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# Zooming in: how organizations in the Movement for Black Lives use social media as a tool for localized political organizing

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Thesis

# ZOOMING IN:

# HOW ORGANIZATIONS IN THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR LOCALIZED POLITICAL ORGANIZING

by

**AASIYA SALWA MUHAMMAD NORRIS**

B.A., Boston University, 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Master of Arts

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*"Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society."*

John Lewis

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. To my grandparents whose dreams are the reason for my reality. To my Mom and Dad for loving me, supporting me, and encouraging me to always dream big and reach for the stars. To Tasneem, Sadiq, Leilani, and Mina for being my shoulder to lean on and loving me unconditionally. To Zachariah for giving me a reason to keep fighting. I love you all to infinity and beyond.

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**ZOOMING IN:**

**HOW ORGANIZATIONS IN THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR LOCALIZED POLITICAL ORGANIZING**

**AASIYA SALWA MUHAMMAD NORRIS**

ABSTRACT

The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has been largely recognized for its ability to mobilize millions of people around the issue of police violence against Black Americans. Considerable attention has been given to the role organizations in the M4BL have played in shaping public discourse by using organizing tools like social media, to draw national attention to the use of police force against Black Americans. Current scholarship brings attention to how political focus has been significantly directed at the national level. Additionally, the use of social media by organizations as a tool to broaden their political and organizational networks has also been studied. My research aims to shed light on instances when organizations use social media as a tool to shift the conversation about politics and policing to the local level and encourage localized political action. This study analyzes the Instagram use of 8 community organizations under the umbrella of the Movement for Black Lives, located in four regions across the United States, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. The posts of the organizations were coded based on three criteria: the type of post they were, the level of

government they referenced, and the type of political action they depicted or advocated for. The findings of this study suggest that zooming in and focusing on localized political discussion and action is a central component of the social media organizing strategy of community organizations in the Movement for Black Lives.

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| | |
|---|---|
| APTPO | Anti Police Terror Project Oakland |
| APTPS | Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento |
| BLM | Black Lives Matter |
| CAARPR | Chicago Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression |
| M4BL | Movement for Black Lives |
| NYPD | New York Police Department |

# INTRODUCTION

The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has played a key role in revolutionizing the methods used for social and political organizing in the modern era. It has been proven to have the capacity to mobilize millions of people by drawing widespread attention to the systematic abuse of Black Americans throughout the United States. Following the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd in 2020, social media use by M4BL supporters and onlookers became the catalyst that spurred political organizing across the United States and the world. The use of social media to facilitate political action and conversation was not unique to the activity that defined the summer of 2020. The phrase and movement "Black Lives Matter" first surfaced after the acquittal of George Zimmerman and "entered the mainstream a year later… when a grand jury declined to indict Darren Wilson in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown" (Wirtschafter, 2021). However, the use of social media following the gruesome murder of Floyd reached levels that were truly unprecedented (Wirtschafter, 2021; Rosenblatt, 2020). According to Valerie Wirtschafter of Brookings, "In the seven days between [Floyd's] death on May 25th, 2020, and the police attack on protesters in Lafayette Square on June 1, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag generated approximately 3.4 million original posts with 69 billion engagements… Prior to the June protest, the record for post [followed] the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, when original content reached 145,631 posts" (Wirtschafter, 2021). Perhaps it was the pandemic that sequestered people to the confines of their homes, giving them ample opportunity to use social media (Rosenblatt, 2020) or a collective rage and sorrow that emanated from the sight of yet another Black American

lynched by law enforcement; nevertheless, social media use by followers and supporters of the M4BL accelerated. In facilitating this mass growth in social media activity, the M4BL effectively reshaped the landscape of digital political organizing.

The M4BL success has largely been attributed to the movement's ability to not only increase collective awareness regarding the state-sanctioned assault on Black life, but also their fearlessness to demand that racist systems of policing and incarceration be reformed or dismantled. My research serves to understand how organizers in smaller organizations, under the umbrella of the M4BL, throughout the country, have chosen to organize. Namely, I focus on their use of social media, which has become increasingly prominent as a communication tool in the modern era, to organize and engage their respective audiences. I have chosen to research how community organizations in the M4BL used social media as an organizing tool in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. I draw specific attention to understanding the extent to which they used their social media platforms to facilitate political participation at the state and local levels.

The current literature on the topic of mass social movements and their mobilization tactics highlights the importance of public discourse (meaning the topics and subsequent discussions that are prevalent in large scale public consciousness and communication) when shaping the narrative around social and political change (Mundt et al, 2021; Norris et al, 2019; Woodly, 2015). Shifting public discourse in favor of a group's political movement has largely been viewed as a necessity for disadvantaged groups working to gain political power (Woodly, 2015; Schattschneider, 1975). There is collective recognition of the M4BL and those who have been mobilized under it taking

strategic action to shape the national understanding of the relationship between Black Americans and the institution of policing. As Deva Woodly notes in her 2021 book *Reckoning*:

> "The broad movement in defense of Black lives has contributed to a re-politicization of the public sphere and has been successful at gaining political acceptance. Through its efforts, the movement has changed the common ways we talk about race, inequality, policing, and well-being, and inserted a commonplace understanding of structural racism and anti-Blackness into mainstream American discourse" (Woodly, 2021).

The literature recognizes the "public sphere" as a place where individuals gain exposure to movements and develop understanding of prominent issues (Mundt et al, 2018; Khamis et al, 2012; Woodly, 2015; Woodly, 2021). The M4BL's ability to shape collective discourse in the public sphere has largely been attributed to social media being used as a tool for messaging and mobilization (Mundt, 2018; Woodly, 2021). There is an understanding that supporters of the movement use social media to share and echo the realities of police violence and counter those who attempt to spread misinformation as a mechanism to derail the movement (Norris et al, 2019). The field is deeply aware of the importance of collective meaning especially in a digital space.

Marcia Mundt, Karen Ross, and Charla Burnett see use of social media with its connection to the public sphere as providing organizations in the M4BL with an opportunity to "scale up". They define scaling up as "the process of expansion and/or

internal strengthening that broadens movement impact. [They view] social media as a scaling tool that simultaneously facilitates strengthening the movement by facilitating collective meaning-making and the creation of support networks and expanding the movement…" (Mundt et al, 2018). Mundt and her colleagues, like others in the field, place significant importance on creating meaning and directing the narrative as it relates to police violence against Black people. They discuss how social media has been used to help the collective reflect on police brutality and develop a shared sense of movement identity (Mundt et al, 2018). Their primary contribution is in building on the discussion of social media as a tool to not only create meaning and collective identity but build organizational power.

Social media has become widely recognized as a vital tool for organizing in the modern era (Mundt et al, 2018; Freelon et al, 2016), particularly in its ability to facilitate coalition building (Mundt et al, 2018). While some organizing tactics require high-cost activity, use of social media is relatively low-cost and allows even the most under-resourced organizations to disseminate their organizational agenda. The low-cost and highly accessible nature of social media use led some scholars, prior to Mundt, to acknowledge social media as a medium for creating "weak ties" (Mundt et al 2018; Nien 2017). Those who viewed social media as a space for the creation of "weak ties" likely developed this understanding because of a recognition of its ability to allow large groups of otherwise unconnected people to have large scale discourse on specific issues. Scholars who view social media as having the capacity to create "strong ties" recognize social media as creating, "large and sustainable interpersonal networks or coalitions by

enabling personalized organizational sharing" (Mundt et al, 2018; Nien, 2017). Mundt and her colleagues viewed social media use as central in the organizing efforts of Black Lives Matter activist in its capacity to, "[mobilize] internal and external resources, [build] coalitions among and between BLM groups and other social movements, and [control] the narrative of the movement" (Mundt et al, 2018; Nien, 2017). All of these outcomes are viewed as essential to helping with the facilitation of expanding activist networks.

The concept of network expansion has been widely explored in the literature. A notable contribution is E. E. Schattschneider's *Semi Sovereign People.* Schattschneider develops a theory of political organizing where power dynamics are crucial. He uses the analogy of a fight to describe political conflict writing, "Every fight consists of two parts: the few individuals who are actively engaged at the center and the audience that is irresistibly attracted to the scene" (Schattschneider, 1975). From Schattschneider's perspective the goal of the group that possesses the least amount of power must be to make their cause as public as possible as a mechanism to recruit the public to their side. By increasing their number of supporters, Schattschneider believes organizers create an opportunity to shift the balance of power in their favor (Schattschneider, 1975). He writes:

> "The nationalization of politics inevitably breaks up old local power monopolies and old sectional power complexes; as a matter of fact, the new dimension produces so great a change in the scale of organization and the locus of power that it may take on a semi-revolutionary character. The change of direction of party cleavages produced by the shift from sectional to national alignments has opened

> up a new political universe, a new order of possibilities and impossibilities" (Schattschneider, 1975).

From Schattschneider's perspective the mechanism by which groups at a power deficit shift the balance of power in their direction is nationalization. Nationalization involves broadening the scope of an issue from the local to the national level. Through nationalization, individuals outside of the immediately impacted community develop a stake in the relevant cause. Schattschneider notes that groups that have the most power will attempt to silo that power and localize the conflict at play. The concept of nationalization as essential to building the power of organizers is echoed throughout the literature. Nationalization is centralized, specifically in discussions regarding expansion into the public sphere as referenced by the previously mentioned authors.

In the context of social media use, Schattschneider's understanding of nationalization can be used to interpret network expansion through digital organizing. Use of social media to draw attention to issues at the national level would likely have the expansive quality of attracting like-minded individuals from across the country. In contrast, more localized content potentially draws a smaller audience that may be situated within a particular region or municipality. The nationalization of social media content by community organizations allows for the widening of the scope of their issue. It takes attention from conflicts, elections, and community concerns at the state and local levels and instead shifts focus to national level politics.

Daniel Hopkins in his book *The Increasingly United States* discusses how the nationalization of American politics can have unintended political consequences at the

state and local levels. Hopkins argues that American political behavior has largely become nationalized (Hopkins, 2018). He attributes the nationalization of American politics to two factors: (1) America's shifting from print and local TV news sources that provide information about local politics to gaining information from online news and cable television and (2) American's not identifying with their states and localities (Hopkins, 2018). Hopkins is attentive to the reality that the nationalization of American politics has consequences for American's attentiveness towards state and local issues. He writes:

> "States and localities make critical decisions across a broad array of policy areas, from what is taught in their schools and how land can be developed to who can marry and what constitutes a crime within their boundaries. Yet in a nationalized polity, many votes cast for governors, state legislators, and even sometimes mayors are cast with an eye toward the candidates' alignment in national politics" (Hopkins, 2018).

Although Schattschneider views nationalization as essential for helping groups shift the balance of political power in their favor, Hopkins sheds light on the notion that increased nationalization may cause a lack of public attention to issues at the local level.

While much of the literature highlights how political attention has largely swayed towards the national level and organizations have moved to use social media to broaden their networks, my research aims to shed light on instances when organizations use social media as a tool to zoom in to localized action. As the literature shows, there is no

disputing the notion that significant attention from organizers and political actors has been devoted to nationalized outreach and organizing. However, there is much to understand about how community organizations respond in times of crisis and social reckoning, specifically in their attempts to reach members of their community.

The reality that organizations fighting police brutality have made a conscious effort to organize at the local level was explored by Sarah Jackson in her article *Black Lives Matter and the Revitalization of Collective Visionary Leadership.* Jackson defines collective visionary leadership as something that is "local and community-based, centers the power and knowledge of ordinary people, and prioritizes transformative accountability and liberatory visions of the future" (Jackson, 2021). Rather than centering national level politics, Jackson, through an interview with Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Alicia Garza, showcases how local and community centered political action is vital to mobilization in the M4BL. She discusses how the M4BL has focused on the issues facing Black communities at the local level. This happens in part by building the organizing capacity of community members (Jackson 2021). Citing a connection between M4BL organizers and Ella Baker, Jackson writes, "Baker felt strongly that the goal of Black freedom and rights were best achieved through the model of radical democracy and popular participation within the movement and as a result focused her energies on empowering local communities to lead with their experiential knowledge. This is mirrored in the way Black Lives Matter activists report their own commitments to centering local communities and their demands" (Jackson, 2021). Building upon Jacksons understanding of the localized power of organizers in the M4BL, my research aims to

highlight instances where organizers used social media to facilitate political organizing at the local level, particularly after the death of George Floyd. I serve to evaluate three main hypotheses:

H1: The observed community organizations focused primarily on the local level of government.

H2: The observed community organizations primarily created post that encouraged political action or served the purpose of providing political commentary.

H3: When post encouraged political engagement the type of engagement depended heavily on the local political context of the organization.

When George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police in May of 2020, community organizations, out of necessity, took to social media as a messaging and mobilization tool for responding to state sanctioned violence against Black people in America. Floyd was murdered in the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many Americans had not left their homes in months and reliance on social media as a mechanism for communication and tool for organizing became even more salient. The approach organizations took in the aftermath of Floyd's death was unique in the sense that it narrowed the scope of political participation and encouraged citizens to focus on politics at the local level rather than a hyper-fixation on national level politics. Despite the national political conversation in 2020 being largely dominated by conversations

regarding the presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden, organizations in the M4BL largely refrained from creating content regarding the presidential race. Instead, they focused on police commissions, educational institutions, and district and state's attorneys. When they encouraged voting, it mainly surrounded positions that directly impact community interactions with policing. They showed a stark commitment to localizing political action. In many instances they used social media as a tool to communicate their political message and achieve their mobilization objectives.

Activists in the M4BL showed that it is possible to take an issue that has spurred energy nationally and focus said energy into tangible policy outcomes at the local level. There is much value in movement expansion and "scaling up", but there is also value in community-based organizing that takes on a smaller scale. Organizers in the M4BL showcased how social media platforms, that are traditionally seen as places to draw large scale attention, can be used to communicate with smaller communities. The localized mobilization of organizers in the M4BL serves as evidence toward the notion that community-based efforts can be in service of a larger goal within an expansive network. Efforts to localize action in the M4BL do not negate the enormous scale of the issues of police violence and systemic racism, rather they showcase how these issues can also be tackled at the local level.

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis serves to provide insight into the question: How did community organizations in the M4BL use social media as an organizing tool in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd and to what extent did they use their social media platforms to encourage political participation at the state and local levels? It does so by analyzing the Instagram posts of 8 community organizations in cities across the American South, Northeast, Northwest, and Midwest. The post analyzed span from May 25th, 2020, the day George Floyd was murdered, to Nov 10th, 2020, a week following the 2020 presidential election. This timeframe was chosen because it encompasses an election that included races at all levels of government, providing an opportunity to understand which levels of government received the most organizational attention from the studied community organizations. Additionally, this period covers several months after Floyd's murder which allows for a considerable amount of information regarding the social media response of organizations.

The choice to focus on social media use as a digital organizing tool in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd is partly due to Floyd's death taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic which made digital platforms vital to the maintenance of communication. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented level of collective isolation which caused people, in the absence of their usual daily distractions, to develop more focused attention to issues such as police brutality. The pandemic also showcased how social media can be used to connect people and disseminate vital information, specifically in a time where face-to-face interactions were highly discouraged. Studying

this period allows for an understanding of how organizers respond when they are faced with times of crisis, but also when there is widespread attention directed towards a specific issue. Evaluating the organizations use of social media, allows for a deeper understanding of how organizations are responding as social media becomes a more salient and entrenched fixture in our society. Additionally, the evaluation of social media as an organizing tool provides insight into the role of digital organizing as a tool for organizational outreach and perhaps a mechanism to attract younger audiences to participate in activism.

The choice to focus attention in this project to social media use in efforts to localize or nationalize organizational efforts, is due to the prevalence of literature that highlights nationalization and network expansion as essential to political organizing. Through my research question I am able to answer several other key questions such as: At what level of government do organizations prioritize seeking political results? What types of political engagement are most encouraged by these organizations? Finally, what proportion of the organization's social media activity centers commenting on the issue of police violence against Black people as compared to content that encourages political action?

Instagram was chosen as the platform for this analysis because of its popularity and diversity of users. The platform Twitter was not analyzed because of its “Retweet” function which allows users to repost content posted by other users. This project aims to focus on content that comes directly from community organizations, not content that is reposted from individuals or organizations outside of the scope of the project. Facebook

was not used for this project, as Instagram allows for users to simultaneously post their Instagram posts to Facebook. This would potentially cause any observable trends to be impacted by posts that are repeated on both Instagram and Facebook. Using Instagram for social media analysis allows for an overall accurate interpretation of the messages and subsequent request for action that community organizers relay to their audiences without falling into some of the potential perils of other social media platforms.

The post of the studied organizations were coded based on three criteria: post type, the level of government referenced, and the type of political action they showed or advocated for.

The types of post are recorded as follows:

- Post that encouraged political engagement
- Post that served as commentary on political or social events
- Post that attempted to educate viewers
- Post that did none of the previously mentioned things

The levels of government are recorded as follows:

- Post that referenced the local level
- Post that referenced the state level
- Post that referenced the federal level
- Post where the level of government referenced was unclear or not explicit

The types of political engagement are recorded as follows:

- Post that showed or advocated for protesting
- Post that showed or advocated for voting
- Post that showed or advocated for attending an organization meeting or joining a community organization
- Post that showed or advocated for contacting local officials through mechanisms such as giving public comment at a government meeting (both virtual and in-person), engaging in mass contact through social media, signing petitions (directed at elected officials), emailing, calling, or writing elected officials
- Post that showed or advocated for volunteering with a community organization or one of its partners
- Post that showed or advocated individual supporters or a community of supporters to engage in some form of education or event that is not a protest or organization meeting
- Post that showed or advocated for people to donate to a community organization or cause related to said community organization
- Post that did not show or advocate for any form of political action

This coding scheme was used to determine the frequency to which the different observed post types, references to government levels, and depictions or requests for political action occurred (See table 1).

| Organization Name | Post Date | Level of Gov:<br>0= not explicit<br>1=local<br>2=state<br>3=federal | Type of Action:<br>1= protest<br>2=vote<br>3=org meeting/ join org<br>4= contact officials<br>5= volunteer<br>6=self/community education or activity (non-protest or community meeting)<br>7=Donate<br>0= none | Type of Post:<br>engagement= 1<br>commentary=2<br>education= 3<br>neither=4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Table 1. Methodology Outline.

**ORGANIZATIONS**

The organizations evaluated in this project are derived from a convenience-based sample. This sampling method allowed me to identify organizations that were active during the observed time period in the absence of an available data set of all active M4BL organizations in the United States. This sample is not a truly nationally representative or random sampling of organizations in the M4BL. There were three mechanisms by which organizations were chosen for this project: prior knowledge, request via social media, and independent research through Google. Aside from geographic diversity as a factor in my selection process, I attempted to choose a sample of organizations that serviced and worked with a diverse range of age groups and focused on varying aspects of policing. In total 630 post were observed across eight organizations spanning from May 25, 2020, to Nov 10, 2020, with varying degrees of activity across the observed organizations.

**American South:**

The Dream Defenders (Florida):

The Dream Defenders were founded after the April 2012 murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida (Dream Defenders, n.d.). Following Martin's murder by white supremacist George Zimmerman, youth activists connected to the Dream Defenders came together to protest (Dream Defenders, n.d.). A key moment in their activism took place when Zimmerman was acquitted in Martin's murder. At that point, activists with the Dream Defenders occupied the Florida State Capital for a month to protest the state's "Stand Your Ground" law (Dream Defenders, n.d.). The "Stand Your Ground" law, protested by the Dream Defenders, allows residents to use lethal force in situations where they perceive a threat to their life is imminent (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.). The law is highly controversial, particularly due to its vagueness and consequences for allowing individuals to murder their neighbors with little to no limitation. It is difficult to understand how Martin, a 17-year-old boy with a packet of skittles and an Iced Tea, posed any threat of imminent danger to Zimmerman, the armed adult man who stalked and murdered him in April of 2012. Building off the momentum that propelled them to resist the "Stand Your Ground" law, the Dream Defenders currently organize Black and Brown youth in chapters throughout the state of Florida. Their aim is to "[advance their] vision of safety and security — away from prisons, deportation, and war — and towards healthcare, housing, jobs and movement for all" (Dream Defenders, n.d.). In realizing this vision, they are united as abolitionist, Black feminist, internationalist, and socialist

(Dream Defenders, n.d.). Together, they fight to abolish prisons and the institution of policing (Dream Defenders, n.d.).

The Dream Defenders were selected for this project due to personal familiarity. While I did not participate in any social media content creation for the Dream Defenders, I did work with them through a political fellowship in 2020. As a part of the fellowship, I worked with organizations in swing states across the country to assist in electing progressive candidates. The Dream Defenders contracted with my fellowship to assist them in call and text-banking for two progressive state's attorney candidates in Florida (Joseph Kimok and Monique Worrell). I have not worked with the Dream Defenders since the conclusion of those special elections, but I admire their work and was interested in further understanding their use of social media as a digital organizing tool.

The Dream Defenders made a total of 112 post to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 26, 2020, and the final observed posts was made November 5, 2020.

Gideon's Army (Nashville):

Gideon's Army was founded in 2010 by a schoolteacher and her students, motivated by concern about the school-to-prison pipeline (Gideon's Army, n.d.). In 2012, Gideon's Army facilitated many listening circles to allow Black and Brown families an opportunity to voice their concerns about policing and the criminal justice system (Gideon's Army, n.d.). The organization has a strong commitment to the practice of restorative justice (Gideon's Army, n.d.), a practice that aims to, "[seek] to examine

the harmful impact of a crime and then [determine] what can be done to repair that harm while holding the person who caused it accountable for [their actions]" (University of Wisconsin Law School, n.d.). Gideon's Army recognizes that many of the issues Black and Brown youth face in schools are a result of an unstable schooling environment, coupled with being criminalized by law enforcement and the carceral system (Gideon's Army, n.d.). They are recognized in the Nashville community as, "the only local organization in Nashville that focuses solely on addressing youth violence and dismantling the prison pipeline through social activism and community and systems transformation led by children in the prison pipeline, their families, and their community" (Gideon's Army, n.d.). Gideon's Army provides vital resources for their community, by working to end the criminalization of Black and Brown youth through the institution of restorative practices.

Gideon's Army was selected for this project as a result of a Google search for community organizations in the American South. I had no previous knowledge of Gideon's Army or their work prior to conducting independent research to find organizations to evaluate.

Gideon's Army made a total of 80 posts to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 26, 2020, and the final observed post was made November 7, 2020.

**Northwest:**

Anti Police Terror Project (Oakland, CA)

The Anti-Police Terror Project Oakland chapter (APTPO) is a Black-led organization in Oakland California, aiming to fight police brutality and provide resources to victims of police terror (Anti Police Terror Project, n.d.). They provide many services to the Oakland community including "documenting police abuses and connecting impacted families and community members with resources, legal referrals, and opportunities for healing" (Anti Police Terror Project, n.d.). Currently they run a program called MH First, an alternative to calling the police in the event of a mental health crisis (Anti Police Terror Project, n.d.). MH First responds to "mental health crises including, but not limited to, psychiatric emergencies, substance use support, and domestic violence safety planning" (Anti Police Terror Project, n.d.). The ethos of ATPTO centers on the notion that police, and the institution of policing has caused undue harm to the Oakland community and that such harm is preventable through replacing police with community-based resources.

The Anti-Police Terror Project Oakland was selected for this project because of a loose personal connection to the organization. In June of 2020 I attended a protest, led by APTPO in Oakland, CA. Although I am a native of San Francisco, I was made aware of APTPO through family members living in the Oakland area. Prior to this project, I did not follow the social media activity of APTPO.

APTPO made a total of 116 post to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 28, 2020, and the final observed post was made October 27, 2020.

Anti Police Terror Project (Sacramento, CA):

The Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento chapter (APTPS) is a community-based organization in Sacramento, California that is dedicated to fighting police brutality and providing resources to the Sacramento community (Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento, n.d.). APTPS is connected to the Anti-Police Terror Project Oakland chapter and has a similar mission. They too document police abuse and provide resources to victims of police terror (Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento, n.d.). The organization also has a MH First program, providing an alternative to police in response to mental health crises (Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento, n.d.). They also fundraise to help women attend self-care retreats, provide support to people getting out of jail, and provide healing baskets for people who have had their loved ones murdered by the Sacramento Police Department (Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento, n.d.).

APTPS was selected for this project as a result of a social media request for community organizations in the M4BL. In September of 2022 I posted a video through the social media app Tik Tok, asking if users knew of any organizations that could be evaluated as part of my project. Tik Tok was the best platform to use to make this ask because of its “For You Page” function. The For You Page allows users who do not follow your page to view your post so long as the Tik Tok algorithm believes that the

person would be interested in the content. Through my post, I received several comments from users suggesting community organizations, one of which was APTPS. Prior to this project, I had no knowledge of APTPS or their social media activity.

APTPS made a total of 77 post to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 27, 2020, and the final observed post was made November 3, 2020.

Ella Baker Center (Oakland, CA):

The Ella Baker Center is a community organization based in Oakland, California. The center was founded in 1996 and has primarily organized in the areas of civic engagement, violence prevention, green jobs, juvenile justice, and police brutality (Ella Baker Center, n.d.). Named after civil rights activist, Ella Baker, the organization seeks to build upon her legacy by, "building the power of black, brown, and poor people to create solutions for one of the biggest drivers of injustice today: mass incarceration" (Ella Baker Center, n.d.). The Ella Baker Center notes that their core focus is "Truth and Reinvestment" (Ella Baker Center, n.d.). "Truth and Reinvestment", meaning an acknowledgement of the systemic inequality faced by Black, Brown, and poor people in this country and a commitment to invest vital resources in historically disadvantaged communities (Ella Baker Center, n.d.).

The Ella Baker Center was chosen for this project as a result of personal familiarity with their work. The center is a partner organization of an organizing collective called Bay Rising (Bay Rising, n.d.). I have worked with many community organizations under the umbrella of Bay Rising. Despite never working directly with the

Ella Baker Center, I am familiar with some of their work, specifically initiatives they have sponsored in conjunction with Bay Rising and their ally organizations. Prior to this project I was not aware of the social media activity of the Ella Baker Center.

The Ella Baker Center made a total of 71 posts to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 28, 2020, and the final observed post was made November 7, 2020.

**Midwest:**

Hands-Up United (Ferguson):

Hands-Up United is a community organization based in Ferguson, Missouri. The organization, formed in the aftermath of the police killing of Michael Brown, serves to combat police brutality and create, "a world where we deal with harm in our communities through healing, love, and kinship" (Dickerson, 2014). The organization has a strong commitment to grassroots organizing with one of their members advocating, "We got to go home, we got to go back to the hoods, the projects, your parish, your town, your city, your borough … and organize, organize, organize" (Saint Lewis Public Radio, 2014) After Brown was murdered police continued their deadly assault on the Black community in Ferguson, killing 18-year-old Vonderrit Myers Jr (Mosendz, 2014). This prompted Hands-Up United and their allies to engage in a weekend long protest event deemed "Weekend of Resistance" (Mosendz, 2014). Their on-the-ground activism has continued as they have shown a commitment to addressing police oppression in Missouri.

Hands-Up United, similarly to APTPS was selected for this project as a result of a social media request for community organizations in the M4BL. Through my Tik Tok post, I received several comments from users suggesting community organizations, through which Hands-Up United was recommended. Prior to this project, I had no knowledge of Hands-Up United or their social media activity.

Hands- Up United made a total of four posts to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made June 1, 2020, and the final observed post was made October 5, 2020.

Chicago Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression (CAARPR) (Chicago):

The Chicago Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression (CAARPR) was founded in 1973 as part of the movement to free activist Angela Davis (CAARPR, n.d.). CAARPR, a part of the larger National Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression, began out of necessity as the rights of Black organizers across the country were under attack (CAARPR, n.d.). The attacks on prominent Black organizers as stated by CAARPR “were more often than not the work of local police, state sovereignty commissions and the FBI” (CAARPR, n.d.). The organization's efforts to free political prisoners, in situations similar to Davis, have been the basis for their continued activism (CAARPR, n.d.). Their current organizing centers fighting excessive prison sentences, the incarceration of immigrants, the exploitation of workers, and the systematic denial of voting rights protection (CAARPR, n.d.).

CAARPR was selected for this project as a result of a Google search for community organizations in the Midwest. I had no previous knowledge of CAARPR or their work prior to conducting independent research to find organizations to evaluate.

CAARPR made a total of 101 posts to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 26, 2020, and the final observed post was made November 7, 2020.

**Northeast:**

Communities United for Police Reform - Change the NYPD (New York):

Communities United for Police Reform- Change the NYPD is a community organization that operates in all 5 boroughs of New York City (Change the NYPD, n.d.). Their goal is to build a strong coalition of community members to push for concrete reforms in the New York Police Department (NYPD) (Change the NYPD, n.d.). The organization cites "broken-windows policing" as one of the key developments that led to a necessity for their organizing. Under the direction of former Mayor Rudy Giuliani the tactic of broken-windows policing aimed to heavily criminalize even the most minor and non-violent offenses committed by marginalized populations (Change the NYPD, n.d.). It led to disproportionate punitive sanction and heightened the criminalization of low-income minority populations in the city. They write, "This has resulted in policing that undermines public safety and trust… NYPD policies and practices often aggressively target and disproportionally impact communities of color,

including: young people, homeless people, LGBTQ people, people with cognitive and psychiatric disabilities, immigrants, women, and Muslim communities" (Change the NYPD, n.d.). Thus, the coalitions solution to these issues is a such: a four-pronged set of demands for the NYPD (1) investment and respect, (2) safety and human rights, (3) accountability, and (4) transparency (Change the NYPD, n.d.).

Communities United for Police Reform was chosen for this project as a result of a Google search for community organizations in the Northeast. Prior to working on this project, I had no knowledge of Communities United for Police Reform or their use of social media as an organizing tool.

Communities United For Police Reform- Change the NYPD made a total of 73 posts to Instagram in the observed time. The first post was made May 26, 2020, and the final observed post was made November 5, 2020.

# RESULTS

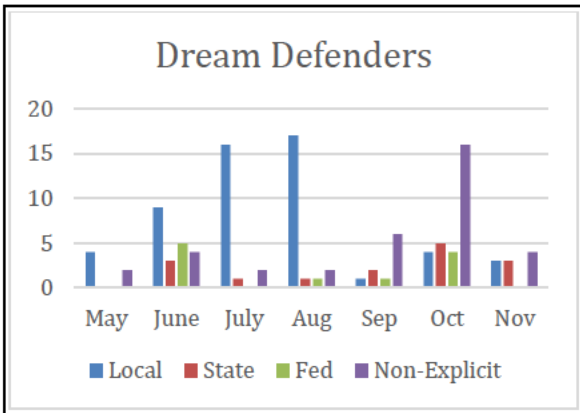
## LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT

The level of government that was the primary focus depicted through the social media activity of the organizations in the observed period was overwhelmingly the local level. The organizations made the most references to local level politics with some exceptions of appeals that were non-explicit and could not be deemed as focused on any particular level of government. In the months prior to the 2020 general election, discussions of politics at the federal level remained relatively non-existent amongst the observed organizations despite the occurrence of the 2020 presidential election. In some rare instances, particularly with the Dream Defenders of Florida (F1) and Hands-Up United of Missouri (F7) post that did not make specific references to any level of government outnumbered appeals at the local level in some of the observed months. Government at the federal level was discussed the least by the observed organizations with the exception of small, but notable increases in attention given to the federal government by the Dream Defenders in June and October of the observed time period (F1). Additionally, in rare instances post that referenced government at the state level increased and even occurred at a similar frequency to post that referenced the local level (F1 Dream Defenders–October; F5 Ella Baker Center–October; F6 Chicago Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression–July).

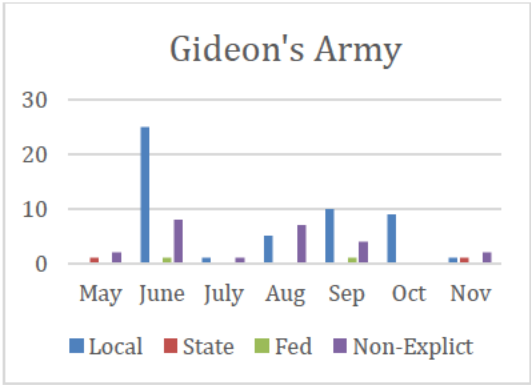

Example 1: On August 4th, 2020, the Chicago Alliance Against Racism and Police Repression posted this infographic (@caarprpnow, 2020) highlighting spending on police at the local level. They accompanied a cartoon of former Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot with criticism of the amount of money she spent on policing during her tenure as mayor.


Example 2: On June 1st, 2020 Hands Up United posted this photo of an individual who is presumed to be a member of the organization at a protest (@handsupunited, 2020). While the location of the post was tagged as Downtown St. Louis, the post was marked as not appealing to any specific level of government because the image does not explain what level of government the protest was intended to influence. Similarly, the words on the

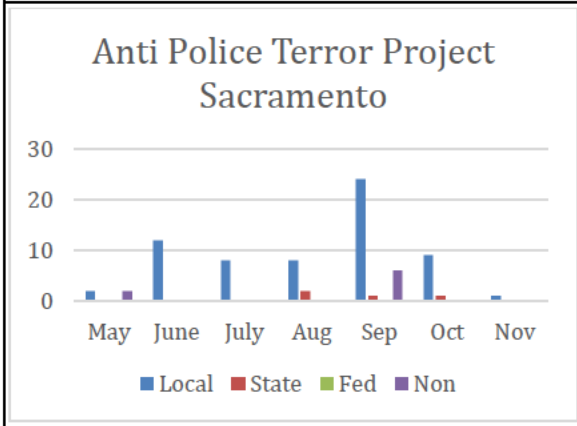
posters being held by the individuals in the background do not directly reference a particular level of government.



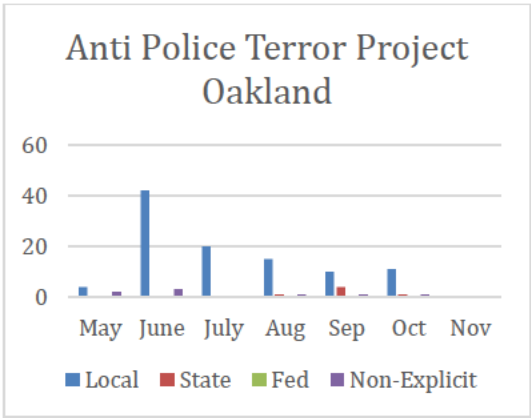

F1



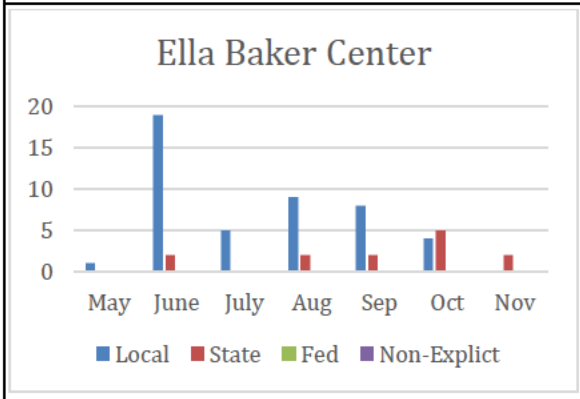

F2



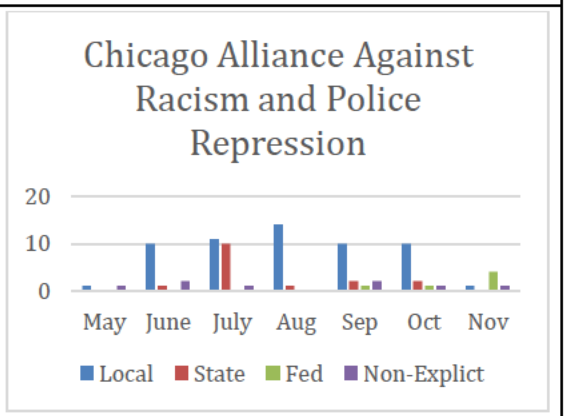

F3



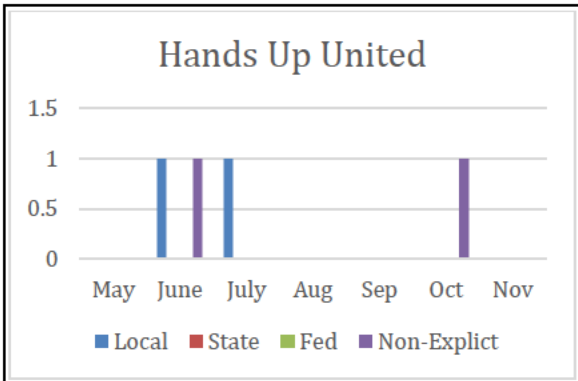

F4



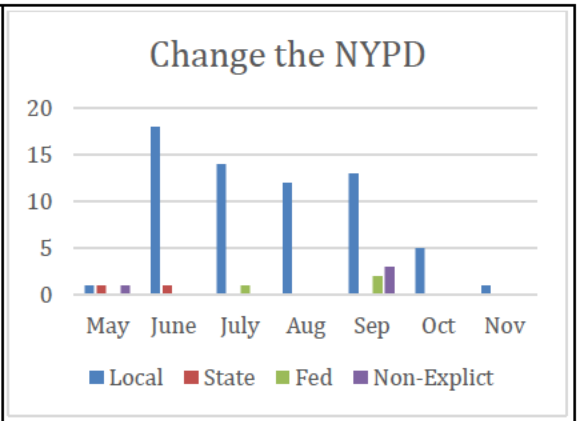

F5




F6




F7



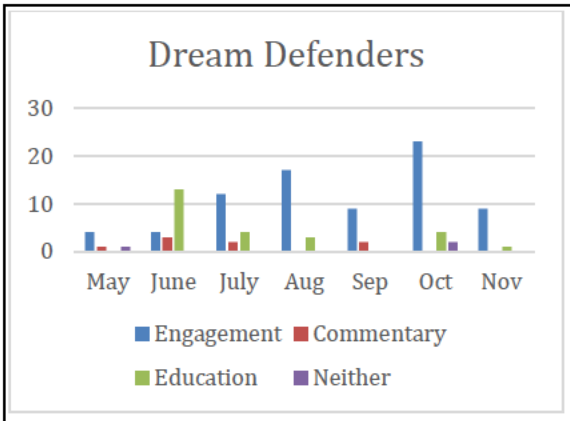

F8

**TYPE OF POST**

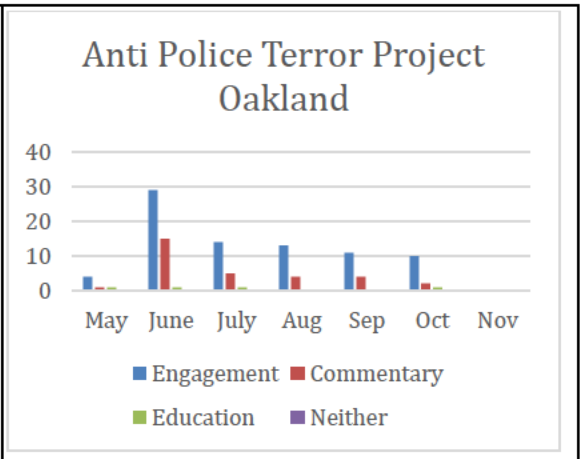
Post that advocated for or depicted political engagement and post that provided social and political commentary made up the majority of the social media activity of the observed M4BL organizations. For a significant portion of the organizations post that (F10, F11, F13) showed or advocated for political engagement made up most of their post in the surveyed months. For other organizations (F14 F15, F16) social and political commentary made up a large portion of their Instagram activity. The Dream Defenders, although most of their activity centered calls for or depictions of political engagement, developed a considerable amount of post in the month of June that were directed at political education (F9). Both Change the NYPD and The Ella Baker Center saw a relatively even split between commentary and engagement within the post that dominated their Instagram activity (F14, F16).


Example 1: On October 21st, 2020, The Ella Baker Center posted this post to their Instagram feed criticizing Prop 20 a proposition on the ballot in the November 2020 election (@ellabakercenter, 2020). This post was marked as commentary because it discussed their opposition to the proposition.

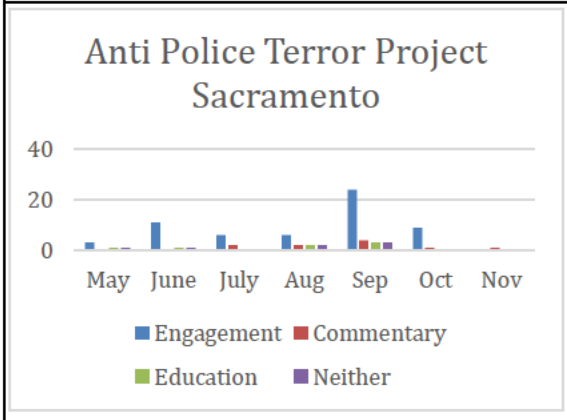

Example 2: On August 31, 2020, the Anti Police Terror Project Oakland chapter posted this call to action requesting that their supporters call and assembly member (@antipoliceterrorproject, 2020). This post was marked as advocating for political engagement because it called on supporters to perform a political action.



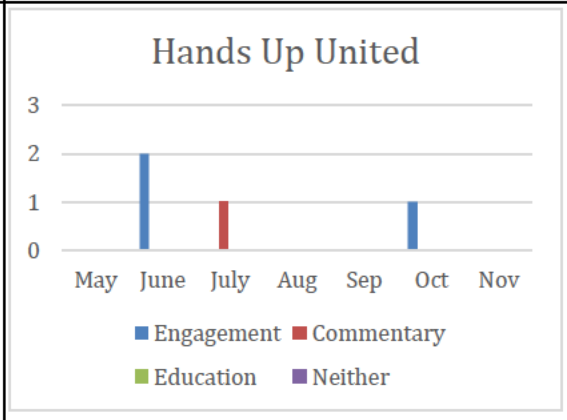

F9



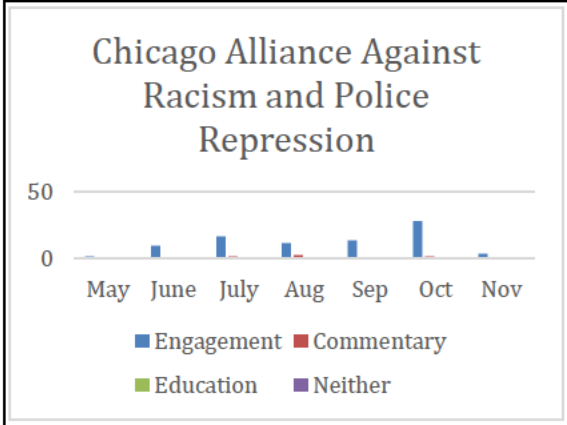

F10



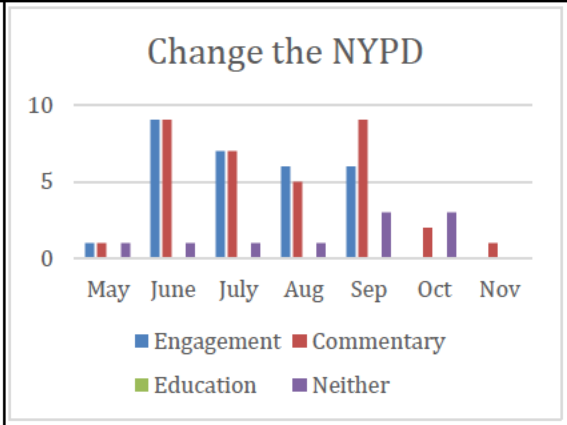

F11



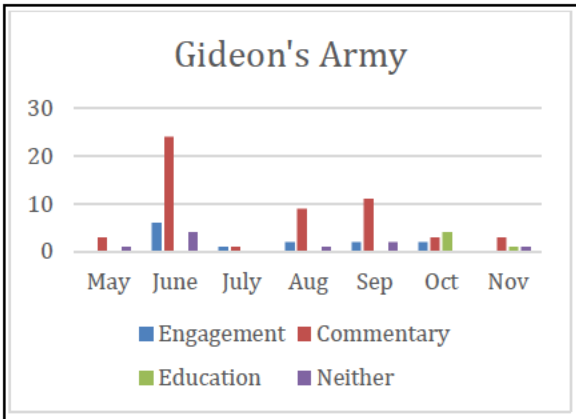

F12



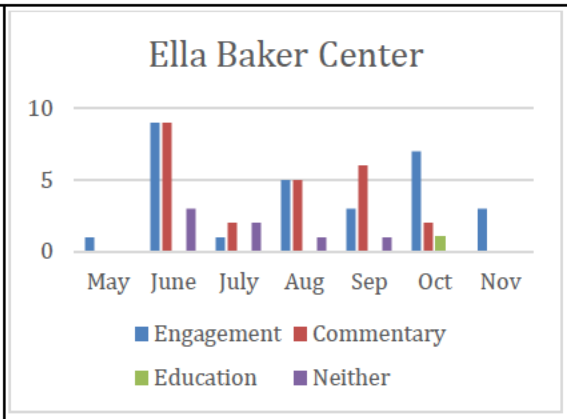

F13




F14



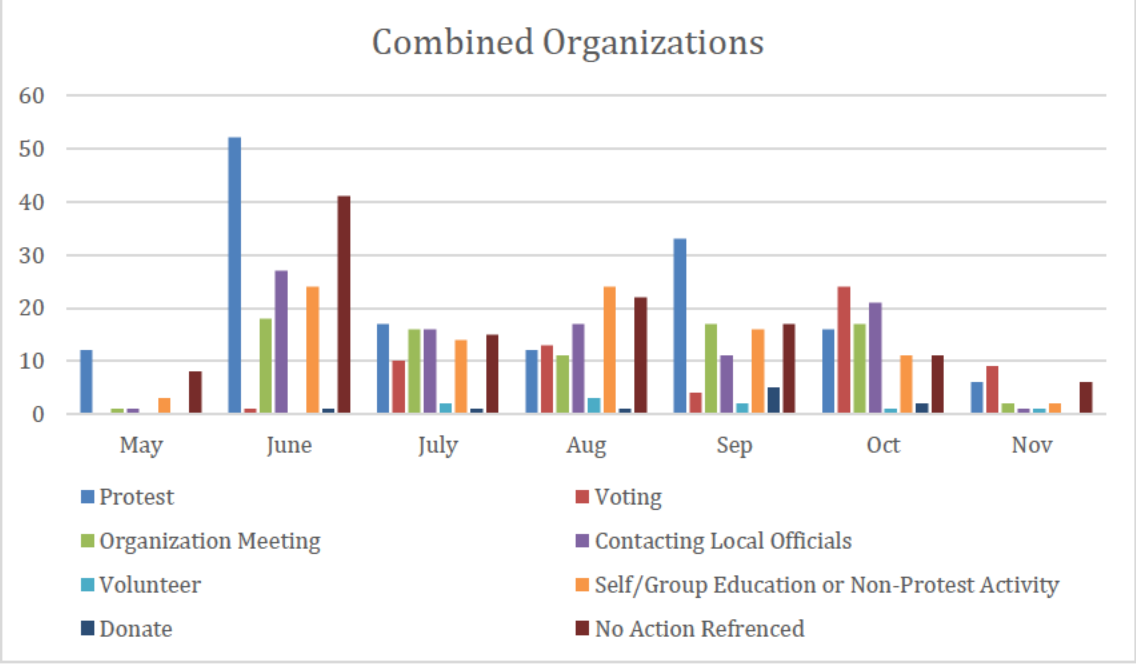

F15




F16

**TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT**

When all the organizations are viewed together there is no single type of political engagement that stands out above the rest throughout the observed period. However, there was a considerably high volume of post that referenced or advocated for protesting in June of 2020. (See appendix for graphs separated by organization)



**F17**

As it relates to H1 that the observed community organizations focused primarily on the local level of government during the observed period my finding suggest that the local level of government was the primary focus of the researched organizations Instagram activity. Across the board organizations request for political engagement, commentary, and educational content centered the local level of politics. Despite key events in the national political sphere, like the 2020 presidential election, focus remained on state's attorney races, police commissions, city councils, among other local political entities.

Regarding H2 that the observed community organizations primarily created post that encouraged political action or served the purpose of providing political and social commentary, my finding suggest that political commentary and request for political engagement made up the majority of post developed in the observed time period. That being said, there was also a significant amount of digital organizing activity through Instagram that centered political education, particularly infographics aimed to educate supporters about protest safety and that provided information about systems of policing and mass incarceration.

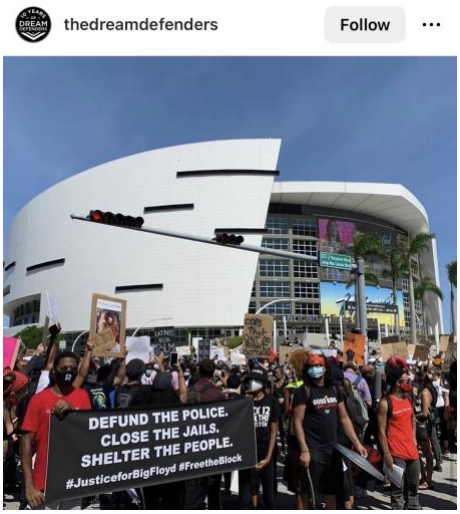
Finally with respect to H3 that when post encouraged political engagement the type of engagement was heavily dependent on the local political context of the organization, my findings suggest that local political context was a primary determinate of the type of political engagement requested by organizations. When local elections occurred, organizations requested that their supporters voted. Likewise, in instances where local government officials were voting on important legislation, organizations

requested that their followers contacted officials in efforts to persuade them to act in the interest of the organization. There was no single form of political engagement that dominated across all of the observed organizations.

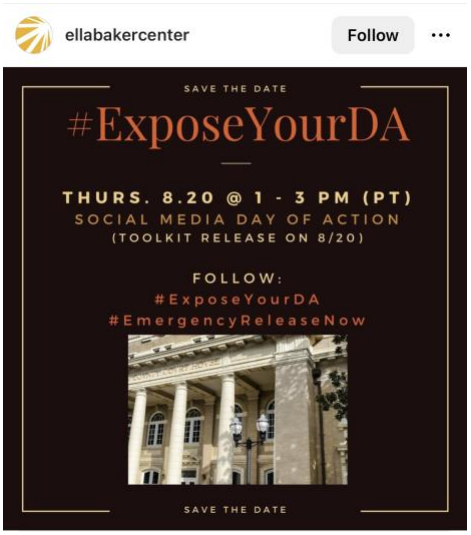
# DISCUSSION

## ABSENCE OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

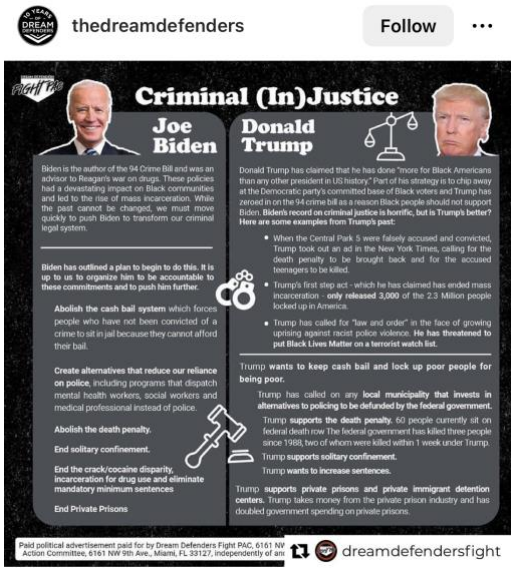
Across the board organizations, rarely addressed the federal level of government despite the murder of George Floyd taking place on the horizon of the 2020 presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden. This is potentially because the police are an inherently local entity. Their organizational direction, funding, and existence are dependent on local municipalities. When organizations make calls to defund the police and close jails (@dreamdefenders, 2020; pictured below) those calls are made to local political officials.




The observed organizations also aim to create an awareness amongst their followers of local level political structure. The Ella Baker Center's #ExposeYourDA campaign encouraged people to use their social media to call out the actions of a local official (@ellabakercenter, 2020). In doing so they alerted their audience to the fact that the District Attorney has control over the emergency release of incarcerated persons. In directing attention to local level politics, the observed organizations, regardless of intention, may have helped to educate their followers about the mechanisms of policing and incarceration.




One of few posts about the 2020 presidential election called out "political theater" and "empty calls to vote" (@dreamdefenders, 2020; see photo titled "Criminal (In) Justice"). The authors wrote, "We are not endorsing a candidate, we are educating voters about the REAL differences between the candidates. There's been a lot of political theater, and even more empty calls to vote, but nobody is talking about the policies. Those policies – and their differences – are life and death for some of us" (@dreamdefenders, 2020). The Dream Defenders primary interest is in protecting lives. They were averse to playing politics by endorsing a candidate for president because they viewed both candidates as inadequate. Thus, their focus was policy, and educating their audience on the key differences between the candidates. Perhaps, their choice and the choice of other organizations to focus primarily on the local level of government is due to the expedient nature to which policy change can occur at the local level and the large impact that local level politicians can have on the policies that impact the day-to-day interactions people have with the police. Local level politics possess a proximity to the intricacies of institutional interaction that are not as easily



accessible when approached from activism on a national scale.

## ORGANIZATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:

The observed organizations made unique decisions across the board that were highly dependent on their local political context. Some similarities were evident across organizations, particularly the abundance of reliance on post that requested or reflected political action or served to provide social and/or political commentary. Outside of the type of post that were developed, their content, particularly within post that centered political engagement, was highly influenced by elections and events that took place in their given municipalities.

### Dream Defenders:

The Dream Defender's Instagram activity in the observed period was by far the most diverse of the organizations. In June of 2020, while many of the organizations focused on political engagement, particularly request for protest related action, The Dream Defenders took a different approach. Their post mainly centered education. They took on the task of developing infographics about mass incarceration, policing, the 1994 Crime Bill, and the War on Drugs. One of their infographics titled "Protect Ya Neck" (@dreamdefenders, 2020), a direct reference to the gruesome action that caused the murder of George Floyd, provided detailed insight into tactics employed by police. In the graphic they alerted their followers to "police [who sent] undercover police into protest to not only gather information about protesters, but to incite violence" (@dreamdefenders, 2020). They also explained that police were employing the tactics of "planting bricks…

to lure people into using them" as well as "rerouting marches, trapping people in alley's and against walls and generally herding people into harms way" (@dreamdefenders, 2020). The post concluded with a call to action warning their supporters to, "Be vigilant, but not discouraged", explaining, "The state is afraid of our power (@dreamdefenders,2020). In the month of June, the Dream Defenders seemed to have centered a type of issue diagnosis, alerting supporters to the intricacies of policing and incarceration in the United States both contemporarily and in their development (@dreamdefenders, 2020). This education equips communities to understand the nuances of what they are fighting for and against.

Post directed at depictions or request for political engagement became prominent in the Dream Defenders Instagram activity in the months following June, with particularly high levels in August and October (F9). These months were characterized by State's Attorney races in Florida which prompted many calls for local-level political engagement, specifically calls for voting. Their advocacy centered Joe Kimok (a state's attorney candidate in Broward County) and Monique Worrell (a state's attorney candidate in Orange-Osceola County) whom the organization deemed as progressive prosecutors. The month of October also stood out because of a high volume of post where the level of government referenced was non-explicit (F1). This is due to many posts calling for people to vote, but not specifically referencing a particular candidate or specific race.

**Change The NYPD and Gideon's Army:**

Some organizations developed a significant amount of content that centered political and social commentary. Nashville's Gideons Army, stood out from other organizations due to its reliance on commentary as its primary action on Instagram. Images like a photo of graffiti on the side of a building proclaiming, "You have STOLEN MORE THAN WE COULD EVER LOOT" (@gideonsarmyunited, 2020) aimed to call out the vilification of protesters and show the hypocrisy of their critics. The commentary of Gideon's Army also centered posting quotes that reflected the standing and beliefs of the organization. Writing directly after the murder of George Floyd, "Dear Black Folk, your pain matters. Your life matters. You unconditionally deserve love and safety. Unconditionally" (@gideonsarmyunited, 2020). Their post reflected a lot of popular themes in the Black political consciousness following Floyd's murder such as collective grief and the need for immediate change. Gideon's Army showcased that while much attention is usually centered around the political engagement that organizations elicit, commentary can be similarly actionable. Their commentary was validating of the experience of Black people and showed the existence of support for many of the objectives Movement for Black lives organizers advocated for.


Communities United for Police Reform- Change the NYPD was an organization that struck a relatively even balance between commentary and engagement. In a video posted in July of 2020 Change the NYPD called out the erasure of their leadership.

Calling for one billion dollars to be cut from the NYPD police budget the organizers wrote in the video, “Some city council members excuse for protecting the NYPD’s budget was that the call to #defundnypd did not come from the Black & Latinx community” (@changethenypd, 2020). In response to false representations of the calls made to defund the police, Change the NYPD organizers used Instagram commentary to push back at their critics and assert that calls for defunding the police and reinvesting in things like education have been longstanding organizational objectives. They coupled commentary with request for political engagement. These requests included attendance at a “Fund Communities Not Cops” (@changethenypd, 2020) march and rally and participation in an event called #CopWatch that helped participants to “learn [their] legal rights” (@changethenypd, 2020). Communities United for Police Reform- Change the NYPD provides an example of an organization that valued both political advocacy, as produced through the mechanism of social media commentary, and request for political engagement.

**Anti Police Terror Project: Oakland and Sacramento**

The Anti Police Terror Projects in both Oakland and Sacramento serve as an example of organizations that primarily focused on using their social media to request political engagement on the part of their followers. They made a significant number of request that their followers contact political officials. The Oakland chapter of the Anti-Police Terror Project made request following the murder of George Floyd, for their members to contact the Oakland police commission and demand the defunding of the Oakland police department (@antipoliceterrorproject, 2020). They also requested that

followers sign a petition for local colleges to end their contract with the Alameda County Sherriff's Office (@antipoliceterrorproject, 2020). Similarly, the Sacramento chapter requested that supporters make calls to members of the Northern California Assembly to "#DecertifyPolice who have killed and abused people in CA" (@aptpsac, 2020). They also encouraged their followers to make public comment at a Sacramento City Council meeting regarding defunding the police. These posts simultaneously serve as both request for political engagement, but also perhaps inadvertently, education tools that alert people to the political powers of government officials.


The organizations also made a considerable amount of request for protest in June and September of 2020 respectively. In September, the Sacramento chapter, prompted by a Grand Jury's decision to not bring murder charges against the murderers of Breonna Taylor, made several requests for attendance at solidarity protest (@aptpsac, 2020). They also made request for attendance at rallies to push the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom, to support the Crises Act which would have invested in "community-based responses to emergencies" (@aptpsac, 2020). The Oakland chapter's request for protest as a form of political engagement occurred mainly in June following the murder of George Floyd. These posts criticized local political officials for the institution of curfews that criminalized nighttime protest. The posts encouraged supporters to disobey the

curfew and continue to fight to defund the Oakland Police Department (@antipoliceterrorproject, 2020).

## ACTIVITY

The general use of Instagram as and organizing tool by the observed organizations varied. Hands-Up United of Utah made a total of four Instagram post in the observed period. This is not to suggest that the organization was not active in any capacity during the observed period. Rather, perhaps social media is not a central component of their organizing strategy as it seems to have been for other organizations. Some organizations, specifically Gideon's Army, the Anti Police Terror Project Oakland Chapter, and the Ella Baker Center saw a notable drop-off in social media activity following the month of June, the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder. This seems relatively consistent with trends I observed through my own social media use during the observed period. Directly after Floyd's murder, outrage sparked high volumes of content ranging from commentary to request for protest action. It may be that in the case of these organizations, the role of the organizer in shaping the landscape of public discourse and engagement is coupled with the role that public attention plays in shaping the activity of the organizer. Other organizations stayed relatively consistent in their social media use which may be connected to several factors including having the staffing capacity necessary to maintain a constant presence on social media. Certain context and moments spark political energy and make social media more central as a tool for political organizing. In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd there may be a relationship between isolation because of the

Covid-19 pandemic and the use of social media as an organizing tool. Floyd's murder sparked outrage, sadness, and concern regarding the subjugation of Black people in America. Social media provided a platform for organizers to address the feelings of their audiences while giving them tangible and actionable ways to combat racist systems of policing.

## CONCLUSION

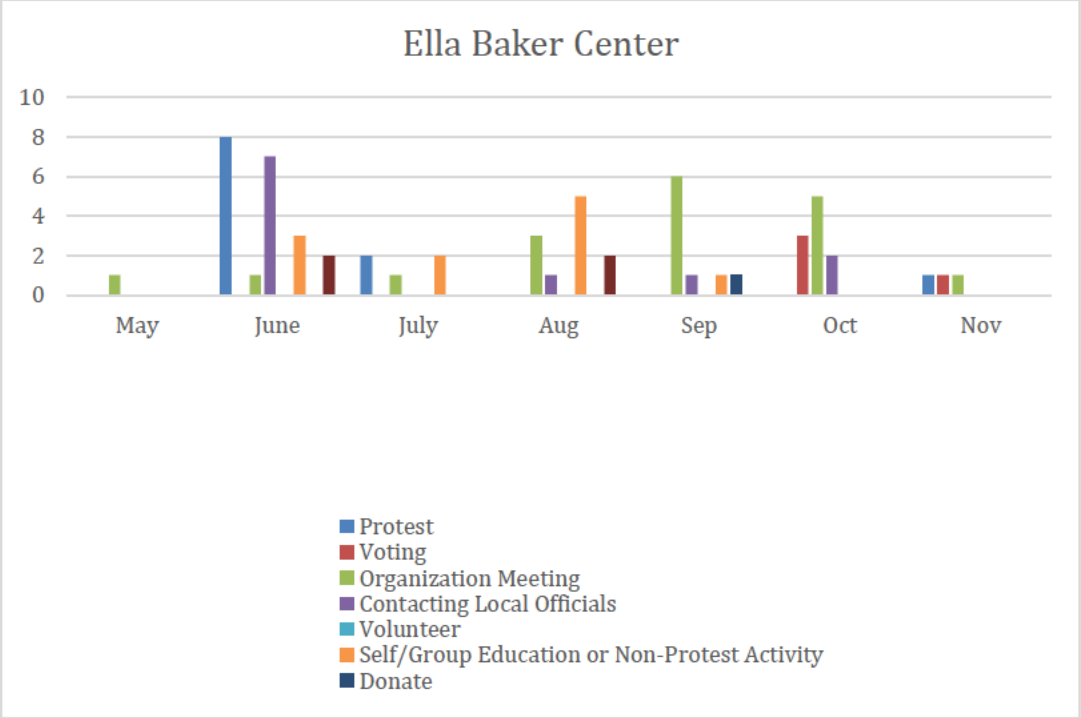
The findings of this study do not serve to be generalizable to all organizations in the Movement for Black Lives. Rather, they serve to provide evidence that there are organizations who are devoted to organizing at the local level and to using social media as a tool for digital organizing. There are serval limitations to this study that arise out of constraints of time and scope of the project. Namely, further research into the motivations of organizations content creation through interviews or surveys of content creators would be fruitful. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore if the murder of George Floyd changed the social media activity of the observed organizations by expanding the period of observation to include post developed prior to Floyd's murder. Lastly, there is a level of subjectivity that must be accounted for in the discretion of the observer to categorize the included Instagram post.

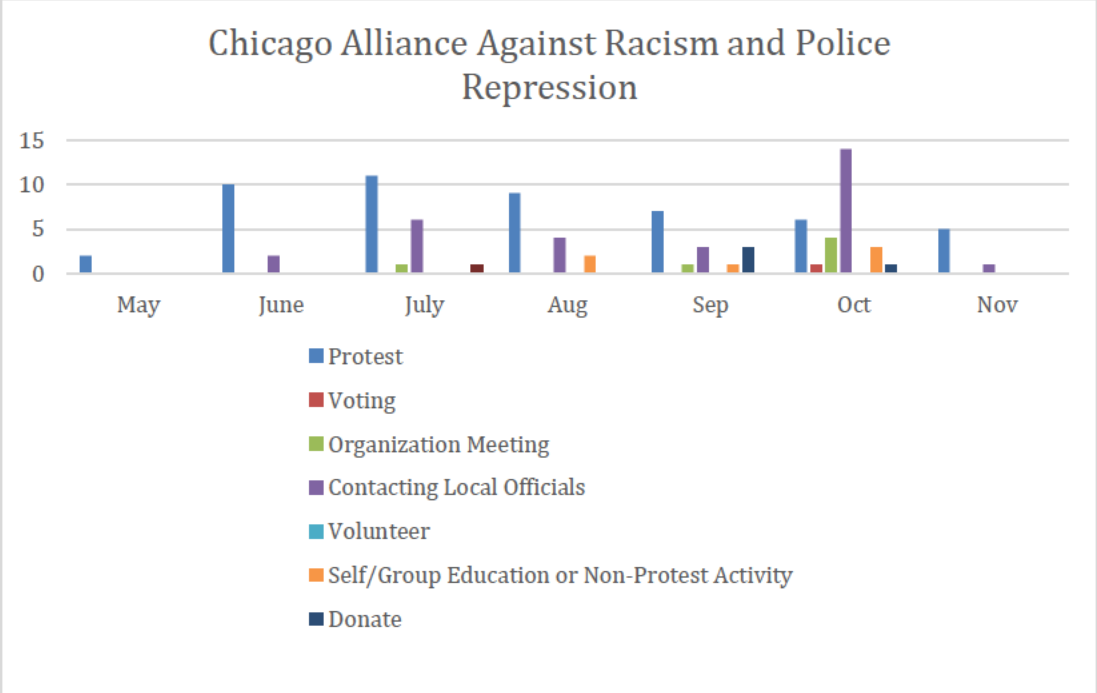
All in all, this study provides significant evidence that local level political organizing is very much alive. Regarding the use of social media as a tool for digital political organizing at the local level, the observed organizations have shown a capability to encourage political action, provide strategic commentary, and educate their audiences on the nuances of politics at the local level. This attention to local level politics becomes increasingly important in the face of censorship regarding the systematic assault on Black life by law enforcement. Local organizations give voice to the concerns of their communities and shed light on the steps that must be taken to address racialized violence and oppression. Organizations in the Movement for Black Lives are deeply devoted to the radical restructure of their local political context and to growing the organizing

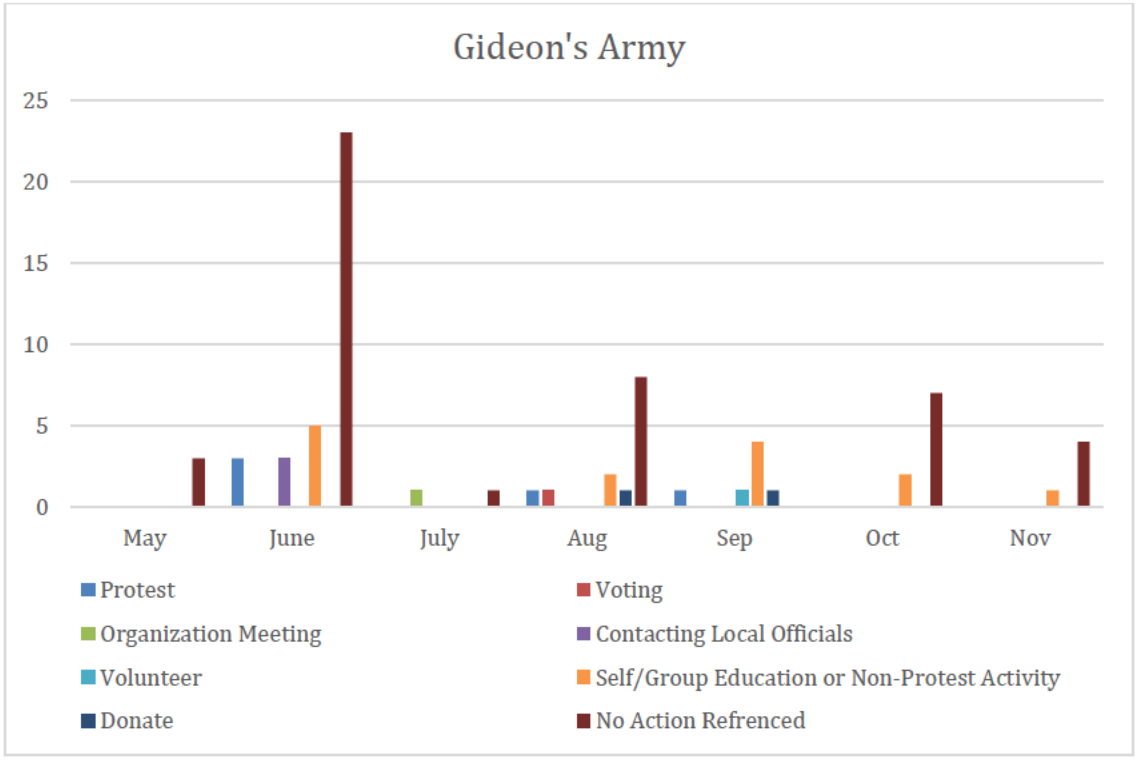
capacity of their grassroots audiences through political action and engagement, education, and commentary.

## APPENDIX

Political Engagement Graphs Separated by Organization:




Gideon's Army
25
20
15
10
5
0
May
June
July
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Sep
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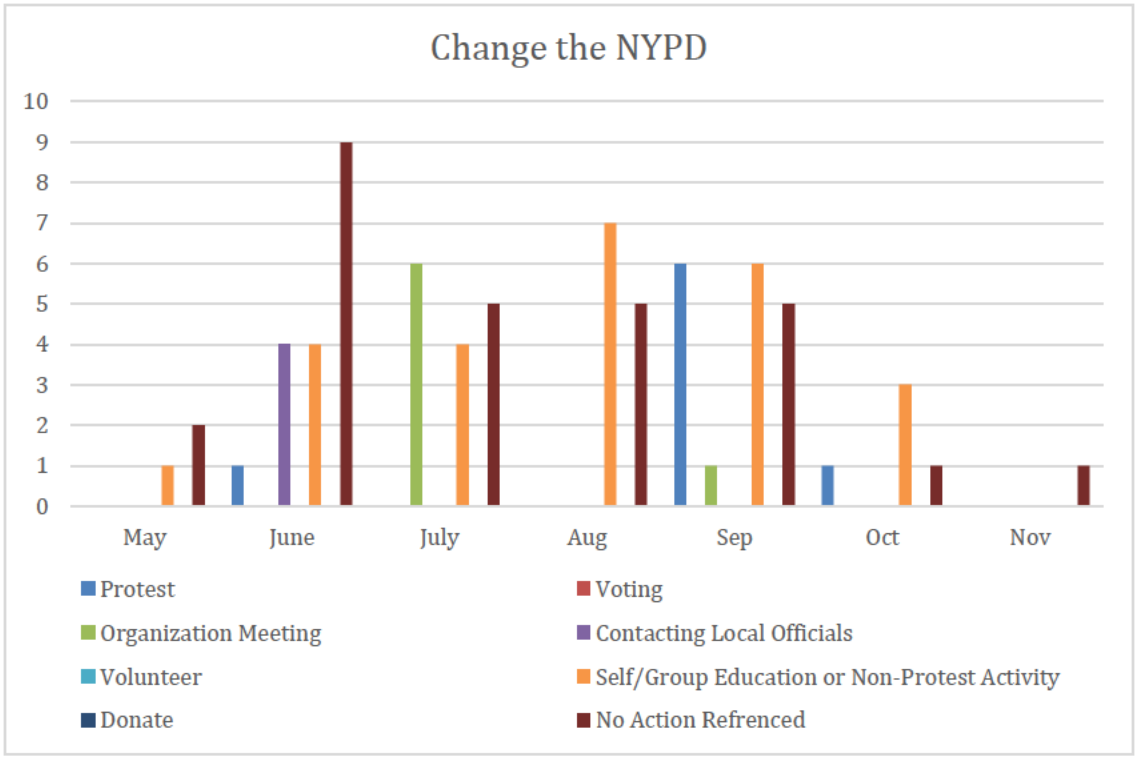
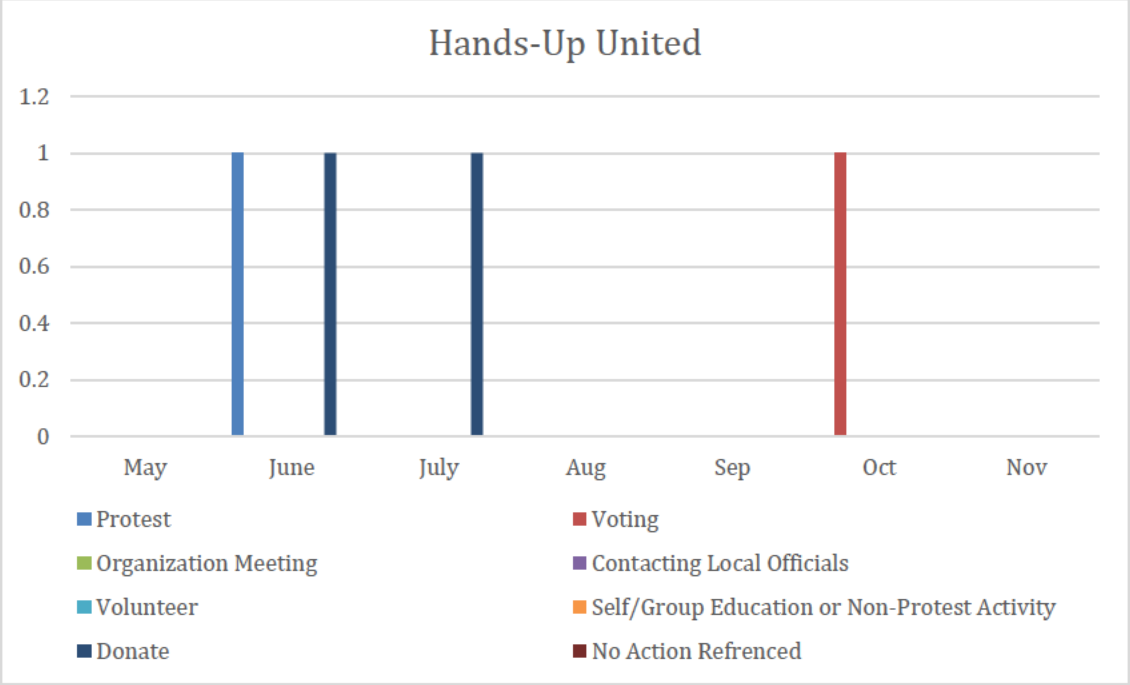
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced


Change the NYPD
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
May
June
July
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced


Hands-Up United
1.2
1
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
May
June
July
Aug
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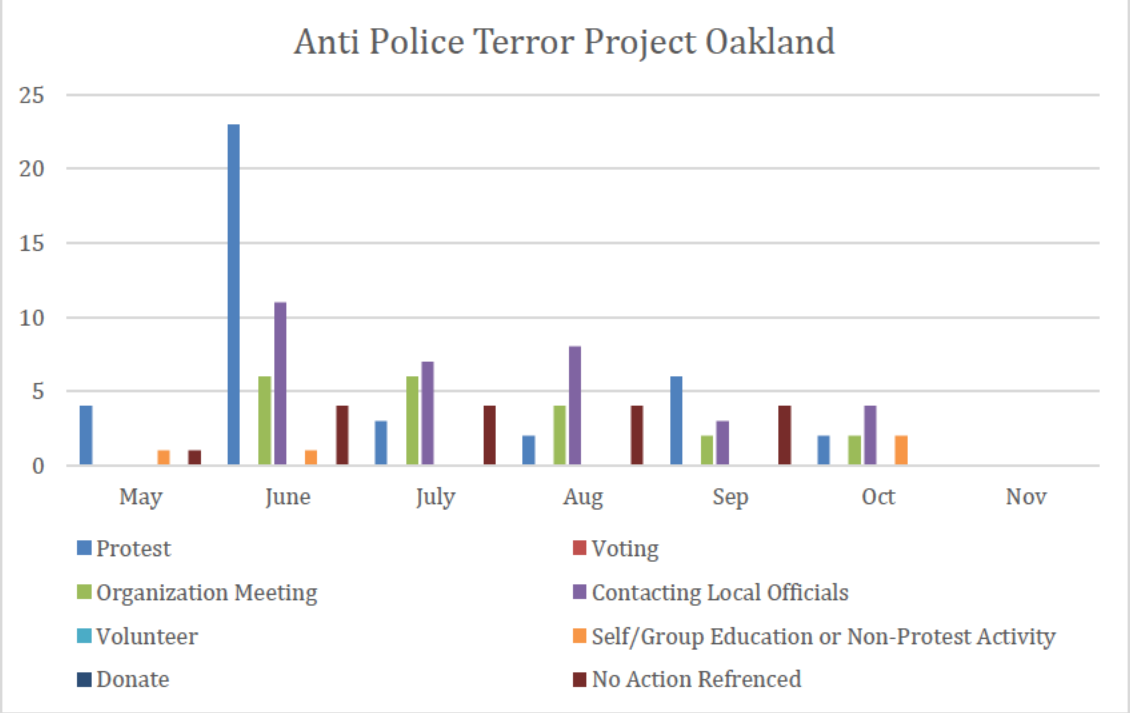
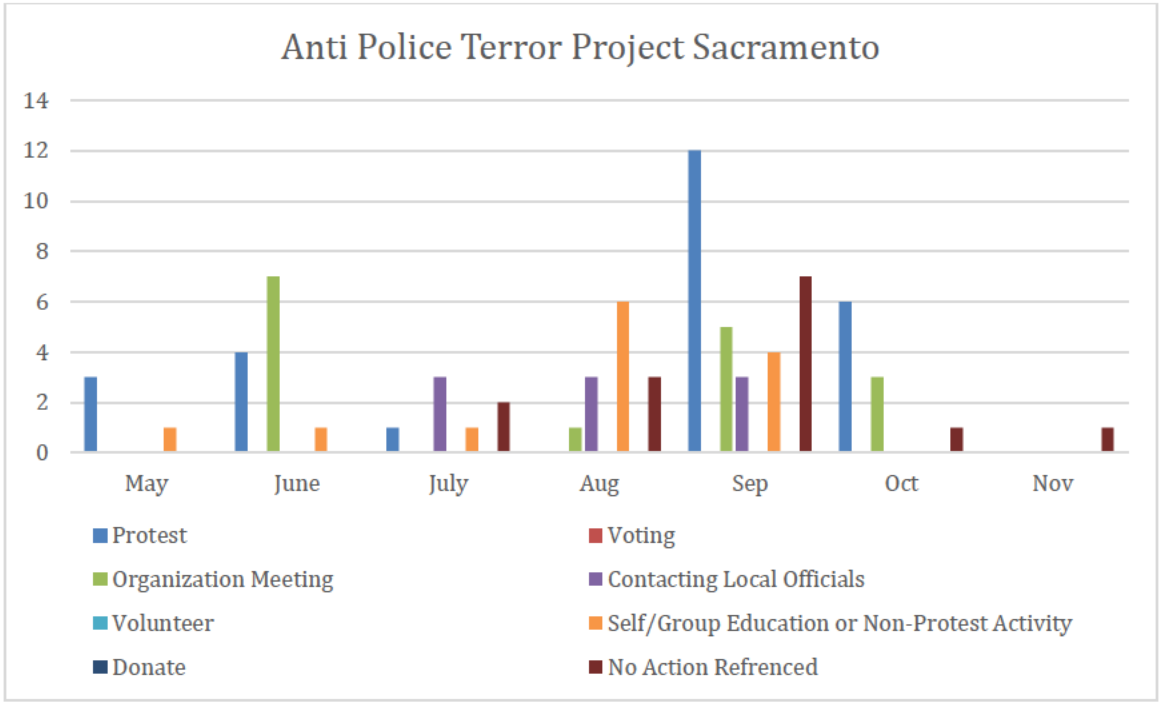
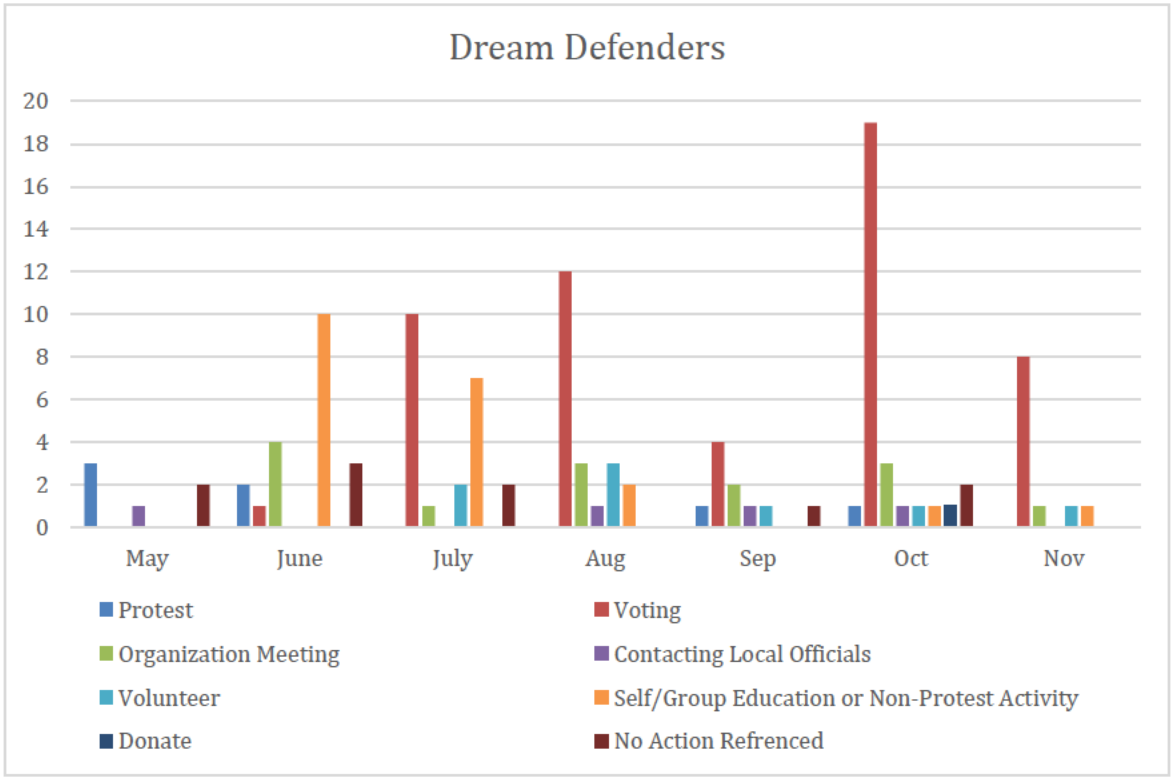
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced


Anti Police Terror Project Oakland
25
20
15
10
5
0
May
June
July
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced


Anti Police Terror Project Sacramento
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
May
June
July
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced


Dream Defenders
20
18
16
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
May
June
July
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Protest
Voting
Organization Meeting
Contacting Local Officials
Volunteer
Self/Group Education or Non-Protest Activity
Donate
No Action Refrenced

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