New York City Public Schools

New York
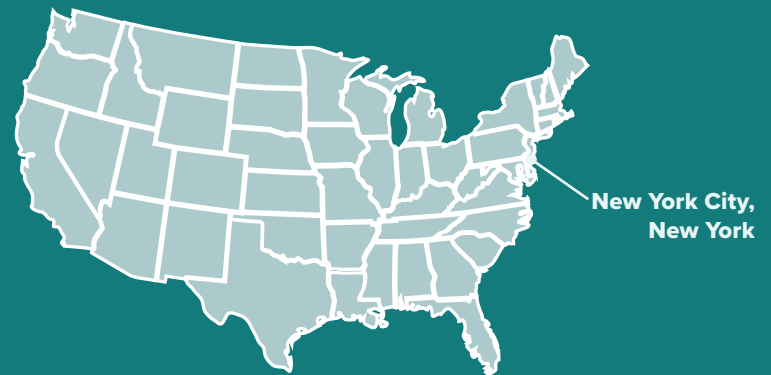
New York City,
New York

Recent survey data has demonstrated that New York City public schools subject Black and Brown young people to unrelenting racist and abusive policing at school. Young people experience a traumatizing environment, in which:

- **91%** of all arrests at school are of Black and Latinx young people,[1] despite these students being only **66%** of the enrolled population;[2]
- Survey data shows that police verbally, physically, and sexually harass students and push them into the criminal legal system at shocking rates; and,
- **More than two thirds** of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that police should be **removed** from schools.

> **They make me feel uncomfortable and they right away assume that I did something wrong.**

> **Students should not fear...we should not [be] worried about officers. We should have peace and freedom.**
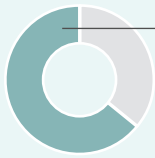
This system is discriminatory and costly. New York City funnels hundreds of millions of dollars into the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline each year. In 2021, the NYPD School Safety Division (SSD), which employs school police known as "School Safety Agents," was allocated **$451.9 million**—an increase of nearly $70 million over the previous five years.[3] The overrepresentation of Black students in incidents with school police is staggering: Black students make up **26%** of enrollment but **59%** of arrests, while white students are vastly underrepresented in every type of interaction with school police.[4]

To uncover information about students' experiences, interactions, and feelings about police at school, the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) fielded in-depth surveys with 174 young people at the end of 2020 and early 2021.

Survey findings in New York City Public Schools reveal that:

Interactions with school police are common and often harmful.

Of those with police at school, **60%** of respondents reported having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, **at least one type of negative interaction with school police.**

The share of Black respondents who reported having or knowing someone who had a negative interaction was even higher **(78%)**.

More than a quarter of respondents have experienced feeling targeted by police based on an aspect of their identity.

28% of respondents have felt targeted by police based on race, primary language, sexual orientation, or gender identity, including identity as transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex.

Respondents (with police at school) have experienced a pattern of disturbing behavior in which school police:*

- **Prevent young people from learning while at school**, for example by taking students out of a classroom **(44%)**
- **Bully, abuse, and traumatize young people**, for example by:
  - Verbally harassing or making fun of students **(17%)**
  - Physically assaulting students **(7%)**
- **Invade young people's physical autonomy**, for example by:
  - Physically searching students (other than walking through a metal detector) **(33%)**
  - Restraining students **(21%)**
- **Force young people into the criminal legal system and advance punitive techniques**, for example by:
  - Arresting students **(18%)**
  - Responding to a mental health crisis **(18%)****
  - Issuing tickets to go to court **(12%)**
  - Responding when a student misses school **(14%)**
  - Issuing juvenile reports **(9%)**
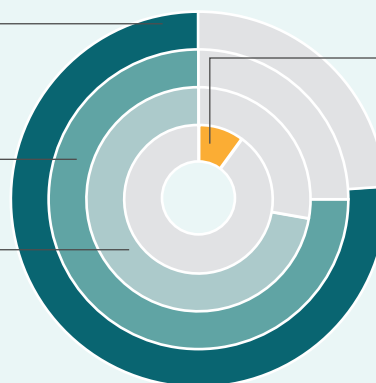- **Sexually harass young people (3%)**

Overwhelmingly, students value more support and resources over police.

When asked what they would like to see more or better quality of at school, students overwhelmingly selected resources, programs, and supports—not police.

76% of respondents selected "dedicated youth led programs to increase access to college and financial aid"

75% selected "mental health supports"

72% selected "safe/comfortable place to hang out with friends"

Only **10%** selected police

Strong relationships with peers and educators make youth feel safe at school.

When asked what makes respondents feel safe (when physically attending school), **82%** selected friends and **69%** selected teachers.

* Percentages refer to respondents who reported having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, negative interactions with school police.

** We believe it is always inappropriate for school police to respond to mental health crises.

Background

District Demographics

Serving 1,126,501 students across 1,866 schools, the NYC school system is the largest school system in the United States.[5] The student body is: Latinx **(41%)**, Black **(25%)**, AAPI **(16%)** and white **(15%)**.[6] **13%** of students are English Language Learners, **20%** are students with disabilities, and **73%** are "economically disadvantaged."[7]

Policing in New York City

The issue of policing in schools exists within the broader context of police abuse in the community. The New York City Police Department (NYPD) employs approximately 36,000 officers and 19,000 civilian employees.[8] Organizers have long highlighted the devastating impact of the NYPD's history of discriminatory policing practices that target low-income communities of color, youth, members of the LGBTQ community, the unhoused, people with mental health issues, street vendors, and sex workers.[9]

In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd when thousands of New Yorkers took to the streets in protest, the New York state legislature passed the historic repeal of 50-a, which had "served to hide police misconduct and discipline from the public."[10] This victory was built on years of organizing by a statewide coalition led by Communities United for Police Reform. In response to widespread calls to defund the NYPD and to remove "school safety agents" from schools, Mayor de Blasio claimed that he cut $1 billion from the police department for the 2021 budget. However, after the final budget was made public it was revealed that much of the supposed cuts were not in the approved budget. For example, Mayor de Blasio claimed to cut over $300 million by transferring school safety agents from the Police Department to the Department of Education (DOE). This would have been meaningless in practice because it maintains the current system of police in schools, but it also never happened.[11] The mayor, along with some city council members, again proposed a transfer of school safety agents from the NYPD to DOE in the 2022 budget—a move opposed by NYC groups fighting for police-free schools.[12]

For Black and Brown young people, there is no escape from police abuse, whether in their communities or at school. Youth see no difference between the police who harass, oppress, and surveil them in the streets from those doing so at school.

Policing in NYC Public Schools

Police Presence in NYC Public Schools

The intentional embedding of the NYPD in school discipline in NYC can be traced back to 1998 when then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani moved responsibility for school security from the then-Board of Education to the NYPD as part of his broader "law and order" campaign. This invasion of police into public schools continued in 2003 when then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration promised to bring down the full force of the NYPD on schoolchildren through enhancing invasive security measures, increasing the presence of NYPD School Safety Agents, doubling the number of permanently assigned uniformed and armed police officers in certain schools, and policing common youthful behaviors such as cursing. This approach explicitly brought "broken windows" policing—a form of policing which prioritizes criminal punishment for low-level infractions—from the streets into the classroom.[13]
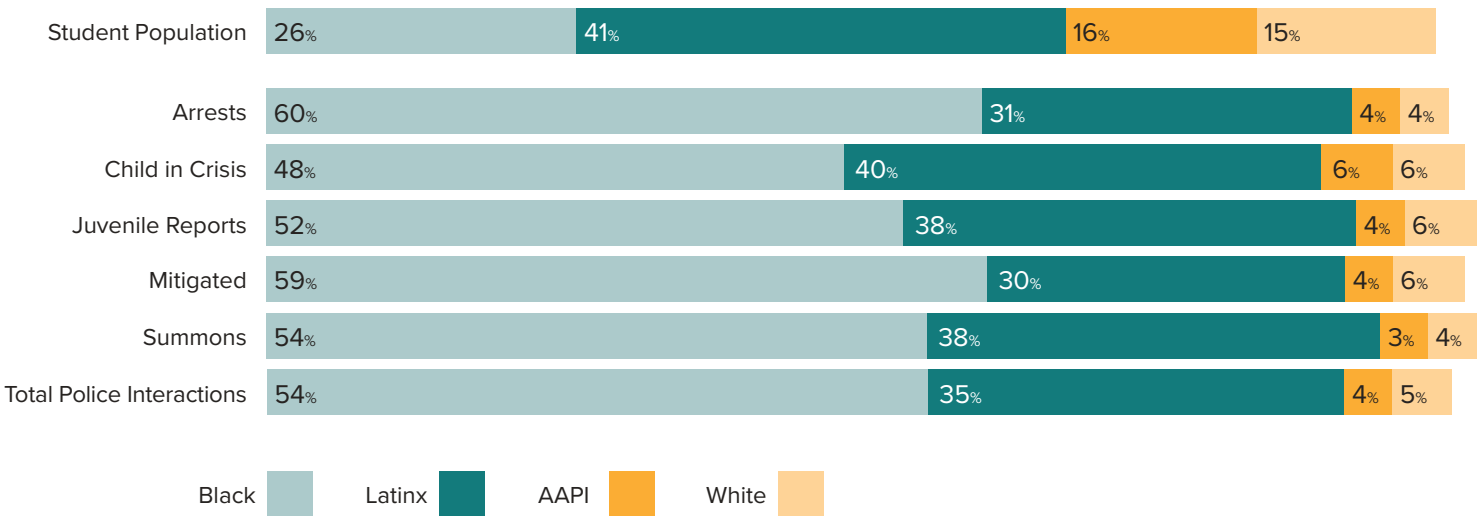
Today, the NYPD employs 5,511 staff[14] in schools across the city.[15] The DOE provides funding to the NYPD to employ school safety agents, and the vast majority of funding for the SSD is dedicated to the personnel costs of these agents.[16]

The Criminalization of Black and Brown Young People

The overall number of incidents involving school police increased steadily from 9,385 incidents in 2016 to 11,179 in 2019.[17] Data on police interactions shows a **disproportionate number of incidents between police and Black and Latinx students across every category,** though there is no evidence to suggest that young people of different races behave differently.[18] For example, Black students make up **26%** of enrollment in NYC schools, but account for **59%** of arrests. White students comprise **15%** of enrollment but are vastly underrepresented in every type of interaction.[19]
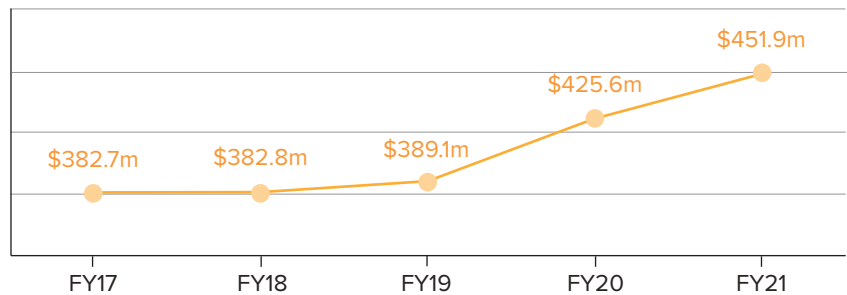
Mean Percentage of Each Racial/Ethnic Group for Each Interaction Over Time, 2016–20

	Black	Latinx	AAPI	White
Student Population	26%	41%	16%	15%
Arrests	60%	31%	4%	4%
Child in Crisis	48%	40%	6%	6%
Juvenile Reports	52%	38%	4%	6%
Mitigated	59%	30%	4%	6%
Summons	54%	38%	3%	4%
Total Police Interactions	54%	35%	4%	5%

Money Spent on Policing in NYC Public Schools

In 2021, the city allocated $451.9 million to the SSD. This budget has grown steadily over the past five years—an increase of nearly $70 million from 2017 to 2021.[20] Compared to the 5,511 NYPD SSD personnel, there are only 1,434 nurses, 1,804 social workers, and 2,952 guidance counselors in the 2022 preliminary budget.[21]

NYC Adopted Budgets to Fund Police in New York City Schools (In Millions of Dollars)[22]

FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21
$382.7m	$382.8m	$389.1m	$425.6m	$451.9m

Community Organizing Context

One of the organizations leading the fight for police-free schools in NYC is the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), led by young people and whose membership reflects Black and Brown students directly impacted by the presence of police in schools. In recent years, UYC has won citywide reforms to address the full consequences of the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline in NYC. Since 2019, UYC's work with local allies has resulted in a reduction of the maximum number of days given in suspensions from 180 to 20, the hiring of more student support staff, citywide restorative justice practices, and changing school police policies to limit the use of handcuffs.[23] The long-term impact of their work is also reflected in the data in which (while acknowledging the impact of COVID-19) showed an 82% reduction in the number of arrests and an 84% reduction in the number of court summons issued in schools between the 2016–17 and 2019–20 school years.[24]

UYC fielded in-depth surveys with 174 young people between December 2020 and January 2021. The survey was designed to uncover information about students' experiences, interactions, and feelings about police and security at school. Findings show that police at school do not make students feel safe; that interactions and sightings of school police are common, frequent, and often harmful; that students go through metal detectors regularly, and many have negative experiences with them; and that students overwhelmingly favor additional supports and resources over more police.

Youth Survey Findings

1 Police at school do not make students feel safe.

Police at school do not make students feel safe, especially compared to other people they interact with at school, like teachers and friends.

When asked what makes respondents feel safe (when physically attending school),
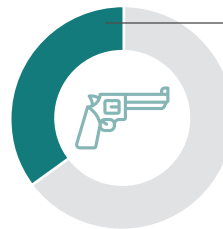
82% selected friends

69% selected teachers
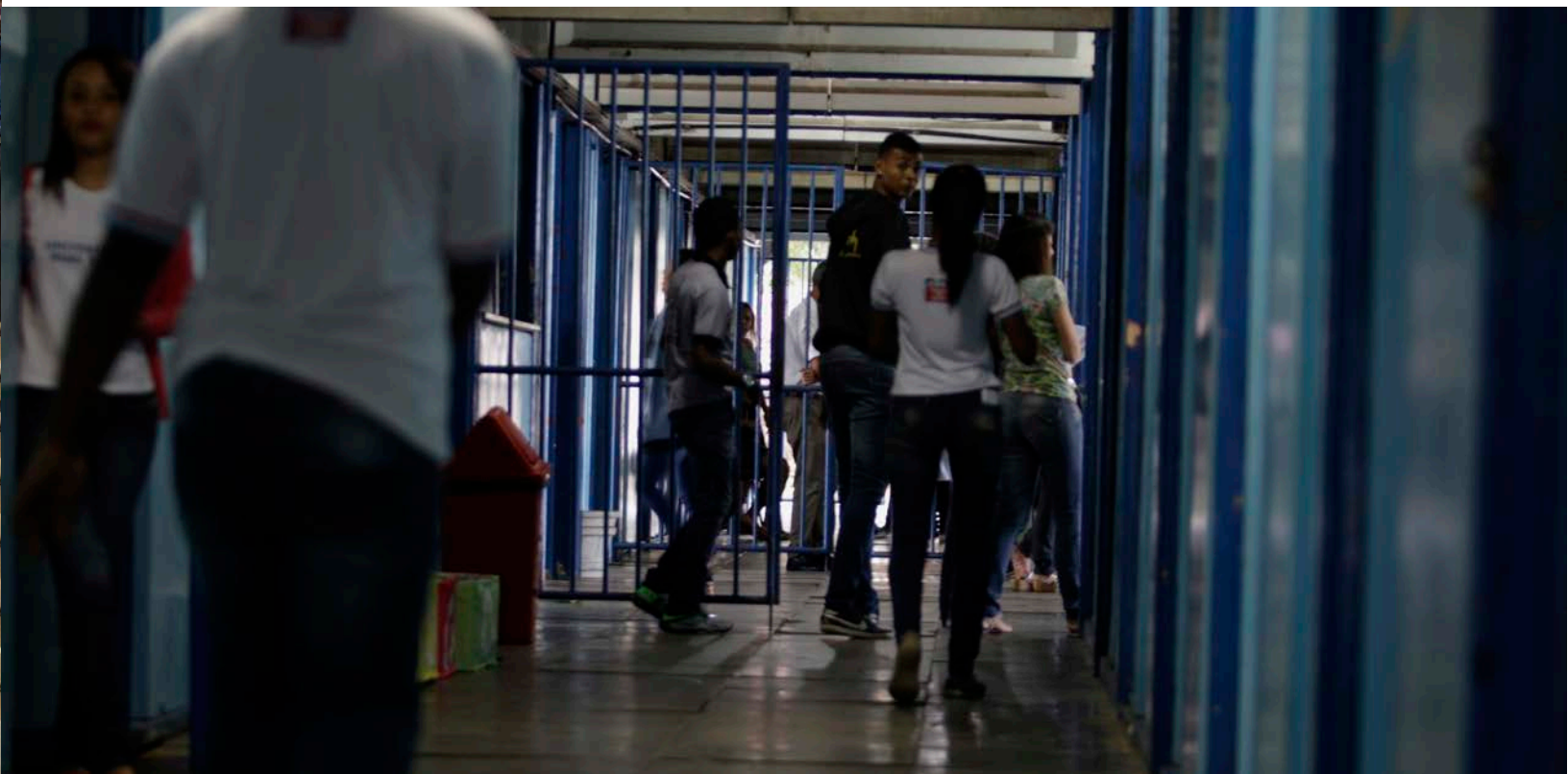
24% selected police

The percentage of Latinx and Black respondents who selected police was even lower **(20% and 22%, respectively)**.

More than a quarter of respondents have experienced feeling targeted by police based on an aspect of their identity.

28% of respondents have felt targeted by police based on race, primary language, sexual orientation, or gender identity, including identity as transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex. **20%** of respondents felt targeted based on race.

Of respondents with police at school, more than a third (35%) are armed with guns.

2 Interactions with and sightings of school police are common, frequent, and often harmful.

Most respondents reported having experienced, or having known someone who experienced, at least one type of negative interaction with school police.

Of those with police at school, **60%** of respondents reported having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, **at least one type of negative interaction with school police.**

The share of Black respondents who reported having or knowing someone who had a negative interaction was even higher **(78%).**

> " I've seen incidents where police have been called in for mental health crises, and it hurts because the way they handle us is not right. Why do they feel it is necessary to handle us this way?

Respondents (with police at school) have experienced a pattern of disturbing behavior in which school police:*

Prevent young people from learning while at school, for example by
- Taking students out of a classroom **(44%)**

Bully, abuse, and traumatize young people, for example by:
- Verbally harassing or making fun of students **(17%)**
- Physically assaulting students **(7%)**

Invade young people's physical autonomy, for example by:
- Physically searching students (other than walking through a metal detector) **(33%)**
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Sexually harass young people (3%)

Force young people into the criminal legal system and advance punitive techniques, for example by:
- Arresting students **(18%)**
- Responding to a mental health crisis **(18%)****
- Issuing tickets to go to court **(12%)**
- Responding when a student misses school **(14%)**
- Issuing juvenile reports **(9%)**

These types of interactions can have devastating impacts for young people. One study found that experiencing an arrest for the first time in high school nearly doubles the odds of a student dropping out, and a court appearance nearly quadruples the odds of a student dropping out.[25] A series of recent studies reveal that biased treatment caused youth of color to lose more trust for school officials compared to their white peers, which was further correlated with reduced college attendance.[26]

* Percentages refer to respondents who reported having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, negative interactions with school police.
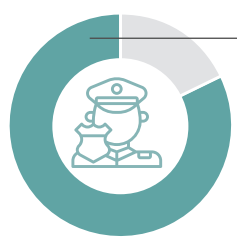
** We believe it is always inappropriate for school police to respond to mental health crises.

> " I felt unsafe because they had too many police officers in my school and there were also two police precincts near our school. They also had metal on the windows and the school does not look like an educational building from the inside. Officers will always walk around hallways and interrupt classrooms as if they were looking for something.

The majority of respondents see police on at least a daily basis.

Of respondents with police at school, **81%** saw police at school at least once daily.

More respondents have daily interactions with police than they do with guidance counselors, social workers, and school nurses.
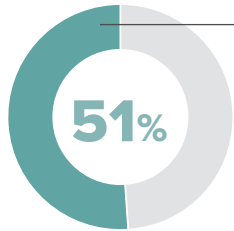

Of respondents with police at school, **7%** reported daily interactions with school nurses, social workers, and guidance counselors, compared to **22%** of respondents who interact daily with police.

Research shows that over time, the **mere presence** of police may have psychological effects on students' "nervous and immune systems that may result in anxiety, restlessness, lack of motivation, inability to focus, social withdrawal, and aggressive behaviors."[27] Community studies suggest these adverse consequences are compounded when a person perceives that the negative interaction is motivated by race.[28]

3 Students go through metal detectors regularly, and many have negative experiences with them.

Half of all respondents (51%) report going through metal detectors at least daily.

51%

Of those required to go through metal detectors, nearly all respondents reported that students are required to go through metal detectors, but that teachers and other staff are less likely to face the same requirement.

Of those who are required to go through metal detectors,

99% reported that students are required to go through metal detectors

99%

14% reported that teachers, and **11%** who reported that school staff, have to go through metal detectors

14%	11%

2% reported that police have to go through metal detectors.

Going through metal detectors is experienced as an invasive process for respondents.

For example, of those who go through metal detectors,

63% have been made to take off their shoes, belt, jewelry, or other articles of clothing;

56% have been scanned with a wand;

53% have been physically searched; and

42% have had their belongings taken.

" It's annoying and very aggressive for no reason especially folks who wear hijabs are forced to remove them.

" The hand wand or metal detector sometimes goes off and they still have to pat you down. Sometimes the police are aggressive at the metal detectors especially when the students like me don't understand English. Students are the only ones that need to go through the metal detectors. And the cops don't want people lingering around the metal detectors once you pass through them and they yell to get people away.
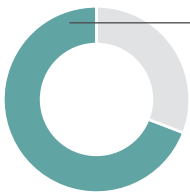
4 Overwhelmingly, students value more support and resources over police and security.

Studies show that investments in counselors,[29] mental health resources,[30] and restorative justice[31] contribute to school safety, yet there is no substantial evidentiary support for the proposition that police presence in schools and suspensions create safe learning environments.[32]

The majority of students think police should be removed from schools.

Of those with police at school, **68%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Police should be removed from my school and my school should have more support and resources for students (for example up to date books, more teachers, academic services, counseling, health, restorative practices, etc.)"

Students would rather increase funding for resources like teachers, nurses, social workers, and mental health supports over police.

When asked to rank investments in order of priority, **most students ranked teachers and mental health supports as the highest priorities** (22% and 49% ranking these options as #1, respectively).

By contrast, **76%** of respondents **ranked police as the lowest priority**.

Although the majority of respondents value other school personnel over police, most students think there are more police at school than nurses or guidance counselors.

Of those with police at school, **74%** of respondents said they think their school has **more police than guidance counselors**

86% of respondents said they think their school has **more police than school nurses.**
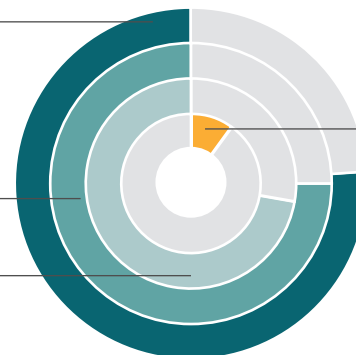
> " Police don't have to be at the school, I don't feel like they serve any actual purpose...

When asked what they would like to see more or better quality of at school, students overwhelmingly selected resources, programs, and supports— not police.

76% of respondents selected "dedicated youth led programs to increase access to college and financial aid"

75% selected "mental health supports"

72% selected "safe/comfortable place to hang out with friends"

Only **10%** selected police

Recommendations

The young people who are most at risk of harm due to harsh policing policies are uniquely situated to re-imagine school environments. This report highlights the vision for safe, supportive, and inclusive schools developed by youth leaders with UYC.

This is Our Youth Mandate:

I   Divest from Youth Criminalization

A Remove all police personnel from New York City public schools. Do not transfer their supervision to the Department of Education.

B Remove all metal detectors, scanners, and invasive security measures from New York City public schools.

C Remove NYPD from responding to mental health crises in schools and from entering schools for any school related matters.

D End all zero tolerance policies and practices, and prohibit arrest, summons, and juvenile reports non-criminal violations and misdemeanors, which disproportionately impacts Black and Brown young people.

II   Invest in Youth Care

A Fully fund and implement restorative practices at all schools by 2022.

B Fully fund and increase school support staff, including guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, restorative justice coordinators, and academic and social support staff.

C Establish a system wide mental health continuum and increase funding for mental health supports for all students.

D Ensure all students have access to:

- Culturally responsive education;
- High-quality and comprehensive selection of sports, arts, and elective courses; and,
- College Access supports, including Student Success Centers.

Storybook

General Feelings about Police and Security

The [police] are so loud and are constantly yelling in our faces, which doesn't feel safe to me.

I feel unsafe because they scare me a lot. They look really mean, which is concerning.

Students should not fear... We should not [be] worried about officers. We should have peace and freedom.

Clearly, if there are police in school it sends a message that kids can't be trusted.

They make me feel uncomfortable, and they right away assume that I did something wrong.

Some police in the schools are really rude to students, and they don't make students feel welcome.

Police judge the actions of students based on what other students have done.

I believe police don't make us feel comfortable in our schools. They are only there to police us and white neighborhoods don't get the same treatment which makes me feel like they only hurt POC.

I feel unsafe because of the idea of having someone with handcuffs interacting [with] youth and making them seem like trouble makers. It intimates youth. If I joke or talk about police, they will confront the idea like "I'm the police, you are the student," you know? They humiliate people, what they call "protocol" is unacceptable for students, especially around mental health and it instills fear.

Negative Interactions with Police and Security

I've seen incidents where police have been called in for mental health crises, and it hurts because the way they handle us is not right. Why do they feel it is necessary to handle us this way?

[My current] school. . . is not filled with police or heavily rely on calling them, but before I attended that school, I attended a school in the Bronx and it was completely different, more police than guidance counselors, the cops were called for a lot. I was suspended for more than 30 days because I supposedly assaulted a cop who was called to stand guard at a door as me and my mom were arguing over a cell phone the school took from me. I walked out of the room and the cop stood right in front of the door so when the door shut it closed in her face, nobody hit her, the door didn't hit her but I was grabbed and suspended for assault.

While I don't experience police harassment because I'm white passing, my peers have. My friends who are Black have experienced being stopped and questioned on their way back to school from lunch while the rest of us don't.

I felt unsafe because they had too many police officers in my school and there were also two police precincts near our school. They also had metal on the windows and the school does not look like an educational building from the inside. Officers will always walk around hallways and interrupt classrooms as if they were looking for something.

There was this one time when [I] was in 7th grade, our book bags were checked by police and teachers in our school. We had to line up outside.

I think some like to act tough sometimes, to make others feel intimidated. When I get out of a class and if [I'm] 10 minutes late they start to ask questions—"What is it that you are doing here?"—very loudly.

There was this incident where there was a fight and the security guard choked a girl out and they had to navigate the court system. The whole school was aware.

[I] feel like there are a lot of police, sometimes [I] cannot eat because they are there watching. People say they are there to protect students but they are targeting students. They also have weapons and we cannot do anything if they do something to us with the guns.

Experiences with Metal Detectors

I am upset that one time walking through a metal detector, they took away my art supplies and perfume and it took me 2–3 days to get it back. I had a Spanish project the same day they took my items away and I couldn't do the project. Luckily, my teacher spent money out of pocket on arts supplies for the students and I was able to still do my project.

They take forever and they make me late to class.

It was an unnecessary process and invasion of peoples' privacy. My scissors were taken from me and they were for school.

The metal detector process has a heavy presence of police. I felt they were very mean and aggressive.

The process doesn't make me feel good.

One time, my friend and I were trying to go through the metal detectors and my friend had a glass yogurt and the cops at the metal detectors got aggressive and mean, all to tell her to throw it out. This really upset my friend and she felt less than for the rest of the day.

In my opinion the metal detectors are unjust because only the students and visitors have to go through them. . . it does not make me feel safe, it only makes me feel discriminated against.

It's weird that only the students need to go through the metal detector.

One time, police wanded me and asked me to pull my shirt up, and it was very uncomfortable for me because they were treating me as if I was stealing something.

I really do not like the hassle that it takes to go through the metal detectors every day. It is really useless and stops high schoolers from simply being ourselves.

When people are late to school it is so confusing and they give you attitude and ask you questions and we have to give our phones and it makes me uncomfortable because what if they lose it? They once almost did... I remember someone brought a Snapple and it broke and they were being mean to her and it's just humiliating. I fear that I can't bring my personal belongings to school because I may never get it back. There is a store that we have to pay a dollar every day because of scanners so that they can hold our phones that we need.

I feel like they pick and choose who they want to search more.

The lines are crazy in the morning and often make me late for class.

Any little thing sets off the metal detectors and [I] often have to go through the metal detectors several times, which make me late for class. Nothing can go through the metal detectors because everything sets it off.

I don't enjoy going through the metal detectors. It takes a lot of time through the morning. It makes me nervous and causes anxiety and for me to be late because I don't know what they will take and if they will take my markers or belongings. It affects my grades and relationships with teachers by making me late in the mornings. I don't like it.

I feel like it's traumatizing not just for me but for others. I had to experience that in middle school, like why did we have to experience this every day? I feel like it is unnecessary and does not have to happen.

The process of going [through] metal detectors makes me feel that I didn't have a say and I feel I was forced to go through them just for me to go to my class and learn.

They keep us outside in the freezing cold, snow storms and all. The metal doctor process is really traumatizing and disgusting.

It was very uncomfortable and frustrating that as a student I had to go through that process

Metal detectors scared me because they will discriminate [against] us, especially people of color.

Metal detectors make me feel really uncomfortable, [especially] to girls. There was one day that one of my friends was carrying women's products for her period and she got ashamed in front of others [when] going through the metal detectors.

Metal detectors are so annoying because they will make students be late to class or even miss periods and during cold weather [it] is annoying to wait or make the line outside the school building just to go in.

It takes way too long. . . It is absolutely ridiculous to me and should be taken away.

I feel that metal detectors criminalize students and they try to put us down.

Metal detectors make me feel that we [are] untrusted because they think we are going to commit a crime.

Metal detectors would go off for any metal object and that would be an excuse for them to treat me as a criminal.

Some students get patted down often. It is not clear why but they are the same group of students.

It's annoying and very aggressive for no reason especially folks who wear hijabs are forced to remove them.

They sometimes double check even if it seems like you really have nothing in your belongings. If something shows up, they will look through to make sure. My school did not allow [us] to bring reusable bottles or any bottled water if it was open.

It's not fair that staff and teachers don't have to go through like students.

They checked my guitar bag to see if I had a gun.

Going through metal detectors makes me feel uncomfortable, especially because I often have to go through the metal detector several times because everything sets it off and in the end [they] pass the wand to not find anything, which just takes up my breakfast time.

When the metal detectors keep going off on one student they are pulled to the side and have to be wanded/patted down. I have had a friend who had to wait to be wanded down for 30+ minutes.

The fact that students have to go through the metal detectors every day, yet staff and teachers can just walk right by doesn't make the school safer but does the exact opposite.

The hand wand or metal detector sometimes goes off and they still have to pat you down. Sometimes the police are aggressive at the metal detectors especially when the students like me don't understand English. Students are the only ones that need to go through the metal detectors. And the cops don't want people lingering around the metal detectors once you pass through them and they yell to get people away.

Other people have been patted down. When you go through scanners you have to take off your belt and it is the first thing you hear.

The metal detectors don't feel normal, they feel like high level technology that is not meant for us because we are kids.