KEEP HER SAFE

Centering Black Girls in School Safety

A case study and report by
the **National Women's Law Center**
and the **Southern Poverty Law Center** *with*
Black girls in Miami-Dade County Public Schools

About the National Women's Law Center

The National Women's Law Center fights for gender justice—in the courts, in public policy, and in our society—working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls. We use the law in all its forms to change culture and drive solutions to the gender inequity that shapes our society and to break down the barriers that harm all of us—especially those who face multiple forms of discrimination. For more than 50 years, we have been on the leading edge of every major legal and policy victory for women. For more information, visit nwlc.org.

About the Southern Poverty Law Center

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people. For more information visit splcenter.org.
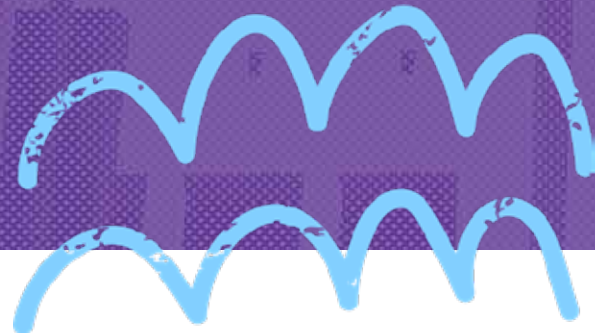
About the Student Co-Authors

This report is co-authored by Black girls and young women who currently attend or previously attended Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Participants in the surveys and focus groups that are the primary source for this report (Black girls and young women ages 14 to 24) were invited to be co-authors and were paid for their time and work. Some are named in the credits, and others have opted to remain anonymous. Their voices are powerful, and this report is the product of their vision and self-advocacy.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

School leaders, local and state legislators, and even members of the U.S. Congress have responded to school shootings by investing more money into school hardening policies—increased police and security presence, metal detectors, harsher discipline codes, and other performative security measures. Prioritizing these unproven hardening efforts as the primary security strategy for our neighborhood schools has created a culture of criminalization in which students are policed and treated like threats to their school community, rather than children and teens worthy of protection.

This is especially true for Black girls who are among those most harmed and made less safe by school hardening policies. Black girls are overpoliced[1] and disproportionately disciplined in schools, causing to them to miss critical class time.[2] Black girls face a distinct set of stereotypes that leave them vulnerable to biases from school staff and faculty, as well as school security and police officers. In school settings that are not intentional about ensuring that students feel supported, Black girls are experiencing harassment, humiliation, surveillance, physical harm, and invasion of privacy.

Not only do school hardening measures make many Black girls feel less safe, the increased presence of school security increases the likelihood that they will be suspended and arrested.[3] Black girls, in particular, are more likely to be referred to law enforcement and more likely to be arrested in school than white girls.[4] Reliance on school security and police to address typical youth behavior contributes to students being pushed out of the classroom and into the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, a school criminalization culture causes Black girls to suffer other harms that are often invisible to those who don't experience them.

For example, it normalizes the policing of girls' bodies and the loss of their autonomy and privacy, increasing girls' vulnerability to harassment and abuse throughout their lives. Ultimately, school hardening policies do not create safer learning environments for Black girls. Despite the disproportionate impact of these policies on them, Black girls have often been overlooked by policymakers and left out of the school safety conversation. **If schools are to be truly and holistically safer, policymakers must center the needs and experiences of Black girls.**

This report is a collaboration between the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and Miami-Dade County Public School students and graduates, with the assistance of local community organizations. Its purpose is to uplift the voices of Black girls and ensure they are heard, seen and centered in decisions about creating safer schools. We asked Black girls and young women in Miami-Dade County about their experiences with school policing and school safety[5], building on previous work done in Miami by SPLC and partner organizations.

Although we originally set out to hear specifically about Black girls' interactions with and perceptions of school police, the girls and young women painted a broader picture about how school criminalization impacts whether they feel safe in school. In this report, we present common challenges Black girls told us they face with school policing and the culture of criminalization in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS). Though it seems long, the length is necessary. The bulk of this report contains the girls' own words. While statistics and trendlines in the background section are revealing, it is only through the girls' textured voices and experiences that readers can truly understand the impact of school policing on Black girls and young women. We urge you to read the report in its entirety, but if you are inclined to read only a portion, the girls' own words are most critical. For that reason, their words are bolded/highlighted throughout. We also share recommendations for schools and lawmakers to implement the vision of holistic school safety that the girls shared with us—strategies for schools to invest in their psychological and emotional safety in addition to their physical safety. We hope that M-DCPS and school districts across the country will hear what Black girls have to say and implement changes to end criminalization and create safe and inclusive schools for all students.

Black girls want to feel safe to be girls with the same courtesy, care, and understanding adults afford to other girls.

This report demonstrates how critical insights can come from centering Black girls in the school safety conversation.

HOW WE STRUCTURED THE PROJECT

Throughout this report, we aim to share in their own words the experiences of Black girls and young women ages 14 to 24 who currently attend or formerly attended Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

We surveyed 47 of them and held listening sessions with 33 to hear about how school police presence in their K-12 schools impacted their safety and well-being. Some of the girls and young women participated in both the survey and listening sessions. The quotes in this report are theirs.

We refer to "*Black girls and young women*" to account for the participants in our project who were over 18 years old at the time of our listening sessions.

To ensure the project was done in a way that would minimize any potential harm to Black girls, the NWLC-SPLC team worked with a licensed therapist specializing in sexual harassment and trauma throughout all phases of the project. The team also sought the oversight of an Institutional Review Board to review and approve the project plan.

KEEP HER SAFE: KEY TAKEAWAYS

Black girls at M-DCPS do not feel holistically safe in school. Instead, because of school policing and broader school cultures of criminalization, Black girls in M-DCPS experience:

▷ Harsher treatment from school police and security guards or "pretty privilege" (different treatment from school police and security guards based on whether the officers perceive them as physically attractive).

▷ Sexual harassment from security guards, often in the form of inappropriate comments about how girls look.

▷ Body policing and profiling through dress code enforcement, particularly from security guards.

▷ Public humiliation and shame during in-class police and K-9 searches.

▷ Lack of autonomy and privacy caused by strict bathroom regulations.

▷ Discipline settings, such as detention, that mimic prison-like conditions.

▷ Minimal education and support for students at risk or who have survived sexual harassment and assault.

For Black girls, holistic safety means feeling physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. Holistic safety also includes:

▷ Safe relationships with trusted adults

▷ Safety from discrimination

▷ Safe resolutions to sexual harassment

▷ Safety from school pushout

At minimum, school leaders and lawmakers should create holistically safe schools for all students by taking the following steps:

▷ Invest in student support services.

▷ Avoid school policies that police, surveil, and harshly punish students and instead, when needed, use proven positive behavioral interventions.

▷ Ensure girls are safe from sexual harassment and assault, specifically including harassment by school police officers and security guards.

▷ Expand understanding of school safety by engaging students in conversation about what a safe school is.
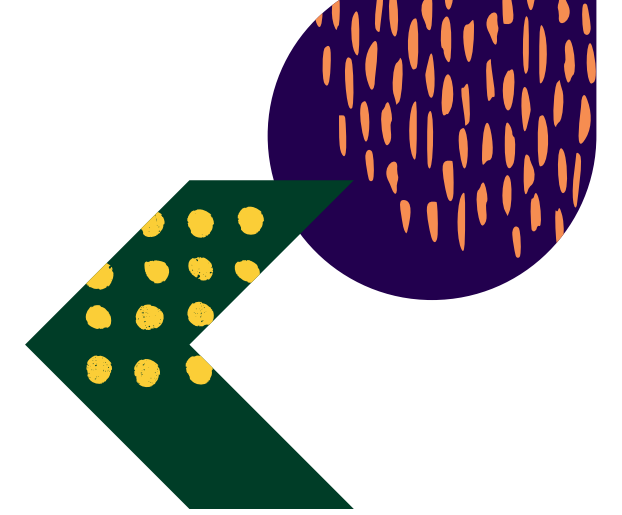
BLACK GIRLS, ADULTIFICATION BIAS, AND SCHOOL POLICING

The experiences of Black girls are rarely centered in conversations about school safety. Yet Black girls encounter specific barriers, stereotypes, and harms based on their race and gender that impacts their experience of school safety. These barriers, stereotypes, and harms can be multiplied by other identities they may hold, such as being members of the LGBTQI+ community or people with disabilities. In schools, Black girls far too often have to learn in environments that are not affirming or supportive of who they are. Instead, they are subjected to school policies that were developed without their input and make school settings less safe for them. This is especially true with school policing and other school hardening policies.

One of the biases Black girls often experience in schools is adultification, meaning people see Black girls as older than they are, less innocent, and more promiscuous or sexually knowledgeable than their white peers of the same gender.[7] This bias also leads people to see Black girls as less in need of protection than other girls.[8] People begin adultifying Black girls who are as young as five years old.[9] **Adultification contributes to a false narrative that when Black girls make mistakes, their mistakes are intentional and malicious, rather than stemming from the innocence of just being a kid.**[10]

In the context of education, adultification often means educators discipline Black girls more frequently or more harshly than their peers, especially for more ambiguous behaviors that are open for interpretation, such as being "disruptive," "disobedient," or "aggressive," or for dress code violations.[11] **When educators act on adultification bias, Black girls are more likely to be excluded from—or pushed out of—the classroom for disciplinary reasons.** In the 2017–2018 school year, nationally, Black girls were four times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension and four times more likely to be expelled than white girls.[12] The sexualization of Black girls and refusal to see them as young or innocent also leads to blaming Black girls for sexual harassment or assault that they experience and/or minimizing the impact of that harassment or assault.[13]

School-based law enforcement officers are also influenced by adultification bias, which leads to criminalizing Black girls for typical youthful behavior. In the 2017–2018 school year, Black girls were three times more likely to be sent by teachers or administrators to law enforcement and nearly four times more likely to be arrested at school than white girls.[14] Black girls with disabilities, who face additional biases and barriers based on the intersections of their identities, were also more likely to be arrested in school than white girls.[15]

When police are present in schools , they are likely to respond to typical youth conduct with criminal consequences such as arrest. Even a first-time arrest can double the chances that a student does not graduate from high school.[16] If that student is required to go to court because of that arrest, their chances of not graduating nearly quadruples.[17] Once students have been involved in the legal system, their chances of getting involved in the legal system again or even going to prison increase.[18]

> I felt like some adults, they don't see younger children as, you know, children who are bound to make mistakes. ... I feel like when you're a Black student, and you go to school, they don't see you as ... 'She's just a kid.' No, they see you as a grown person who's responsible for your decision and, of course, you are, but I feel like, as kids, we should be given, like, second chances.
> *– 12th grade student at Homestead Senior High School[6]*

WHAT IS ADULTIFICATION?

Adultification is a type of bias based on racial stereotypes.

It can cause someone to see Black girls as older than they are, less innocent, and more promiscuous or sexually knowledgeable than their white peers.

When teachers or other school officials "adultify" Black girls, they are more likely to discipline or even physically harm and arrest Black girls more frequently or harshly than they might other students for similar behaviors.

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE?

The school-to-prison pipeline is a phrase used to describe the national trend of school policies and practices that funnel students out of school and into the juvenile and/or criminal legal systems.

WHAT IS SCHOOL PUSHOUT?

School pushout refers to the punitive discipline practices schools use that exclude students from class and force them out of school altogether.

Because Black girls are disproportionately targeted and harassed by school-based police, they are more likely to be pushed out of school and into the criminal legal system. Beyond missing learning time in the classroom, this means that Black girls are more likely to experience long-term effects due to school policing. For example, students with criminal records from a school-based arrest face barriers to being admitted to college or receiving federal financial aid.[19] Black girls who do not graduate high school because of pushout experience long-term financial consequences: Black women who start but do not finish high school stand to lose $246,000 in job earnings over a forty-year career, compared to Black women with a high school diploma, and nearly $1.2 million compared to Black women with a bachelor's degree.[20]

Adultification bias combined with school policing can also lead to dangerous situations for Black girls. Over the years, Black girls have frequently been the targets of physical and sexual abuse by school-based law enforcement officers.[21] Black girls are then faced with the risks of speaking out against authority and being ignored or disbelieved, if they do.

> **With the safety, education, and livelihood of girls at stake, it is critical that school leaders and policymakers talk to Black girls about their experiences and implement the policies needed to create safe and supportive learning environments for them, which will also create safer and more supportive environments for all students.**

What is school policing?

One of the most common names for a school-based police officer is a **school resource officer** or **SRO**. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "SROs are sworn law enforcement officers responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools."[22] Some school districts may use other names, such as "school safety agent," but ultimately, they are all different ways of softening the name for a school-based law enforcement officer who carries the force of law, like the power to arrest and give out tickets or citations.[23]

School policing is not always carried out by sworn police officers. Some school districts use unsworn police officers, who are considered members of law enforcement but typically do not have the authority to make arrests, carry a firearm, or wear a badge. Some districts also employ or contract with **security guards**, who do not have the force of law but do regularly surveil and regulate students, refer students to law enforcement, and enforce disciplinary codes throughout the school day. In Florida, the law has been interpreted to allow for civilian security guards with less training than police officers to carry guns on school campuses, increasing risks to students and creating a more hostile school climate.

Each of these types of officers, regardless of their titles or specific legal powers, carries out different forms of school policing by shifting the school environment from one of learning to one of surveillance and criminalization.

WHAT IS SCHOOL HARDENING AND CRIMINALIZATION?

School hardening refers to the practice of installing and stationing mechanisms of the security industry in school buildings. These mechanisms include metal detectors, security cameras, military-grade metal and glass, and school-based police and security guards.

School hardening mechanisms are often the same ones used in criminal legal institutions, such as jails and prisons.

Relying on extreme school hardening measures often negatively impacts learning environments and can imply to students and the broader school community that students are the threats who need to be policed, rather than valued community members who need to be protected. This can also lead to school criminalization, where typical youth behaviors that used to only land students in detention and other school-based punishments, might land them in handcuffs instead.

WHAT IS SURVEILLANCE?

Surveillance is the monitoring of the behavior of an individual who is suspected of participating in criminal activity, or who is racially profiled and assumed to be participating in criminal activity. The goals of surveillance are often to gather information and to keep control over the individuals being watched.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CLIMATE?

To learn more about school climate, check out this NWLC resource: "…and they cared": How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color School climate is a measure of how students and adults experience school. A positive school climate includes positive relationships among and between staff and students, a safe environment where students feel they belong, and equitable supports to meet high expectations. To learn more about school climate, check out this NWLC resource: "…and they cared": How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color.

Though Black Girls in Miami-Dade County Public Schools Face a Higher Risk of Experiencing the Detrimental Consequences of Overpolicing, the Commission Dictating Florida School Safety Lacks Diversity, Expertise, and Perspective to Consider Their Safety Needs

In the immediate aftermath of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Broward County, Florida, in 2018, the Florida Legislature passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (MSD Act). The MSD Act created measures that prioritize criminalization and shut students and families most affected by school hardening out of the school safety decision-making processes.

For example, it created the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission (MSD Commission), which was established to investigate system failures and recommend changes to school safety policies.[24] The people chosen to serve on the MSD Commission, however, lacked the expertise and diversity necessary to make recommendations that would reflect the needs of all students in Florida.[25] From its inception in February 2018 until July 2023, all thirteen members of the commission were white, and five, including the chair of the commission, were active or former law enforcement officers. Now, of fifteen members, fourteen are white, eleven are men, seven are current or former law enforcement officers and only one is a mental health professional.[26] Making matters worse, the MSD Commission has a history of refusing to consider public comments[27], including from the most impacted groups such as student representatives of March for Our Lives—an organization formed by students who survived the 2018 MSD shooting.[28]

In just five years, the MSD Commission's recommendations have led to hundreds of millions of dollars in school hardening grants, mandatory Threat Assessment[29] teams made up of law enforcement at the school and district levels, an increase in mandates requiring school officials to report students to law enforcement, and harmful new laws requiring more police presence in schools.[30] These laws include requiring all schools in the state to have a "safe-school officer."[31] A safe-school officer can be a school resource officer, a "school safety officer" who has the power to make arrests and carry weapons, an armed security guard, or a "school guardian"—a non-law-enforcement school employee with minimal firearms training.[32]

The policy changes pushed by the MSD Commission have had a distinct impact on Black girls. About half of all girls in Florida who come into contact with law enforcement in school for incidents that previously would have been handled with regular school discipline or at most a civil citation (or ticket) are Black girls.[33] Over the last several years, one-fourth of Black girls involved in incidents in school that usually receive a civil citation were arrested instead.[34]

The risk is even greater for Black girls attending Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), which received more funding under the MSD Act and related school safety legislation than any other district in Florida.[35] The tens of millions of dollars that must be spent on security measures in M-DCPS, including metal detectors, bullet-resistant glass, and security cameras, has more than doubled from $9.5 million in 2017–2018 to over $20 million each year after.[36] That money has also gone towards employing more school-based police than any other district in the state.[37] Those officers are part of M-DCPS' own internal police force, the Miami-Dade Schools Police Department (M-DSPD),[38] which employs 474 sworn officers—over 70% of whom are white and nearly 40% of whom are under the age of 30.[39] In addition, M-DCPS contracts with at least seven different municipalities to enable municipal law enforcement officers to work in M-DCPS[40] and also hires security guards. In fact, in the 2020–2021 school year, there were approximately 1,300 security guards working in Miami schools, nearly twice the number of full-time school counselors.[41] Some schools like Miami Northwestern Senior High School, in addition to sworn law enforcement officers, had as many as sixteen security guards.[42] Yet the same school listed only five counselors on staff to serve the entire student body.[43] Meanwhile, no school district in Florida, including M-DCPS, has met the industry standard for staffing school counselors, social workers, school psychologists or school nurses.[44] Because M-DCPS is one of the most heavily policed school districts in the country, it is particularly important that policymakers seek input from Black girls in Miami and create opportunities for them to express their thoughts and concerns on school safety and be heard.[45]

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INCIDENTS CAPTURED BY THE MEDIA IN FLORIDA ALONE

SRO fired for using excessive force on a Black girl attending Westridge Middle School. A video surfaced of the SRO yanking the girl's head back by her hair. (Nov. 9, 2019)

16-year-old Black girl (Taylor Bracey) slammed to the ground, knocked unconscious, and then handcuffed to prevent a fight (Jan. 27, 2021)

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2019          2020          2021
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6-year-old girl cries and yells for help as Orlando police arrest her at school for throwing a tantrum (Feb. 24, 2020)

15-year-old Black girl who had difficulty de-escalating after defending herself in a fight initiated by boys was tased by SRO after she had calmed down (January 2021)

Schools in Miami Lack Holistic Safety for Black Girls

Even though Florida lawmakers have sold school policing as a straightforward fix for school safety, Black girls' feelings about safety in Miami schools are anything but straightforward. Of the girls and young women who responded to our survey, nearly six in ten respondents said they feel mostly or completely safe at school. However, in the listening sessions, many girls and young women shared mixed feelings about how safe they feel or felt in their high schools. A handful of the girls said they felt outright "unsafe," due to factors like lacking a sense of community at school.

Many girls wanted schools to address safety holistically, noting their physical, emotional, and psychological safety needs. When schools invest in practices like school policing and normalize cultures of criminalization, they often sacrifice students' holistic safety by treating Black girls and other students as threats to safety rather than as young people with safety needs to be met.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "HOLISTIC SAFETY"?

For the purposes of this report, we relied on the descriptions of and suggestions for safety from the Black girls and young women with whom we worked to define "holistic safety" as being safe physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Holistic safety also includes:

— *Safe relationships with trusted adults*

— *Safety from discrimination*

— *Safe resolutions to sexual harassment*

— *Safety from school pushout*

Disconnected, Threatening, Biased: The Reality of School Policing Through the Eyes of Black Girls

In M-DCPS, students are policed by both school resource officers (SROs) and security guards.[46] The girls and young women with whom we spoke perceived SRO presence in their schools to be limited. Many girls and young women reported regularly having one or two SROs on campus at most. A handful reported regularly seeing "a few" SROs around, defined for this report as between three and nine officers. They shared that these numbers would increase if there was a response to a major event, such as school searches, fights, or threats of violence. Some mixed feelings were expressed across the groups about the police presence in their schools. While a few participants offered that their presence was a reassurance of safety, many of the Black girls and young women described SROs on campus negatively. They highlighted the lack of resources the so-called "school resource officers" provided to them. Others expressed resignation at having SROs around, even as they felt like acting their age or having one "off day" could land them with an arrest.

"At my school, they're mostly responsible for stopping fights, or they're there when students are caught with drugs or when students … are arguing and stuff like that. But I would say you can't really trust them, like, or go to them when you're in actual need of help because I feel like they don't take us seriously … they're just there to just stop fights. And that's all."
–*10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

"I don't really see them as … a resource officer where we can go to them with our troubles or confide in them. … For me, I don't like it because I just feel like they're just waiting for us to make one small, minor mistake, and they're ready to arrest us because, like, I've only seen my school resource officers … arrest students. I haven't seen them have any peer mediations, no calm conversations, no type of parent meeting, or anything like that. I've only seen them arrest students. And … that's all they're good for. … It's, like, what's the point in going to school? It makes us not want to go to school because we feel like we can't make one minor mistake or just have one off day. And we can go from a perfect straight-A student to now, what do they call, a 'juvenile.'"
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 2*

"Whenever it came to anything that pertained to mental health, there was nobody putting their hands on, like … let me fix that situation. But if it ever came to a 'ha ha ha' in the hallway, officers were like, 'What's going on? What are we doing over here?' Where was all that energy when people were looking up in their school laptops on how to kill themselves?"
–*Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

Some of the girls and young women felt their SROs policed them differently based on their race and ethnicity.

"But they make it obvious that the Hispanic girls or… the white girls…they are very much more lenient with them. They talk more to them. They're… more talkative and conversational with them. They aren't as aggressive with the Hispanics and the whites as they are with the Black kids."
–*12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

"At my school, I see them being more gentle and compassionate towards, like, the lighter-skinned students … like the Hispanic students, the Caucasian students. And towards the Black students and darker-skinned, they're more aggressive towards us and treat us like we're nothing, basically. And they haven't directly said, like, negative comments about us, but I do hear them saying, like, colorist things and things about our hair and stuff like that."
–*10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

The girls and young women also highlighted how SROs do not understand their developmental trajectory and social-emotional needs, even policing girls experiencing ongoing conditions or acute crises with mental health.

"If I was on the first floor and … the school police officer … would see me, he'd be like, 'Hey, why are you out of class?' Or like, 'What are you doing?' And if … it's something like I'm having an anxiety attack, all of my teachers knew this, that I would … just walk on the first floor. … And it's just like, 'I'm going to the band room for XYZ reasons.' 'Oh, why are you going to the band room?' 'Sir? I'm just going to the band room.' That's all you need to know. … So, it's like you think I'm trying to skip school? No, I'm really going to the band room because I can't breathe, and I can't think, and there's only so many people that can get my mind to function."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

"Whenever it came to anything that pertained to mental health, there was nobody putting their hands on, like … let me fix that situation. But if it ever came to a 'ha ha ha' in the hallway, officers were like, 'What's going on? What are we doing over here?' Where was all that energy when people were looking up in their school laptops on how to kill themselves?"
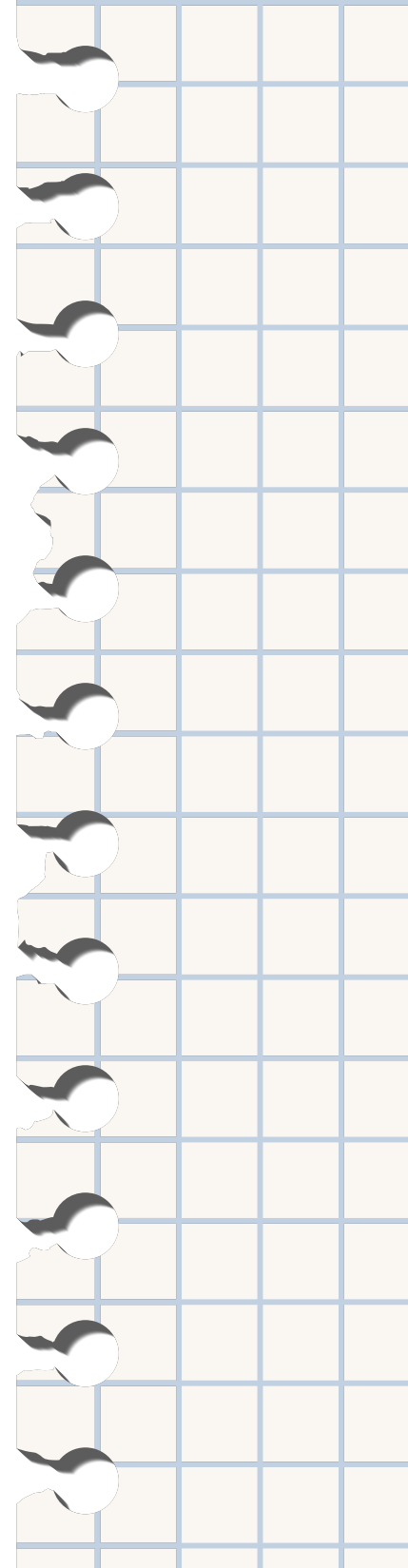–*Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

The **National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO)** tries to promote a "triad" model for SROs, claiming SROs act simultaneously as law enforcement officers, teachers, and informal counselors.[47] Yet, as the girls and young women expressed, the role of police is inherently adversarial to students, as their main functions are to police, surveil, control, arrest, and ultimately incarcerate students, not to help them. Student accounts and incidents in the media show time and again that the main expertise of school police officers is to police—especially in schools with large populations of students of color.

Nor does it make sense to expect police officers to be teachers and counselors; students need caring adults and qualified professionals formally trained in education, youth development, and mental health to play these roles. These professionals range from everyday classroom educators to occupational therapists to school psychologists, and what school police officers do is not equivalent to the expertise of these professionals in academic, psychological, and social-emotional support. School districts and policymakers do students a disservice and put them in harm's way by conflating the expertise of SROs with that of education and mental health professionals.

"But there are times where I don't feel the most safest. Sometimes it could be just the culture that my school has in general."
–12th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School

"And it was just, there wasn't...like a culture of...reliability."
–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student

"For me, the way I saw most police officers were, like, kind of cautionary, because, like, I wouldn't see them as somebody who, like, you can talk to and tell, like, what you're going through just because, like, this is someone who can arrest you at any moment. And, therefore, there's like… a real, like, block between you actually communicating with them on, like, the daily. And I know that they're supposed to connect with students, but it's really hard to connect with students when you have a gun and handcuffs."
–Former Miami-Dade County Public School student

"But with other interactions, I see them … more aggressive towards the students. But that's only when they're, like, arresting them. And they're not, like, very sensitive or, like, compassionate, trying to get to the bottom of why the student is acting out or misbehaving. They just are ready to arrest them. And I feel like we're minors, and we can be going through a lot at once. And I know some people think, OK, we're just kids, we can't be going through so much. But, like, mental health is real. And we can really be going through depression, or stuff that can be going on at home. And we feel like we have nobody. So, we result into doing bad things. And I'm not making an excuse. But that's just the reality of things. And I feel that some adults don't look at that reality. And they just think it's a choice that we want to act out or behave that [way]. But sometimes it's just an attention seeker for somebody to look at us and somebody to say, 'Hey, why are you doing this?' and then we can finally have that moment to express ourselves. But that's not the kind of relationship our school resource officers try to have with students. They're more aggressive."
–Miami-Dade County Public School student 2

"Personally, I feel like they don't care about students. They don't care for the feelings, or the mental or physical health of students. They just treat us like we're nothing, like we're just plain trash. And they just wait for us to do something wrong or mess up and to give us a cruel and unnecessary punishment … and I feel like that's not helping us in any way and not encouraging us to come in school to learn. It's actually pushing us away [from] doing the right thing and making us not want to do the right things."
–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School

Though Black Girls in M-DCPS Have Been Immersed in the Culture of Fear That Underlies Florida School Safety Policies and Have Fears About Their Physical Safety, Securing That Safety Should Not Be at the Expense of Their Emotional and Psychological Safety

Physical safety in school often came up early in the listening sessions. It was clear that the ability to be physically safe weighs on Black girls in Miami, especially as they grapple with the fear of school shootings and the lasting psychological impact of frequent school shooter drills.

> "I think it's changed over the years, especially with the culture with like a school shooter, has really changed the dynamic of school safety."
> –*Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

> "Just knowing that I'm in a city where we have high crime rates and then recently there's been a lot of school shootings … I kind of have a lot of anxiety about, like, getting hurt at school … always looking behind my back, watching my stuff to make sure that I at least try to protect myself from anything…"
> –*12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School*

> "Sometimes let's say, when we have a drill and they'll say it's a drill, but I get a kind of anxious feeling, because what if the things that happen to other schools is happening now?"
> –*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 1*

Many of the girls and young women consider their safety in relation to whether entrances and exits were secured.

> "I feel as if there's like a certain type of inconsistency … sometimes they're, like, really secure and locked up. And sometimes… you really just walk into the school."
> –*12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

> "I feel safe because my school environment is welcoming, and there's really only one entrance point."
> –*12th grade student at Barbara Goleman Senior High School*

Some of the girls and young women with whom we spoke shared that their interactions with SROs were positive. In some instances, a "good" or "nice" police officer was singled out from others. A minority even wanted more police presence or shared they would be scared without them present. These responses were often in dialogues about threats of violence or fears of shootings in school.

> "I think they're pretty nice. One came inside my class and talked to us because my teacher had an issue … and she was … like, telling us like the right things to do, stuff like that."
> –*9th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

> "But if there was a police officer at all the entrances and exits, and things like that, and obviously … nothing can go in or out of school without a police officer being there, I will feel much more safe."
> –*12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

> "I don't feel bad or good about it. Because I know they're there to do their job. I know if a situation were to occur, they'll do their best to deal with it."
> –*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 3*

Ultimately, Black girls do not want to feel like they would have to fend for themselves in the event of an emergency. But even some girls who thought school police could help in emergency situations were left grappling with the uncomfortable feeling of having to trust agents of a system known for harming people of color.

> "At my school, we don't even have a police officer anymore. … So it does make me feel a bit unsafe. But it also makes me think, are these police going to be useful as the security guards? Because if the security guards aren't doing anything, and I know some police officers don't exactly have correct training, especially when it comes to kids of color. So, what's gonna happen even if these cops do show up?"
> –*10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

> "Sometimes I feel OK and other times [I'm] like eh, nah, I'm not messing with them because I don't really feel safe around them."
> –*10th grade student at South Dade Senior High School*

> "Like, I know I have said, like, good things about this one officer, but our conversations are very short as well. It's more like a joke and then, you know, keep moving on to the next day. But I think it's also the sense of, like, I don't want to conversate with you because, like, just your role in general makes me feel unsafe, because we know, like, the history of, like, police and things like that, definitely if you're like a person of color."
> –*12th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

The scope of this project did not include whether and how schools are teaching girls about alternative options for their physical safety beyond police, but as Black girls and their communities, and all of us, contemplate and see more models of school safety interventions, we hope to collaborate with girls to learn more about what other interventions may help girls feel safe.

School policing is not the solution to creating schools that are safe for all students to learn. School policing teaches students that the school's priority is to control them and police their behavior, rather than to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Policing can also mimic prison conditions that lead students to become comfortable with institutional settings."[48] Some of the mixed feelings the girls and young women expressed during the listening sessions revealed how Black girls felt about their "protection" from extreme events like school shootings and their overall safety in school coming at the expense of their psychological and emotional well-being, as well as their physical safety.

Harassment of Black Girls by Security Guards Should Not Be a Daily or Normal Occurrence

Our conversations with the Black girls and young women in Miami shed light on an element of school policing that is not often reflected in data or national discourse: security guards also carry out school policing and cause harm to Black girls and other students.

While discussing their interactions with SROs, the girls and young women revealed that they are more directly policed daily by security guards at M-DCPS. In fact, the presence of security guards looms large in schools attended by the girls with whom we spoke. Many of the girls and young women estimated there were often many more security guards on their school campuses at M-DCPS than there were police officers.

Black girls in Miam i expressed feeling like the security guard at their schools focused less on school safety, and more on policing how Black girls could physically move in school spaces and express themselves.

"Once you get around certain security guards, none of that matters no more. It doesn't matter how smart you are, it doesn't matter how many accolades you got, how many scholarships. It's like, once they get around a certain group of kids, you no longer matter. And, like, they make it their mission to try to find something that you've done to try to get you in trouble. ... Because to be honest, like, what do they really do other than yell at us 24/7? Like, our parents do that enough. Teachers do that enough. We don't need people in the hallway yelling at us, too."
– *12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

"The security guards at my school honestly, their role is ... not to say they don't do anything, but they really do not do much. They lock the bathrooms. They tell us to go here if we're not somewhere. But most of the time, they're kind of just around collecting our passes, if you're outside of the classroom. ... There's never been an instance where I, like, needed a security guard or where they've really done anything to, like, influence the school community or the area."
–*10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

"Security, I feel like they're not really here for safety, but more for—well, at my school, they're here for, yeah, like, the rules, like, if you're out of dress code, if you're out in the hallways..."
–*9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School*

"Like with the security guards, it was just like, every time you saw one you wanted to, like, avoid them as much as possible. They kind of, just kind of just like stared at you or asked what you're doing."
–*Former Miami Arts Charter School student 1*

"I will say that I've had security guards speak to me in a very rough and, like, aggressive manner. ... So, like ... there were security guards I would just naturally avoid because I just didn't want to go through that in my school day. So, I'd rather go on another floor to get out than   speak to them."
–*Former Miami-Dade County Public School student*

"One of these security guards I won't name, he will ... like purposefully stop me to just argue with me and stuff."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 2*

"Yeah, I believe the administration, people who aren't actually security, do more than what the security would do for us. Like, the only job I think they'll take seriously is unlocking the bathroom door."
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

"The security guards, kind of the same. They were there more for locking doors, watching kids during lunch ... they don't really do anything."
–*Former Miami Arts Charter School student 2*

When they are policed by security guards, the girls and young women told us they face several forms of discrimination, including racism and sexual harassment. They feel like their security guards treat them differently than they treat students of other races, particularly in terms of aggression, profiling, and racialized comments.

"And they never spoke to you in a respectful tone. It was always loud or, like, extra loud. And it was just like a thing of, like, if you were having a bad day, and then Joseph, the security guard, decided to yell at you from ... not even across the hallway, from like a couple feet. It's just like, now you just, like, took me over the edge. Because it's like, you just came at me with a tone that I just did not want to be spoken to."
–*Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

"You got dressed comfortably, which for me is a hoodie and jeans, sometimes even just a head wrap and like some shorts and a hoodie. ... [M]e going to school dressed like that, I'd get profiled automatically."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

"And then, like, the men ... I guess harass people... like, they literally really call girls, like, they say they're all ghetto."
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

Nearly one-third of the girls and young women we surveyed identified as LGBTQI+, and some who participated in the listening sessions described experiences where security guards treated Black LGBTQI+ girls or their friends differently or made them feel uncomfortable.

"Like whenever she's walking around, you can see them like giggling or, like, they're looking like, they have weird little faces or... their faces be squinting... like her presence makes them uncomfortable or something and... even when they address her, they don't address her as a 'her.'... They always say 'he,' and it always really makes her, like, upset. Because she always has to explain to him, like, 'Those are not my pronouns.'... And they still always say 'he' instead of 'she.'"

–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School, describing how security guards treat her trans friend.

"So, one year, when we did the Day of Silence, we decided to do shirts, like as a dedication, and then also have people, like, sign the shirts... And one of the security guards that I had known since my freshman year, I guess, couldn't tell. ... I was pan[sexual]. So, when I was wearing the shirt, and I had the tape ... they went on a huge religious spiel. ... [A]fter that day... whenever they would speak to me, [would] be like extremely curt."

–12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School describing the Day of Silence, which is a national student-led demonstration where LGBTQI+ students and allies take a vow of silence, often by putting tape over their mouths, to protest the harms LGBTQI+ people face due to harassment and discrimination in schools.[49]

"I feel like, that's just unprofessional. Like, my sexuality doesn't have anything to do with like the way I should be treated or protected."

–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School

Many of the girls and young women felt security guards policed them differently based on how girls look. They referred to what they called "pretty privilege," or special perks or leniency they felt security guards extended to girls they thought were good-looking or popular. This privilege often meant that security guards also would not discipline "pretty" girls for behaviors for which they might otherwise discipline girls who are bigger, darker-skinned, or not female-presenting.

"'Pretty privilege' is a thing because a so-called 'pretty girl' could do something, and [the male officer will] let her get away with it. And then you do the same thing, and if he's on your case, he want to take you to the office... They treat the prettier girl ... with way more leniency than they do someone that's just regular, all because of how they dressed or how they look."

–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

"But if you were bigger, like wider—I'm not even talking about taller, like you have, like, you know, extra cushion in your tush—they will talk to you more aggressively, for sure."

–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student

"And [the security guard] didn't write them up. [The security guard] didn't punish them or nothing, just because ... they fit [the guard's] beauty standards that they are able to get like a pass and more benefits."

–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School

Of the Black girls and young women we surveyed, nearly one-third said they worry about being sexually harassed. Over a quarter said they worry about being sexually assaulted. Unfortunately for Black girls in M-DCPS, some of those concerns about sexual harassment and assault become a reality in how security guards use their positions of authority to adultify and sexualize Black girls. Black girls and young women at M-DCPS feel constantly scrutinized under the gaze of security guards. Some guards have inappropriate relationships and interactions with girls that the Black girls and young women identify as unprofessional, uncomfortable, or odd.

The girls and young women we spoke to described sexual harassment, often in the form of verbal harassment, more from school security guards than from SROs in M-DCPS.

"But they're, like, always just talking about girls, or they're always [saying], 'What's she wearing?' or 'Why does she walk like that? … Some of the security guards … they try to, like, sexualize relationships out there. And it's like, 'Oh, don't get pregnant.'"
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

"[O]ne of them had commented on my butt."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 2*

"[C]ertain security guards might make certain girls feel uncomfortable. For example, if a bigger or thicker female student [one with wider hips, larger breasts, or bigger buttocks]

would walk by, other students and sometimes even the same student herself would talk about how they caught a security guard looking at them in an inappropriate way."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 4*

"I feel like the security guards trying to, like, force you to talk to them is some form of sexual harassment. … Like I've seen some security guards they, like, I don't know why girls let them … give each other hugs. … I know some girls, they have [guards'] numbers. They text, so [guards] be like, 'Oh, they're needed in the office.' But what [those girls] really do, they just want to go skip."
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

"This was when … we had to take pictures for our ID. And obviously, you have to stand in front of the camera and take a picture. So, the security guard, [unclear] having him take our pictures … I sit on the chair, and I'm waiting for him to take the picture. And he's like, 'Oh, baby, you're not gonna smile for me?' I'm looking at him. I'm like, oh, what?! Like, no, I'm not going to smile for you!"
–*12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

"Or like for instance … when there's a student, like a more curvier girl, you know, a more prettier girl, they'll see her, and they'll get to, like, whistling or, like they'll talk. They be cracking each other up, talking to each other. And it's like they don't even try to hide it… [T]hey're so like blatant with it. It's just … it's disgusting."
–*12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

"I've heard certain security guards will try to flirt with young women in our school like in the hallways and stuff. So, people would, like, just talk about just, like, avoiding them, period. Like, you know just, like, if you see him, like, just walk away."
–*Former Miami-Dade County Public School student*

One former M-DCPS student, in particular, shared a few instances of sexual harassment she either experienced or witnessed:

"You have security guards grooming these girls, and grooming guys. … You have all these people that you swear are gonna just brighten the school and make everything better. They're not. They're really not."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

"So one of the security guards because we didn't have nametags… I'm out of uniform, and like I look cleaned up, and for whatever reason they think I'm a sub. … I was going in

for a late pass. So, one of the security guards sees me walk into the front office. And he like opens the door for me when I'm walking out. And he's like, 'Hey, how are you?' I'm just like, 'Oh, you know, I'm fine.'… And he's like, 'Oh, you know, if you want, I can show you around.' And I looked at him, and I was like, 'Oh, I'm not new here.'… He's like, 'Oh, what class are you going to?' I'm just like, 'cause I'm thinking this is like a normal conversation, and he's not like putting any like difference in his voice. I'm just like, 'Oh, I'm going to biology.' And as we're walking, he was just like, 'Oh, this, that, and the third. Like you look really beautiful.' I was like, 'Um, thank you.' Because then when I get to the class, my teacher's like, '[Z], you're next to present.'… The security guard does a double take. And he's like, 'You're a student?!'"
–*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

"There was one situation with another girl. … I was sitting in the office because I was an office aide. And she was pregnant. And she was coming in, and she was in a dress. And like when the doors opened, obviously, [there was] like a wind flow. So, like the dress rose a little bit. … But I remember… there was a security guard talking to the school police, and he made a comment on her body saying something like along the lines of like, 'If only she wasn't like pregnant,' or 'If only like she didn't go to this school.'"
–*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

> "The photography club was doing like the photos and everything. And there was a girl who was standing next to the security guards. ... And we noticed that after the picture was taken, the girl looks, like, really like uncomfortable ... kind of like jumped back and, like, she's normally known to be, like, super like happy, gentle ... but then it came out. ... And she, like, explained to us that when she was taking the photo with the security. ... She herself said that she didn't even know if this was purposefully, but he put his hand like on like her lower back thigh under, like, the skirt that she was wearing."
>
> *–12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

The stories of the Black girls and young women shed light on a pervasive problem at Miami-Dade schools: school policing forces girls to accept the constant regulation of their bodies and actions and normalize an abuse of authority by officers that can easily lead to sexual harassment or assault. They also indicate that M-DCPS needs to do more to educate its students on sexual harassment and assault.

> "I know, like, some officers, they're like comfortable with touching people. Like, they'll put their hand on, like, the small of your back or on your shoulder and stuff. And this happened to me before, which isn't inherently sexual or anything, but it just makes me uncomfortable because I don't like people that I don't know touching me."
>
> *–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School*

Sexual harassment and sexual assault are often underreported, especially among kids and teens.   This can come from a lack of clarity about harassing and inappropriate behavior or the normalization of it, leaving students unsure about whether to report. Particularly where this behavior is by adults with authority who are stationed in schools "to protect students," students are even less likely to report these behaviors and seek the support they need.

Black Girls Experience Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment & Assault that May Violate Title IX

The participants in our listening sessions revealed that the culture of policing and surveillance has led to a disturbing culture of sexual harassment of Black girls at M-DCPS, particularly by school security guards. Yet, they did not feel like M-DCPS was equipping them with the language, tools, and support they need to advocate for themselves or report in instances of harassment—nor did they feel like M-DCPS fosters an environment that prevents harassment in the first place.

The girls and young women expressed not having received much formalized education or discussion of sexual harassment or assault in their schools.

> "Our teachers and our security guards or administrators tend to tiptoe around sensitive topics like this. I feel like they don't give us explicit directions or have meetings with us to let us know where to go if we're feeling unsafe. We kind of just go to where we feel comfortable."
>
> *–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

> "It's not a set meeting. It's like an off-topic thing where a teacher will rant about it."
>
> *–Miami-Dade County Public School Student 1*

A few students mentioned attending the Health Information Project (HIP), a program run by an organization independent of M-DCPS where high school juniors and seniors are trained to teach health education to freshmen.[50] Most of the participants didn't seem too familiar with how the program was usually implemented, and they generally only remembered a brief section on sexual harassment among the rest of the training curriculum.

> "They didn't, like, go too deep in sexual harassment because, you know, it's not really a topic to talk about."
>
> *–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 5, referring to HIP*

Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, school districts are required to hire at least one Title IX coordinator, someone who handles sex discrimination complaints and addresses any schoolwide patterns or problems that relate to sex discrimination.[51] School districts are also required to make sure all students know who that person is and how to contact them.[52] Among the participants we asked in our listening sessions, not one of the girls or young women knew what a Title IX coordinator was or who it was in their school. In fact, when we asked what ideas they had that would make reporting sexual harassment easier for them, some of the girls even described a Title IX coordinator's role, without knowing that they are already entitled to this sort of support.

> "I think having a male and female counselor specifically for harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, that they can go to or have a direct helpline would be incredibly useful, because some people don't want to go to the administrators because they won't do anything. But I think having set people for this set reason would definitely make more people comfortable with coming forward and expressing inappropriate interactions that they've had."
>
> *–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

When we asked the girls and young women what the process was for reporting harassment in their schools, especially if it was by an SRO or security guard, their answers were mixed, and some were uncertain. They described processes like anonymous report boxes stationed in the school's main office or being told to go to an adult, like a teacher or counselor. Some girls were not sure what the process for reporting sexual harassment was at all.

> "Usually, they'll tell us like if we've been assaulted or harassed to report it to them, and they'll have like anonymous report boxes that we could just write a message in and then administrators say they'll read it and handle themselves, but ... we don't even know if people put messages in those boxes. And we don't know if those things get read and/or handled."
> *–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School*

> "At my school, I would say there's not really a process. They just tell you to go down to the office and whoever is there, just say to them. There's not really like a process that's like step one, step two, step three ... it's just go to whoever you find at the office and hopefully they listen to you and actually trust you and believe you, but that's not really effective for us."
> *–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

> "I feel like ... it's not really clear who they're supposed to go to. Like that's never been something that's been clearly stated to us, like who should we go to."
> *–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 3*

What was consistent among most of the girls and young women was that they did not trust school administrators to believe them, take their reports seriously, or provide supportive measures—making them less likely to report instances of sexual harassment or assault, even if the harassment was by an SRO or security guard.

> "I believe they don't take that seriously either because even with that one pervy security guard, like people say that he takes pictures of us. ... He could say anything and they'll oh, they'll rub it off."
> *–Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

> "I know that students, like they'll speak about reporting them, but I don't know if they actually did. And I know like some of them, even though they wanted to, they were scared to report. ... Usually, people who are victims of harassment and assault, they just they don't get heard out. Like, I've been to schools where we've had ... big spikes in public things that happened at the school with sexual assault and stuff. ... [L]ike the adults, they'll like try to make everybody forget about it. Like they'll try to push it to the side and ignore it and stuff. And then the students who are talking about it, they're kind of siding with the abusers."
> *–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School*

WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual harassment is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature and includes a wide variety of actions, such as sexual slurs, sexual "jokes," "catcalling" (also called street harassment), sexual rumors, sending or requesting unwanted sexual images or videos, forced kissing, groping, rape, or other forms of sexual violence. Sexual harassment also includes any sexual contact or romantic relationship between a student and school employee or adult contractor, and efforts to initiate any such contact or relationship—regardless of whether the student wants the contact or relationship.

Sexual assault is sexual harassment that becomes physical.

Under federal civil rights law, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, all members of the school community have the right to be free from sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of gender identity, sexual orientation, pregnant or parenting status, and other characteristics.

To learn more, check out this NWLC resource: 100 School Districts Student Toolkit: How to Change Your School's Sexual Harassment Policies.

WHAT IS SEXUAL GROOMING?

Grooming is a method used by offenders that involves building trust with a child, teen, or adult with the intent to gain alone time and create a relationship built on manipulation. People who engage in this behavior often use grooming as a prelude to committing sexual assault or otherwise abusing an individual. You can learn more about grooming here.

The term "grooming" recently has been weaponized against LGBTQI+ and LGBTQI+-allied educators. Those kinds of generalized allegations are baseless and steeped in hate. Here, the term was not used in that context

WHAT ARE SUPPORTIVE MEASURES?

Supportive measures are steps schools can take when students experience sex-based harassment in order to protect those students' ability to feel safe and learn in school. Schools are required to provide supportive measures under the federal civil rights law Title IX.

What supportive measures a student needs will depend on each specific situation. Some common supportive measures are moving a student's seat or changing their class to keep their harasser away from them.

WHAT IS EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE?

Exclusionary discipline is made up of the school policies and practices used to punish students for certain behavior by removing them from their regular classrooms. Some of the most familiar examples of exclusionary discipline are suspensions and expulsions.

"I didn't report my experience. And the reason for that is there's been numerous students that report things all the time on SROs and other situations, and the problem never gets resolved. It just gets pushed to the side. And they don't take it seriously."
–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School

"No, they haven't. … I'm assuming because they never, they would never imagine, like, the SROs in our school to do anything like that sort. … And I am really close to the principal. But I just feel like she wouldn't believe it, either."
–12th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School, responding to whether anyone at school has ever told students what to do if an adult like an SRO acted inappropriately with a student

"Probably, like, the fear of not being believed. Like, if you were to report it, and then they'd be like, 'Oh, we know this person. They wouldn't do that…' That's why I would never [report] … if anything ever happens with me."
–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

"I think they feel so comfortable like that because number one: girls, if they were to report, you know, if they were acting inappropriate … it's more than likely they're not going to believe them, which all falls back into this, you know, patriarchy. … They might be like, 'Oh, you know, maybe he was just playing around.' Like, yeah, it's always downplayed. So, I feel like yes, some men … know that. They know that … they're not gonna believe you. They're gonna believe

them and take their side because 'Oh, how? Like, why would he ever do that? You know, he's such a saint.' Things like that. And that just … makes me mad."
– Miami-Dade County Public School student 2

"When it comes down to us teenagers speaking our minds, the majority of adults think we're wrong or our opinions are invalid and irrelevant. This is where many issues arise, even within households, as children and teenagers fear expressing themselves due to potential punitive reactions from adults, often overlooking the possible emotional distress these young individuals may be experiencing."
–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 4

"[S]ometimes people tend to be like, 'Oh, it's never that serious,' especially in the generation we live in."
–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 5

"I feel like something that would discourage me from reporting is knowing that, like, even if you go, they wouldn't be able to help anyways. Because most of them, they have the same mindset in general. … They promote, 'Oh, we're trying to help,' but they don't really do anything about it."
–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School, referring to school administrators, counselors, and police

Black Girls Experience Cultures of Criminalization That Go Beyond Hiring School-Based Law Enforcement

While discussing their experiences with SROs, Black girls and young women in Miami ended up painting a fuller picture of their school climates in ways that went beyond their experiences with law enforcement officers. We learned that other elements of criminalization within M-DPCS school climates impact Black girls' perceptions of what school safety overall is and what it isn't.

Generally, the girls and young women overwhelmingly described their school environments at M-DCPS as negative.

> **"I feel like the environment's not welcoming. ... You have to make yourself comfortable with it."**
> *–Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

They detailed instances of teacher bias and cultural insensitivity, lack of learning, smoking or drug presence on campus, and fighting in their schools. Youth "misbehavior" in schools is often rooted in a variety of unmet social-emotional, psychological, academic, or even medical needs.[53] Responses rooted in care and support can help students navigate their needs throughout the school day. Instead, schools that rely on school hardening policies and criminalization tend to respond to these

needs with punishment, isolation, and law enforcement—all of which contribute to a negative school environment. According to Black girls, M-DCPS often responds with body-policing, police and K-9 searches, bathroom surveillance, prison-like exclusionary discipline, and performative security measures. Rather than make them feel safe, these measures make Black girls in Miami feel disrespected, frustrated, unwelcome, and sometimes even scared.

Dress Codes and Body-Policing Single Out Black Girls

Black girls in Miami feel like the ways they dress, act, and move through school spaces are constantly being scrutinized and policed, sometimes more than their peers.

Close to half of the girls and young women who responded to our survey worry about getting in trouble for how they dress or wear their hair, as that is their frequent experience.[54] They feel security guards and other school staff are consistently policing how they express themselves, and it has a harmful impact to their sense of belonging at school.

> **"But it was almost like... I'm making you feel shameful for the clothes that you choose to wear."**
> *–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

This body surveillance and control can become another form of harassment. The girls and young women even noted that security guards and some SROs occasionally denigrate their hair or clothing, making them feel like if they came to school with natural hair or certain clothing items, they would be stereotyped, profiled, or treated differently than other students.

> **"Yes, like when a student, like, comes ... with their natural hair at their natural state, [the SROs] usually say negative things about it. Like if it looks wild, if it looks untamed, and stuff like that."**
> *–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

> **"And if you dress like, quote, I guess people from a third perspective would consider 'urban wear,' which would be like your hoodies, your graphic tees ... If your graphic tee looked too 'delinquent-ish,' but it had nothing to do with crime, all of a sudden, it's like, 'Well, you can't wear that shirt.' And it's like, my Tupac shirt, bro?"**
> *–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

Girls also noticed double standards for dress code enforcement, explaining how girls' bodies are policed more than boys.' And among girls, Black girls feel like those who are curvier are more often policed and sexualized than those who have less pronounced or more petite figures.

> **"I've seen them treat other people differently, like girls, if they're dressed a certain way. ... But it's like they'll let certain things slide even though it's still not dress code. But with other kids, not so much. ... Like more so, they'll let guys through more often than girls."**
> *–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 3*

> **"Also, if you are, like, a woman of color, you were getting more harassed about the dress code than like our white counterparts ... only because you're more developed."**
> *–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student*

"There's a clear difference from when I dress up for school, and then when I don't, and then how I'm treated."
–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

"[I]f a girl isn't in dress code or something like that, they'll say something smart. Like they'll say things like, 'Oh, I know I wouldn't have had my daughter out the house like that' or 'She needs to change her clothes' and '…for body shape, she can't be wearing stuff like that.' They say, like, snarky stuff."
–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School

"There's girls who wear tights or joggers, and it depends who you are. Like, they do have favorites. … And security are like, if like girls are like smaller … like more petite, they don't really say anything if you wear tights. But if it's like a girl with more curves, they're gonna say something because of their shape. And … they just look at them. They'll stare."
–9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School

"And so, when dress coding, I noticed that the girls … who are smaller and didn't have any curves in their body would … they will just look past them. But girls, just because they have different body types, they'd be targeted. And I feel like that's where a lot of inappropriate behavior will stem from, because they're just sexualizing these young girls, and it's incredibly inappropriate."
–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School

Constant policing of how Black girls dress and wear their hair through both racist and sexist stereotypes can teach them to be ashamed of their bodies and cause them to have low self-esteem.[55] Additionally, when Black students are constantly reminded of racist stereotypes—even in subtle ways—studies show they perform worse academically.[56]

Police Searches Target and Humiliate Black Girls

Another element of the culture of criminalization in M-DCPS was that the girls and young women were very acquainted with both random and announced police searches occurring at Miami-Dade schools, including those with drug-sniffing police dogs.

"And I've seen so many searches at school before, so I'm kind of used to seeing, like, them bring the dogs in."
–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School

"It's just normal, like, I don't know how I feel about it."
–9th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

"I feel like I have to be on my toes to make sure I'm not around people who will get me in trouble, because they literally, like, do random checks and bring the dogs out to come smell people. And I'm like OK, who around me smells like cannabis? Because now I got to lose my seat to make sure they don't go ruffling through my stuff."
–Miami-Dade County Public School student 1

But even though girls thought police searches to be a normal occurrence at school, they felt confused and humiliated by the public scenes of criminalization and invasion of privacy in front of their peers and teachers. Police searches create a culture of suspicion and presumed guilt that girls felt lingered in the school environment, even after the search itself was over.

Constant policing of how Black girls wear their hair can teach them to be ashamed of their bodies and have low self-esteem.

"Those searches were terrible. Those searches were terrible …"
–12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School

"Actually, at my school, one time they came in our classroom, and then they was like, 'We need everyone to just stand up and give me your book bag.' And then they started going through everyone's bags without any permission. And then they dumped everything out, everyone's book bag. And they wouldn't tell us the reason or what they were looking for. And they just invaded our privacy. And they didn't tell us anything. And I felt like that issue was not talked about enough at my school."
–10th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School

"I think because they didn't find anything, I was just like, OK, bet. But it is a bit like, I don't know, intense and not necessary."
–Former Miami Arts Charter School student 2

"It's embarrassing. And then my teacher used it against me."
–9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School

"I once got reported for having marijuana on me, but I don't smoke because I have chronic asthma. So, the police had to bring me outside of my class and interrogate me and stuff and I was just confused about it…"
–12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School

"Culture of criminalization" is a phrase we use in this report to describe how Miami-Dade schools rely on excessive school hardening measures, such as hiring school-based law enforcement and allowing regular police and K-9 searches of students, which create environments where students themselves are treated like threats to their school community, rather than young people worthy of protection. A "culture of criminalization" also creates a school environment where policing in all forms takes priority over ensuring students feel safe physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

> "It's embarrassing. … Because when they don't find anything, they're like, 'OK, we're gonna do this again, just in case you might have something in the future.' So, they definitely keep an eye on students if they do search. … It's incredibly embarrassing, especially in front of all your peers. It's like, 'Ohhh.' It's just humiliating."
> –*10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

One former M-DCPS student described for us how invasive police searches can be for girls in schools. During a random police search, one day, an officer asked the student to open her bag in the middle of the classroom. She was embarrassed by the request because she was carrying several menstrual products and extra, clean underwear in her bag that day, so she denied the officer access to her bag. But the officer insisted. So, the student tried to reason with the officer by offering to go into the hallway with him and her teacher to show him the contents of the bag privately. Instead, the officer responded with public humiliation:

> "He rips the bag open. He dumps it out. I look at him. And I'm just like, well, great. Now there's panties on the floor. What are we going to do? Because now he's looking at it. I'm looking at him. He's like, 'You gonna pick them up?' I'm like, 'No, you can pick them up.' And for 30 minutes. … We did not have class that day because I was going back and forth with an officer because … why would you put my things on the floor?"
> –*12th grade student at North Miami Beach High School*

Police searches normalize elements of the carceral system in schools and send the message to girls—and all students—that they do not have the power to decide who touches their bodies and belongings and how. They also normalize public shame and humiliation at a formative time in youth development, when building trust with both their peers and educators is important and can impact how well they do in school.

Police searches in school can be particularly problematic where law enforcement and school security are consistently present on a school campus. Law enforcement and school security may be more inclined to intervene in smaller issues and use police power to address a small problem. Students are less likely to have procedural protections during these searches, and law enforcement and school security can act with impunity in the name of school safety. There is also the potential for school police and law enforcement to abuse their power by conducting intrusive searches randomly and without justification. Researchers have also noted that schools subject to grading based on academic achievement have an incentive to increase surveillance and policing as a means to push lower-performing children out of school.[57] Currently, there is little data about which schools and students are subject to searches as safety officers are not required to report this information. However, as discussed more fully below, schools with greater populations of Black students have greater numbers of school safety officers and Black students are more likely to attend a school with more police and security officers than mental health providers, putting Black girls at greater risk of humiliating random, suspicionless searches.[58]

Policing Bathrooms Deprives Black Girls of Bodily Autonomy

A common experience many of the girls and young women spoke about was the policing of bathrooms through practices such as locking bathrooms and assigning security officers to monitor them. In some Miami-Dade schools, strict bathroom regulation has become a disciplinary response to students caught fighting or perhaps smoking in the bathroom, forcing all students to suffer the consequences.

One current M-DCPS student shared how frustrating it is to feel like she can't use the bathroom when she needs it:

"... and they lock our bathrooms now, during the passing periods, in between classes, in the morning, 10 minutes between classes. And so, because kids were smoking in the bathrooms, and they were stealing things from the bathroom. It was a really weird time. But now, if I want to use the restroom, I have to wait like 10 minutes, and then we also have to get passes signed out. We used to just have, like, big passes that everyone could take, but now I have to sign a pass, find a teacher to sign it, sign a sign-up sheet. And now they're going to take measures where they're going to get, like, a lock pad for the bathrooms, and they're going to have a code that they're going to change, and only the teacher will have it. And it's so odd. It'll have, like, keys. It's like, this is a school in Miami. This is not the Pentagon."
–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School

"We have two bathrooms on each floor. We have a girls'... and a boys' bathroom on one side. And then there's also a bathroom on the other side. They lock one, and only one is available. So, we have lines of girls using the restroom. And they'll keep ... they'll prop the bathroom door open for both bathrooms. So, it's just a complete lack of privacy. And it's just absolutely ridiculous. And then they won't let you go up to a different floor to use the bathroom."
–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School

"And it just is really upsetting when you're just trying to get through the day, and you can't go to bathroom because it's locked."
–10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School

A handful of girls told us about how bathroom regulation in M-DCPS, especially by security guards, poses a compounded issue for trans girls and other students who do not subscribe to the gender binary.

"I'm friends with [a] trans girl. And ... she uses the girls' bathroom, and they don't like that. Like, they'll be like, 'You're a boy. You need to use that bathroom'... and they don't respect, like, her boundaries at all."
–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

Bathroom-policing does not make Black girls in M-DCPS feel safer. It, instead, serves as another reminder that girls are not in control of their bodies as they are being surveilled. When schools police bathrooms, they take away elements of students' bodily autonomy without actually addressing the behaviors, such as fighting, that they intended to stop. Policing bathrooms also disrupts learning by causing students to miss class time while waiting to use the bathroom or looking for someone to unlock the doors. Ultimately, the practice makes girls feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in their learning environment.

Prison-Like Exclusionary Discipline in School Disrupts Learning for Black Girls Who Are Often Targeted for Subjective Offenses

In the listening sessions, girls and young women sometimes described their schools as jail-like or prison-like, particularly when in-school suspensions were discussed. The students referred to the in-school suspension program at M-DCPS as "CSI," but the program is officially called the School Center for Special Instruction (SCSI). M-DCPS describes SCSI as an alternative setting to a student's class where students can receive tutorial and guidance services.[59] Under state law, in-school suspension is supposed to be an alternative education setting to "provide instruction and counseling leading to improved student behavior, reduction in the incidence of truancy, and the development of more effective interpersonal skills."[60]

But students' experiences with SCSI in M-DCPS do not reflect that description. A handful of participants in our listening sessions described SCSI as students being removed or kept from attending classes during the school day to be detained in another part of the school, sometimes an empty classroom, an auditorium, or the cafeteria when not in use for lunch. Many students described not being allowed to do their classwork or any homework while in SCSI. In some schools, the rooms are also usually kept extremely cold, and students are not allowed to use the bathroom—a deprivation that courts have deemed unconstitutional and inhumane in a prison or jail.[61] One girl even called SCSI "cruel and unnecessary punishment," highlighting how M-DCPS creates a carceral experience when students are suspended in school.

"[H]ow can I explain [CSI]? It's just like a jail. Like you go in, it's no service as soon as you walk in there, and it's not much to do, like ... They just put us in the auditorium. So, they have like all these securities and stuff, but where are the substitutes, where are ... more teachers and stuff?"
–9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School

"The way that ... they treated those CSI kids was honestly like, straight out of a jailhouse. They had to be walked into lunch as if they were like jail mates just like in a single-file line."
–Former Miami Palmetto Senior High School student

"I know that [CSI is] very time-consuming. And I feel like it's not needed. Because you have us literally all day for seven hours in the auditorium. No phone. No schoolwork. Just sitting there. And it's just like ... how is this productive? Our parents send us to school to learn, and then we're out of dress code and... now we can't learn for the day? Now we have to sit in one space for seven hours. And that's your form of discipline? I don't really like it."
–Miami-Dade County Public School student 2

"Yes, [CSI is] basically where, like, you have to stay in the cafeteria all day, and you can't go to class. They take your phone. It's freezing in there. You can't go to sleep. You literally just you sit there all day and don't do nothing. … I felt like they purposely make it freezing cold in there. They make it like you can't use the bathroom … like, is that even legal? … And even during lunch, when it's time for you to go in … you have to go to lunch after everybody else. After you're done, [you have] to clean up the whole cafeteria after the whole school. Once you clean up after them … that's when you go get whatever lunch that's left. Like, I just feel like that's not right. That's not productive. It doesn't do anything. All it does is make us hate the school system more. It … makes you want to act out more, like, because I don't understand how is that helping us resolve anything or helping us learn anything by treating us like we're in prison."
–12th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School

The most direct consequence of exclusionary discipline such as in-school suspensions is that students lose critical instruction and face time with educators in the classroom. Even worse, some of the girls and young women made it clear that they weren't allowed any work while they were attending in-school suspension—despite guidance in the Code of Student Conduct that "SCSI should be designed to provide tutorial and guidance services"[62]—sometimes leading to full days of lost learning. These learning losses can come as a consequence for minor behavior infractions. For example, under state law, in-school suspension, or SCSI in M-DCPS, is required for a third dress code offense.[63]

Exclusionary discipline also affects perceptions of safety across the school community. Both teachers and students report feeling unsafe and unsupported in schools that respond to minor misbehavior with harsh, exclusionary discipline.[64] In contrast, when schools prohibit the use of suspensions for minor, subjective offenses, feelings of school safety[65], attendance[66], and academic achievement[67] increase.

Performative Safety Measures Don't Make Black Girls Feel Safer

Many school hardening measures, like SROs and metal detectors, are highly visible. These symbols of school security are often performative, intended to create the perception of protection from outside threats, even while the actual focus of these measures is policing the students within. Indeed, adoption of these measures is often motivated by whom the school serves, rather than the safety of the community in which the school is located. Schools in the United States with larger populations of students of color are more likely to use school hardening measures, such as metal detectors, school police and security guards, locked gates, and random sweeps.[68] Black girls and young women in Miami feel like these measures are not creating actual safety for all students.

Our survey participants reported having security cameras in their schools, security or police officers at the front and/or all doors, lockdown or active shooter drills, and ID badges that all students are required to wear.[69] Yet less than two in five survey respondents feel or felt safer with these safety measures, and half feel neither safe nor unsafe with them. Among the safety measures offered for selection in the survey,
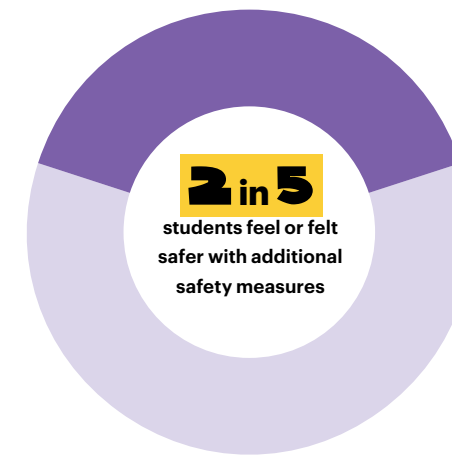

2 in 5 students feel or felt safer with additional safety measures

Chart 1. Student feelings about security cameras, security or police officers, lockdown or active shooter drills, and ID badges.

only security guards/police at doors, locked doors, lockdown drills, and ID badges (briefly) came up during listening sessions, though not as positive features or well-implemented measures of school safety.

"Yeah, because, our school … they gave us school IDs, student IDs, but they never look at the student IDs. They don't require them. They're not strict with it."
–9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School, commenting on how nonstudents have been able to enter her school by wearing similar colors to the school uniform

"Yes, um, the lockdown drills. I have a huge problem with them 'cause [they make us walk] to the corner, and I feel like that's not the safest thing. So for me to feel safe in a situation like that, like if, you know, a school shooter was to actually be at the school, I feel like we need a better plan, instead of just putting us on the corner and telling us, like, 'You can't [leave]'…"
–12th grade student at Homestead Senior High School

Some students reported other visible school hardening measures that do more to "perform" school security than they do to make Black girls feel secure in school. For example, the MSD High School Public Safety Act requires schools to conduct monthly "Code Red" or active assailant response drills[70] even though they can be traumatizing to students. The drills require students to practice sitting still and silently in the dark while a police officer, playing the role of an active shooter, attempts to open classroom doors. Under Florida law, a number of these drills must be unannounced, leading to panic and confusion.[71] Although schools should have protocols in place for emergencies, they should also consider the impact on students' emotional and psychological safety when creating these protocols.

The most direct consequence of exclusionary discipline such as in-school suspensions is that students lose critical instruction and face time with educators in the classroom.

During one Code Red at a Florida high school, students vomited, fainted, and wrote farewell notes to parents after believing the drill to be real.[72] One recent study found that active shooter drills were associated with increases in depression (39%), stress and anxiety (42%), and physiological health problems (23%), which collectively negatively impact student well-being.[73] Girls in our listening sessions shared the stress of not knowing whether they are in real danger during these "Code Red" drills.

> **"This year, we had a 'Code Red.' Those are serious. They didn't let us know until like later on that it was a drill. ... [W]e had one last year at the end of the school year, and someone actually had something on them, so it was like ... like my heart was beating ..."**
> *–12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 4*

In addition to being concerned about performative security measures, Black girls in Miami feel like the physical infrastructure of their school buildings leaves them vulnerable. They wondered why their schools haven't taken safety measures that better account for students' whereabouts or deter possible intruders.

> **"It depends on the day because, like, my campus, I realized it's very easy for kids to leave ... and come back because, like, the structure of it, there's some, like, the walls, they try to make it, I guess, have the aesthetic. So, there's, like, squares in them, and people will literally use the squares to climb up over ..."**
> *– Miami-Dade County Public School student 1*

> **"And the hallways are super narrow ... and there's only three separate hallways, and three stairwells. So, it's just caught in over 1,000 students. So, it's just a rush of people walking to class. I have to, like, push through people, right. So, I can't imagine running from an intruder ..."**
> *– 10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

> **"And yeah, the structure of the building is very easy to get in and out of. Anyone can just, not even trying to sneak out like you said, like climbing stuff. They're just walking out the door. And being able to walk out the door and walk back in is a big safety issue."**
> *– Former Miami Arts Charter School student 2*

M-DCPS and all schools can create physical safety without adopting performative security measures or making school buildings look and feel like prisons. At minimum, schools can do this by making commonsense changes that create safety within the school infrastructure. For example, schools can assign school staff or adult helpers who are not part of the school policing system to monitor school entrances and exits. Schools can also try their best to assign class schedules in ways that don't overcrowd narrow or smaller-capacity spaces in the school and maximize access to exits. Importantly, school districts should establish effective emergency plans, which can include coordination with law enforcement while not requiring regular police presence in schools. Schools should seek student perspectives in such emergency planning, especially accounting for their emotional and psychological well-being, and make sure the plan is shared clearly with the entire school community.

In addition to the commonsense changes, schools can invest money once used for school hardening tools into mental health professionals, create environments that make students feel like their mental well-being is as important as their physical well-being, and invest in other student-centered resources.

> **M-DCPS and all schools can create physical safety without adopting performative security measures or making school buildings look and feel like prisons.**

Keeping Her Safe: Creating Holistic School Safety for Black Girls and All Students

Despite the complexities of school safety, Black girls in Miami were clear that the culture of criminalization in M-DCPS is doing more harm than good. These students have a holistic vision of school safety that they hope schools will adopt.

How Black Girls in Miami Define School Safety

When asked how they define school safety, the girls and young women emphasized the emotional and psychological aspects of safety. They expressed that feeling safe includes the following: feeling comfortable; not having to worry; not being afraid of getting hurt or needing to watch one's back; being able to express oneself and have safe spaces to exist within; having supportive, nonjudgmental adults around; and having mental health and emotional support in schools.

"I think school safety for me … goes two ways. One is, like, physical safety, as in, like, not being afraid of being bodily hurt in school and then an emotional safety, like, having a safety net with the teachers, administrators, and overall the school itself, where you feel comfortable to be a person."
–*Former Miami-Dade County Public School student*

"I would say like being surrounded by adults and other people with, like, well intentions for everyone in the space—you know, like not too judgmental or anything, like, very supportive. That's like socially, I guess socially safe. And then, like, for in other ways, having people to support us emotionally and mentally, too, more counselors and stuff."
–*12th grade student at Miami Edison Senior High School*

"I'm in class, out of harm's way …"
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 5*

"I don't have to worry about getting hurt …"
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 2*

"Being comfortable at school."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 6*

"One of the ways that I would define school safety is not having to watch my back, especially from someone who was placed in the school to protect me, guard me, and make me feel secure."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 4*

"A place where you can feel comfortable and, like, also where there's [good] communication."
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 3*

"More activities, more like selection of classes, so, like, students can get more involved. … [W]e don't really know most of the faculty at our school. Like, we'll see them around, but we don't get to know them. So, maybe, like, build connections …"
–*12th grade student at North Miami Senior High School 3*

"The teachers and administrators will support us … by making sure that like our grades are good, and they support us mentally, too."
–*9th grade student at Booker T. Washington Senior High School*

"I would define safety at school as having a community that you feel comfortable speaking out to … that they're asking what makes you comfortable, that they're reaching out to make sure that they're making you feel comfortable. Feeling that you can move freely throughout the space."
–*Former Miami Arts Charter School student 2*

"Being comfortable with the people around you and knowing that no one is gonna bully you or jump in and call you weird. I think also having a community, not only with the students, but with the staff, as well, with staff connecting to students rather than just administrating us is very important."
–*10th grade student at Miami Arts Charter School*

"Yeah, like a safe space for self-expression. … And then just having access to, like, resources, the counselors or, you know, teachers who will be supportive … if you're feeling unsafe. And then just tighter, tighter gun control laws, for sure, and [going over] drills, safety drills."
–*Former Miami Arts Charter School student 1*

"Just, like, having, not like an overwhelming amount of security, maybe like [one or two] that will, you know, will take measures to make sure students are safe. And just being able … to express yourself and, like, be freely at school."
–*9th grade student at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School*

"I feel like schools are, like, somewhere where we spend like majority of our time, so … even the environment … needs to feel safe. Like, you need to have, like, some comfortability being in your school. And, like, again, like no bodily harm, but also mental health is a real big factor in that. So, like, being able to have resources [available] to you 24/7 when you are going through something and when you feel like you're in situations where they don't feel safe to you, whether that be physically or mentally, you have somebody to go to."
–*12th grade student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School*

"I think being able to have a support system. I feel like that would make me feel like it's a safe space in school."
–*Miami-Dade County Public School student 2*

Making Black Girls' Holistic Vision of Safety a Reality

What students need now more than ever are policies and laws that provide resources for schools to prioritize care over criminalization. By describing their experiences with school policing and other elements of school criminalization, the girls and young women helped us develop recommended steps that students, schools, and lawmakers can take to ensure students are feeling holistically safe in school.

Invest in Care, Not Criminalization

Money spent on school policing and other school hardening mechanisms has meant that millions of students attend schools that lack resources for mental health and other student supports, such as counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers.[74] In 2019, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that "[s]chools where at least half of the student population is nonwhite, as well as high-poverty schools (i.e., where at least 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches), have the highest percentages of law enforcement officers on campus."[75] This inequitable distribution of school resources reflects a bias deeply ingrained in our national consciousness: that white students are more deserving of care and support than students of color.

Police presence in schools promotes fear and mistrust among students, causing students to feel disconnected from their school communities.[76] Students who are overpoliced and heavily surveilled with school hardening measures, such as metal detectors and security cameras, have also reported feeling "powerless and stifled" and losing motivation to "exhibit socially acceptable behavior and adhere to school norms."[77] This culture of criminalizing students for acting like kids and teens creates a harmful school climate—particularly for the students of color who are the most likely to be on the receiving end of this criminalization.

By investing in criminalization, particularly in schools with high populations of students of color, states and school districts are often denying these students equal access to education and safe spaces. Instead, offering a variety of academic, physical, and mental health resources helps students toward achieving the social and emotional well-being necessary to focus on and benefit from their classes.

Schools should adopt evidence-based school safety measures and provide all students with care and community to establish a positive school climate. A positive school climate can prevent violence and significantly decrease the likelihood of "crime," "aggression," and "violent behavior."[78] Whereas criminalization, constant surveillance and suspicion, and bias in school discipline can impair relationships between students and school officials and create learning environments that are unwelcoming and even fearful for students, particularly students with multiple marginalized identities.[79] Having trusting relationships with adults and peers and feeling included and affirmed (or "identity-safe"[80]) in school can have a positive impact on a student's ability to learn and is crucial to fostering school safety.

Police presence in schools promotes fear and mistrust among students, causing them to feel disconnected from their school communities.

Based on what we heard from our listening sessions in Miami, here are some ways lawmakers and school districts can invest in care and create a positive school climate for all students:

Schools free of criminalization.

State policymakers and school districts can build learning environments where students are kept safe from threats rather than treated as threats themselves and give communities the autonomy to decide for themselves what school safety means. State policymakers should implement changes to laws and policies that can allow communities to choose police-free schools or police-free zones within schools with strict restrictions on how and when police officers and security guards can interact with students. Schools and school districts, then, can end or reduce the scope of their contracts with police departments or private security companies, and reduce or remove altogether police officers from their schools. Allowing communities to choose police-free schools or zones would not mean schools can't have safety protocols for violent incidents. Resources saved from school policing can be invested in hiring school staff who are trained in violence interruption and techniques to de-escalate potentially dangerous situations. Districts can also coordinate with local law enforcement to create plans for emergencies.

End reliance on exclusionary discipline and zero-tolerance policies.

Discipline that removes students from their classrooms and intentionally deprives them of learning as punishment can have both long- and short-term negative effects for students, including pushing them out of school altogether.[81] Exclusionary discipline often does not lead students to change the behaviors they are disciplined for and creates learning environments where students feel unsafe and unsupported.[82] Zero-tolerance policies are school rules that lead to exclusion, like suspensions and expulsions, even if it is the first time a student violates them. Many states have laws that require zero-tolerance for bringing weapons to school, but other states and school districts might have them for minor behaviors. For example, a few girls we spoke to said they have attended Miami-Dade schools that have zero-tolerance policies embedded in their dress codes. These policies don't allow students the space to learn, grow, and be young people in a safe and caring environment.

Hire school counselors and other staff to support student mental health.

Students need space in schools to learn about mental health and safe ways to regulate emotions and express themselves. School counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals are crucial to creating these spaces, but millions of students in the United States attend schools without even one school counselor.[83] School districts should redirect funds previously used for school policing and hardening to hire and retain school counselors.

Adopt restorative programs and practices.

When executed well, restorative programs and practices offer more positive alternatives to addressing school-based conflicts and violence than more traditional punitive discipline or zero-tolerance policies.[84] Restorative programs use evidence-based practices to focus on building community, give space to learn from and correct mistakes, and address root causes of behavior through listening, accountability, and healing.[85] To faithfully implement restorative practices, school districts should hire staff dedicated to restorative practices, such as restorative justice coordinators who can provide ongoing support and accountability.[86]

Break Down Cultures of Criminalization:
What Can M-DCPS and Similar School Districts Do Now?

The MSD High School Public Safety Act is one example of how lawmakers in Florida are not considering the experiences of students who are living at the intersections of multiple identities, such as Black girls. Unfortunately, it may take some time and dedicated advocacy before Florida lawmakers and those in states with similar political leanings are ready to divest from school hardening practices.

The good news is that community advocates and school leaders don't need to wait for state or federal lawmakers to bring about change in their schools. School districts in Florida, like M-DCPS, and other similarly hostile states can take meaningful steps to ensure they are proactively breaking down cultures of criminalization while advocates work toward attaining police-free schools.

Here are some immediate steps Black girls and young women in Miami say M-DCPS and other school districts should take:

1 ==Help students build relationships with trusted adults in the school community who are not law enforcement.== Black girls in Miami told us they are most likely to turn to teachers when they are feeling unsafe at school. They also feel comfortable seeking help from school counselors and other supportive adults in their communities, such as coaches or mentors in local organizations and afterschool programs. The girls and young women were clear that they don't look to SROs and security guards when they have safety concerns. Girls want their schools to offer more and earlier opportunities for them to get to know adults in their schools who are available to help them and the specific resources they offer. Districts should also ensure that these trusted adults, such as teachers and counselors, receive ongoing training in social-emotional learning, responding productively to student misbehavior, and recognizing when students are in distress. With adults equipped to provide these resources, students can feel an increased sense of a school community that cares for them.

2 ==Keep security guards and SROs out of everyday discipline.== Black girls in Miami feel like security guards and SROs police their bodies, clothing, and hair in ways they do not police their white peers. They face aggression for walking to the bathroom or visiting a school counselor and harassment for wearing makeup or leggings. Black girls face the risk of criminal legal involvement just for being themselves. Schools that are required to hire SROs, security guards, "safe-school officers," and other law enforcement officers should take steps to ensure these officers are not enforcing everyday school rules, such as dress codes. Law enforcement is not needed to determine whether a student is late, acting out in class, or wearing an outfit that does not comply with a dress code. These behaviors should be addressed by educators and counselors who can work with students to build healthy and safe ways to resolve conflicts and express themselves.

3 ==Run thorough background checks for security guards and SROs.== Although Florida law and agreements between the Miami-Dade School Board and local law enforcement require background checks for all officers hired to work in schools, several girls and young women we spoke to felt that security guards and SROs were not well-vetted for their positions. This left them feeling uneasy about the interactions they have had with officers or witnessed between officers and students. Schools should ensure they are conducting thorough background checks for security guards and SROs, particularly for any history of sexual harassment, violence, or misconduct.

The girls and young women were also clear that schools should check the social media platforms of applicants for security guard and SRO positions, as students have been able to find sexist, racist, and other inappropriate content on some officers' platforms through even informal searches.

4 ==Make sure an adult is paying attention to the school entrance and exit points.== Many girls and young women feel like security guards are doing more to restrict access to bathrooms and censor how they dress than they are to ensure individuals who don't belong to the school community aren't able to get into school buildings. In schools where security guards are required, schools can, at minimum, ensure that security guards are stationed at school entrances and exits (rather than in hallways or other high-traffic areas where they are likely primarily engaging with students) and carefully identifying who is coming in and out of the building and why. As schools work to get rid of school policing models altogether, they can station other trusted staff or adult helpers to do this monitoring.

5 ==Provide ongoing sensitivity training around race, gender, sexuality, and disability for security guards and SROs.== Black girls in Miami don't feel like their security guards and SROs understand the challenges they face due to their intersecting identities. At minimum, schools required to hire security guards and SROs should ensure their officers are receiving ongoing training, so they may interact with students in more culturally competent ways and not create hostile school environments. However, schools should view this as a step needed to create safer schools in the short term while working toward a criminalization-free environment. Policing is inherently about control and creates power dynamics rooted in violence and submission. Sensitivity training cannot train law enforcement officers not to police.

Ensure Girls Are Safe From Sexual Harassment & Assault

A critical element of school safety is safety from sexual harassment and assault. Schools have the power to create this safety for all students by adopting survivor-centered policies that effectively respond to and prevent sexual harassment. At a minimum, school districts should always make sure they are complying with Title IX's legal requirements.

During our listening sessions, the Black girls and young women we worked with engaged in a tough conversation about sexual harassment and assault by SROs or security guards that they may have experienced or observed at school. In addition, we heard observations from the girls about various relationships and interactions with security guards that would count as sexual harassment. The girls and young women did not call these situations sexual harassment, which is not uncommon:

Many individuals, whether youth or adults, do not identify harassing behaviors as sexual harassment in the absence of being given working definitions for behaviors that constitute sexual harassment.

They offered the following critical changes they hope to see in M-DCPS and all schools to better protect girls and support student survivors.

According to the girls and young women, schools should:

▷ **Take immediate action and hold harassers accountable for their actions**, especially for security guards and SROs, who exercise significant power over students, which makes harassment especially threatening and coercive.

▷ **Provide student survivors with counseling** and other support, if they need it.

▷ **Allow student survivors the agency to make decisions** during Title IX investigations without forcing them to do things that would add to their trauma.

▷ **Designate and clearly identify school staff**, such as Title IX coordinators, to help them with reporting.

▷ **Better inform students** of the steps they can take if they were to experience sexual harassment or assault.

▷ **Believe students who report harassment** or assault and do not minimize their experiences or feelings.

Additionally, based on experiences the girls shared, schools should:

▷ **Regularly train all students** about what conduct can constitute sexual harassment and assault and about appropriate, healthy behaviors, setting healthy boundaries, and the importance of bodily autonomy.

Schools have the power to create this safety for all students by adopting survivor-centered policies that effectively respond to and prevent sexual harassment.

For more information on how to implement these policies and others to prevent and respond to sexual harassment, check out NWLC's report, 100 School Districts: A Call to Action for School Districts Across the Country to Address Sexual Harassment Through Inclusive Policies and Practices.

DO YOUR PART TO KEEP HER SAFE

School communities are made up of people with many different roles. No matter what role you play, you can advocate for policies and laws that end criminalization and keep Black girls and all students holistically safe.

IF YOU'RE A STUDENT

To advocate for holistic and inclusive school safety policies in your school, you can:

▷ **Get familiar with, and educate others about, your rights as a student**—not only those protected by federal civil rights laws, including Title IX and laws protecting against discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, and disability, but also those protected by state laws and school district policies.

▷ **Identify school discipline rules or policing/security practices that primarily or disproportionately impact certain groups of students**, like Black girls, or that create a culture of criminalization.

▷ **Create a student organization** that focuses on advocating for nondisciplinary and noncarceral approaches to school safety.

▷ **Build support within your community,** with teachers, parents, and school alumni.

▷ **Write down your recommendations** for creating a safe school and share them with school leaders, like your principal, superintendent, or school board members.

▷ **Attend student council, school board, or Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings** to advocate for new school policies or practices.

▷ **Help create an environment of safety** by reporting incidents you witness or experience, encouraging other students to report incidents and making sure students who report incidents know that they have a community of peers who support them.

▷ **Hold your school leaders accountable,** including by reaching out to local media to grow awareness of your concerns and recommendations.

IF YOU'RE AN EDUCATOR, SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR, OR OTHER SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADER

To bring about holistic and inclusive school safety policies in your school, you should:

▷ **Consider nondisciplinary and noncarceral approaches** to school safety.

▷ **Engage and listen to students** in discussions about school safety, including non-law enforcement safety solutions.

▷ **Have discussions with students** to address how they feel about school shootings and how the school can help ease anxieties.

▷ **Replace school-based police officers and security guards** with school counselors, psychologists, nurses, and non-law enforcement adult helpers.

▷ **Restrict where school-based police officers and security guards are allowed to police school campuses** and strictly prohibit their interactions with students except when students or staff face threats of death or serious bodily harm.

▷ **Host trainings and workshops** for students on topics such as healthy habits and relationships, body positivity, and emotional self-regulation.

▷ **Provide regular, interactive trainings and discussions** on sexual harassment and assault, students' rights, and what students can do to report these issues.

▷ **Rely less on discipline that removes students from their regular classrooms** or involves school safety officers and focus on evidence-based practices that resolve conflicts while keeping students safe and in class.

▷ **Get rid of or equitably reform dress codes and grooming policies** and consider how policing girls' looks may impact their well-being.

▷ **Consider how to make spaces accessible for students without policing their bodies,** especially with bathrooms and where necessary to have locked doors for safety.

▷ **Host ongoing trainings for all school staff** on topics like harassment and Title IX, restorative justice, and bias/stereotypes as well as sensitivity training on race, gender, disability, and intersectionality.

▷ **Create intentional time and space**, such as assemblies or meet-and-greets, for students to get to know school staff.

▷ **Track and work to eradicate disparities** in your school's or district's disciplinary practices and hold school safety officers accountable by requiring them to report critical demographic data related to any searches, surveillance or policing of students.

IF YOU'RE A LAWMAKER...

To bring about holistic and inclusive school safety laws and policies in your school district and state, you should:

▷ **Consider nondisciplinary and noncarceral approaches** to school safety.

▷ **Refocus funding to invest more in preventative measures** such as school counselors, psychologists, nurses, and non-law enforcement adult helpers, rather than overinvesting in school-based police officers and security guards, particularly where their presence is already excessive and has been shown to have a harmful impact on students—such as increasing the rates of suspensions, expulsions, unjustified searches, and days missed at school.

▷ **Engage directly with students, families, educators, and impacted communities** when drafting laws and regulations about school safety.

▷ **Pass laws that invest money into social, emotional, and academic resources** for all students rather than school criminalization and hardening.[87]

▷ **Ensure that the members of commissions and advisory boards that shape school safety legislation look like the student populations they represent** and prioritize the experiences, needs, interests and perspectives of our state's student population, including Black girls.

▷ **Monitor, collect, and make publicly available demographic data** and conduct impact studies to understand the disparate impact of school safety legislation.

THOUGHTS FROM STUDENT CO-AUTHORS

"Some teens are feeling like they need to disown themselves or like they don't feel good about themselves and try to hurt themselves. And talking to a mental health counselor is the best way to feel better about themselves."

"Talk to a counselor about your mental health, even if you are 18 and under, because it will help you with your mental health."

"Black girls will feel safer and more welcomed coming to school because they won't feel insecure about themselves."

"Understanding your rights as students makes them feel more knowledgeable and helps Black girls navigate their educational environment more confidently."

"Involving and including students in safety discussions empowers them and guarantees their input in shaping safety measures that have a direct impact on their lives."

"Revising dress codes diminishes the likelihood of scrutinizing girls' bodies, thus ensuring that students can freely express themselves in a comfortable manner."

"Ongoing professional development for staff fosters a more inclusive and equitable school environment."

"Do mental health checkups on students to see where they are mentally."

"Help students learn more about why bullying is not allowed in schools."

"Getting rid of dress codes would be good for students; teachers are quick to retaliate. What if it's something that makes me feel comfortable in my body?"

"Dress codes target female students. Revising dress codes could reduce the stigma."

Remember: There is strength in numbers!

Schools should not try to silence or punish you for advocating for safe and inclusive policies for all students. However, some school districts may take punitive action against students trying to speak out—especially school districts that have shown hostility to the experiences of diverse students.

Working in groups can minimize the possibility that you personally will get in trouble for advocating for your rights. We encourage you to work with student groups, parents and guardians, caring educators and administrators and local organizations in your community to build a united front and support you against potential push back from your school or district.

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6. Names have been changed to short descriptions to protect each student's privacy. Quotes from students at the same school and in the same grade were assigned numbers to distinguish each speaker.

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23. School districts hire sworn law enforcement officers in two main ways. One is by making a contract, called a memorandum of understanding ("MOU") with the local police department to essentially borrow police officers and station them in the schools. Another is when a school district creates its own police department and the district itself operates the department and employs police officers.

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79. *See*, e.g., Jen Weiss, "Scan This: Examining Student Resistance to School Surveillance," I*n Schools Under Surveillance: Cultures of Control in Public Education*, edited by Torin Monahan and Rodolfo D. Torres, 213–29. (Rutgers University Press, 2010), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj93f.15; Elizabeth Pufall Jones et al., "Discipline and Disconnected: How Students Experience Exclusionary Discipline in Minnesota and the Promise of Non-Exclusionary Alternatives," 3 (America's Promise Alliance, June 2018), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED586336; Amanda Petteruti, "Education Under Arrest."

80. Social identity threat occurs when individuals feel like they are at risk of being judged negatively because others may associate their identity (such as race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, language, immigration status, disability, age, etc.) with undesirable characteristics, stereotypes, or biases. Identity safety in schools means that school officials foster learning environments that are inclusive and affirming, where students feel safe, valued, and protected. See Laura E. Hernández and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms," (Learning Policy Institute, August 24, 2022), https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/wce-identity-safe-schools-classrooms-report.

81. Patrick, Onyeka-Crawford, and Duchesneau, "…and they cared," 12.

82. Sara Luster, "How Exclusionary Discipline Creates Disconnected Students," (National Education Association, July 19, 2018), https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/how-exclusionary-discipline-creates-disconnected-students#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20reality%20is%20that%20exclusionary,of%20the%20Center%20for%20Promise; Patrick, Onyeka-Crawford, and Duchesneau, "…and they cared."

83. Amir Whitaker et al., "Cops and No Counselors,"; Michelle Morton, "Miami-Dade County School-to-Prison Pipeline,"; Morton et al., "The Cost of School Policing,"; American School Counselor Association, "School Counselor Roles & Ratios," Accessed, March 2024, https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios.

84. Patrick, Onyeka-Crawford, and Duchesneau, "…and they cared," 7; Power U and Advancement Project, "Restorative Practices: an introduction for Miami-Dade educators," (Feb. 2014), https://www.poweru.org/sdm_downloads/restorative-practices-guideline-for-miami-educators/.

85. Ibid.

86. *See* Andy Kopsa, "The City That Kicked Cops Out of Schools and Tried Restorative Practices Instead," (In These Times, December 12, 2022), https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-city-that-kicked-cops-out-of-schools-and-tried-restorative-practices-instead.

87. Evans High School, a community partnership school in Orlando, FL, is a great example of how schools can invest in social, emotional, and academic resources. Through its community partners, Evans High School provides robust integrated supports for students and families, including after-school programs, on-site health care, and parent and student engagement. Learn more here: https://chsfl.org/schools/evans/.

BACKGROUND

This report focuses on Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) based on previous work done by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and partner organizations centering the experiences of Black girls.

Specifically, the SPLC followed the lead of community-based organizations—Black Girls Matter MIA, the Dream Defenders, the Miami Workers Center, the Power U Center for Social Change, and S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective—which hosted a series of workshops and listening circles during the 2016–2017 school year. These workshops taught Black girls attending M-DCPS about systems of oppression and heard directly from them about their experiences in M-DPCS schools. In addition to the workshops and listening circles, Power U surveyed over 600 M-DCPS high school students about how they were experiencing school and being treated in Student Success Centers, an M-DCPS alternative to out-of-school suspensions.[87] The survey revealed disturbing results: Black girls had lost trust in the adults who are supposed to protect them and keep them safe.[87]

Well over half of survey respondents, including students of all races and genders, did not feel that their schools dealt with sexual harassment effectively, and about half of respondents felt that their schools did not effectively prevent students from being sexually assaulted or touched inappropriately.[87] Worse, when incidents regarding inappropriate sexual conduct between school employees and students surfaced, lack of transparency on how the incidents were handled and how to prevent recurrences further eroded students' trust. [87] When asked if the presence of police made them feel safer in schools, less than half of students surveyed agreed with that statement.[87] Specifically, Black girls reported being "sexually harassed and assaulted at schools by security guards who are purportedly there to make them feel safe." [87]

The Black girls in the SPLC's focus group echoed what was said back in 2016 and 2017. Black girls reported they experienced or were aware of routine sexual harassment from school police and security guards. They described SROs and security guards as often holding special relationships of power in the school environment because, for example, they were related to staff members in positions of authority or because they also served as coaches for athletic teams. Due to these special relationships of power, students did not feel safe to report predatory behaviors by security guards and SROs. In the few instances when students did make reports, they told the SPLC that their schools failed to follow up on the complaint. The students also reported that the presence of security guards did not make them feel safe.[87]

THE ORIGINS OF TODAY'S VERSION OF SCHOOL POLICING

Although school policing was not a new practice in the United States in 1999, the shooting at Columbine High School that year marked a key shift in how political leaders would approach school safety. Following Columbine, the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education surveyed schools to assess new strategies schools could adopt to prevent and manage threats.[87] They found that the most effective way to ensure safe schools was to improve school climate and strengthen trust and communication among a school's community members[87].

Nevertheless, instead of promoting these findings, the Clinton administration set the stage for the level of school policing and hardening we see today by creating the COPS in Schools program. Between 1999 and 2005, the COPS in Schools program, run by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), awarded about $724 million for the hiring of SROs across the country.[87] Today, DOJ continues to award millions of dollars for SRO hiring under the COPS Hiring Program.[87]

The data has been clear for over twenty years: positive school climate and trusting relationships create safe schools. But policymakers have continued to ignore these recommendations by prioritizing policies in the name of school safety that, instead, increase the number of law enforcement officers in schools—without evidence to show this results in greater safety, or even reduced gun-related offenses.[87] Recent studies of school shootings over the last few decades have found that police presence in schools has not made school shootings less likely or less severe.[87] In fact, school police officers were present at some of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history, including those at Columbine, Parkland, and Uvalde. One study found that school shootings result in nearly three times more deaths in schools where armed police are present.[87]

Instead, school policing often leads to (or even requires[87]) law enforcement officers arresting, ticketing, and using force on students in response to youth behaviors that would previously have resulted in discipline from school administrators or trauma-informed or healing-based responses from school counselors. Schools with more officers also have higher arrest rates for minor[87] and subjective offenses—offenses that don't have a clear definition and are open to a wide range of interpretations by the enforcing individual—like "disorderly conduct."[87] In fact, students attending schools with at least one SRO are almost five times more likely to face a criminal charge for "disorderly conduct" than students who attend schools without SROs.[87] Law enforcement officers often confront or arrest Black students for typical youth behavior: recent examples in the news including law enforcement responses to students having a Nerf toy gun in the background of an online class at age twelve, pointing fingers in the shape of a gun at age thirteen[87], getting a failing grade in a virtual ceramics class at age fifteen,[87] and taking too much milk in the cafeteria at age eleven[87]. Black girls are at particular risk of being targeted by school police when intersecting racist and sexist stereotypes, like adultification bias, influence how an officer decides to enforce a subjective offense.

DISCLAIMER While text, citations, and data are, to the best of the authors' knowledge, current as of the date the report was prepared, there may be subsequent developments, including legislative actions and court decisions, that could alter the information provided herein. This report does not constitute legal advice; individuals and organizations considering legal action should consult with their own counsel.