

HIGH SCHOOL

Arrested Learning

A survey of youth experiences of police and security at school

Elizabeth Public Schools, New Jersey

April 2021



Acknowledgements

This report was written by Kate Hamaji and Kate Terenzi (Center for Popular Democracy), in collaboration with staff and young people from Make the Road New York (MRNY), Make the Road Nevada (MRNV), Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS), the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), and the the Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder.

We are deeply grateful to the organizers and youth leaders who shaped and fielded this survey and the young people who shared their powerful stories, experiences, and expertise. They are the true authors of this report.



The Center for Popular Democracy

The Center for Popular Democracy is a nonprofit organization that promotes equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy in partnership with innovative base building organizations, organizing networks and alliances, and progressive unions across the country.

www.populardemocracy.org



The Research Hub for Youth Organizing at the University of Colorado Boulder

The Research Hub for Youth Organizing supports young people's capacity to claim power and create more just communities through field-driven research. They advance youth participation and leadership by co-creating and sharing research and curriculum with youth organizers, teachers, education leaders and policy makers. Taphy T, Kathryn Wiley, Daniel Garzón, Joanna Mendy, and Ben Kirshner contributed significant research and writing to this report.

www.colorado.edu/education-research-hub



Make the Road Nevada

Make the Road Nevada (MRNV) builds the power of Latinx and working-class communities of color to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, and transformative education. MRNV's vision for Nevada begins with building a strong grassroots foundation in Las Vegas. It ends with elevating the power of working-class immigrant communities in every community around the state. They organize in Latinx and immigrant communities, and develop leaders who advocate for their families, their neighborhoods, and beyond.

www.maketheroadnv.org



The Urban Youth Collaborative

Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) is a coalition of students from across New York City fighting for transformative education reform that puts students first, with a focus on replacing harmful policing in schools with restorative justice and trauma-informed care. The UYC coalition is made up of members from the Future of Tomorrow of Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, Make the Road New York, and Sistas and Brothas United of the Northwest Bronx.

www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org



Latinos Unidos Siempre

The mission of Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS) is to work towards the educational, cultural, social and political development of youth of color, by empowering youth to take leadership roles in the community, advocating for social and political change and other forms of systemic and institutional oppression through grassroots organizing.



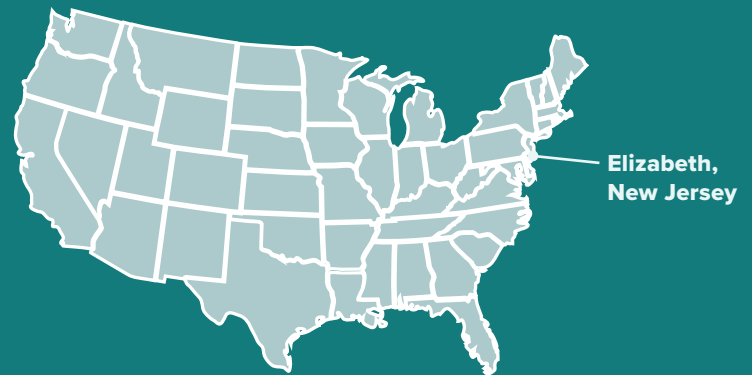
Make the Road New Jersey

Founded in November 2014 in Elizabeth, Make the Road New Jersey (MRNJ) builds the power of immigrant, working-class and Latinx communities to achieve dignity and respect through community organizing, legal, policy innovation and transformative education. Every week, hundreds of immigrant families - young people and adults - come together to fight for dignity and respect in their communities.

www.maketheroadnj.org

Elizabeth Public Schools

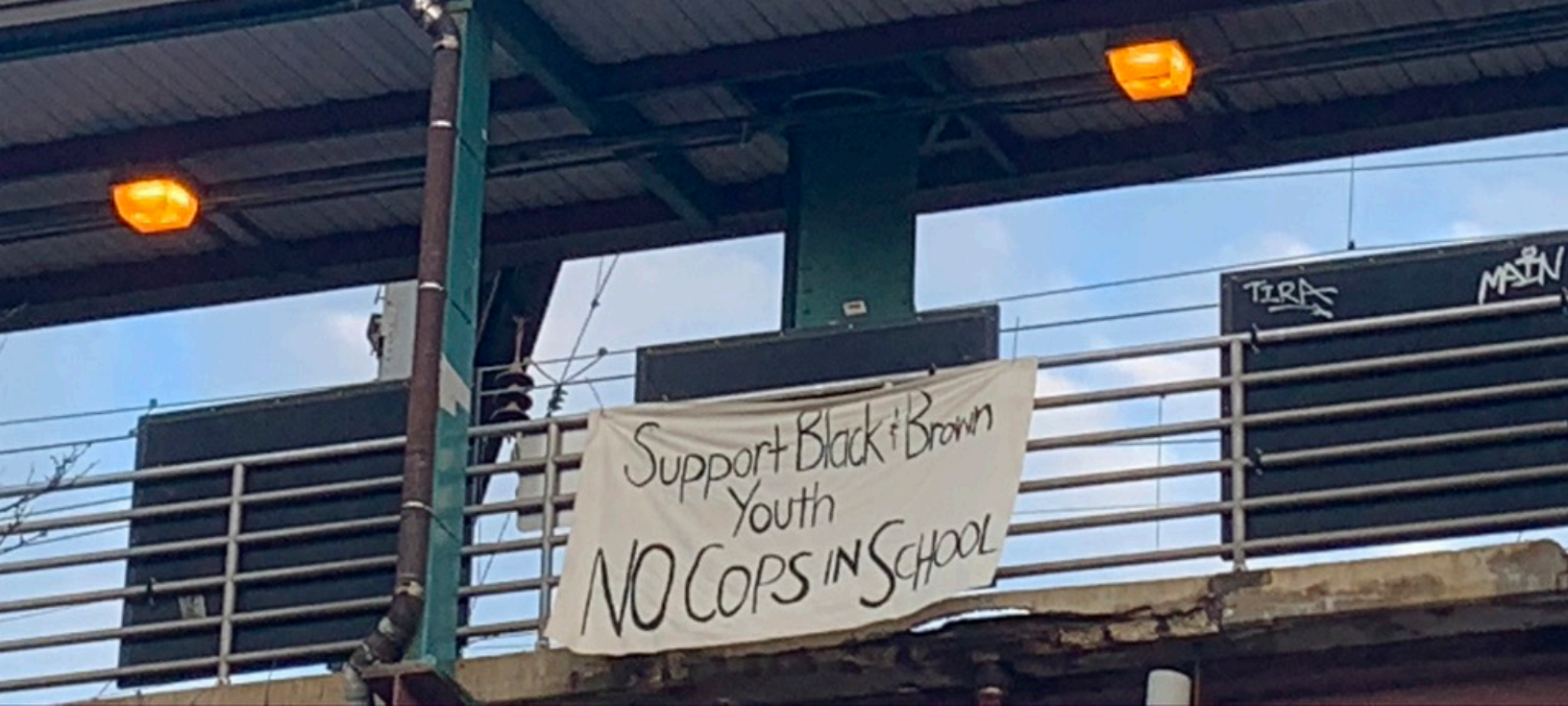
New Jersey



Recent survey data has demonstrated that Elizabeth Public Schools (EPS) punishes, marginalizes, and denies Black and Brown young people access to supportive learning environments, and instead subjects them to an abusive policing and security infrastructure in schools. Young people experience a traumatizing environment in which:

- Students are surrounded by police at school. EPS has the largest in-house security force in the State of New Jersey.¹ The estimated ratio of students to security guards is 169:1,² compared to a 513:1 student to nurse ratio and a 587:1 student to counselor ratio.³
- The district under-invests in critical support needs such as college services, counselors, nurses, and psychologists, while funneling millions of dollars into the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline each year. In 2018—2019, for example, the district spent \$8.1 million on security, while spending only \$3.7 million on health services and \$2 million on “attendance and social work services.”⁴
- Black students at Elizabeth public schools are more likely to be referred to law enforcement than white students: the U.S. Department of Education’s civil rights data indicates that while Black students made up **18%** of total student enrollment, they were **32%** of the students subjected to referrals to law enforcement.⁵

To uncover information about students’ experiences, interactions, and feelings about police and security at school, Make the Road New Jersey fielded in-depth surveys with 166 young people at the end of 2020 and early 2021.



Survey findings in Elizabeth reveal that:



Security guards at school do not make students feel safe.

When asked what makes respondents feel safe (when physically attending school),

81% selected friends

71% selected teachers

13% selected security police



Overwhelmingly, respondents value more support and resources for students over police.



When asked to rank investments in order of priority, **most students ranked teachers and mental health supports as the highest priorities**

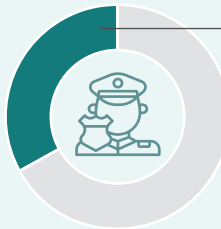


(28% and 46% ranking these options as #1, respectively).

By contrast, over two thirds of respondents (67%) **ranked police as the lowest priority.**



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



Nearly **a third** of respondents who have police stationed at school report having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, at least one type of interaction with school police—for example being taken out of a classroom, being arrested, or being given a ticket to go to court.

“ I feel unsafe because... [the guards] make things worse, they make everything more complicated, they are ready to [use] more violence, they don't want to hear what people have to say.

Background

District Demographics

As of 2018–2019, the Elizabeth Public Schools served 28,195 students in 36 schools.⁶ The student body is 73% Latinx, 17% Black, and 8% white.⁷ A fifth of students are English language learners (20%) and 76% are low-income.⁸ 12% of students have disabilities.⁹

“ Freshman year. . . [I made] a lot of stupid mistakes, the more I think back on those times the more I realized if I had someone to talk to. . . I would have done better with grades and mental [health issues]. . . you throw a kid out it makes them angrier. . . They didn’t make me feel safe. . .

Policing in Elizabeth

The issue of policing in schools exists within the broader context of police abuse in the community. The Elizabeth Police Department has been shrouded in scandal, with numerous investigations throughout the 1990’s into a group of officers known as “the Family.”¹⁰ This secretive group of officers was accused of planting evidence on civilians, using racist language, and intimidating other officers.¹¹ The department has a history of excessive force and brutality, which has been met with a failure to investigate complaints.¹² For example, between 2016 and 2018, 21 people filed formal complaints of excessive force, 16 reported wrongful arrests, and an additional 10 accused police of various other crimes.¹³ Of cases referred to internal investigators, not a single claim of serious police wrongdoing was substantiated by the police department.¹⁴ In 2019, a police director resigned after officers reported to investigators that the director routinely used slurs to describe Black people and women.¹⁵

Elizabeth has a history of uprisings against anti-Black police brutality. In August 1964, after decades of police brutality and several incidents taking place over the summer, uprisings took root in a number of northeastern cities, including Elizabeth.¹⁶ Over a three-day period, hundreds of Black residents took to the streets in protest of anti-Black police violence.¹⁷ Nearly 60 years later in June 2020, hundreds again took to the streets in protest of systemic police brutality following the murder of George Floyd.¹⁸

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

Policing and Security at EPS

Police and Security Presence at EPS

The use of police (known as School Resource Officers) in EPS dates back to at least 1998, when at least one municipal police department officer was assigned to schools on a regular basis.¹⁹ Historically, there is a woeful lack of publicly available data on the use of school police in the district. Public data does not make clear whether school police are employed directly by the district, by the city police department, or some combination, nor does it offer up-to-date information on the number of school police currently used in EPS. The state of New Jersey also fails to require schools to report the scope of policing, security forces, use of metal detectors, or interactions with police.

A comment from the district Superintendent made during a 2019 board meeting indicated that EPS employed “167 security guards district wide,” and additional “police officers in targeted locations.”²⁰ Several years earlier, a school board member stated that the EPS had the “largest in-house security force in the State of New Jersey.”²¹ Based on the number of security guards, a local news outlet estimated the ratio of students to security guards to be 169:1.²² Other current staff to student ratios include: 513:1 student to nurse ratio and a 587:1 student to counselor ratio.²³ These vastly different staffing ratios indicate how funding and resources for the criminalization and control of young people are prioritized over basic and critical resources like nurses and counselors.

Beyond security and law enforcement personnel, EPS relies on technology, surveillance equipment, and a web of law enforcement relationships as part of a punitive and criminalizing approach to “school safety.” A description provided by the superintendent noted that the district employs “extensive security monitoring, metal detectors, and camera surveillance systems.”²⁴ In 2019, the School Board President indicated the district has consulted with former law enforcement officers from juvenile investigations, SWAT, crisis negotiations, investigation, and accident investigations divisions.²⁵

“ I believe security guards in my school do not contribute to students’ safety and education...[they] interrupt my class to take people’s hoodies and harass students. . .

The Criminalization of Black and Brown Young People in EPS*

EPS fails to accurately report on interactions that young people have with police, and has refused open records requests that could have provided more clarity. From the data available, the New Jersey Department of Education reported that across the state “during the 2017–2018 school year, school personnel reported incidents to the police on 7,449 occasions, [...] in addition, 1,385 student arrests occurred at school.”²⁶ Experiencing an arrest for the first time in high school nearly doubles the odds of the student dropping out, and a court appearance nearly quadruples the odds of the student dropping out.²⁷ For immigrants and undocumented young people, school push-out can result in detention and deportation.²⁸

The U.S. Department of Education’s civil rights data indicates that Black students at Elizabeth Public Schools are more likely to be referred to law enforcement than white students. While Black students made up **18%** of total student enrollment, they were **32%** of the students subjected to referrals to law enforcement.²⁹

Money Spent on Policing and Security in EPS

In 2018, the district spent \$8.1 million on “security” (a broad category that was not disaggregated in the budget document).³⁰ In contrast, it spent \$3.7 million on health services, \$2 million on “attendance workers and social work services,” and \$1.2 million on “educational media services/school library.”³¹

Elizabeth School District Budget Fiscal Year Ended June 30 2018, Actual Expenses³²

	Total
Security	\$8.1 million
Educational Media Services/ School Library	\$1.2 million
Attendance and Social Work Services	\$2 million
Health Services	\$3.7 million

Again, EPS fails to provide data—and has refused information requests—on the costs of the police state in and around the schools. In addition to the personnel costs, there are many non-personnel capital costs associated with buying and maintaining surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and the web of “extensive security monitoring” as the district describes.³³

Every level of government appears to contribute large sums of money to uphold the policing of mostly Black and Brown young people in Elizabeth’s schools. Federally, support for these non-personnel surveillance expenditures may come in part from federal grants. In 2019, Elizabeth received a federal COPS School Violence Prevention program grant in the amount of \$494,750.³⁴ Allowable program costs included coordination with law enforcement, motion detectors, x-rays, social media monitoring, violence prediction software, metal detectors, locks, lighting, technology, and training for law enforcement.³⁵ Also included in the COPS awards are consultant and civilian personnel costs and benefits, as well as sub-awards which can be made to other agencies.³⁶

At the state level, school aid data shows that beginning in 2008–2009, New Jersey has been giving districts aid earmarked for school security, initially with a statewide allocation of nearly \$224 million. Since then, the state has allocated \$200 million or more each year (with the exception of 2010–2011 due to recessionary cuts).³⁷ Elizabeth is projected to receive **\$12.2 million in school security aid in 2020–2021 alone.**³⁸

* This analysis draws on federal OCR data and state DOE data. There are discrepancies between these data sources. For example, the New Jersey DOE reported 120 incidents of law enforcement referrals in 2017-2018, but federal data reported the number of students referred to law enforcement, (34 students over the same time period, and also possibly undercounting the total number of referrals if the same students are referred multiple times). While there are limitations to both, they do provide a picture of student contact with law enforcement.

Community Organizing Context



Make the Road New Jersey's Youth Power Project (YPP) has launched a campaign to remove all law enforcement personnel from the New Jersey public schools and to redistribute funds to restorative justice and student services. This campaign is led by members of YPP—young people of color whose lives have been impacted by the carceral state, either through direct involvement with the juvenile criminal legal system, school discipline or arrest, or a parent's incarceration or deportation. MRNJ's YPP has convened a table of partners (state-wide and local teacher groups, advocacy groups, and youth groups) to take action that involves 1) providing testimony at local school board and/or state budget meetings, 2) hosting Facebook and Instagram livestreams to educate peers, and creating TikTok series, and 3) direct action and mobilization through COVID-safe marches and rallies. In August 2020, as part of a national Day of Resistance calling for the safe, healthy and equitable reopening of schools, MRNJ organized an action at City Hall to protest the presence of police and security guards in schools.³⁹

MRNJ fielded in-depth surveys with 166 young people between November 2020 and January 2021. The survey was designed to uncover information about students' experiences, interactions, and feelings about police and security at their schools. Findings show that police and security do not make students feel safe; that interactions and sightings of school police and security guards are common, frequent, and often harmful; that students go through metal detectors regularly, and many have negative experiences with them; and that students would overwhelmingly favor additional supports and resources over police and security.



Youth Survey Results



Police and security at school do not make students feel safe.

Police and security 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),

81% selected friends

71% selected teachers

13% selected security police



Of respondents with police at school, nearly a third reported that police are armed with guns (30%).**

“ There’s something that I think is so deeply wrong about the fact that a person on campus gets to just walk around with a gun on them. From the past year you can obviously see that cops have a power dynamic issue and I don’t feel comfortable with cops on campus having a gun and being able to use it.



* In Elizabeth public schools there are both security guards and police. Security guards are district employees, while police are employed by the police department. Responses are based on students’ perception; it may be difficult at times to distinguish between the two.

** There were 60 respondents with police stationed at schools, or 36% of all respondents.

“ I normally don’t like walking out in the hallway alone. . . I feel the security guards watching the girls and they call us these little pet names.

“ I was called down to be searched because of my skin tone—I did not give consent. My parents were not contacted and I was searched for drugs along with other kids.

“ I have been sexualized—they tried to calm me down by calling me pretty. I don’t trust cops.



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

Of respondents with police at school, nearly a third (32%) report having experienced, or having known someone who has experienced, at least one type of negative interaction with school police.



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 (20%)



Invade young people’s physical autonomy, for example by:

- Physically searching students (other than walking through a metal detector) (13%)
- Restraining students (7%)



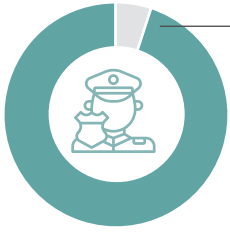
Force young people into the criminal legal system and advance punitive techniques, for example by:

- Arresting students (8%)
- Responding when a student misses school (3%)
- Issuing juvenile reports (7%)
- Issuing tickets to go to court (8%)

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.⁴⁰ A series of recent studies reveal that biased treatment causes youth of color to lose more trust for school officials compared with their white peers, which was further correlated with reduced college attendance.⁴¹

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

Students see police at schools regularly, including nearly a third who see police at their school on a daily basis.

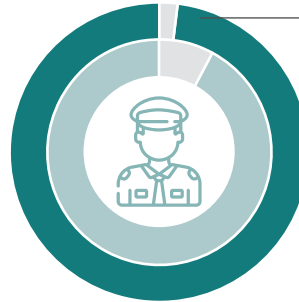


Of respondents with police at their schools, **95%** saw police at school at least once a month in an average month. Of these, **32%** saw police at least daily.

“ One of [the] security guards in my school is very biased. . . Like certain students can be out in the hallway talking to others but some students, security will spot and immediately go up and tell them to go to class.

Sightings and interactions with school security guards are also common and frequent.

Of those with security guards at school, **74%** of respondents had interactions with security guards (other than just seeing them in or around the school) at least once in an average month. Nearly a quarter of respondents (**23%**) had daily interactions. Black respondents reported daily interactions at an even higher rate (**30%**).



Nearly all respondents (**99%**) saw security guards at school at least once a month in an average month, with the vast majority of respondents reporting at least daily sightings (**93%**).

33% reported seeing security guards 6-10 times a day, and **13%** reported seeing security guards more than ten times a day.

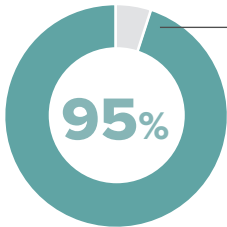
Research shows that over time, the mere presence of police may have psychological effects on students’ “nervous and immune systems that may result in anxiety, restlessness, lack of motivation, inability to focus, social withdrawal, and aggressive behaviors.”⁴² Community studies suggest these adverse consequences are compounded when a person perceives that the negative interaction is motivated by race.⁴³





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

The overwhelming majority of respondents go through metal detectors, and most go through metal detectors at least once a day.



Of respondents who go through metal detectors, 95% of respondents reported going through metal detectors at least once a day.

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, 97% reported that students are required to go through metal detectors

96%

36% reported that teachers have to go through metal detectors

36%

24% reported that police, and 26% reported that security guards, have to go through metal detectors.

24%

26%

“ It holds up students from getting to class on time. You could arrive at 7:40AM with enough time to make it to class if not for the extensive line at the metal detectors. When we’re late to school, we get detention.

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

For example, of those who go through metal detectors,

68% of respondents reported that their bags have been physically searched;

50% have been scanned with a wand;

25% have been made to take off their shoes, belt, jewelry, or other articles of clothing;

38% have had their belongings taken; and

22% have been yelled at.

“ It makes me feel like they want me to feel dangerous like I’m going to do something.

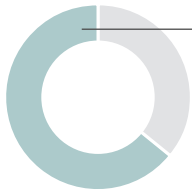
“ They don’t check the teachers. They beep and they let them go. If we beep they check our bags and stop us and it’s embarrassing.

“ It’s sooo backed up, especially now with COVID it’s a hazard.

4

Overwhelmingly, students value more support and resources over police and security.

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



Of those with police at school, **63%** 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** (28% and 46% ranking these options as #1, respectively).

By contrast, over two thirds of respondents (67%) **ranked police as the lowest priority.**

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

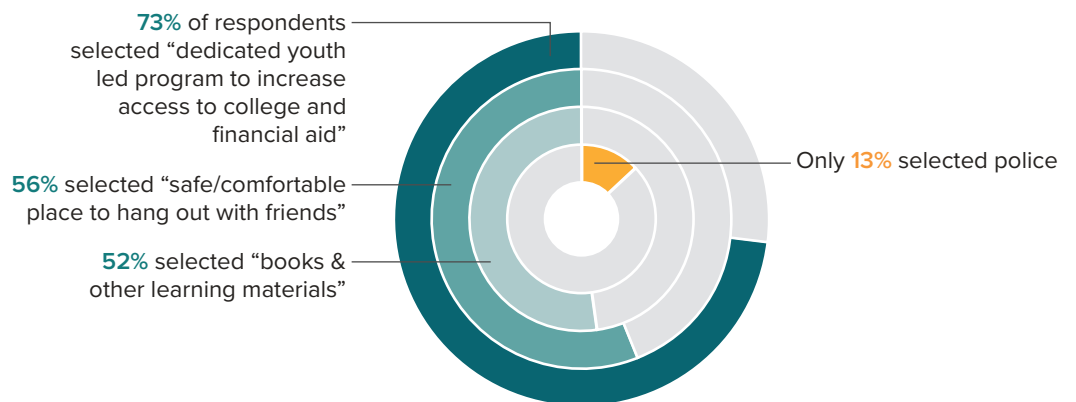


Of those with police at school, **nearly half of respondents (47%)** said they think their school has **more police than guidance counselors.**

Nearly three fourths (**73%**) of respondents said they think their school has **more police than school nurses.**

Studies show that investments in counselors,⁴⁴ mental health resources,⁴⁵ and restorative justice⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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



“Police-free schools isn’t about just removing security guards or cops out of the building; it’s about redirecting police funding into academic and mental health resources for students. Police in school is also seen by the use of metal detectors, school fencing, and other so-called “security measures.” These things cost a lot of money and personally I think they are not as effective as they are meant to be. I live in Elizabeth, NJ, a predominantly Black and Brown city, and I had many instances where these policing methods affected my day-to-day school life. I get late to class because of the long lines to check our backpacks. . . I want to study during lunch on the hallway tables but security guards get upset at me and kick me out, I want to get something from my locker and I’m screamed at for no reason. They are everywhere just to pinpoint small little things you do to get you in trouble. . . What’s most interesting about this is that I have asked my friends from other schools in NJ [that] are predominantly white, and they tell me they have never been in situations like mine, that they didn’t even have metal detectors in their schools! So this tells me that this isn’t about security but about fear and seeing Black and Brown students as a threat. . . . I want to see my school and others schools in my city reconsidering their security measures more closely and invest in another type of security for their students which is about their health and success, what actually matters; when we get hurt, we need more nurses, when we get hurt emotionally or have problems at home/friends, we need psychologists, when we want to improve our chances to get into a good college, we need counselors.

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 MRNJ.

This is Our Youth Mandate: Fund Education, Not Incarceration

I Divest from criminalization

- A Immediately remove all police from in and around schools.
- B Terminate all contracts with the local police and sheriff's departments that police in and around Elizabeth public schools.
- C Remove school security guards from schools.
- D End surveillance of young people including by removing metal detectors, surveillance cameras, banning facial recognition software, prohibiting social media tracking, and ending all other forms of invasive surveillance.
- E Stop soliciting federal and state funds used to police, surveil, and criminalize young people. Seek waivers to redirect funds from the federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, Department of Homeland Security or similar federal or state programs to be used on support services instead of policing and criminalizing infrastructure in schools.
- F Direct all school personnel in the district to not call the Police Department into schools unless there is an extreme emergency that threatens the life or safety of other students.
- G Collect and publish accurate data regarding all forms of discipline and policing. Elizabeth Public Schools must accurately collect information about discipline and police interactions, disaggregated by race, age, gender, disability, school, charge, sanction imposed, and type of interaction.
- H End all arrests or citations in schools.
- I Expunge students' discipline records.

II Invest in our education

- A Ensure all students have access to College Access and Career Readiness supports, including Student Success Centers, Advanced Placement and Honors classes, college trips and scholarships. Support a pipeline to college and career, including by providing free access to college and universities, paid internships, and eliminate barriers to entering higher education.
- B Fully fund and increase culturally competent school support staff, including teachers, mental health programming, guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, restorative justice coordinators, and academic and social support staff.
- C Fully fund and implement restorative practices at all schools.
- D Create a culturally relevant curriculum.
- E Fully and equitably fund public schools, including programs for students with disabilities and schools in low-income communities.
- F Invest in schools to make them welcoming places including by having more clubs and field trips; improve school lunches, and make urgent structural improvements, including installing air conditioners.

III Restore and strengthen the civil rights of young people in education

- A Provide maximum local democratic control of the education system. Support youth suffrage, especially on elections impacting their education.
- B Ensure that Black and Brown young people have meaningful input into the process to select educational leaders who have a proven track record of working to dismantle the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline.
- C Ensure that all school policies are inclusive, non-punitive, and trauma-informed, including ones related to school discipline, immigrant students, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities, among others.

Storybook

General Feelings about Police and Security

Police and security guards represent a criminal state... [Police/security guards] are abusive and talk mean to students.

When I interact with [security guards/police], I start to think, what did I do wrong? Or, what's about to happen?

I felt unsafe because [security guards/police] were able to target anyone because they have the authority to. I've seen people get hurt while they abused their power. I felt unsafe as I knew anything could happen.

I feel unsafe because [security guards/police] make things worse... They are ready to [use] more violence, they don't want to hear what people have to say.

I don't feel safe with cops with guns being in or in front of my school.

Freshman year... [I made] a lot of stupid mistakes, the more I think back on those times the more I realized if I had someone to talk to... I would have done better with grades and mental [health issues]... you throw a kid out it makes them angrier... They didn't make me feel safe...

[Security guards/police] should... not patrol whether a student is in uniform. Sometimes they yell at students for sitting in the hallway too long, they yell at students for using a cellphone.

[Security guards and police] don't make us safer... [S]ome of them are very racist. [T]hey always pick favorites... if they keep doing this less and less kids will come to school.

[Security guards/police] would follow us and make us feel miserable, we couldn't do anything without being suspected of doing something wrong.

I know my peers have that fear of being targeted—I know that's a legit fear in nearly every school. If there is a situation, [security guards/police] would target a Black/Brown student before a white student.

I believe security guards in my school do not contribute to students' safety and education... They interrupt... class to take people's hoodies and harass students...

I... take issue with allocating too many resources in security personnel and not enough towards mental health support, guidance counselors, and social workers.

Negative Interactions with Police and Security

Security guards are always known to cause problems and harass students over their uniform, disrupting class time to do it, too.

There have been situations where a security has called me out over nothing and have made me feel uncomfortable...

One of [the] security guards in my school is very biased... Like certain students can be out in the hallway talking to others but some students, security will spot and immediately go up and tell them to go to class.

Any interaction with security was always negative.

[The security guards/police] didn't care, they would fight with students, one was a pedophile.

[The] things they do, like patting [students] down—I don't think that should be happening.

Sometimes they would look at me funny and I think they are suspicious of me so I'm scared.

My friend of color got handcuffed, patted down, and taken out of school... The SROs have favorite students.

I normally don't like walking out in the hallway alone... I feel the security guards watching the girls and they call us these little pet names.

I was called down to be searched because of my skin tone—I did not give consent. My parents were not contacted and I was searched for drugs along with other kids.

Security was really disrespectful and a lot of interactions felt like a power trip—like the power to bully.

Sometimes when they take away stuff they don't tell you to come back and get it so students sometimes forget things that are important.

The security guards always have a nasty attitude towards the students and would even yell at us. The security guards have favoritism with the students they interact with.

It's time to prepare students for the real world—monitoring students 24/7 is not the best way. We need to teach peers how to interact with each other—not that privilege determines how far you get in school or how obedient you are will determine how far you get. That's not cool.

This one time it smelled like weed... They let my white friend and the girl go by but they went through all the Black guy's stuff. They all got suspended but my Black friend had more time and they were trying to charge him. White friend went to rehab.

My friend [was] taken out of class with excessive force.

Every day the security guards would walk into class to check if everyone was following the dress code, which would disrupt class time.

I was yelled at because I did not have a hallway pass when I actually did.

They take away sharpeners sometimes which is annoying so sometimes we don't have pencils to write with—so we have to ask other people.

Experiences with Metal Detectors

They don't check the teachers. They beep and they let them go. If we beep they check our bags and stop us and it's embarrassing.

Oftentimes I would be late to class even if I got there on time because I would have to explain a half-opened water bottle in my backpack and the lines were sooo long.

Only students have to go through them [as] opposed to everyone else. I think it presents a bias that students are the danger entering the school and staff is clear since they work there.

They've taken things out of my bag to search it and there have been many instances where staff/teachers would avoid the detectors completely.

[The metal detector process] is so long and when you're late to class, you get in trouble for it even if it was the metal detectors holding you up. So you still get a tardy.

[The metal detector process] is systemic racism.

Security guards take what they think is bad. I brought a playing game into school that my English teacher gave me to use and we were allowed to use them in class but security snatched it because they deemed it wasn't for school and I had to get my teacher to take it back from security.

Every safety measure felt artificial.

It is very annoying because [security guards and police] have bias towards students and focus on those students.

[Metal detectors are] not needed—it takes a lot and they can take things out of our bags without us being able to say anything back.

The [metal detector] process would make it hard to get to class on time and it would make students late since it would create huge crowds of students waiting. I would try to get to school on time, but I'd end up late to class. Instead of wasting their money on that, I think they could spend on more resources like books (etc.) for students because it's more necessary for their futures.

Only students have to go through the metal detectors every day in the morning, and it is mandatory. Students also have to give up belongings so the guards can search it, and they are wanded as well.

It makes me feel like they want me to feel dangerous like I'm going to do something. When I hear other people's experiences in other schools, it makes me... jealous.

We would have to line up outside of school to go through the metal detector and it would cause us to be late to class.

[The metal detectors] would take away from class time because everyone was waiting at the metal detector.

I feel like I'm being accused of doing something wrong right when I walk into school. There is a sense of fear attached to multiple security guards and metal detectors present.

Methodology and Survey Sample

Elizabeth Public Schools

Survey findings were the result of a 55-question survey conducted by MRNJ staff from November 2020 to December 2020. The survey sample included 166 young people living in Elizabeth, New Jersey. To take the survey, respondents had to be 21 years old or younger and have attended public school within the last year and a half. Incomplete responses were removed from the sample, except responses that were complete except for the demographic questions (one respondent). Two respondents answered questions about police at school, although they indicated that there were no police at their schools. To be conservative, the content about police in schools was omitted from those two responses.

Respondents were asked to answer questions based on their experiences prior to COVID-19 school closures.

Student Demographics

Respondents identified as: Latinx (73%), Black (20%), white (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (6%), and other (5%). (Note: respondents were able to “check all that apply.”)

Respondents’ most commonly spoken languages were English and Spanish. For half of respondents, Spanish was their primary language spoken at home (51% of respondents), followed by English (38%).

Respondents identified as female (67%), male (31%), transgender (0.6%) and non-binary/gender non-confirming (2%).

Respondents were in 6–12th grade or currently not in school (but had attended school within the last year and a half). The majority of respondents were in 11th or 12th grade (34% and 36% of respondents, respectively).

School Demographics

38% of respondents characterized their schools as having “majority Black and Brown students,” 37% characterized their schools as having an “equal mix of students of color and white students,” 16% as having “majority Brown students,” 4% as having “majority white students” and 5% as “other.” 54% of respondents characterized their schools as having an “approximately equal mix of students from households with low, middle, and high incomes” and 38% of respondents characterized their schools as having a “majority of students from homes with low incomes.”

This data reflects respondents’ assessment of their schools. The report authors did not validate this with demographic data provided by schools or the district.

Endnotes

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