



Seattle Office of
Police Accountability

2023

POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY COMMUNITY SURVEY REPORT



Table of CONTENTS

• Project Background	3
• Survey Results	4
○ Police Activity Awareness	5
○ Experiences with the Police	6-7
○ Filing a Complaint	8
○ The Importance of Police Accountability	9
○ OPA Awareness	10
○ Belief in Effectiveness of Reporting	11
○ Ways to Hold Police Accountable	12
• Next Steps by OPA	13

Project

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2023, the Seattle Office of Police Accountability (OPA) partnered with local research firm [EMC Research](#) to explore community awareness of and opinions about Seattle's police accountability system, particularly OPA. While the survey was open to everyone, **we especially wanted to hear from communities disproportionately impacted by policing based on SPD Terry stops and use-of-force data.** OPA shall be responsive to community needs by obtaining information about community perspectives and concerns germane to OPA access and OPA's oversight responsibilities. The results from this survey will guide OPA's community outreach work – helping ensure those most likely to need our services are aware of and have access to them.

Identifying Audiences

We determined our key audiences by looking at data from the *2021 Center for Policing Equity report* which found, among other things, that Black and Native American people experienced higher rates of Seattle Police Department (SPD) use of force. Confirming this was the 2022 Seattle Police Monitor [report](#) which similarly found that “Black and Native American persons in Seattle are disproportionately stopped, detained, and/or subjected to force by Seattle police.”

To accomplish this, we worked with EMC Research to design and distribute a survey targeting our key audiences who we identified as:

- Those who identify as male (164 responses)
- Black men, including African American and African immigrants (73 responses)
- Indigenous/Native American populations (13 responses)

We also considered the following data when making our determinations:

- Seattle demographic data from the [U.S. Census](#)
- Population density data from the [2020 U.S. Census](#)
- Neighborhood racial demographics from the [U.S. Census](#) and University of Washington's "[Mapping Race and Segregation in Seattle and King County 1940-2020](#)"
- OPA complainant data between 2020-2022
- SPD [Terry stops](#) and [use-of-force](#) data

Distribution

OPA staff distributed the survey in-person at community events across the city, and online in OPA's digital monthly newsletter and on its social media. Out of the 475 respondents, 223 self-identified with being a member of at least one of our key audiences.¹

¹ During the survey period, August 28 through October 24, 2023, we received 475 responses to the survey.

Survey RESULTS

EMC Research compiled the survey results, highlighting our key audiences' responses. Please note that smaller sample sizes mean larger margins of error. We, therefore, recommend interpreting the results – especially those from Indigenous/Native American respondents – from a qualitative perspective, without assuming they represent the target populations.

The following chart is a demographic breakdown of respondents by outreach method.

Demographic		OPA in Person	Social Media
Gender	Male-identifying	27%	39%
	Female-identifying	70%	44%
	All others/refused**	3%	17%
Age	18-29	19%	8%
	30-49	48%	52%
	50-65	23%	20%
	65+	7%	14%
Self-ID Ethnicity	African American or Black	35%	5%
	Hispanic or Latino	20%	5%
	Asian/Asian American	7%	7%
	Indigenous/Native American	4%	2%
	White or Caucasian	33%	68%
Geography	South/West Seattle	40%	24%
	Rest of Seattle	40%	61%
	Outside of Seattle***	18%	6%

*Research and report provided by Ian Stewart, Senior Principal, and Ayse Toksoz, Senior Director, EMC Research. Graphics provided by the Office of Police Accountability.

**Gender category options also included: 1) Non-binary, 2) Another identity (Please specify _____), and 3) Prefer not to respond. Collectively, these options were less than a percent, so EMC incorporated them into "All others/refused."

***Outside of Seattle includes those who do not live in Seattle, but work, visit, or attend school in Seattle.

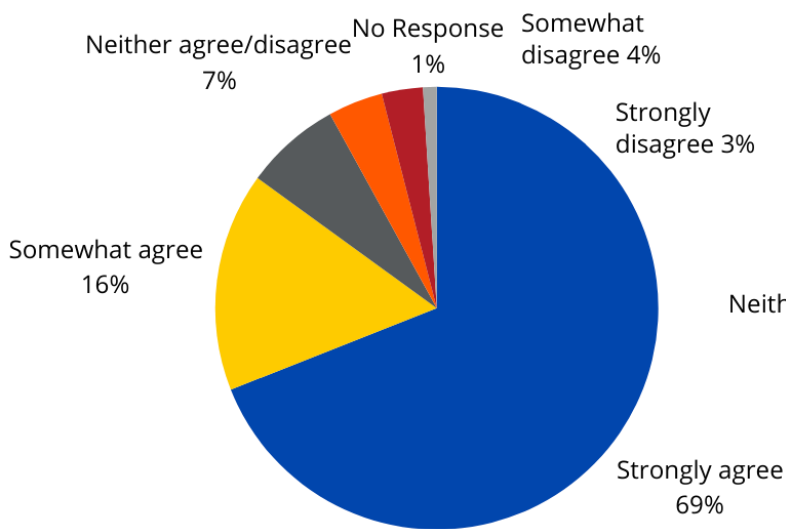
POLICE

ACTIVITY AWARENESS

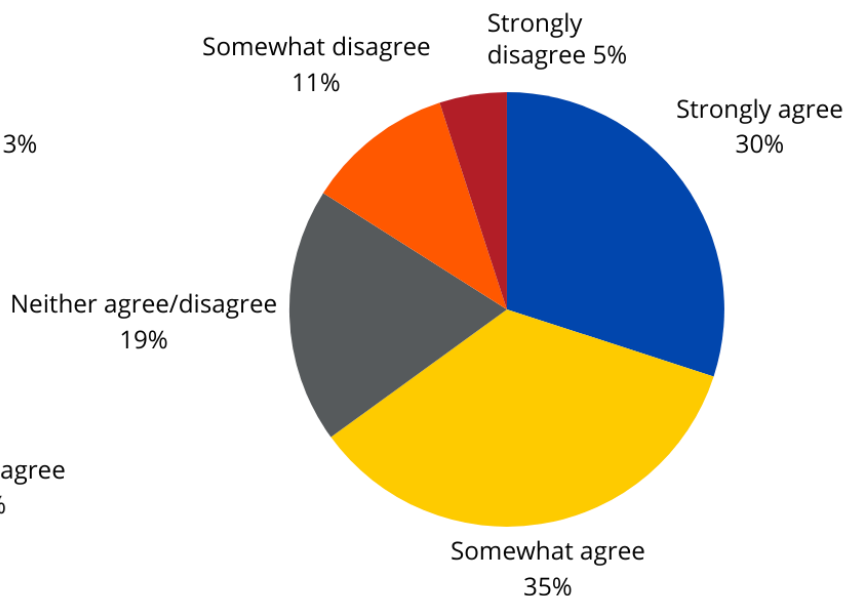
Police Activity Awareness

Around two-thirds of those surveyed agree with the statement, “People in my neighborhood talk about what’s happening with the police frequently.” The agreement with the statement among men and among Indigenous/Native American respondents is similar to overall levels and higher among Black respondents, suggesting that Black communities may be more aware of police related news.

“I have recently heard or read about police misconduct in Seattle” (N=475)



“People in my neighborhood talk about what’s happening with the police frequently” (N=475)



78%

The agreement with the statement, “People in my neighborhood talk about what’s happening with the police frequently” among Black respondents is high (78%), suggesting Black communities may be more engaged in police-related news. That said, awareness around recent police misconduct seems even among key audiences; 85% overall; 86% among key audiences (combined); 89% among men; 82% among Black respondents.

EXPERIENCES

WITH THE POLICE

Most (85%) Indigenous/Native American respondents report having experienced issues and negative experiences during their police encounters.^{2,3}

Overall, 18% of respondents agreed with the statement, “Nobody I know has had any experiences with an SPD officer in the past two years,” and levels of reported encounters and this figure is the exact same among key audiences. Chance encounters/non-crime related encounters, calling police to ask for help or questions, calling police as witness or victim of a crime, and community meetings or events are the most common causes of police interactions.

Have you, or has someone you know, had an experience with an SPD officer in the past two years? * (N=475)	Percentage
Chance encounter or non-crime related encounter	30%
Traffic stop	16%
Traffic crash	10%
Called police to ask for help or questions	21%
Called police as witness or victim of a crime	24%
Community meetings or events	22%
Arrest	8%
Other (Not specified)	12%
Nobody I know has had any experiences with an SPD officer in the past two years	18%
No response	3%

**Multiple responses accepted.*

Less than a third (27%) of those who reported having experienced a police encounter in the past two years thought the police officer gave a reasonable explanation for their contact, 27% overall responded “No.” Half of Indigenous/Native American respondents feel that they weren’t given a reasonable explanation; the rate is lower for Black respondents with 21% feeling that way.

Only 1-in-3 overall report not having a negative experience during police encounters, with the rest reporting unprofessional behavior, use of force, biased policing, or other issues—or a combination of those. Only 20% Indigenous/Native American respondents to this question report not having a negative experience.

² Issues and Negative issues are how EMC referred to "Unprofessional behavior" "Use of force" "Biased policing" and "Other" combined.

³ 13 respondents identified as Indigenous/Native American populations.

EXPERIENCES

WITH THE POLICE CONTINUED

The survey asked respondents – who either had or knew someone with concerning SPD interactions – what actions were taken to report those concerns.

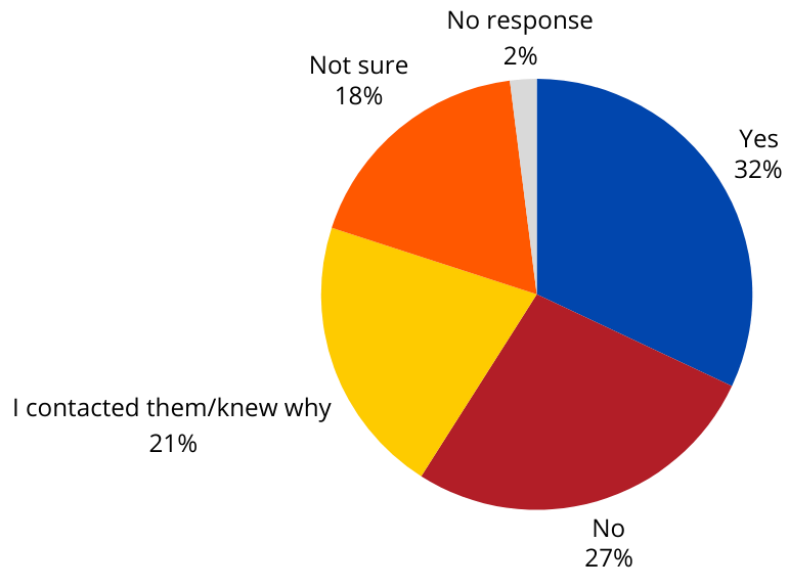
If a complaint was filed: “Where did you file the official complaint?”* (N=41)	
OPA	63%
SPD	21%
Filed online	11%
Filed with City of Seattle or WA State government	5%

*The responses were open-ended, verbatim, and categorized into the subsets above by EMC Research.

If a complaint was NOT filed: “What kept you from doing something about the issue you experienced?”* (N=106)	
Lack of trust/belief that anything would happen	60%
Didn't know what to do	10%
Fear of retaliation/of SPD	10%
Minor issue	5%
Didn't have time	4%
Spoke directly to police	2%
Other	7%
Don't know/refused	2%

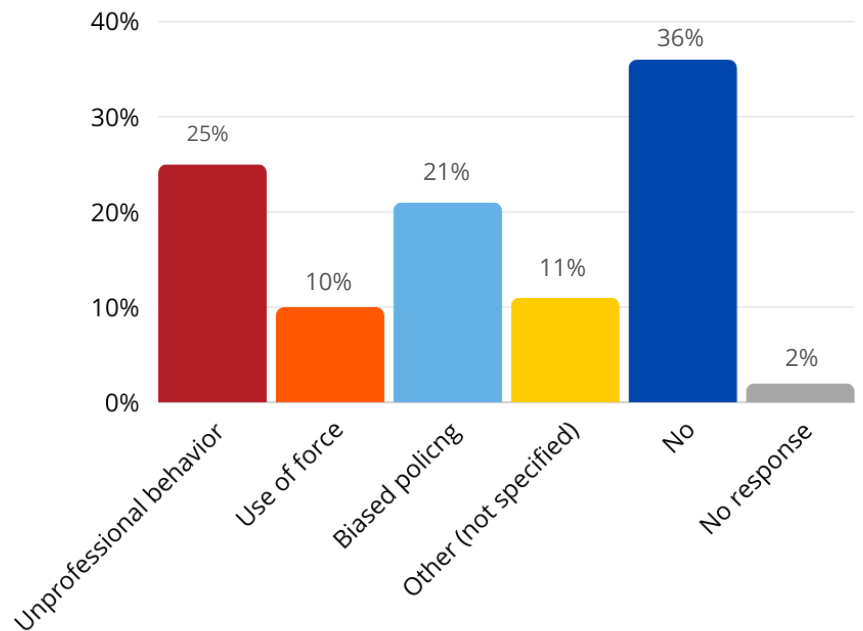
*The responses were open-ended, verbatim, and categorized into the subsets above by EMC Research.

“Regardless of the outcome, did the police officer give a reasonable explanation for their contact?” (N=376)



“Did you or the person you know have any of the following issues during the police contact?”* (N=376)

*Multiple responses accepted.



FILING

A COMPLAINT

Those with a problematic SPD experience were asked whether they chose to file a complaint and, if so, how the complaint was filed.

“Did you or the person you know share your experience in any of the following ways?”* (N=194)	
Filed an official complaint	9%
Hired a lawyer	4%
Talked to news reporters	5%
Talked to a community advocate	4%
Talked to a church leader	3%
Other	5%
Have not done anything	22%
No response	1%

*Multiple responses accepted. Please note that due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

“Some people say they have chosen not to report police misconduct for a variety of reasons. Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons people might give for choosing not to report.” (N=475)							
Statements	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A	No response
“It wouldn’t have made a difference.”	49%	24%	9%	6%	9%	3%	1%
“Police oversight is biased.”	47%	21%	13%	8%	7%	3%	0%
“I’ve heard that nothing happened after others took action, so I didn’t bother.”	45%	22%	13%	5%	10%	5%	0%
“I wanted to file a court case instead.”	10%	9%	33%	11%	21%	16%	1%

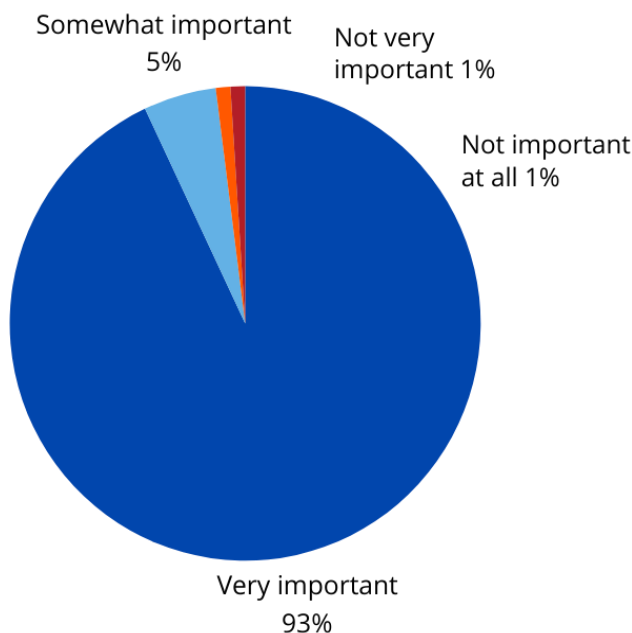
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THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY

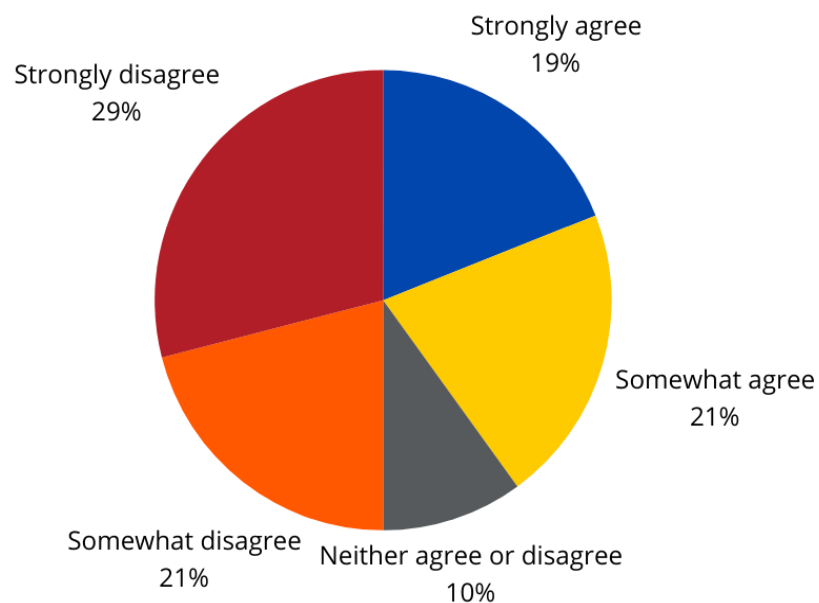
There is near-universal agreement that police accountability is essential, and our key audiences value the concept as much as other demographics. Almost everyone (98% overall) says police accountability is important for Seattle, with 93% considering it “very important.”

A majority of Black and Indigenous/Native American respondents say they know how to report negative police experiences. A large plurality (41%) of respondents say, “If I have a negative experience with a Seattle police officer, I know how to report it” (note: respondents were not asked whether that meant reporting it to the City or the OPA). After being presented with some basic information about OPA's work, 96% say it is important for Seattle to have a department that holds SPD officers accountable, with this rating being very high across demographics and audiences.

“How important is it for Seattle to have police accountability?” (N=475)



“If I have a negative experience with a Seattle police officer, I know how to report it” (N=475)



- Knowledge of how to report is higher among in-person respondents (50% Agree) than those via social media (36%), as well as among Black respondents (64%) and Indigenous/Native American respondents (62%).⁴
- The key audiences combined (those who identify as men, Black, or Indigenous) agree with the statement, “If I have a negative experience with a Seattle police officer, I know how to report it ” at higher rates (50%).

⁴ 13 Respondents identified as Indigenous/Native American populations.
2023 Police Accountability Community Survey Report

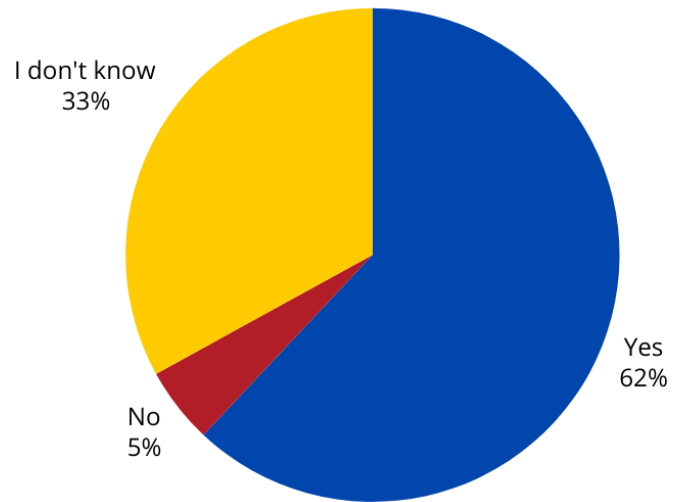
OPA

AWARENESS

There is a distinct split in OPA awareness by survey mode. A large proportion of those responding to the social media survey are aware of OPA (70% Had Heard), while a plurality of those at tabling events were not (42% Had Not Heard).

The modes of distribution potentially inflate awareness among both groups, a factor that should be considered when interpreting the data. However, awareness gauged at the tabling events may reflect the general community. Notably, male respondents exhibit a higher level of OPA awareness than women. OPA awareness among all key audience members aligns with overall levels.

“Does Seattle have a department specifically tasked with investigating police misconduct?” (N=475)



“How did you hear about the Office of Police Accountability?” (N=372)

OPA’s Website	8%
A friend or family member	10%
Social media	24%
At an event	9%
Cannot remember	12%
Other*	37%

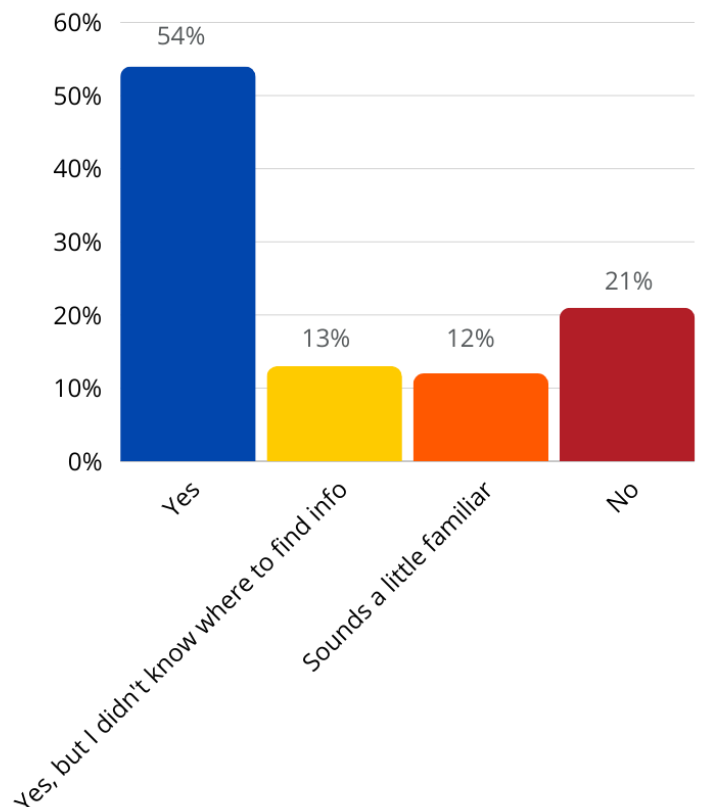
**EMC did not provide the responses for “Other”*

“If you needed to file a complaint with OPA, what method(s) would you use?”* (N=475)

Phone	25%
Email	31%
Form on the OPA website	61%
In-person	17%
Other (Not specified)	7%
No response	2%

**Multiple responses accepted.*

“Prior to this survey, had you heard of OPA?” (N=475)



BELIEF IN

EFFECTIVENESS OF REPORTING

Despite the perceived importance of police accountability, there is widespread skepticism about the effectiveness of reporting police misconduct.

“Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Seattle Office of Police Accountability (OPA)?” (N=475)						
Statements	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
I trust that the Seattle OPA will conduct a thorough investigation.	16%	21%	21%	12%	28%	1%
I am interested in learning more about the Seattle OPA and its work.	29%	30%	26%	8%	7%	1%
I am interested in attending community events organized by the Seattle OPA.	19%	26%	26%	14%	15%	0%
I worry that the Seattle OPA would side with the officer over the community member.	47%	19%	18%	7%	9%	0%
I worry that the Seattle OPA’s police investigations take too long.	41%	26%	26%	4%	3%	1%

*Please note that due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

When asked why people may not report police misconduct, pluralities of the major subgroups think “It wouldn’t have made a difference” (68% of those in person / 75% from social media), that “Police oversight is biased” (60% / 72%) and that it’s not worth bothering because nothing happened when other people have reported misconduct (59% / 71%). Few overall prefer filing a court case instead of reporting police misconduct (18%), but almost a third of Black respondents and 38% Indigenous/Native American respondents elect that option.⁵

⁵ 13 Respondents identified as Indigenous/Native American populations.

WAYS

TO HOLD POLICE ACCOUNTABLE

Trust in process

Respondents are split on whether they trust OPA to conduct a thorough investigation and many report concerns about the process.

Despite the high importance of having a body that works to hold the police accountable for misconduct, there is a belief that OPA would side with the officer over the community member and that OPA’s police investigations take too long, both overall and among key audiences.

Trust in OPA to conduct a thorough investigation is a minority position among most demographics, with the key exception of 60% of Black respondents expressing trust, and a majority of those responding in-person (56%).

Social media respondents express higher levels of mistrust around the process, with a majority disagreeing with the statement, “I trust that the Seattle OPA will conduct a thorough investigation” (55% Disagree). Social media respondents also agree with reasons not to file a complaint at higher rates, including suspecting that police oversight is biased.

What does holding police “accountable” look like to you?* (N=475)	
Consequences/accountability for officers	31%
Fire bad officers	18%
Community/independent oversight without police participation	9%
Transparency/clear expectations	7%
Make sure police do their job fairly/equally	7%
End qualified immunity	5%
Abolish/defund police	4%
Arrest/criminal liability for officers who commit crimes	3%
Training	2%
More support for police/lift up good officers	2%
End/reform the police union	2%
More informed hiring/Blacklist cops with disciplinary issues (at SPD or other depts)	2%
Other	5%
Don't know/Refused	3%
<i>*The responses were open-ended, verbatim, and coded into categories by EMC Research.</i>	

“Police exist to serve and protect the public, without bias, using the least amount of force necessary. Accountability means that there are meaningful consequences when they fail at any of those things, including disciplinary action of the officers involved - and their leadership, along with actionable plans to prevent similar conduct in the future.” - **Anonymous Community Member**

NEXT STEPS

BY OPA

The results of this survey show there is strong public support for police oversight in Seattle. Almost everyone surveyed (98%) said it's important for our city to have police accountability, with 93% giving it a "very important" rating.

While these numbers are encouraging, respondents also made it clear that there is much work to be done to build trust in OPA. For example, an overwhelming majority (66%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "police oversight is biased." And across demographics, there is a belief that OPA would side with officers over community members.

Rather than being discouraged by these results, we see them as an opportunity for learning and growth.

Encouragingly, most Seattleites knew about OPA and its services before taking the survey, with 67% reporting familiarity. Moreover, despite overall skepticism about Seattle's police accountability system, most respondents expressed interest in learning more about OPA and attending our in-person events – a priority for our office.

In 2023, our Community Engagement team hosted or attended over 60 events across Seattle, focusing on those most likely to reach marginalized communities. They attended community listening sessions, presented "[Know-Your-Rights](#)" trainings to high school students, and engaged community members impacted by policing.

We believe the high levels of community awareness demonstrated in this survey are a testament to the success of our outreach efforts.

Still, the survey results show that OPA needs to do significantly more to earn trust in Seattle's accountability system. **This survey is a crucial step, as it will shape OPA's understanding of community needs and expectations and inform how we serve Seattle communities.**

Our thanks to EMC Research for designing and helping us distribute this survey. And a special thanks to the almost 500 community members who shared their thoughts on policing and police oversight in Seattle.