



YOUTH AGENDA POLICY REPORT

THE WASHINGTON BUS
FELLOWSHIP
2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Washington Bus builds the political power of young people across Washington State. A key part of our programming is the Youth Agenda Survey, an issue based survey which is targeted at young Washingtonians. Each summer our Fellowship gives 15 young people the chance to learn from progressive experts from across the state, run the most innovative, effective, and fun civic programs in Washington State, and collaborate with community organizations and issue campaigns for hands-on organizing experience.

During the summer of 2020, the Covid 19 health crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement made organizing more urgent than ever. This was the first ever remote Fellowship, where Fellows used the tools of digital organizing to engage their peers in critical conversations about key issues that matter to them. The Youth Agenda Survey gives young people the chance to share their top policy priorities. This summer the Fellowship worked on deepening their understanding of three issues on the Youth Agenda survey: Climate Justice, Criminal Justice, and Housing for All.

HIGHLIGHTS

HOUSING FOR ALL

- Housing must be accessible to people with disabilities
- Housing instability and homelessness are interlocking issues
- Young people are urgently affected by student debt, and are increasingly rent burdened
- Stigma around housing instability is a crisis for students, and exacerbates mental health issues

CLIMATE JUSTICE

- Decentering whiteness is critical for an intersectional Climate Justice movement
- BIPOC communities, Immigrant communities, and other marginalized communities are most affected by climate change and must lead the conversation

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

- Mass incarceration and prisons must be abolished
- Rehabilitation, education and the removal of barriers to re-entry for those behind bars is critical
- Community led programs which give youth alternatives to the criminal justice system should be prioritized
- Public funding which reflects the priorities of BIPOC communities is crucial

THE PROCESS

The Fellows, as activist researchers, led a participatory research process:

- Reflecting on their own stories and experiences with these issues
- Facilitating group conversations with other young people to learn from each other
- Learning from organizations working on these issues

GET ON THE BUS:

The Washington Bus makes politics engaging, effective and fun. The Bus puts young Washingtonians in the driver's seat and gives them the tools to be organizers, legislators and leaders. We catalyze the energy and enthusiasm of young people to create sustainable, positive change in Washington State through civic education, voter engagement, and leadership development.



INTRODUCTION

For over ten years, the Washington Bus has been leading youth powered change in Washington State. A key part of our programming is the Youth Agenda Survey, an issue based survey which is targeted at young Washingtonians. Through our work on High School and College Campuses across Washington State, we have surveyed thousands of young people on which issues matter most to them. This summer, our Fellows worked to deepen their understanding of three key issues on the Youth Agenda Survey: Housing for All, Climate Justice, and Criminal Justice.

The issues on the **Youth Agenda Survey** are:

- Climate Justice
- Reproductive Justice
- Gun Reform
- Housing for All
- Criminal Justice
- Economic Justice
- Student Debt Reform
- Immigrant Rights

THE FELLOWSHIP

Each Summer, 15 young people between the ages of 18-25 begin the Washington Bus Summer Fellowship, where they learn the hands on skills of democracy, strengthen their understanding of racial and social justice, and work in committees to build youth powered campaigns.

This summer, the Fellows worked on three issues:

HOUSING FOR ALL

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Using the power of digital base building, Fellows facilitated **Peer Listening Sessions**, bringing together their peers to have meaningful conversations on what these issues mean to them. They reached out to **organizations doing work on these issues** to learn about their strategies and tactics to create change. Finally, they reflected on the impact these issues have on their own lives, building **personal narratives** that weave together everything they learned. As **activist-researchers**, Fellows focused on the power of youth organizing to engage their peers and deepen their knowledge.

Each committee has worked to produce policy recommendations that detail action steps youth can advocate for to improve our community. With all that being said, the Washington Bus Fellowship recognizes that we are building on the work that communities are already doing on these issues. The intentions of all of the work that has been done by the Fellows is to add to the conversation and labor that has already been paved by the communities most impacted in Washington State.

– Megan Thao, Washington Bus Fellow 2020

THE PROCESS

Through a participatory research process, Fellows sought to answer two key questions:

**HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE IN WASHINGTON STATE UNDERSTAND
THE IMPACT OF THESE ISSUES ON THEIR LIVES?**

**WHAT MEANINGFUL ACTION WOULD YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS
WASHINGTON LIKE TO SEE ON THESE ISSUES?**

PEER LISTENING SESSIONS

32

PLS participants

56

PLS surveys

Peer Listening Sessions (PLS) were virtual safe spaces where young people could come together to learn from each other on these issues, and to share their perspectives on what change they want to see in Washington State. Fellows facilitated these meetings, and used them as an opportunity to have deep conversations and learn from each other. They recruited from Washington Bus volunteers and their own networks.



HEARING FROM PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

**POST PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM
LA RESISTENCIA**

**HOUSING DEVELOPMENT CONSORTIUM
SEATTLE HOUSING AUTHORITY
REAL CHANGE**

**DUWAMISH RIVER CLEAN UP COALITION
SUNRISE TACOMA**

After their Peer Listening Sessions, Fellows worked to identify organizations doing work on these issues in Washington State. They reached out to learn from them about their work, and the best way that youth organizers can take action on these issues.



PERSONAL NARRATIVES

After reflecting on their peer listening sessions, each Fellow wrote a personal narrative that demonstrated how this issue shows up in their life and the life of the communities they are a part of. Personal narratives on policy areas that resonated for each Fellow used a story of self, story of us, story of now model.

The full report, with every Fellow's personal narrative, and their policy recommendations, can be shared by request; please email leila@washingtonbus.org. This snapshot gives a brief glimpse into the report by highlighting excerpts.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

We believe criminal justice reform means proactively working to address the root problems in this system. We recognize that the current mass incarceration problem stems from decades of racist legislation and institutional norms designed to work against socially marginalized communities. We further recognize that organizers have been doing this work for decades and that we need to build off of their work to continue to build momentum and power for systemic change. The issues we identify within criminal justice include: the school to prison pipeline, defunding and demilitarization of law enforcement, investing in our communities, rehabilitation over retribution, restoring the right to vote, and affordable and accessible housing.



The Washington Bus Fellowship Criminal Justice Committee

Rachel Smithers, Zawadi Chege, Rachel Izuagbe, Zubin Abraham Ahmed, and Gloria Gonzalez Zapata



“ [THIS CONVERSATION] HAS MADE ME EVEN MORE PASSIONATE ABOUT DISMANTLING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND ALLOCATING RESOURCES TO THE PEOPLE THAT NEED IT. ”

PEER LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

EDUCATION

In the school to prison pipeline, disciplined students are disproportionately Black, Native American, and disabled. For example, in the 2017-2018 school year, the discipline rate for Black students was 243% of the white student discipline rate in Washington's K-12 schools.

Schools can't be just without creating a safe, transparent, adaptive, and accessible environment for all students.



Rachel Smithers

PUBLIC FUNDING

In my last few years of high school, right before my eyes, I saw how public education programs and public college readiness courses were being defunded but other public initiatives like the new Children and Family Justice Center (more commonly known as the King County Youth Jail) were being funded. Public funding is a way that the local officials prioritizes what they believe the residents need and to fuel their own agenda. For years communities have been demanding funding for public resources and the defunding of prisons, jails, detention centers, juvenile detention centers, and law enforcement.

The Black Lives Matter movement brought to the forefront the idea of ending police brutality and incarceration of BIPOC by defunding the police and using public funds to invest in BIPOC communities.



Gloria Gonzalez-Zapata

COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES

Growing up as a Black, undocumented woman in a low income family, I had to endure a vast amount of roadblocks caused by the lack of resources and underfunded programs. I've witnessed how it prevents young people from reaching their full potential. We need to fund communities for folks to be provided with the resources they need in order to gain opportunities to succeed.



Zawadi Chege

Justice is not about punishment, it's about addressing the problem, changing the behavior, and restoring relationships.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

REHABILITATION

We need a system that works to support the changes necessary for someone to reintegrate into society after they have spent years isolated from the world. We have community members that work within rehabilitation centers and witness the obstacles that recently incarcerated people face.



Rachel Izuagbe

From lack of access to education to the loss of the right to vote, how can you truly believe an individual will succeed after incarceration when they are expected to fail at every step?

ABOLITION

Often instead of focusing on solutions such as defunding the police, they are increasingly militarized and funded. This investment is found to be detrimental to the community and society they have supposedly sworn to protect. Of course, this is in no way limited to the general law enforcement, as institutions like Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are just as harmful. The youth can see this simple and plain, which is why we demand solutions and a complete rebuilding of the system.



Zubin Abraham Ahmed

Reform is for something broken, not a system operating at peak capacity.

“THROUGHOUT OUR RESEARCH, YOUTH-CENTERED DISCUSSIONS, AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS, THIS CAMPAIGN HAS EMPHASIZED THE POWER OF COMMUNITY-CENTERED YOUTH-LED CHANGE. WHILE CREATING POLICY, IT'S NECESSARY TO EMPOWER THOSE WHO ARE MOST DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY THE U.S. CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, INCLUDING INTERSECTIONS OF BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR, DISABLED, QUEER, AND ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES.”

HOUSING FOR ALL

INTRODUCTION

We believe that housing is a human right, and people deserve safe, secure housing regardless of income or citizenship status. Homelessness continues to rise in Washington, which is why this issue needs to be addressed and prioritized. It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure affordable housing for students. Folks with disabilities, low income folks, and those with a criminal conviction all face increased barriers to housing. Housing insecurity also affects mental health and exacerbates mental health issues. We urgently need community care and support to make sure that young people can grow up with safe, secure, and affordable housing.

The Washington Bus Fellowship Housing for All Committee
Megan Thao, Fatima Jamal, Joanna Pelayo, JaNaya Hall, and Michael Ninen



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I WOULD LOVE TO SEE AFFORDABLE HOUSING ORGANIZERS WORK WITH CLIMATE CHANGE/JUSTICE ORGANIZERS TO ENSURE ALL HOUSING PROJECTS ARE MADE WITH CLIMATE JUSTICE AT HEART AND MIND. LOW INCOME AND HOMELESS FOLKS ARE IMPACTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE AND DO NOT NEED THEIR HOMES TO CONTRIBUTE FURTHER TO THE HARMS THEY THEMSELVES MUST FACE.

”

PEER LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

HOUSING FOR ALL

HOUSING INSTABILITY

From the listening session, I have found that many college-aged community members felt that the housing crisis was a conversation they could not be a part of. Although I grew up facing the inability to pay rent and relying on family members when we had to move, I also didn't feel like I could speak upon the housing crisis because I never experienced homelessness. Yet, housing instability is made up of many different factors. Having to choose between having food in your fridge versus paying rent is a form of housing instability. Having to take out loans to afford living in the school dorms is a form of housing instability.

The housing crisis is larger than people would think. It is important for youth now to take action.



Megan Thao

COLLEGE STUDENTS

Prior to Covid-19, housing for students was already unstable. The global pandemic we continue to face today has affected the living conditions and situations of more students. Many college students are forced to take out loans in order to pay for their living arrangements and school fees. We need to have rent control in place that prohibits landlords from charging students more than they can afford while also allowing them to afford their necessities.



Joanna Pelayo

We need to create affordable and accessible housing for college students.

HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

I've always been aware that housing accessibility would be something that I'd have to be cautious about because of my physical disability but I never expected affordability to be more of a privilege than a given right. From the age of six up until I was going into my Junior year of high school my family and I lived in a house that was affordable, but that did not mean it was accessible.



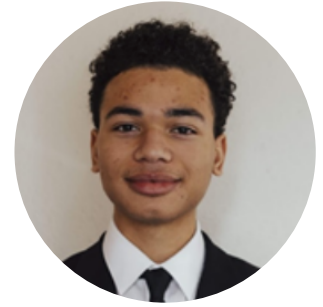
JaNaya Hall

Living with a disability should not lower the quality of living, but it is a reality for many who live with a disability.

HOUSING FOR ALL

COMMUNITY HEALING

I come from housing instability. When I was younger, the 2008 financial crisis left a huge impact on me and my family. We lost our home, but we never lost our community. Through our struggles we received support from church family, food banks, and social services. Without these community based resources we would never have been able to survive those rough times.



Michael Ninen

Sustainable and affordable housing needs to foster community. These services make a healthier community by enriching it from within.

MENTAL HEALTH

At a very young age, I had to face the harsh reality of housing instability. My family went from house to house of our family friends trying to find a place to sleep for the night. With my large family, we didn't mind being crammed in, as long as we had a roof over our heads. This instability and stress took a toll on my mental health. From our peer listening session, I noticed that many participants related to the connection between housing instability and mental health. I discovered my school wasn't the only one that never fully discussed homelessness and where students didn't receive enough support to help with their mental health.



Fatima Jamal

Schools need to have open discussions about homelessness and provide more mental health resources for those struggling without a secure place to stay.

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MOVING FORWARD, ADVOCATING FOR HOUSING FOR ALL SHOULD INCLUDE MORE TRANSPARENCY AND EDUCATION AMONG YOUTH. BEING ABLE TO LEARN WHERE STATE OFFICIALS STAND ON THE HOUSING CRISIS, UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF TENANT RIGHTS, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY OPEN CONVERSATION WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS WILL ALL HELP IN CREATING YOUTH ACTION TOWARD BUILDING EQUITABLE HOUSING IN WASHINGTON.

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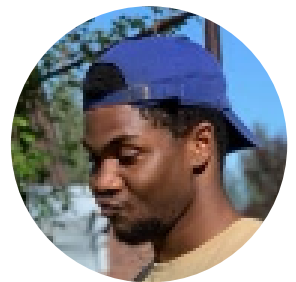
CLIMATE JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

Our climate is in crisis. Climate Justice looks to serve the most vulnerable and underrepresented identities that are and have been directly impacted by environmental issues. We seek equitable and restorative solutions to support the development of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Understanding that climate justice is an immigrant rights issue, a race issue, and an LGBTQ issue shifts the conversation from surface-level platitudes into a social justice perspective that rightfully makes way for BIPOC communities to take center-stage in the climate movement. Because they are already experiencing the effects of climate change, these groups are the most qualified to advocate for systemic changes.

The Washington Bus Fellowship Climate Justice Committee

Mina Zavary, Mumina Ali, Stephanie Chavez, Lupita Corona, and Chris Clay



“ I WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE PEOPLE EDUCATED ABOUT [CLIMATE JUSTICE] AND TAKING ACTION. ”

PEER LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

CLIMATE JUSTICE

INTERSECTIONALITY OF CLIMATE JUSTICE

While protecting natural ecosystems and species is vital, shallow environmentalist perspectives contribute to the misunderstanding of climate change as an issue caused by personal responsibility, not the compounding of man-made systems of oppression that have devastated the most vulnerable communities across the globe for decades now. Not only do immigrant communities often live in environmentally unsafe areas, but many were forced out of their homeland to Western nations as a result of conflict following ongoing instability around climate.

Every social movement is undeniably linked to climate justice,



Mumina Ali

CLIMATE POLITICS

Throughout the research that the Climate Justice Committee has performed, we have committed to move away from the reformist ideal and instead, focus on centering the voices of BIPOC's who have been impacted by climate change and climate injustices. This includes supporting progressive political candidates with progressive platforms. We have to support policy ideas like expanding funding for unionized, green jobs and training and prioritizing clean waterways over industrial use.

Overall, the mainstream political narrative must change from 'reform' to a radical climate justice approach which centers the voices and lives of impacted BIPOC's.



Stephanie Chavez

RESPECTING INDIGENOUS LAND

Indigenous people and tribes, such as the Duwamish Tribe, are still marginalized through the legacy of racist policies and laws here in Washington State. By refusing to federally recognize tribes throughout Washington State, the erasure of Indigenous life and culture continues. We can't keep teaching children that all the exploitation is a thing of the past. It isn't, it's still happening every day. We need to educate the youth of the historical and present truth.

Indigenous knowledge is critical to the Climate Justice movement.



Lupita Corona

CLIMATE JUSTICE

DECENTERING WHITENESS

Although climate change disproportionately affects BIPOC, they are left out of change consistently. The mainstream environmental movement is designed for the upper-class, white population, often excluding Black and brown folk. I believe it is crucial to stop centering white voices in the climate movement and instead listen to BIPOC. There is importance in letting communities most affected lead the way.



Mina Zavary

Decentering whiteness in the climate movement by inviting young BIPOC voices into typically white spaces is the best way to raise awareness of income inequality, systemic oppression, and racism, as the key drivers of climate change.

PAYING REPARATIONS

Growing up as a Black man in the United States, environmental racism has a direct impact on my life. My grandparents have a business near the Port of Tacoma, which has an increasing impact on air and water pollutants in Hilltop, a predominantly Black and low-income area. Therefore, these factors have played an essential role in my understanding of interconnectedness regarding reparations and climate justice. Reparations work to recognize those who have been segregated and disenfranchised, and actively search for unique solutions for each community affected.



Chris Clay

Reparations would serve as an acknowledgement that systemic oppression has prevented the flourishing of BIPOC communities.

“

THE POLITICAL CONVERSATION AROUND CLIMATE JUSTICE HAS BEEN AND IS PREDOMINANTLY CENTERED AROUND THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABILITY. OFTENTIMES, THIS EQUALS FINDING A FORM TO SUSTAINABLY CONTINUE TO POLLUTE AND EXPLOIT THE ENVIRONMENT RATHER THAN RADICALLY MOVING AWAY FROM THIS CAPITALIST NARRATIVE. MARGINALIZED BIPOC COMMUNITIES IN WASHINGTON STATE CONTINUE TO BEAR THE BRUNT OF CLIMATE INJUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HARMS.

”

CONCLUSION

This report highlights the change that we, the Fellowship Class of 2020, believe needs to take place on three crucial, interconnecting issues in Washington state. Throughout this process, we learned more about organizations that are already working to build power for change in their communities. We also learned that on every level, budget allocations do not reflect the demands of the communities that are impacted by said budget. Through a combination of hearing unique personal stories in our Peer Listening Sessions, hearing from community organizations, and reflecting on our own experiences and knowledge, we saw that youth have unique and valuable insight into the issues that impact them. Abolition, fighting for housing justice, and building climate justice is all collective work. Our stories matter – and so do the stories of the frontline communities of climate change, our friends and neighbors behind bars, and our unhoused neighbors who are disproportionately, Black, Indigenous, queer, and low income. If simply voting was the answer to these broad, complex, and deeply personal issues, then we would not be facing a crisis of racial injustice, a climate catastrophe, and a homelessness crisis in Washington State. Building youth power takes work; and the youth have already been doing this work in WA. It gives us hope to see the dedication, passion, and resilience of the many folks building power and making change.

THANKS TO

POST PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM

[HTTPS://POSTPRISONEDU.ORG/](https://postprisonedu.org/)

LA RESISTENCIA

[HTTPS://WWW.NWDCRESISTANCE.ORG/](https://www.nwdcreistance.org/)

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT CONSORTIUM

[HTTPS://WWW.HOUSINGCONSORTIUM.ORG/](https://www.housingconsortium.org/)

SEATTLE HOUSING AUTHORITY

[HTTPS://WWW.SEATTLEHOUSING.ORG/](https://www.seattlehousing.org/)

DUWAMISH RIVER CLEAN UP COALITION

[HTTPS://WWW.DUWAMISHCLEANUP.ORG/](https://www.duwamishcleanup.org/)

SUNRISE TACOMA

[HTTPS://HUBS.SUNRISEMOVEMENT.ORG/SUNRISETACOMA](https://hubs.sunrisemovement.org/sunrisetacoma)

STORYTELLERS FOR CHANGE

[HTTPS://WWW.STORYTELLERSFORCHANGE.ORG/](https://www.storytellersforchange.org/)

REAL CHANGE

[HTTPS://WWW.REALCHANGENEWS.ORG/](https://www.realchangenews.org/)

Find out more:

www.wabuseducationfund.org

www.washingtonbus.org

This report was compiled by Leila Reynolds for the Washington Bus Fellowship Class of 2020. Thanks to Fellows and to Peer Listening Session participants.