



Testimony of:
YouthAction Members
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Presented to the NYC Racial Justice Commission &
Department of Youth and Community Development

Youth for Racial Justice Public Input Session

September 10, 2021

Good afternoon. We are NYC high school students and youth advocates with Citizens' Committee for Children (CCC). CCC is a 76-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. We document the facts, engage and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for solutions. YouthAction Members are high school students from across the five boroughs who join CCC to be trained and mobilized around policy change in our schools and communities.

We would like to thank the NYC Racial Justice Commission and the Department of Youth and Community Development for the opportunity to provide testimony related to structural racism in NYC Charter. While we understand that many of the issues and recommendations in this document may not fall under the purview of the New York City Charter, we would like our youth-centered priorities to be at the forefront of decisions made by this commission as they work to achieve equity in New York City structures, systems, and governing documents.

Over the last year, YouthAction members have been immersed in Voicing Our Future, a multifaceted project to bring youth perspectives to the forefront of conversations around public policy. To this end, last winter we surveyed over 1,300 youth from throughout the five boroughs, reaching youth from almost every zip code in the city. The survey consisted of a series of questions centered around the priorities of young people and their experiences in NYC schools and communities. We also conducted a series of focus groups with an additional 250 youth to gather input on designing the survey, unpacking the results and creating recommendations for change.

Through this participatory process, we have identified Educational and Employment Opportunities, Mental Health, and Policing in Schools as the priorities we would like to focus on to create a more equitable future for New York City's young people. Each of these issues affects the daily lives of youth citywide and racially unjust policies have created disproportionately negative outcomes in each of these areas for the city's Black, Latinx, and immigrant youth. In addition, almost a third of New Yorkers are under 24, which is why it is extremely important to have youth-centered priorities embedded in our laws and policies.

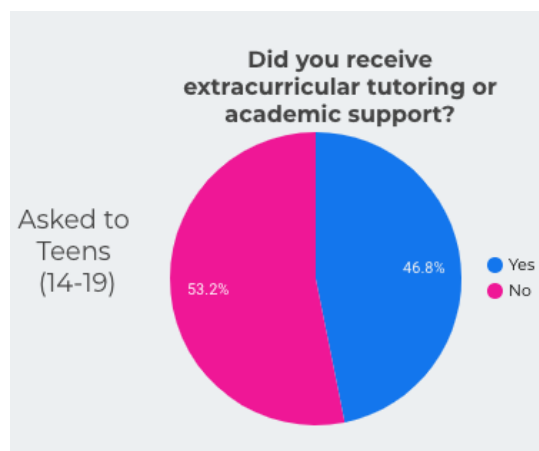
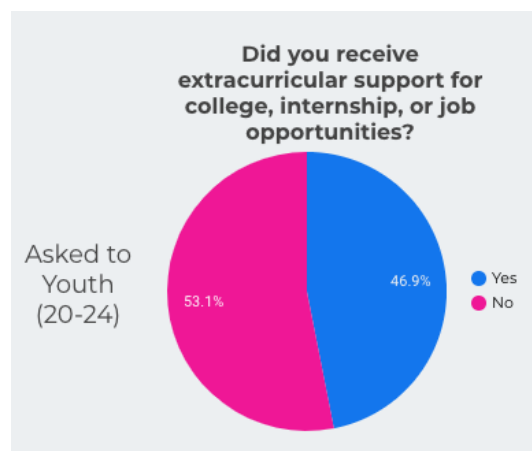
Educational and Employment Opportunities

Last year, all students experienced profound isolation and learning loss as the pandemic prevented students from being in classrooms. According to data from the NYC Department of Education, only 85% of students had interactions with remote learning during the Spring 2020 term, and rates of interaction were lowest in districts with high economic insecurity and among students in temporary housing. This issue disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx youth, further exacerbating racial inequities in education that predated the pandemic, which can be seen in historical disparities between white students and their Black and Latinx counterparts in test scores, graduation rates, and college readiness.

"I've been pretty much a straight A student throughout my 11 years of public schooling, but this year as a senior, my grades have all dropped because of remote learning and my struggles with mental health. I don't feel like the NYC government nor the schools are doing their best to have the best interests of their students in mind. Especially those who don't have access to technology or are students with IEPs."

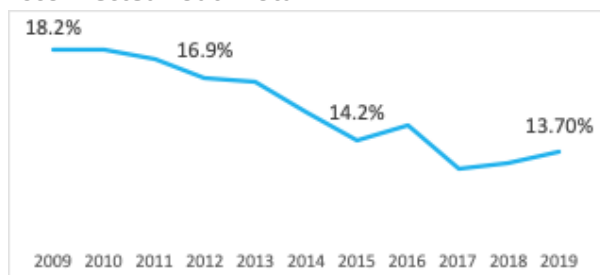
- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

More than half of the youth we surveyed reported they did not receive extracurricular support such as tutoring, college, internship or job opportunities in the last year.

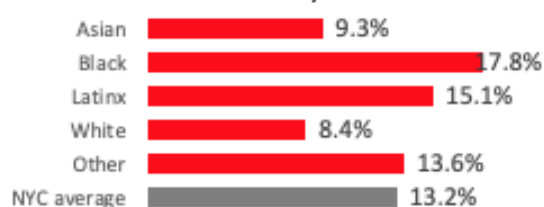


Citywide, the percentage of youth aged 16 to 14 who are not in school or working (*disconnected youth*), has decreased close to five percentage points since 2009. In 2019, Black and Latino youth reported rates of disconnection at roughly two times those of White youth.

Disconnected Youth Total

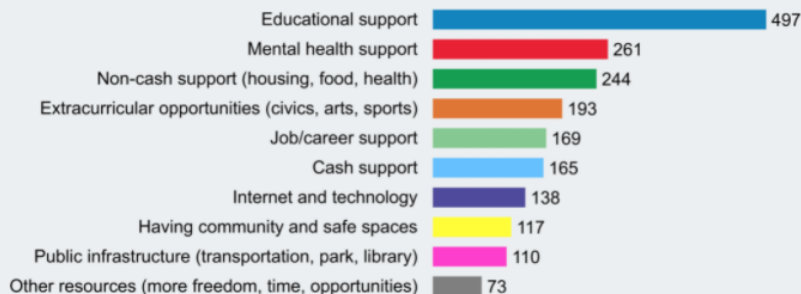


Disconnected Youth by Race



Youth who completed the Voicing Our Future survey indicated that educational support ranks first on a list of important resources for youth in NYC and extracurricular opportunities ranks fourth.

What is an important resource you have (or wish you had) as a young person in NYC right now?



In addition to the profound need for investments in schools and youth enrichment and employment opportunities, we must address the fact that New York City has the most segregated school system in the country, which continuously excludes Black and Latinx students from admittance into the City's highest performing schools. This is explicitly racist and needs to be remedied, and we know that desegregated schools are not just good for students of color, but for white students as well.

"NYC is diverse but it's also the most segregated public school system in the nation. We need to work on reforming the system and helping underfunded schools receive more resources and opportunities. It is extremely unfair for students to struggle on their own just because they live in low-income areas. The specialized schools requiring SHSAT and SAT scores further increases the struggle of low-income students as they can't afford the thousand dollar tutoring fees and personal college counseling. Everyone should have equal opportunities and support to succeed."

- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

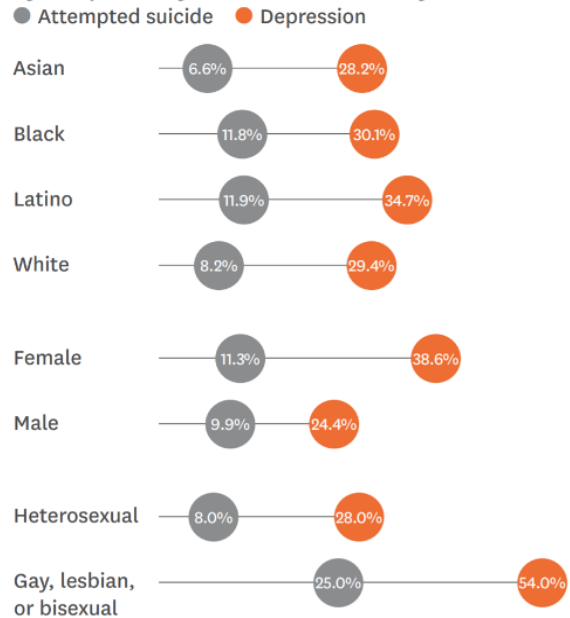
In order to address racial disparities with respect to educational and employment opportunities for youth, New York City must take action to:

- Create universal youth development opportunities for year-round learning that are holistic and culturally responsive
- Expand year-round youth employment opportunities, including the Summer Youth Employment Program
- Improve college and career readiness programs through the CUNY and SUNY systems and through partnerships with private colleges and expand access to Black, Latinx, and immigrant students
- Integrate New York City schools by reimagining admissions policies to ensure that Black, Latinx, and low-income students are not shut out of the City's most competitive and desirable schools

Mental Health

Prioritizing policies that promote healthy child development and behavioral health is extremely important as mental health is such a prevalent issue that suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals from 15-19 and the third leading cause of death for children 5-14. The rate of suicide is higher among youth living in poverty, LGBTQ+ , Black and Latino youth, and girls. These statistics are devastating and are often directly caused by the absence of proper mental health services across the board but especially for these vulnerable populations. In the mental health crisis we are facing, anxiety and depression increasingly impact more and more of our city's youth with the stressors that have arisen in recent years ranging from the rise of social media to climate change, to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Youth Reporting Depression and Attempted Suicide by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Identity, 2017



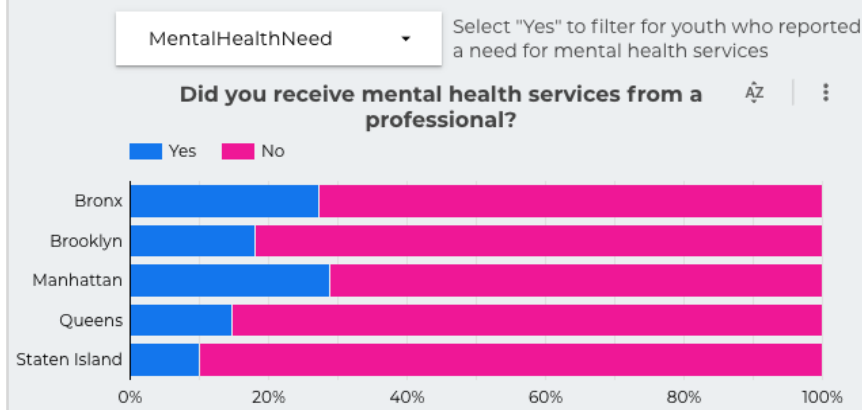
"I wish we had culturally-competent mental health services for all youth, especially youth of color."

- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

"The Counselor to student ratio is so big [that] I feel like I can't speak to them. I wish we weren't so understaffed."

- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

FINDING Among youth who report a need for mental health services, only 42% received them.



The chart in the education section above indicates that the second most important resource for NYC youth, following educational support, is mental health support. In our data we also found that 35% of our participants wanted or needed mental health services and of this 35% only 42% of these individuals were able to access these necessary and desired services which would better their lives.

In order to address racial disparities with respect to mental health for youth, New York City must take action to:

- Substantially increase investments in a full continuum of behavioral supports for students in K to 12 schools, including whole-school approaches that are healing centered and trauma-informed
- Strengthen relationships with community-based behavioral health providers
- Support team-based models that engage mental health professionals and school staff in student well-being
- Ensure that students with higher-level needs have access to clinical services
- Engage communities to determine which array of services are most needed in each community and school

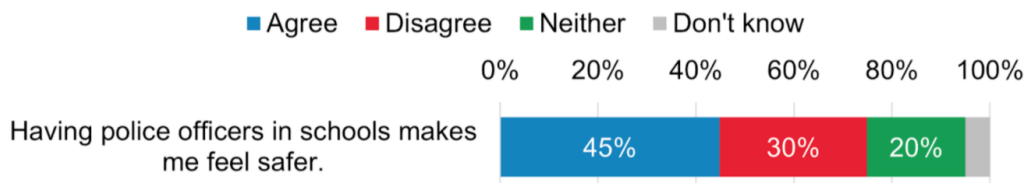
Policing in NYC Schools

Police presence in schools has been the topic of contentious debate recently, and this topic is even more relevant with NYC having more School Safety Agents and NYPD than any other school district in the country. Many feel a need to move away from punitive measures and implement more restorative practices with a focus on community building to dismantle the policing culture in NYC public schools. In order to address this concern, we are advocating for schools to prioritize the importance of social emotional well being with mental health support from social workers as opposed to criminalizing students.

Interestingly, in the Voicing Our Future survey, only 30% of respondents report that having police officers in schools does NOT make them feel safer, while 45% say they do feel safer with police in schools. When unpacking this finding in focus groups with youth, we found that many youth have relationships with their School Safety Agents that is more reflective of a social worker than a police officer, but these police officers are not trained in this field, meaning that replacing officers with guidance counselors and social workers would benefit youth.

Less agreement: police in schools, having a say

Tell us how you feel about the following statements...



Regardless of the fact that many students have positive relationships with their school safety officers, there are many students for whom policing in schools has a detrimental effect, especially Black and brown students. Black and Latinx students are disproportionately impacted by over policing in school, making up 91% of students who are arrested or receive a summons in school. While Black girls make up 22% of the public school population, they make up 66% of all girls targeted for police mitigation. Students who come into contact with the police in school are twice as likely to drop out. New York City currently employs more School Safety Officers than guidance counselors and social workers combined, spending over \$450 million on the School Safety Division each year.

"I feel like having police officers at schools is worse than security guards, because police officers tend to be a lot more intimidating and students don't feel safe because they may be the type to overreact over a minor problem. It gives off school to prison pipeline vibes when police officers are at a school."

- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

"As a black person I wouldn't feel safe having police officers in my school. I would feel uncomfortable given the history of the NYPD and my people."

- Open-ended response from Voicing Our Future Survey

In order to address racial disparities with respect to policing in schools for youth, New York City must take action to:

- Reduce the size, scope and presence of School Safety Agents and NYPD in schools with the ultimate phasing out of SSAs entirely
- Redirect funds from school policing to implement healing-centered, restorative and trauma responsive practices in place of punitive measures
- End zero tolerance policies that are subjectively administered and disproportionately target Black and brown youth.

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Sources

[Voicing Our Future survey results](#)

[Keeping Track Online](#)

[Healing Centered Schools Task force report](#)

[Urban Youth Collaborative Police-Free Schools FactSheet](#)

[NYC Child and Family Well-Being Index](#)

U.S. Census Bureau. (2009–2019). American Community Survey, 1-year estimates. Public Use Microdata Sample files.