

# Executive Summary

The systemic criminalization of youth of color, youth with disabilities, and youth of color with disabilities in schools is one of the most blatant and egregious examples of structural racism and violence in this country. The presence of police officers, guns, handcuffs, and metal detectors in schools creates hostile teaching and learning environments that are reinforced by harsh, punitive, and exclusionary<sup>ii</sup> school discipline policies. Together these practices constitute what is widely referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>iii</sup> As this report demonstrates, Milwaukee's reliance on punitive approaches to discipline is ineffective, costly, and, most troublingly, racially biased.

In Wisconsin, access to equal education, as defined in the state constitution and confirmed by Wisconsin Supreme Court, is a fundamental right for all young people (aged 4–20). However, Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS) punitive discipline policies and practices, including police presence in schools and alarmingly-high suspensions and expulsion rates—which disproportionately affect students of color—directly undermine impacted students' fundamental right to education.

## Milwaukee's School-to-Prison Pipeline and Its Harmful Impact

Ongoing reliance on punitive school discipline strategies by MPS and the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) exemplify the school-to-prison pipeline at work in Milwaukee. A squad of 12 officers is assigned to MPS schools and an additional six officers are responsible for taking young people considered truant into custody. At least 12 schools have metal detectors, forcing 12,224 young people through these devices every morning. Police or school personnel restrained (e.g. with handcuffs) or secluded (i.e. confined to a guarded solitary room) young people 1,139 times in the 2016-2017 school year. In just one year, more than 3,000 students faced citations for missing school, which require in-court, daytime appearances.

Despite costing Milwaukee and MPS millions of dollars over the last decade, the truancy program has failed to make a dent in truancy rates during that time. While this heavy police presence interferes with the learning environment, there is no substantial evidentiary support for the proposition that police presence in schools creates safe learning environments. Studies have shown that schools are no safer, even after years of punitive policing and disciplinary measures, than before such policies were implemented.

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<sup>ii</sup> "Exclusionary" discipline refers to all forms of discipline that remove students from the educational environment, including classroom removals, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions.  
<sup>iii</sup> All citations for information presented in the Executive Summary are included in the main text of this report.

In addition to punitive policing, negative impacts are also created by MPS' use of exclusionary discipline practices. In the 2016–2017 school year, MPS suspended 10,267 students (13.6 percent of total enrollment). In all, MPS suspended one out of every three ninth-graders (34.9 percent).

### School and Policing Policies Have a Discriminatory Impact on Students of Color and Students with Disabilities

Troublingly, harsh disciplinary policies executed by school personnel and school resource officers have led to high rates of racial disparities and disparities for students with disabilities that pull these students into the school-to-prison pipeline. While MPS fails to collect data that would allow for an analysis of students of color with disabilities, the existing data suggest that students of color with disabilities likely experience compounding discrimination in the discipline process.



Despite white students' overwhelmingly similar behavior patterns, and despite Black students accounting for only 55 percent of the student population in Milwaukee in the 2013–2014 school year, data shows that Black students accounted for **84.6 percent of the referrals to law enforcement**. Harsh policing policies also disproportionately impact students with disabilities. For example, while students with disabilities account for only **20 percent of the total enrollment, 91 percent of students who were restrained or put in seclusion were students with disabilities**.

The discriminatory impacts of police presence in schools is amplified by the MPS practice of exclusionary discipline. Over the course of two school years, federal investigators identified “over one hundred incidents at the District’s schools where [B]lack students were expelled, while similarly-situated white students were suspended for similar misconduct.” The most recent MPS data from the 2015–2016 school year shows that eighty percent of the 10,267 suspensions were of Black students, who make up just 53 percent of the total enrollment<sup>iv</sup> In Milwaukee, students with disabilities are suspended at a rate of 1 in 5, while students without disabilities are suspended at half that rate (1 in 10).

<sup>iv</sup> The percentage of Black students in MPS was 55 percent in the 2013-2014 school year, which is the year for which the most recent data regarding law enforcement referrals is available. Two years later, in the 2015-2016 school year, the percentage of Black students had changed to 53 percent of the student body, which is the school year for which the most recent discipline data is available. To ensure that the most recent data is used throughout the report, this report will use 2013-2014 data for police referrals and 2015-2016 data for discipline data.

## Milwaukee's School-to-Prison Pipeline Costs Millions of Dollars

Based on available data, each year the City of Milwaukee pays millions of dollars across city and county agencies to maintain the school-to-prison pipeline. This spending on criminalizing and surveilling young people includes:

- \$1,120,898: Police Officer Program in Schools
- \$60,000: External School Police Squads
- \$435,000: Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression Officers
- \$122,000: Adjudication of Truancy Citations
- \$76,000: Installation of X-Ray Machines
- \$51,000: Maintenance of X-Ray Machines
- \$13.7 million: Safety Assistants for MPS
- Detentions and Juvenile Court



In addition to the direct costs, the increased rate of drop out caused by the school-to-prison pipeline incurs high indirect financial costs. According to a national study by the Center for Civil Rights and Remedies at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), suspended students graduated at a rate of around 15 percent below their classmates who were not suspended. UCLA estimated that for each student who drops out, the social and fiscal impact is as much as \$600,000 over the course of a student's lifetime.

## Supportive Approaches Are More Effective than Punitive Ones

In schools, like in communities at large, supportive approaches have been found more effective for increasing school safety than punitive approaches. Restorative approaches have emerged as one of the most effective methods of shifting school policies toward the aim of creating nurturing, inclusive, and supportive schools. Guidance counselors also provide critical services to create safe and supportive schools. Increasing the number of school counselors has been directly linked to a reduction in fights and school infractions. Despite evidence supporting these approaches, Milwaukee continues to prioritize funding for policing and punitive practices rather than restorative programs and funding for more support personnel.

## From Failure to Freedom: The Youth Power Agenda

The young people who are most at risk of harm due to harsh policing and disciplinary policies are uniquely situated to lead the dialogue around developing truly safe and equitable learning environments. MPS must divest from policing and punitive practices and instead invest in supportive programs, restorative practices, and support professionals that facilitate improved environments and provide students with the freedom to thrive. The blueprint for achieving this is presented in this report as the Youth Power Agenda.

### Divest from Failure:

- Remove police officers from in and around schools
- Remove metal detectors from schools
- End suspensions and expulsions
- End arrests and citations for misdemeanors. Provide citywide alternatives to incarceration for students charged with felonies in school
- Stop the use of seclusion and restraints
- Stop truancy citations and prosecution

**Invest in Freedom:**

- Create an inclusive school code
- Implement robust restorative justice practices citywide
- Increase the number of licensed support professionals, including therapists, social workers, psychologists, and guidance counselors
- Reduce classroom size
- Provide culturally-responsive education and training
- Collect and publish accurate data regarding all forms of discipline
- Invest in universal, free, high-quality early childhood education
- Create a universal youth jobs program

