old thing to knock*

*down the door.*” Another disclosed witnessing a “*tazing*” of a homeless male. Yet another youth described what was perceived to be a negative encounter with law enforcement and added: “Yeah, I feel like they do investigate, but I don’t feel like they investigate appropriately.”

A minority of youth provided positive feedback about and experiences with law enforcement, including a small contingent who had applied to the LASD’s Deputy Explorers Program or ROTC. In their descriptions, two youth characterized LASD as “*cool*” or “*chill*” and noted that they “*let you go with a warning.*”

**Theme Seven (cross-cutting): The majority of adults and youth participants believed that the LASD did not treat all racial or ethnic groups equally.**

Regardless of the disagreement between adults and youth in terms of the overall quality of LASD officers, both groups agreed that the Department did not treat groups equally, particularly on the basis of race or ethnicity. While adult respondents were on average positive about the overall recent quality of officers within the Department (Theme Five), it was also apparent that the majority of participants believed that people of color were treated unfairly. Many provided opinions without citing specific incidents. For example, some of the following declarations were made: “*In most cases it depends on the color of the skin*” or “*I think there’s a lot of racial profiling going on*” or “*Well I think, they don’t treat them [different races/ethnicities] the same. There is a lot of discrimination towards African Americans and Latinos. . .*” Also, an African-American woman with a White husband perceived differential treatment of each of their families.

***What the Sheriff’s Department is Doing Well and Areas for Improvement***

Both youth and adults were asked what LASD was “doing well” and what the organization “can do better to support your neighborhood.” The following three themes emerged – one adult specific, the other two cross-cutting.

**Theme Eight (adults): Adult participants frequently described and appreciated the LASD’s increased community engagement.**

Perhaps the most promising theme identified by adult participants emerged from their collective agreement that LASD has been actively involved with community outreach and engagement efforts. This was true despite less than 20% of participants indicating they were involved with LASD community meetings (see Figure 5). In many cases, this finding was spontaneously noted by participants without prompting. In other instances, it was offered by residents when directly asked what LASD was “doing well.” When encouraged to articulate a specific timeframe, nearly all noted relatively recent changes, using qualifiers such as “*within the last five years*” or “*recently*” or “*in the last few years.*” The following statements highlight adult residents’ overall favorable perception of LASD’s community engagement and interactions with the community:

*“I feel like the Sheriff’s department is doing a lot more community outreach and they are more present in events and in the community. People aren’t afraid anymore to approach them. They’re very approachable.”*

*“I would say the last five years, there seems to be a lot more community engagement. And it’s positive.”*

*“I can admit to that. I mean, my experiences aren’t the most positive, but I can definitely admit to seeing them at more events.”*

One Antelope Valley resident provided a detailed account of a positive interaction during which LASD very clearly exceeded expectations:

*“They come to those meetings. I know they go to other community meetings. They’re there, they engage people. They were more than friendly when they came to my class. They were giving students their personal cell phone numbers. They were telling them if you have any issues call me. They don’t have to do that. These are not just the deputies, these are the sergeants, the lieutenants that I’ve had in class that are saying, ‘hey, here’s my number, if you know something, if you see something, if you want to talk about something, just call me.’”*

**Theme Nine (adults): Many focus group participants experienced delayed response time when requesting assistance. And while frustrated, many were also sympathetic to the demands placed upon the Department.**

One consistently cited area for improvement involved LASD’s response time when they were called for assistance. While a small minority of adults described incidents wherein deputies were quick to respond to an incident, many adult participants disclosed that they had reached out to the LASD for assistance, but were frustrated by the slow response time. *“The police didn’t respond fast enough”* was a recurring sentiment expressed by many others: *“I have made a police report and no, the police don’t show up right away”* or *“When you have an emergency and you call them, they don’t come.”*

Yet, this frustration was also tempered with an understanding of the demands on the Department. Some noted that the officers have *“just too much territory to cover”* while others described the organization as *“seriously understaffed”* and still others acknowledged that *“there’s not enough manpower, not enough resources.”*

**Theme Ten (cross-cutting): Both adult and youth participants frequently cited a lack of translation services within LASD.**

Many participants were Spanish speakers or had family members whose primary language was Spanish. When asked whether or not LASD provides *“appropriate language assistance services”* Spanish speaking residents were vocal about and critical of the Department’s inability to effectively communicate with their community with one participant stating: *they do not have Hispanic officers that speak Spanish.* Others were quick to report instances wherein translation services were unavailable and the frustration that resulted, for example:

*“Nothing, never. Have you ever experienced a cop with an interpreter? Nope, not me. You know the cops, there’s no interpreter, we asked them if you can come, we wait for*

*hours. She's went through it too. She's experienced it too. You know. Just waiting and waiting and waiting."*

*"They should have someone in the office because I have been there... Well, I've experienced people that don't speak Spanish and no one is there. For us to communicate, if we have a question and no one is there to answer... also they have had forums groups that are being held at McDonald's, but the officers there don't speak Spanish. But it is important if you're making a meeting and you know that there's a high percentage of Hispanic people and you really want our community to be better, to have better service and for both the community and the Sheriffs to have a better communication, language is really important."*

A small minority of participants were hearing impaired or legally deaf and shared their experiences with the Department's ability to communicate with this minority population. One participant was initially hesitant to reveal their encounter, but then described an account with LASD:

*"I have something. The police, I don't understand sometimes, because I am deaf. I don't understand them a lot. And they don't understand me a lot. And sometimes they're yelling at me, but I don't understand them because I'm deaf. They are constantly yelling at me and one time one of them pointed a gun at me."*

Another participant recounted how a small group of hearing-impaired residents approached LASD with their concerns related to the lack of availability of American Sign Language (ASL) capability within the Department:

*"Yeah about two years ago we brought that up to the Sheriff's department. And they said oh, that's something that they're interested to know about and want to check out. I don't know if anything has changed. But we did bring it up a few years ago."*

### ***Suggestions to Improve Community Relations***

Toward the close of focus groups, participants were asked to provide specific suggestions about how LASD could improve community relations. While many individuals noted singular suggestions – such as the hiring of more Latino or Black deputies, recruiting personnel with non-military backgrounds, more “*watchdog*” community organizations for “*keeping them [LASD] in check,*” or community policing programs – the following two predominant themes emerged related to both the role of deputies and residents in improving community relationships.

#### **Theme Eleven (cross-cutting): Continued and additional community engagement with LASD would improve community relations.**

As highlighted in Theme 7, many adult participants readily acknowledged that recently, LASD has been more actively involved in community outreach and engagement efforts. Yet, both adult and youth participants also agreed that additional outreach would be valuable in establishing a more positive relationship between law enforcement and residents. It was evident that LASD's

presence at community events fostered positive perceptions of individual deputies and the Department as a whole. Participants conveyed true appreciation for LASDs community engagement efforts and described instances of deputies at neighborhood picnics handing out stickers to children, lauded the *Coffee with the Cops* program, and discussed the benefits of town hall meetings or student-Sheriff dialogues. These events served to “humanize” the Department and according to residents, decrease the fear response by making officers more approachable. Adults and youth both requested greater community engagement, as exemplified by the following narrative:

*“They should be more invested in the community. Like going out and going to events with the community and we can come out and meet them. Right now we are working to have that night out that, the National Night Out. A place where community members can come out and feel free to ask questions and mingle with them. . . .So we feel more connected with the officers.”*

In addition to attending community events, others noted the potential benefit of officers who take the time to simply speak on a personal level with residents. For example, some expressed the hope that officers could become friendlier or more approachable and wanted them to: *“Stop and say hi to people. When you see people, just come over and say hey I just wanted to say hi.”* One youth eloquently articulated an additional benefit of that could be achieved through LASD becoming more engaged, invested, and understanding of diverse neighborhoods, throughout Antelope Valley:

*“I feel like the cop should make more of an effort to get to know the neighborhoods. Much the time with people in the neighborhood see a crime happened they keep quiet because they are scared that if they say something they will either get hurt or killed or go to jail. I feel like cop should have more of a relationship with the neighborhood and that way it could help with crimes that are being committed.”*

### **Theme Twelve (cross-cutting): Residents also have a responsibility to cultivate positive relationships with LASD in their neighborhoods.**

Acknowledging that community relations is a “two-way street,” many residents also readily recognized their own role in improving relations. In addition to offering suggestions for LASD and their staff, many described the ways in which residents can cultivate better relationships with and perceptions of law enforcement throughout Antelope Valley. Across age groups many endorsed the belief that in order to achieve meaningful change and positive relations, “it has to be both sides.” The following two accounts exemplified this position:

*“What happens is that sometime as parents, or as Latinos, I have heard, well sometimes we do it to our own children. We create fear onto our children with the police because we say things like ‘if you misbehave then I’m going to call the police or look there’s a police there, he’s going to do something to you.’ I think that as a culture we need to stop saying those things and start saying that the police is there to help and they are there if you do something wrong and then there are consequences just like at home and outside of home.”*

*“But when you do see them, they’re very courteous. As you’ve stated, I’ve raised all of my children to respect the police. Not to fear them. If you are respectful, then you deserve to be treated with respect.”*

## Conclusion

The underlying purpose of the qualitative research effort and this report was to supplement and contextualize the quantitative Antelope Valley community survey; it is also designed to provide in-depth descriptions of, as well as lived experiences from, community residents surrounding their perceptions of law enforcement. Data analysis of the five focus groups with adult and youth residents generated meaningful themes, many of which allow for a depth or dimensionality often difficult to achieve in survey research alone.

Utilizing a robust data analysis and coding procedure, eleven themes were identified. The majority were cross-cutting, though three were specific to adults, and one limited only to youth respondents. Results revealed that both adults and youth held similar positive beliefs about the purpose or role of LASD within their community (namely “*to protect and serve*” and “*keeping peace*”) and overall provided positive feedback about deputies’ ability to maintain public safety. While adults overall were more favorable in their assessment of LASD’s job performance – and youth were on the whole more critical – both groups were also critical of LASD’s treatment of residents of color and consistently noted perceived discrimination against Black and Latino populations.

Adult participants consistently discussed the increased community engagement on the part of LASD that has occurred over the last few years and have welcomed these positive interactions with deputies within the community. Both also groups offered meaningful ways in which the relationship between residents and the LASD could be improved, namely through increased community engagement on the part of LASD officers. Residents also acknowledged a personal responsibility in cultivating positive relationships with LASD in their neighborhoods through their own mutual involvement, compliance, and awareness. Many individual participants noted singular suggestions for improved community relations – such as the hiring of more Latino or Black deputies, recruiting personnel with non-military backgrounds, more “*watchdog*” community organizations for “*keeping them [LASD] in check,*” or even community policing programs.

Participants demographics in the focus groups, were not representative of the overall AV population with regard to race or ethnicity. While not generalizable to all residents of Antelope Valley, these findings – particularly when viewed in conjunction with the quantitative survey findings – provide valuable context and a pathway forward for both community engagement and future inquiry.

## Appendix A: Focus Group Questions: Antelope Valley Residents<sup>8</sup> / Brief Demographic Survey

1. We would like to conduct a brief “go-around” and have everyone tell each other a bit about your history in Antelope Valley. (*Prompts: How long you have lived here? Worked here? Had family residing here? Attended school here?*)
2. We would like to know a bit more about your neighborhood. In your opinion, how safe is your neighborhood/place of employment? (*Prompts: How safe do you feel walking around your neighborhood? Are you unconcerned/concerned about your safety? How often are you out in public spaces? Are you comfortable walking near your home or being outside?*)
3. Please describe the role of the Sheriff’s Department within your neighborhood. (*Prompts: Do they patrol your neighborhood regularly? What do you see them do/what actions do you see them take? How frequently do you see them? What purpose do they serve?*)
4. If you or a family member were the victim of a crime, how confident are you that it would be fully and fairly investigated? If confident, why? If not confident, why not? [*Asked of adults only*]
5. Have you or your family had any direct experience with the Sheriff’s Department? If so, when was this experience and what was it like? (*Prompts: Have you or your family been stopped by the Sheriff’s Department while in a public place? Stopped by the Sheriff’s Department while in a car? Participated in youth programs offered by the sheriff’s Department? Requested assistance from the Sheriff’s Department?*)
6. We will follow this question with a few specific requests, but overall, how well do you think the Sheriff’s department in your community are doing their job?
  - a. Do they investigate crimes fairly?
  - b. Are they welcomed in your neighborhood or do they make you feel unwelcome in your neighborhood?
  - c. Do they provide appropriate language assistance services (translator, interpreter) where needed? Do any of you know anyone who needed them? [*Asked of adults only*]
  - d. Do they treat diverse groups of residents equally?
  - e. Do they impact families’ ability to maintain housing? [*Asked of adults only*]
6. In your opinion, what is the relationship is like between the Sheriff’s Department and youth throughout Antelope Valley? (*Prompts: Is the Sheriff’s Department aware of the problems youth face today? Is the department supportive of youth? Do you feel that you and your close friends have ever been unfairly targeted?*) [*Asked of youth only*]
7. In your opinion, can the relationship between your community and the Sheriff’s Department be improved? If so, how? If no, why?
8. What can the Sheriff’s Department do better to support your neighborhood? What is the Sheriff’s Department doing well? If you could change one thing about the Sheriff’s Department, what would it be?

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<sup>8</sup> As noted some questions were asked only of adults. Other questions were modified slightly for youth.

9. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not asked about that helps inform our understanding of the relationship between neighborhoods in Antelope Valley and the Sheriff’s Department?

## Demographic Survey<sup>9</sup>

### Adult Focus Group Demographic Survey

	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55 or over	
Age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Black	White	Hispanic / Latino	Native American	Asian / Pacific Islander	Other
Race [check all that apply]	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Male	Female	Transgender	Other		
Gender identity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>		
	Palmdale	Lancaster	Other	If other please note below:		
City of Residence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>			
				Yes	No	
Have you or anyone in your family been stopped, ticketed or arrested by a Sheriff's Department deputy in the Antelope Valley?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
				Yes	No	
Have you or anyone in your family made a request for service with the Sheriff's Department in the Antelope Valley?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
				Yes	No	
Have you or anyone in your family participated in the lawsuits against LASD?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
				Yes	No	
Have you or anyone in your family been actively involved with the CACs or community meetings held by LASD or the Monitoring Team?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
				Yes	No	
Have you or anyone in your family ever worked in law enforcement?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
				Yes	No	
In the last 2 years, have you used Section 8 vouchers or public housing assistance in the AV?				<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

<sup>9</sup> Adult and Youth Demographic Survey are identical except for the age groups: the youth survey’s age group options were 14, 15, 16, 17 or 18.