


[\(/\)](#)

[AMERICAS \(/TOPIC/AMERICAS\)](#)

NYC School Cops Are Putting Kids on the Fast Route to Prison

[f](#) Share [t](#) Tweet [—](#)
[t](#) [g+](#) [r](#) [✉](#)

By [Alice Speri \(/contributor/alice-speri\)](#)

June 23, 2014 | 11:05 am

It's a bit of an urban myth that summer is the time for teenagers to get in trouble: They are not in school, they have plenty of time on their hands, weather and spirits are hot, and everyone's out in the streets. But, as it turns out, New York City's young are more likely to get into the kind of trouble that will land them in jail during the school year than during summer recess — and that's because many of them get arrested by the officers patrolling their schools.

Last year, 50 percent more teens were swept up into the criminal justice system in May 2013, when school is in session, than in August, according to data from the city's Department of Probation cited by WNYC (http://www.wnyc.org/story/blocking-school-prison-pipeline/?utm_content=buffer879cf&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer).

The kids arrested in the largest gang bust in NYC history got caught because of Facebook. Read more here. (<https://news.vice.com/article/the-kids-arrested-in-the-largest-gang-bust-in-nyc-history-got-caught-because-of-facebook>)

"They aren't better behaved during the summer than the winter," the department's former commissioner, Vincent Schiraldi, said to a panel addressing the issue in February. "They're just less surveilled."

'The mandate right now for school safety officers is that they run the show.'

The presence of cops and school safety officers in New York City's public high schools dates back to 1998, when the city's Board of Ed transferred all school safety from educators to the NYPD — a step that student and civil rights advocates said contributed massively to the exacerbation of the so-called "school to prison pipeline." The fact that more students end up in jail from school than from the streets backs that up, critics of the practice said.

"This speaks volumes about what's going on in our schools and the pressing need for change," Donna Lieberman, executive director of the NYCLU, told VICE News. "The mandate right now for school safety officers is that they run the show. They are not supervised by and they are not required to obey the schools. You can have safety officers there, but they should be guided by educators."



In a report (http://www.nyclu.org/files/publications/nyclu_STPP_1021_FINAL.pdf) released last fall, the civil rights group put the problem in numbers. There were nearly 70,000 school suspensions in 2011 — more than twice what it was ten years earlier — and sweeping arrests in schools that 90 percent of the time involved black and Latino students, even though these kids make up only 70 percent of the city's public school population.

The students arrested, the report added, were usually the ones living in neighborhoods affected by another infamous problem — the NYPD's racially targeted "stop and frisk" practice. In other words, these kids got the same treatment in school that they were getting on the streets.

'What school safety agents have done is enable teachers to teach and students to learn.'

The NYPD has regularly defended its school safety division.

"It is a difficult, demanding job," former police commissioner Raymond Kelly said in a promotional video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB9bknCLW0>) distributed by the department. "What school safety agents have done is enable teachers to teach and students to learn in a much safer environment than existed in the past."

Sixty years after Brown vs. Board of Ed, US schools are still pretty damns segregated. Read more here. (<https://news.vice.com/article/60-years-after-brown-vs-board-of-ed-us-schools-are-still-pretty-damn-segregated>)

But not everyone feels that way.

"School is supposed to be a safe space. Young people are already harassed constantly on a daily basis, especially young folks who live in low-income neighborhoods of color," Jaritza Geigel (<http://www.maketheroad.org/article.php?ID=1691>), a young organizer with the community group

Make The Road New York, told VICE News. “They are constantly harassed by cops on the street and now they have to face cops in schools.”

Geigel graduated from a heavily policed Brooklyn high school, where, she recalled, she watched a safety officer handcuff one of her classmates and then punch her in the face. Now that she works with students facing the same punitive system, she says the problem lies with school safety officers’ inadequate training.

“They don’t have training around youth development and they don’t understand that they are not dealing with criminals, they are not dealing with people in the streets, they are dealing with students who are coming into an educational institution,” she said. “What a lot of our young folks are saying is, ‘Listen, we wanna be safe,’ but they wanna be treated with respect and dignity so that they don’t feel like animals, they’re not criminalized, harassed, and disrespected by these authority figures that are there to protect them but are actually doing more harm than good.”



Special needs

Overly punitive school discipline not only disproportionately affects black and Latino youth, mainly boys. It also especially harms special needs students — who, instead of receiving additional support, are suspended twice as often as their peers, NYCLU found.

“The irony that kids who are identified as having special needs end up in the criminal justice system when the schools can’t deal with their special needs is kind of ridiculous,” Lieberman said.

Meet the South Central LA School Counselor who helps students combat PTSD from gang violence. (<https://news.vice.com/article/meet-the-south-central-la-school-counselor-who-helps-students-combat-ptsd-from-gang-violence>)

“Officers are not getting the training to understand special need students, they need to understand that this young person can’t communicate in the same way that a regular student can,” Geigel agreed. “A lot of these young children are emotionally disturbed students and have emotional reactions, it does not mean that they want to cause anyone harm.”

'His pants were at his ankles, and they walked him down the hallway where everyone could see, and the handcuffs were so tight.'

In one instance, she recalled, school officers detained a student who was visibly agitated.

“His pants were at his ankles, and they walked him down the hallway where everyone could see, and the handcuffs were so tight, and he was so emotionally upset that he was moving around a lot, so the cops started grabbing his arm, and all he wanted to do was get the cuffs off him and not feel restrained. He kept saying that over and over again, and he was agitated but he also had six safety agents surrounding him. This one particular safety agent proceeded to yell at his face and tell him things that were not things that would deescalate an emotionally upset person,” she said.

“Then I just saw the six safety agents take him down to the ground, which was completely unnecessary. There is six of you, and he’s maybe 100 something pounds, against six grown adults, and he’s already handcuffed. There’s no need for you to put him on the ground like that. It was so disgusting.”



Push for Reform

Advocates have been successfully pushing for some reform to the harsh measures and, in theory at least, students can no longer be suspended for minor infractions. But that still happens.

“What we are seeing is that things that students are no longer supposed to get suspended for, like talking back to a teacher, or having a hat on, or not wearing their uniform, and very, very minor incidents like chewing gum, young people are still being suspended for,” Geigel said. “What we are asking for is to really limit the role of school safety agents in terms of interaction with students. There is no need for a safety agent to tell a student to go to class or to deal with things that really teachers should be dealing with.”

'The reality is that if they keep interacting with law enforcement over and over, they'll eventually end up in the criminal justice system.'

As the data shows, she added, those interactions often end up being the first of a long series of encounters with authorities.

“The reality is that if they keep interacting with law enforcement over and over, they'll eventually end up in the criminal justice system,” Geigel said. “By limiting the interaction they have with school safety agents we are also trying to stop the beginning of that pipeline. The system right now is clearly not working and the data proves that.”

Youth advocates are also pushing for more transparency on incidents which currently go unreported — including the public disclosure of data on the number of all arrests in schools and instances of handcuffing.

The city's new administration has pledged to implement some major changes. “The system is complicated and the challenges are many, and it will take the whole village to come up with a solution,” Lieberman said. “We hope that we will see some progress, certainly before the

beginning of the next school year.”

Follow Alice Speri on Twitter: @alicesperi (<https://twitter.com/alicesperi>)

RECOMMENDED



(/video/egyptian-election-amid-political-crisis-and-insurgency)

Egyptian Election Amid Political Crisis and Insurgency
(/video/egyptian-election-amid-political-crisis-and-insurgency)



(/article/egypt-jails-journalists-and-america-sends-military-aid)

Egypt Jails Journalists, and America Sends Military Aid (/article/egypt-jails-journalists-and-america-sends-military-aid)



(/video/the-battle-for-iraq-dispatch-3)

The Battle for Iraq (Dispatch 3)
(/video/the-battle-for-iraq-dispatch-3)

MOST POPULAR



09:42 ▶ :-chance-high-episode-7)

Last Chance High (Episode 7) (/video/last-chance-high-episode-7)