

Spring 2023

The Chicago Youth Movements Oral History Project: Documenting Abolitionist Youth Resistance

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Abstract: Chicago youth organizers have constantly challenged us to reimagine society by creating movements that center abolition, freedom dreaming, and collective action. In pursuit of racial justice, they have mobilized communities across Chicago and resisted punitive and carceral structures. This project presents a collection of seven oral history-style interviews with Black and Brown Chicago youth who organized in the No Cop Academy and Cops Out CPS movements. Both sequential and intimately linked, these movements showcase the radical and caring politics used by youth to mobilize their communities and resist racialized state violence. Answering the call of scholar-activists who demand that we shift our frameworks away from “revolution as intellectual work,” this project looks to young people whose political work on the ground is often devalued. It affirms youth organizing spaces for fostering nuanced conversations, relationships, and questions that constitute revolutionary change. The structural conditions that cause youth to resist, especially the school/prison nexus, are discussed before introducing the two movements and the interview collection. Focusing on how organizers navigate their relationship to schooling and policing structures, this project will 1) bolster historical documentation of Chicago youth organizing efforts in the last decade and, 2) position student organizers as legitimate producers of knowledge. The Chicago Youth Movements Oral History Project is housed in a digital archive created and run by No Cop Academy organizers, it bolsters community archives and call us to engage in radical listening.

Suggested Citation: Tegegne, Jennifer (2023). *The Chicago Youth Movements Oral History Project: Documenting Abolitionist Youth Resistance.* No Cop Academy. <https://nocopacademy.com/>

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

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Acknowledgements

This project is for young people who agitate, resist, mobilize, and dream for alternate futures. It is for student activists who believe that we deserve better than the world we have inherited. Before engaging with the contents of this capstone, it is important to celebrate the people and places that have made it possible for me to do this work. I begin by thanking the Chicago youth organizers with whom I had the privilege of collaborating—Destiny, Meron, Veronica, Feker, Citlali, Catlyn, and Rubi. I am deeply grateful to them for trusting me with their stories and allowing me to create this oral history collection. They are just seven or thousands of Black and Brown Chicago students whose incredible passion, love, and labor foster abolitionist and caring movements and spaces.

Thanks to KINETIC, a youth organizing space in the Uptown neighborhood, I had the privilege of growing in such organizing spaces. I want to give a huge thank you to KINETIC Youth—past and present—for being my second family and helping me grow as an activist and community member. I credit the years I spent in KINETIC for exposing me to people and places that have made me the person I am today. The feelings, connections, and conversations from which this capstone emerged are mostly grounded in that I had as a Chicago Public School (CPS) student organizer. I have dedicated most, if not all, of my college papers to issues surrounding Chicago youth, community organizing, or the school/prison nexus. As a result, these organizing spaces and the people who shape them are near and dear to my heart. Whether they mobilize communities under organizations like KINETIC or within their own schools, I dedicate this project to Black or Brown high school students in Chicago who constantly disrupt structures and demand justice.

I would be remiss not to mention how my positionality, politics, and future goals factor into this capstone project. As a future educator, I am committed to co-creating formal and informal learning spaces that empower students to recognize their power, question their realities, and equip them with the tools to effectuate change. In many ways, youth organizing spaces have structures and values that make possible such transformative and caring learning. I am invested

in efforts to learn more from these spaces and adopt liberatory pedagogy and ethics into formal schooling. I believe that this project is a small step in the right direction. It is by holding space for students that we can collectively reimagine the formal classroom space and the role of the teacher in empowering students. Studying, supporting, and valuing youth activists can help us accomplish this goal.

Despite the incredible conversations that grew out of this project, it is also important to note the limitations created by my positionality as a Yale student. I was neither physically located in Chicago nor was I still an active member of the Chicago youth organizing community. Furthermore, I went to a CPS high school where I rarely had contact with police officers and had access to far more resources and privileges than students in traditional high schools. This positionality informs the kind of distance I had from the deeply traumatizing and deadly encounters Black and Brown Chicago youth have with the police. It was through my organizing work, family, and friends that I encountered, or witnessed, the devastating carceral realities that structure the school/prison nexus in Chicago. With this in mind, I want to note and provide a warning to readers for discussions of police brutality, violence, and murder.

Although this project centers on resistance to such violence, we must ground ourselves in the fact that this work should not be romanticized. Youth across the country do not desire to inherit a world in which they have to spend time protesting their schools, agitating their mayor, or demanding for the board of education to value them. Youth organizers dream of a time and space in which their campaigns and protests will no longer be necessary. Ultimately, this project calls us to consider the transformative and educational effects of storytelling by student organizers. It demands that we decenter analysis and dominant research frameworks to make space for students who are engaged in critical reflection, community building, freedom dreaming, intentional refusal, and active resistance.

Introduction

On October 20, 2014, 17-year-old Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times in the back by a white Chicago Police Officer. Despite efforts by political and police officials to cover up the shooting, a dashcam video capturing the killing was released to the public in November 2015, 400 days after it happened.¹ Similar to the many children who have lost their lives at the hands of CPD officers, Laquan McDonald had countless interactions with state institutions of over-policing, punitive punishment, poverty, trauma, and disinvestment.² When he was three years old, Laquan was taken from his mother because the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services deemed his mother unfit to “provide him with proper supervision.” After being placed in a foster home that year, he moved between foster care and different relatives’ homes. Throughout his life, he attended numerous public schools—mostly low performing or later closed down— and had a series of interactions with the criminal legal system.³ ⁴ In addition to expulsion hearings and school records characterizing his behavior as aggressive and defiant, McDonald’s educational journey in CPS was frequently interrupted by time spent in the Cook County juvenile detention center. Ultimately, it was understood that multiple state institutions had failed him before one of them, law enforcement, took his life.⁵

The police murder of Laquan McDonald caused public outrage and resulted in protests, community outcry, and calls to investigate the murder as well as the department. Eventually, the

¹Sanchez, Humberto. “Fact Check: Did the Cook County State’s Attorney Do Nothing for 400 Days after the Laquan McDonald Shooting?” Ballotpedia, March 11, 2016.

² “Laquan McDonald’s Journey in Foster Care – Chicago Tribune.”; LA Times, “This Kid Had an Impact on People’: The Troubled Life and Fleeting Potential of Laquan McDonald.”; Karp, Sarah. “How CPS Failed Laquan McDonald.” Illinois Answers Project, February 8, 2016.; NBC Chicago, “Laquan McDonald Was Trying to Start Over, School Says”, November 26, 2015.

³UChicago Consortium on School Research. “School Closings in Chicago.” May 2018.

⁴Karp, Sarah. “How CPS Failed Laquan McDonald.”

⁵ibid

chief of police was fired and then-state attorney, Anita Alvarez, was voted out of office.⁶ Unfortunately, this was just one of the thousands of cases where Black or Brown teenagers in Chicago have lost their lives at the hands of CPD officers. Beyond the many cases of excessive use of force or brutality against youth, “reports have shown that the Chicago Police Department has killed more children since 2013 than any other local law enforcement agency in the country.”⁷ Violence inflicted by the police structures in the city, especially towards poor and racialized communities has characterized the history and legacy of CPD.⁸ Despite the overwhelming anti-Black violence they inflicted, “\$4 million dollars per day of Chicago's operating budget was going to the Chicago Police Department.”⁹

This legacy was interrogated by the state in 2015 when public pressure following McDonald’s murder caused the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to open a federal and state investigation of CPD policing. This investigation resulted in a damning DOJ report that criticized the Chicago Police Department and its dangerous culture of "excessive force" and disproportionate attack on BIPOC—especially African-American—residents.¹⁰ These findings were echoed by a city-appointed task force that Mayor Rham Emanuel initiated 10 days after the U.S. attorney announced the DOJ investigation¹¹; this task force released a report in the spring of 2016 stating that “the community’s lack of trust in C.P.D. is justified,” given the racist practices

⁶Washington Post. “Chicago’s Prosecutor Loses Reelection Battle in the Shadow of the Laquan McDonald Video,” October 26, 2021.

⁷Teegne, Jennifer. “Chicago Youth Dismantling the Carceral State: #NoCopAcademy and Abolitionist Reimagining.” [unpublished] Yale University, 2021.

⁸ibid

⁹No Cop Academy. “The Timeline,” May 23, 2021.

¹⁰In a New York Times article, the taskforce is quoted as saying that “C.P.D.’s own data gives validity to the widely held belief the police have no regard for the sanctity of life when it comes to people of color,” the task force wrote. “Stopped without justification, verbally and physically abused, and in some instances arrested, and then detained without counsel — that is what we heard about over and over again.; Davey, Monica, and Mitch Smith. “Chicago Police Dept. Plagued by Systemic Racism, Task Force Finds.” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2016.

¹¹Chicago Tribune. “Laquan McDonald Timeline: The Shooting, the Video, the Verdict and the Sentencing.” Jan 19, 2019.

and conduct that characterize its history with Black Chicagoans.¹² Although organizers in the city saw the group as yet another example of city politicians making decisions on behalf of community members, it is important to note that their report states that “C.P.D.’s own data gives validity to the widely held belief the police have no regard for the sanctity of life when it comes to people of color.”¹³ When the DOJ released its report in January 2017, the city was placed in a court-enforced agreement with the Justice Department to ensure that reforms address deficient training procedures and accountability systems.

Months after the federal consent decree was placed, Rahm Emanuel used the investigation’s conclusions to justify his plan to build a \$95 million cop training academy in Chicago’s Garfield Park neighborhood.¹⁴ Politicians and business leaders involved in the project painted the academy to be an essential element of reforming and improving the department through better training. Increased investment in policing structures and personnel was emphasized as a good solution for Chicagoans despite the kind of poverty, disinvestment, and governmental neglect Black and Brown neighborhoods in the South and West sides experienced. It goes without saying that Garfield Park is an impoverished and predominantly Black and Brown neighborhood located on the west side of the heavily segregated city.

Despite city efforts to portray the academy as a necessary solution to police brutality and murder, community members across the South and West sides recognized that it would merely expand—through increased resources and personnel— a department whose surveillance and

¹²Davey, Monica, and Mitch Smith. “Chicago Police Dept. Plagued by Systemic Racism, Task Force Finds.”

¹³ibid.; In reference to statistics related to profiling, police shooting and UOF data by the Chicago Police Department. “In a city where whites, blacks, and Hispanics each make up about one-third of the population, 74 percent of the 404 people shot by the Chicago police between 2008 and 2015 were black. Black people were the subjects in 72 percent of the thousands of investigative street stops that did not lead to arrests during the summer of 2014.”

¹⁴ Byrne, J. (2019, May 16). *Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s controversial plan for a \$95 million police academy sails through City Council*. Chicagotribune.Com.

policing practices are rooted in racist and classist ideologies. Some community activists were outraged by the fact that corporate and governmental profits were being prioritized through misleading and reformist rhetoric justifying the construction of a cop academy in one of the poorest and most over-policed neighborhoods in the city. Youth across the city, in partnership with community organizers in social justice and community empowerment organizations, started to mobilize against the cop academy in 2017 and formed a coalition called No Cop Academy. Made up mostly of Black and Brown public school students from impoverished areas in the city, the movement challenged the expansion of Chicago's carceral system and called for the immediate cancellation of the Cop Academy project.

These youth activists started organizing themselves and their communities to push the city to not only halt this project but also defund the Chicago Police Department. By conducting community surveys and townhall alongside direct actions like petitions and protests that brought attention to the issue, these grassroots efforts catalyzed serious conversations regarding CPD's conduct and the city's refusal to invest in social services for impoverished communities. The students and adults who had protested historic public school closures a few years prior took to the streets in solidarity with Garfield Park and with the recognition that the cop academy would cause problems for other neighborhoods in the city.¹⁵ In addition to their specific demand to halt the construction of the Cop Academy, the organizers worked throughout 2017, 2018, and 2019 to build a campaign that centered on the historical and experiential recounting of the violence incited by CPD. For example, they elicited memories of a CPD black site and off-the-books interrogation compound on the westside called Homan Square. The department used the facility

¹⁵North, David. "West Garfield Park Residents Reject Proposed Police Academy, Organizers Argue." *South Side Weekly* (blog), September 13, 2018.

to abuse, torture, and disappear thousands of Chicagoans since the 1990s.¹⁶ By tracing the brutal history that the department has with poor Black and Brown residents of the city, student organizers spoke truth to power and resisted the expansion of the carceral system in Chicago. The murder of Laquan McDonald was a significant moment in time for many students who took to the streets to resist state violence; these students went on to engage in a movement that rejected continued surveillance, brutality, and murder by a police department that has and continues to terrorize Chicago youth and their communities.

Three years after No Cop Academy was initially formed, another youth movement led by students in Chicago Public Schools made similar demands to defund the Chicago Police Department and reduce the outsized role that it plays in their lives. This time, George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis sparked a nationwide protest to Defund the Police and question the role that policing structures play in the lives of Black Americans. The months that followed, especially in the fall of 2020, saw the rise of youth campaigns across the country calling for police officers to be removed from their school hallways.¹⁷ Joining nationwide movements like Black Lives Matter, the Cops Out CPS coalition formed another youth-led movement in Chicago that sought to disrupt institutions of policing and surveillance. From June 2020 to the summer of 2021, another generation of high school students around the city began to mobilize their communities, this time with the specific priority of getting Cops out of their public schools. Much like No Cop Academy, this movement highlighted the formation of abolitionist youth organizing that challenges the criminalization, neglect, and devaluation of their communities.

¹⁶Through a Guardian transparency lawsuit and investigation, this information was exposed despite the fact that "Chicago police have described [Homan square] as little more than a low-level narcotics crime outpost where the mayor has said police "follow all the rules."

¹⁷Zahn, Brian. "'Students Feel Criminalized': Push to Get Cops out of New Haven Schools Grows." *New Haven Register*, March 27, 2021.; Chelsea Sheasley. "In a Roiled Minneapolis, Schools Are Testing New Model for Safety." *Christian Science Monitor*, April 20, 2021.

These organizers followed abolitionist traditions that call for a reduction in police funding. They called for the removal of police and carceral solutions from many domains of society and fought against the state’s surveillance of racialized bodies.

The work of this abolitionist movement also influenced my personal growth, critical consciousness, and sense of purpose—I was involved in Chicago youth organizing spaces that worked in collaboration with, or on similar issues as, No Cop Academy and Cops Out CPS. Throughout high school, I had the privilege of building community within KINETIC,¹⁸ a multi-racial and interfaith youth organization of refugee and immigrant students based in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. Through collective reflection and community building, KINETIC became a grassroots organizing space where racial justice, educational equity, and immigrant rights were a focus of mobilizing our fellow CPS students. Although our membership came from neighborhoods and schools across the city, we were primarily comprised of and focused on mobilizing students on the North and West sides. However, our work necessitated collaboration with student organizers from across the city and allowed us to build relationships that transgressed the city’s segregation and effort to isolate different struggles for equity. As KINETIC organizers, we identified the immigration, criminal legal, and educational policies that caused the material conditions within which we saw our parents, fellow students, and neighbors suffer. We engaged in countless political education workshops and got trained in grassroots organizing through practice and mentorship. Throughout the years, we passed a sanctuary city resolution, drafted and changed bilingual education policy, ensured CPS was a sanctuary district for undocumented students, trained in direct action planning alongside teachers at the Chicago

¹⁸AAAJ. “KINETIC.” Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago.

Teachers Union (CTU), and stood in solidarity with other youth campaigns like #NoCopAcademy and joined such coalitions.

It wasn't until 2019, when I left Chicago for college, that I understood the transformative role that organizing played in shaping my politics, worldview, and conceptualization of education. It became clear to me that I learned and grew in those spaces more than I ever did in the classroom.¹⁹ The relationships, conversations, and learning that I engaged with in these spaces transformed my politics, commitment, and connection to members of my community. With this in mind, I started to talk to other college-aged peers who were involved in community organizing during high school and was surprised to hear some of their reflections. Some shared similar sentiments and talked about their former work influencing their academic and professional pursuits. I heard about others who ended up dropping out of high school to engage in full-time organizing in Chicago. Others discussed their frustration with schooling structure and feeling like higher education did not provide the kind of learning they appreciated and witnessed in organizing spaces. I became even more invested in these conversations as I realized the transformative role youth organizing spaces play in cultivating caring learning environments. They were alternative sites of learning where generative pedagogy outside of formal schooling focused on affirming, empowering, connecting, and transforming us deeply.

These conversations laid the groundwork for the questions I hope to answer in this project. By documenting student activist narratives regarding their childhoods, involvement in activism, politics, and abolition, I hope to **1) document No Cop Academy and Cops Out CPS:**

¹⁹ This commitment to organizing became very clear to me when the spaces I needed to survive Yale were mostly concerned with resisting institutional structures or abandoning its ivory towers to support New Haven community organizing work. I felt like I continue learning most from work on the ground— from pushing for the abolition of the Yale Police Department through on-campus organizing with the Black Students for Disarmament at Yale (BSDY) to working as an organizing fellow for Students for Educational Justice (SEJ) or ARTLC teacher organizers.

two significant youth movements that showcase the power of collective youth resistance against racialized violence, and 2) think through the way these students navigate(d) the very institutions they are agitating through grassroots activism: Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Police Department. Through the creation of a public oral history archive that houses a collection of student activist narratives, the capstone seeks to bolster the historical documentation of Chicago youth organizing in the last decade. It also contributes much-needed scholarship focusing on the transformative and loving spaces that Chicago youth create in the face of structures and rhetoric that criminalizes and renders them unworthy of life-affirming environments and neighborhoods.²⁰

I hope to ground my work and contribute to an archive that looks at youth, not as collateral damage of civic problems but as civic problem-solvers.²¹ By upholding the oral history tradition,²² this capstone project defaults to the very youth organizers to tell us about their lives, work, and commitments; it celebrates the incredible ways of knowing and being practiced by Black and Brown students in Chicago. This is rooted in the idea that we can effectively hold space and celebrate youth agency when we listen to young students reflect, build community, and act to shape their current and future realities. I hope to ground my research and contribute to an archive that looks at youth, not as collateral damage of civic problems but as civic problem-solvers.²³

²⁰Kushner, Rachel. "Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind - The New York Times," April 17, 2019.

²¹ Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. "Youth Activism in the Urban Community: Learning Critical Civic Praxis within Community Organizations." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 6 (November 2007): 693–710.; Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. "From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46.

²²Abrams, Lynn. "Power and Empowerment." In *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edition., 153–75. Routledge, 2016.

²³ Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. "Youth Activism in the Urban Community"; Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. "From Assets to Agents of Change"

This project is a product of relationships, conversations, and inquiry born out of two primary questions mentioned above. In order to answer these questions, the project discusses the structural conditions that cause youth to resist these systems (with a focus on the school/prison nexus) before engaging in rich conversations with the very students discussed. By inviting and documenting these conversations, the capstone places focus on how youth activists describe their involvement in youth organizing and how it changed, if it did at all, their perceptions of what a just and free world looks like.

The School/Prison Nexus: A Form of Racialized State Violence

When youth and community activists in Chicago protested the police murder of Laquan McDonald, they did not restrict their criticism to the police officers who took the life of yet another Black child. Instead, they insisted on the multiple and various institutions that resulted in him being neglected, criminalized, and unsupported. Organizers effectively implicated The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the Chicago Public Schools system, as well as Psychiatric hospitals, and the child welfare officials who placed him in cycles of unsustainable interventions and institutions. The series of systematic failures evident in Laquan McDonald's life not only showcase the inadequate attention given to those the system labels as "at-risk youth" but also the continuum of carceral experiences that children in the U.S. navigate across the education, health, and policing sectors. This has been a focus of activism, scholarship, and policy research labeled as the School-to-prison-Pipeline (STPP) by many.²⁴

In a report investigating the criminalization of youth, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund defines STPP as the cumulative result of educational and criminal justice policies that "push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually, the criminal justice system, where the prison is the end of the road."²⁵ Although school expulsion and entry into the juvenile system (both disproportionately targeting students of color) signify two pivotal points of this pipeline, there are countless policies and practices within the education system that perpetuate a constant system of surveillance and policing. Communities across the country have invoked conversations regarding practices rooted in criminal perceptions of LGBTQ students

²⁴McConville, Madalaine. "School-to-Prison Pipeline; Its Creation, Effects, and How It Can Be Diminished," April 2019.

²⁵ NAACP LDF. (n.d.). Dismantling The School To Prison Pipeline. In *Issue Reports*. NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, INC.

interrogated the relationships that school districts have with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Critical scholars like Bettina Love have unpacked the network of structures, policies, and systems that seek to trap racialized youth in cycles of incarceration. Going beyond the popularized term “school to prison pipeline”, Love discusses the School/Prison nexus to be a more effective descriptor of the “complex and multilayered existence of carceral logic within schools that positions Black and Brown bodies under constant observation and scrutiny through policy, teacher praxis, school culture, and administrative practices.”²⁶ Therefore, Love calls us to interrogate the ways in which school practices and structures outside of SROs and arrest records already work to surveil, undermine and control the bodies and minds of racialized students. An important aspect of this framework is an acknowledgement of how the School/Prison nexus affects everyone but has a particular impact on Black youth, students with disabilities, as well as indigenous students. Due to its expansive and generative foundations, this paper will discuss carceral logic found within and between the school and prison systems using the framework of the School/Prison nexus.

One of the many practices perpetuating the nexus is the outsourcing of school security and discipline to sworn police officers and law enforcement officials whose presence in schools is often the start of a child’s interactions with the criminal legal system.²⁷ Often referred to as School Resource Officers (SROs), these police officers are placed in schools through contracts

²⁶ Wall, Maeve. “We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom.” *Professional Educator* 45, no. 1 (January 2022): 13–16.; “Disrupting the School to Prison Nexus,” United Way of Nashville. 2020 Quetzal Education Consulting, 2020.

²⁷ Archer, Deborah N. “Introduction: Challenging the School-to-Prison Pipeline School-to-Prison Pipeline Symposium.” *New York Law School Law Review* 54, no. 4 (2010 2009): 867–74.; Nelson, Libby. “The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Explained.” *Vox*, February 24, 2015. ; Kim, Catherine Y., Daniel J. Losen, and Damon T. Hewitt. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*. NYU Press, 2010.

(Memorandum of Understanding- MOUs) between school districts and the local police department. Although the terms of these agreements can vary across different jurisdictions, SROs tend to be employees of the police department who are under the supervision and control of the police department (they answer to police supervisors and are subject to the personnel policies and practices of the department). Some states have continued to address the fact that some school districts do not have formal MOUs that outline the policies, expectations, and role that these officers are supposed to serve in school buildings they have been stationed in.²⁸ Despite the palatable and non-threatening name of ‘School Resource Officer,’ SROs are cops in schools who simply have their duty hours “determined by the provisions of a labor agreement between the Police Department and the School District.”

There are between 14,000 to 20,000 police officers who work in school hallways across the country. The students that these officers arrest are disproportionately Black, Native, or Latinx²⁹ with about 70,000 arrests being reported each year.³⁰ Like many aspects of U.S. society, the structures implicated in the construction and preservation of the school/prison nexus are rooted in the colonial and racial projects of white supremacy.³¹ The racist ideologies that drive mass incarceration and the over-policing of predominantly Black, Brown, and poor communities follow students into their school hallways and classrooms. Due to implicit bias, stereotype threat,

²⁸ Marybeth Sullivan and Timothy Bleasdale. “MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING AND SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS.” The Office of Legislative Research (OLR) Connecticut General Assembly.

²⁹ Evie Blad and Alex Harwin. “Analysis Reveals Racial Disparities in School Arrests.” PBS NewsHour, February 27, 2017

³⁰ Babisak, Jennifer. “The New MOU between CPD and CPS: A Step in the Right Direction?” *Loyola University Education Law and Policy Institute* (blog), July 31, 2020.

³¹ Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review*, June 10, 1993. .; Winterhalter, Elizabeth. “What Is Critical Race Theory?” *JSTOR Daily*, September 2, 2021.

and racial anxiety, Black children are criminalized, surveilled, and punished at alarming rates.³² They are also “more likely to attend schools with police officers, more likely to be referred to law enforcement, and more likely to get arrested” than any other racial demographic of students in the country.³³ In addition to similar statistics showing the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rate of Black children, studies have shown that “the racial composition of schools is associated with the use of more punitive and less reparative approaches to discipline, just as it has been associated with criminal justice harshness.”³⁴ The criminal legal system’s racist apparatuses not only surveil and police predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods but inflict similar and disproportionate surveillance based on racially segregated schools and districts.

Within conversations regarding the racialized violence that particularly Black and Indigenous students face through the school/prison nexus, scholars have emphasized that “the thing that makes a child most likely to be the target of police in schools is having a disability.”³⁵ Those with disabilities face the tragic consequences of having these officers in the schools.³⁶ It is no news in the fields of education policy, instruction, and administration that the U.S. education system struggles with creating affirming, safe, and caring environments for students with learning and physical disabilities. Particularly, scholars like Sami Schalk have articulated the

³²NAACP LDF. (2017). Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline. In Issue Reports. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF).

³³ American Civil Liberties Union. “Cops and No Counselors,” 1551732361.

³⁴ Payne, Allison Ann, and Kelly Welch. “Restorative Justice in Schools: The Influence of Race on Restorative Discipline.” *Youth & Society* 47, no. 4 (July 1, 2015): 539–64. ; Nelson, Libby. “The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Explained.” *Vox*, February 24, 2015.

³⁵ Nance, Jason P. “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Tools for Change.” *Arizona State Law Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 313–72.; (2021). Turning Off the ‘School-to-Prison Pipeline’. *AJN, American Journal of Nursing*, 121 (5), 16-16. doi: 10.1097/01.NAJ.0000751048.18807.73

³⁶ Resendes, West. “Police in Schools Continue to Target Black, Brown, and Indigenous Students with Disabilities. The Trump Administration Has Data That’s Likely to Prove It. | News & Commentary.” *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), July 9, 2020.

connections between anti-blackness and ableism— critically detailing the link between police violence, disabilities, and the school/prison nexus. In Chapter 2 of her book *Black Disability Politics*, Schalk gestures to scholarship by Rhea Boyd who frames “the continual exposure of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children to police violence as a public health issue.” These scholars emphasize that “a disability can be both the impetus for and the result of police violence.”³⁷ Such engagement with the effects of police violence on the health of BIPOC students reorients our approach to these conversations and avoids pathologizing students with disabilities. It keeps us focused on state violence that causes harm and a network of traps within which students are caught into a continuum of policing rather than on “the potential disability resulting from harm.”³⁸ It is this logic that allows for an education system to continue functioning when there are states where; Black girls are 8 times more likely to get arrested compared to White girls, Native Americans make up 8% of the student population but 23% of those arrested in schools, or where Black students “make up 39% of the enrollment in public schools with at least one arrest but 75 percent of school-based arrests.”³⁹

Given the alarming statistics and experiences that expose the school/prison nexus, researchers, educators, and activists have laid out solutions to make changes to the system. Demands for more restorative discipline practices, increased mental health resources, and calls to remove police from schools are frequent calls for reform.

³⁷ Schalk, Sami. *Black Disability Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Nance, Jason P. “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Tools for Change.” *Arizona State Law Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 313–72.; (2021). Turning Off the ‘School-to-Prison Pipeline’. *AJN, American Journal of Nursing*, 121 (5), 16-16. doi: 10.1097/01.NAJ.0000751048.18807.73; Evie Blad and Alex Harwin. “Analysis Reveals Racial Disparities in School Arrests.” PBS NewsHour, February 27, 2017.

Although restorative justice practices are being incorporated into school practices and district-wide disciplinary policies, the change has not been significant and rarely applied in schools surveying students most at risk of getting trapped by the school/prison nexus. The more Black a school is, the less likely it is for restorative and rehabilitative practices to be used when addressing issues of disorderly conduct.⁴⁰ Such practices include the use of student conferences, peer mediation, restitution, and community service in order to address student behavior and misconduct in ways that center care, remorse, and improvement.⁴¹ The use of restorative, rather than retributive, practices to address school discipline is a growing and generative field of scholarship. Countless educators across the country have pushed their schools and districts to move in a better direction and work alongside students who are invested in shaping school policies and culture.⁴² However, this commitment is rarely shared by administrators and school officials, especially those who work in minority-majority schools where more students are perceived to be “troublemakers” and in need of harsh punishments.

Because of racialized and punitive rhetoric regarding problematic student behavior, the problem is often framed as an individual failure, lack of care, or incompetence. The student is often pathologized in order to justify the solution of removal from the classroom (in-school suspension) or school community (out-of-school suspension or expulsion). Students, teachers, and researchers across the country have called on increased access to mental health resources and

⁴⁰ Payne, Allison Ann, and Kelly Welch. “Restorative Justice in Schools: The Influence of Race on Restorative Discipline.” *Youth & Society* 47, no. 4 (July 1, 2015): 539–64.

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Anti Racist Teaching & Learning Collective. “Exploring Racial Justice and Restorative Justice in and Beyond the Classroom.”

personnel as a more sustainable intervention to challenging student behavior.⁴³ It is also important to note that Title I schools that serve predominantly Black and/or Latine students and have high numbers of English Language Learners or special needs students require more resources to accomplish a caring learning environment with trauma-informed teaching and care.⁴⁴ It is with an equity-based understanding that many called for increased attention to student well-being and criticized alarming counselor or social worker-to-student ratios in high-need schools. However, these demands were not met with comprehensive policy change and substantial allocation of resources that altered the approach schools took when addressing the behavioral manifestations of trauma and societal inequities.

During the covid-19 pandemic, youth activists across the country led campaigns calling for more school counselors, social workers, and trauma clinicians.⁴⁵ More often than not, these demands were accompanied by calls to remove police officers from schools. The lack of restorative and caring practices within the education system was clearly reflected in the personnel found in the schools. As recently as 2016, “1.6 million students attended a school with a sworn law enforcement officer and no counselor.”⁴⁶ Such statistics are extremely concerning due to the alarming increase in the number of students experiencing depression, anxiety, and trauma.⁴⁷ Instead of psychologists, social workers, and counselors who can effectively address

⁴³Rossen, Eric, and Katherine C. Cowan. “Improving Mental Health in Schools.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 96, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 8–13.; Rones, M., and K. Hoagwood. “School-Based Mental Health Services: A Research Review.” *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 3, no. 4 (December 2000): 223–41.

⁴⁴Darling-Hammond, Linda. *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. Teachers College Press, 2015.

⁴⁵Connecticut’s Care not Cops campaign, StudentsStrikeBack and cops our cps in Chicago, LUSD students campaign as well as NYC students who called for more mental health support are a few examples.

⁴⁶ American Civil Liberties Union. “Cops and No Counselors,” 1551732361.

⁴⁷ibid

these mental health concerns, schools constantly resort to harsh discipline practices that usually trap students in a cycle of encounters with punitive structures.

Students who are marginalized and oppressed due to societal inequities and discrimination are often collateral damage to policies that prioritize surveillance and punishment over trauma response and mental health care. As a result, failure to make the changes necessary to disrupt the school/prison nexus perpetuates the status quo; schools are not pushed to address the realities and conditions of poverty, institutional and individual racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, etc. Rather, schools normalize punishing students in ways that not only rely on racial and gender stereotypes but allow them to elide school responsibility to the child's wellbeing and mental health. It is through these systematic failures, points of resistance, and refusal to change that the school/prison nexus serves as one of many apparatuses making up the prison industrial complex. Studies have shown how the presence of SROs in a school increases the likelihood of arrest for disorderly conduct.⁴⁸ Because Black students are disciplined disproportionately, especially for discretionary offenses, the presence of SROs in schools has a significant effect on their lives and the interaction they may have with the criminal legal system.⁴⁹ As a result, students are funneled into the prison system and add to the tragic number of people who have been caged and disappeared by a system termed the New Jim Crow.⁵⁰

Scholarship in Abolitionist theory and praxis, as well as education and law, has argued that policies that contour the School/Prison nexus inflict racialized violence within broader

⁴⁸ Theriot, Matthew T. "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no. 3 (May 1, 2009): 280–87.

⁴⁹ NAACP LDF. (2017). *Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline*. In Issue Reports. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF).

⁵⁰ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2020.

colonial and capitalist structures in U.S. Society. Therefore, it is important to understand how the policies and practices that contour the school/prison nexus inflict racialized state violence to students and their communities. Here, I gesture towards transformative writing that has been done by Black feminist scholar-activists like Angela Davis and Ruth Gilmore. Additionally, many scholars have applied concepts in Critical Race Theory, Indigenous studies, and queer theory to interrogate the carceral conditions that the education system normalized. Such scholars have effectively argued that conditions of racialized state neglect and disinvestment have created an education system that is not free from societal inequities but rather have disproportionately impacted Black and poor people.

Although there are countless studies and scholarship that focus on the School to Prison Pipeline (or School/prison nexus) and the tragic impact it has on the current and future realities of Black and Brown youth across the country, they often focus their analysis on the structural, and sociological dimensions of the system.⁵¹ When they emphasize solutions and ways to dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline, this scholarship tends to focus on legal and research-based policy changes that school administrations and policymakers can adopt.⁵² In his book, *The School To Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment*, Christopher Mallett synthesizes the recommendations that scholars tend to make in their work: School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, professional development, Conflict resolution/ cultural competency/ Student and Family Engagement/Increased screening for student risk, change in federal, state and

⁵¹ Archer, Deborah N. "Introduction: Challenging the School-to-Prison Pipeline School-to-Prison Pipeline Symposium." *New York Law School Law Review* 54, no. 4 (2010 2009): 867–74.

⁵² Nance, Jason P. "Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Tools for Change." *Arizona State Law Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 313–72.; (2021). Turning Off the 'School-to-Prison Pipeline'. *AJN, American Journal of Nursing*, 121 (5), 16-16. doi: 10.1097/01.NAJ.0000751048.18807.73.; Mallett, Christopher A. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2016.; Kim, Catherine Y., Daniel J. Losen, and Damon T. Hewitt. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*. NYU Press, 2010.

local policies.⁵³ Some of these recommendations are emerging from or converging with the demands of young people and community members on the ground. Although this overlap does exist, and some scholars go out of their way to survey students before making these recommendations, the work of young people pushing solutions and policy changes is often in the periphery or invisibilized in this literature. There are not nearly as many scholars focusing on the student organizing that emerges in response to oppressive structures and practices that make the U.S. education system inequitable and unjust.⁵⁴ The policy and practice solutions outlined in the scholarship reflect important and necessary research, however, there is a need to highlight the work of community activists and youth on the ground who create beautiful spaces as they seek to dismantle the School/Prison nexus. They are not only victims of these structures but also agentic stakeholders who create campaigns to dismantle them and problematize the logics that renders them normal.

Youth Organizing for Racial Justice

The work of youth activists—especially in Black and Brown U.S. communities—tends to focus on challenging social policies that inflict racialized state violence. Although there are countless movements focused on environmental justice, pandemic policies, and educational practices, most U.S. youth-led campaigns in the past decade have centered on racial justice. Issues of mass incarceration, educational inequities, gun violence, and over-policing have taken

⁵³ Mallett, Christopher A. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2016.

⁵⁴ Samuel Banales (2012) effectively details the imbalance of scholarship in this area. In his dissertation, which is titled “Decolonizing Being, Knowledge, and Power: Youth Activism in California at the Turn of the 21st Century,” he discusses work by scholars like Jennifer Tilton and Shawn Ginwright as being in the minority when compared to those that pathologize youth and frame them to be victims or passive people in cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. (Banales, Samuel. “Decolonizing Being, Knowledge, and Power: Youth Activism in California at the Turn of the 21st Century.” UC Berkeley, 2012.

center stage for resistance enacted by U.S. high school students.⁵⁵ It is important to note as well that youth movements often emerge from, or converged with, larger nationwide movements calling for racial justice—from Black Lives Matter after Michael Brown’s murder in 2012 to the nationwide March for Our Lives movement that called for an end to the gun violence epidemic. Youth have named local issues and constantly formed cross-city and cross-state solidarities to address structural issues of violence, policing, and brutality. Even when certain school walkouts, youth-led direct actions, or protests prioritized specific local and school-level issues of curriculum and instruction, many have explicitly named their concerns as racial justice struggles.

For example, students in Tucson, Arizona created a powerful campaign to oppose GOP lawmakers who banned a Mexican American Ethnic Studies course in 2010 citing indoctrination and an unjust portrayal of white people as racists.⁵⁶ Although the course was ultimately banned, a version of it still exists and the campaign cultivated a vibrant and strong community of students who stood up for their right to learn about their people and histories. California has also seen many high school students rise up to advocate for increased access to ethnic studies. These students continue to step into the role of community activists taking inspiration from former organizers whose work made California the birthplace of ethnic studies in higher education.⁵⁷ These movements continue to inspire youth-led campaigns in other parts of the U.S., reaching students in places like Connecticut. Borrowing from direct action strategies and toolkits

⁵⁵ Wakisha Bailey. “Young Activists Head to Harrisburg to Voice Concerns over Philadelphia Gun Violence.” CBS Philadelphia- Local News, August 12, 2022. Thomas Breen. “Youth Leaders Push For Police ‘Abolition.’” New Haven Independent, June 6, 2020.; March For Our Lives. “Mission & Story.” Accessed April 9, 2023.; Transformative Youth Activism and the School of Ethnic Studies.” *The Urban Review* 45, no. 1 March 2013

⁵⁶ Stephenson, Hank. “What Arizona’s 2010 Ban on Ethnic Studies Could Mean for the Fight Over Critical Race Theory.” *POLITICO*, July 11, 2021.; Cabrera, Nolan L., Elisa L. Meza, Andrea J. Romero, and Roberto Cintli Rodríguez. “‘If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress’: Transformative Youth Activism and the School of Ethnic Studies.” *The Urban Review* 45, no. 1 (March 2013): 7–22.

⁵⁷ Fernando, Christine. “K-12 Students Are Becoming Activists, Drawing on Lessons from Historic Fight for Ethnic Studies.” *USA TODAY*.

establishing a tradition of youth mobilization, youth in organizations like Students for Educational Justice (SEJ) in New Haven, Connecticut pushed the state to mandate Black and Latino Studies in every high school.⁵⁸ These seemingly disconnected movements happening in geographically and temporally distinct spaces form a legacy of organizing and youth resistance that is slowly shifting policies and practices. SEJ's work made Connecticut the first state in the country to manage ethnic studies at the K-12 level.⁵⁹

March for Our Lives, a significant and large youth movement that emerged from a tragic school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, has led to a nationwide movement against gun violence. With hundreds of chapters forming in schools across the country, this youth-led movement has promoted local fights for background checks and stricter gun laws in addition to setting forth a national policy agenda. They have also taken inspiration from the civil rights freedom riders and spearheaded a campaign that registered over 50,000 voters across the U.S. Adopting a public health approach to gun violence, the movement does not primarily discuss the issue as a racial justice struggle. Despite this, their policy agenda explicitly details that MFOL understands the fight as an intersectional issue that is “inextricably bound with our long journey for racial justice, economic justice, immigrant rights, and the rights of our LGBTQIA+ comrades.”⁶⁰ This agenda has also called for a reimagination of public safety and divestment from systemically unjust surveillance and targeting of impoverished and racialized communities.

⁵⁸ Tuhus, Melinda. “Connecticut Students Push for African-American Studies in Public School Curriculum.” *BTL* (blog), April 3, 2019.

⁵⁹ Office of Governor Ned Lamont. “Governor Lamont Announces Connecticut Becomes First State in Nation To Require High Schools Provide Courses on Black and Latino Studies.” State of Connecticut- Governor Ned Lamont, December 9, 2012. .

⁶⁰ March for Our Lives: Policy Agenda. “It Ends With Us: A Plan to Reimagine Public Safety.” Accessed April 9, 2023.

MFOL is just one example of thousands of youth struggles that address local issues and form grassroots campaigns that push media attention to issues, question political discourse, change policies, and uplift the voices of their fellow students or communities. Students in New York City have impacted local politics and demanded educational equity and justice through campaigns dedicated to addressing the impacts of school segregation (IntegrateNYC).⁶¹ Other high school students in nearby Philadelphia are continuing to craft art-based campaigns to demand effective and meaningful gun laws and investment in impoverished communities.⁶² As recently as 2022, students from Central High School took their arts-based activism on the road, going to Harrisburg and speaking directly with state legislators.⁶³

In addition to organizing collectives of students within schools or formal youth organizing spaces, young people in other states continue to dedicate time and energy to addressing pressing problems. Such work is exemplified by Mari Copeny of Flint, Michigan. Following a devastating government budget decision to overlook the water protections for the city, Flint was thrown into a crisis that it has yet to overcome. Copeny spent a good part of her childhood as an advocate for increased investment in communities and accountability for an oversight that caused between “6,000 and 12,000 children [to be] exposed to drinking water with high levels of lead.” She was spotlighted by countless media outlets and invited to visit the White House for her passion and commitment to supporting her community.⁶⁴ Although grateful

⁶¹ IntegrateNYC- Campaigns. “The Student Movement for School Integration.” Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://integratenyc.org/campaign>.

⁶² CBS Philadelphia. “Focusing On The Future: Group Of Local Teenagers Hoping To Create ‘Change’ Through Artistic Activism.” CBS Philadelphia- Local News, July 29, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/pennsylvania-youth-vote-voting-politics-focusing-on-the-future/>.

⁶³ Wakisha Bailey. “Young Activists Head to Harrisburg to Voice Concerns over Philadelphia Gun Violence.” CBS Philadelphia- Local News, August 12, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/philadelphia-harrisburg-gun-violence-pennsylvania-youth-vote/>.

⁶⁴ Los Angeles Times. “Read the Letter from ‘Little Miss Flint’ That Stirred Obama to Visit Flint.” Los Angeles Times, May 4, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-read-little-miss-flint-letter-20160504-snap-htmstory.html>.; *Sojourners*. “The Story of Little Miss Flint.” February 28, 2020. <https://sojo.net/media/story-little>.

for the attention she has been able to bring to the Flint water crisis, Mari Copeny explicitly denounced the tendency to romanticize youth advocacy without addressing the issues they are raising.⁶⁵ As she continues to raise awareness that is still not adequately addressed by the government, Copeny gestures to a comprehensive politics that implicates the intersectionality of educational inequity, unemployment, and community disinvestment. In an interview with a media outlet, she emphasized that “our schools need upgrades. We need roads fixed, we need jobs, we need change.”⁶⁶

Although they are not as publicized, youth campaigns have been making demands to decrease funding for police while calling attention to neighborhoods where the state disinvests from life-affirming institutions.⁶⁷ In addition to resisting police brutality, excessive use of force, and criminalization of impoverished and racialized communities, students have launched campaigns specific to the impact that police have on young people. Here I am referring to numerous youth-led campaigns that challenged the expansion of carceral systems; from campaigns that rejected new juvenile detentions being constructed (early 2000s California), to those resisting punitive policies that criminalized their peers and trapped them in the cycles of the school/prison nexus (Chicago youth rejected CPD gang databases mid-2010s, they also crafted restorative solutions to address violence in 2022).⁶⁸ As recently as 2022, youth across states like Connecticut, Oregon, Minnesota, and Illinois demanded cops to be removed from their

miss-flint.; Jackie Menjivar. “‘Little Miss Flint’ Mari Copeny Is Fighting For Her Hometown.” *DoSomething.Org*. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.dosomething.org/us/articles/mari-copeny-just-be-cause-qa>.

⁶⁵ Sara Ali. “Little Miss Flint Has Spent Her Life Fighting The Water Crisis.” *Good Good Good*, April 11, 2022. <https://www.goodgoodgood.co/articles/little-miss-flint>.

⁶⁶ Sara Ali. “Little Miss Flint Has Spent Her Life Fighting The Water Crisis.” *Good Good Good*, April 11, 2022. <https://www.goodgoodgood.co/articles/little-miss-flint>.

⁶⁷ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, 2007.

⁶⁸ Chicago Sun-Times. “Good Kids Mad City Proposes Youth-Driven Approach to Stop Violent Crime,” June 22, 2022. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2022/6/22/23178498/good-kids-mad-city-chicago-violence-peacebook-ordinance-gangs-job-training>.

schools. These campaigns have prioritized policies and structures—as well as the resulting carceral conditions—that play outsized roles in their lives and cause them to move to action.

Although few in number, there are studies on youth or youth activism that—despite sometimes dealing with normalized topics of violence, gangs, or other urban-related problems—make youth politics and political identities fundamental to their research.⁶⁹ This project seeks to situate itself in this area of scholarship focused on youth activism for racial justice. Ethnic and American Studies scholar Hosang has written extensively on issues of race, law, and resistance. In his piece “Beyond Policy: Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth,” Hosang discussed a nationwide rise in youth resistance following the 1980s and 90s which saw an “assault on youth citizenship.”⁷⁰ Here, HoSang is tracing the emergence of youth protest culture in the economic and political conditions, both material and ideological, that the U.S. positioned its youth. These shifts were apparent in the rise of criminalization of young people with the superpredator image being popularized as well as the consequences of a systematic assault on the welfare state which reduced investment in youth. As mass incarceration increased and the wealth gap further relegated racialized communities to inequitable resources and neighborhoods, youth activism was on the rise in the early 2000s.⁷¹

⁶⁹ HoSang, Daniel. “Beyond Policy: Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth”. In *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change*, ed. Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright. New York: Routledge, 2006.; Shawn Ginwright. “Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism.” Social Science Research Council Youth Activism Forum, June 7, 2006. <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>.; Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. “New Terrain in Youth Development: The Promise of a Social Justice Approach”. *Social Justice* 29 (4): 82-95 (2002); Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. “From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>.

⁷⁰ HoSang, Daniel. “Beyond Policy: Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth”. In *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change*, ed. Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright. New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁷¹ Clay, Andreana. *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back: Youth, Activism and Post-Civil Rights Politics*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/193/monograph/book/17920>.; Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. “From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>.; HoSang, Daniel. “Beyond Policy:

Scholar-activists Taj James and Shawn Ginwright have also discussed economic isolation, social stigma, and “barriers to political participation” as primary challenges for youth in the U.S.⁷² Explicitly naming these conditions, young people across the country formed grassroots coalitions to address issues directly affecting their communities and holding institutions accountable— from Justice for DC Youth,⁷³ Youth Rights Media in Connecticut,⁷⁴ No on Prop 21 in California,⁷⁵ to youth mobilizing under Friends and Families of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Youth.⁷⁶ Issues of poverty, criminalization, lack of investment, racism, and systemic neglect were intersecting causes for many of the issues that these campaigns addressed. Ginwright and James argue that in addition to discussing social ills that claim young BIPOC students as victims, we should focus on the vibrant organizing spaces that youth of color in urban communities create. They make this call after arguing that these resistance spaces and communities are being overlooked in mainstream literature and necessary sites of social justice youth development and transformation.⁷⁷

In her work chronicling the lives, resistance, and realities of Oakland youth in the 2000s, Jennifer Tilton discussed two campaigns led by young people. One of them, the No to Prop 21

Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth”. In *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change*, ed. Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright. New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁷² Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. “From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>

⁷³ Tilton, Jennifer. *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America*. New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865928>.

⁷⁴ The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven. “A Voice for New Haven Youth.” Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.cfgnh.org/articles/a-voice-for-new-haven-youth>.

⁷⁵ Against the Current. “Youth Confront California’s Prop 21,” May 2000. <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc086/p942/>.

⁷⁶ Shannon Dawson. “Youth Justice Advocacy Group Fights To Keep Incarcerated Teens Out Of Louisiana’s Infamous Angola Prison.” *NewsOne*, August 11, 2022. <https://newsone.com/4388341/youth-advocacy-group-angola-prison/>.

⁷⁷ Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. “From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>

campaign, directly challenged the political discourse and policies mentioned above as advancing the criminalization of youth. Proposition 21 was a California bill that sought to expand punitive three-strikes laws, make it easier to try youth in adult court, send them to adult prisons instead of youth facilities, bolstered numerous gang provisions that trapped youth in the system, and exacerbated the impact of these experiences by opening up juvenile records to schools and employers. By detailing the multiracial and powerful campaign that young people created in opposition to this policy, Tilton also linked it to a distinct yet related fight to halt the expansion of juvenile detentions in the Bay Area.

By discussing the interrelated and concurrent struggles to oppose Proposition 21 and refuse the expansion of the juvenile system in Oakland, Jennifer Tilton's *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America* sets a firm foundation for work dedicated to documenting youth resistance to carceral structures. The second movement she discusses was formed through Oakland youth organizing in 2001 dedicated to pushing local officials to abandon their plan of building a "Super Jail for Kids." The proposed juvenile detention facility would be located in the suburbs of Alameda County and significantly expand the number of beds in the county's juvenile system while moving incarcerated youth further away from their families in the city. A multiracial group of South Asian, Black, Jewish, Tongan, and Latino youth responded to this proposal with a campaign that 1) delayed the approval of an expansion of the juvenile detention apparatuses, 2) reduced the number of beds being proposed, and 3) derailed original plans to have a facility in the suburbs and instead caused officials to expand within the old facility.⁷⁸ In addition to discussing the campaign's use of spoken word,

⁷⁸ Tilton, Jennifer. *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America*. New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865928>.

poetry, and direct actions, Tilton notes the alliances Oakland youth established in order to accomplish their goals. They partnered with think tanks to get statistics regarding the county's reliance on incarceration and also formed alliances with homeowners in the suburbs where the new facility was being proposed.

Tilton ultimately argues that the young activists in Oakland challenged the racialized images of youth crime by crafting a “social movement that foregrounded a politics of generation instead of race. They forged new political networks that linked young people across racial lines to challenge neoliberal public policies that had abandoned and criminalized a generation.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Ginwright and James note other youth movements as generational struggles in which youth identity is used as a starting point for demanding transformative change in institutions. Although this is an important trend and reality that underlies the strategies of youth activist movements across the country, it is important to look at youth struggles that explicitly name their fight as one for racial justice. Adreana Clay's *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back: Youth, Activism and Post-Civil Rights Politics* does this through an ethnographic study in two youth-led organizations, Teen Justice and Multicultural Alliance. Although incredibly extensive, this work is also limited to organizing at the turn of the 21st century and focused on Oakland youth of color activism.⁸⁰

The meaningful attention that the aforementioned scholars pay to youth organizing space is important to adopt in works focusing on more recent movements within and beyond the Bay area. This project and oral history archive creation build on the generative scholarship of scholar-

⁷⁹ Tilton, Jennifer. *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America*. New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865928>.

⁸⁰ Clay, Adreana. *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back: Youth, Activism and Post-Civil Rights Politics*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/193/monograph/book/17920>.

activists in ethnic and education studies who name youth organizing as an important site of learning, citizenship, and development. It will not only add to these discussions by foregrounding recent Chicago youth organizing but through a distinct methodology and form. Even when scholars explicitly call for shifts in mainstream academia regarding the portrayal of the youth of color in urban spaces,⁸¹ they rarely produce work in academia that extends space for students to tell us their own stories, opinions, and experiences. Instead, young people are subjects in our research and not equal collaborators or people given a platform to vocalize, analyze, and reflect on their past realities and actions. Therefore, this oral history archive looks to high school students or young adults to tell us about the youth movements through which they built community, created trouble, and learned.

There are numerous pieces of literature in the fields of ethnic studies, education, and critical race/legal studies that argue that conventional and Western formations of expertise and revered institutions of education do not possess the answers to societal inequities. Rather, these scholars look to communities and spaces that are least invested in perpetuating the capitalist and colonial logics that are foundational to our political, economic, and cultural realities— it is with this rationalization that youth are positioned as agentic and significant arbiters of knowledge. Recognizing that young people are the answers to many of our questions and issues with inequity, this paper positions them as authoritative producers of knowledge and revolutionary dreams. The work that youth activists are engaging in has the potential to indicate the kinds of futures that young people seek to create in a world where they are often silenced, dismissed, and criminalized. Therefore, this project defaults to their knowledge, self-narration, and expertise in order to document their work and learn from it.

⁸¹ Shawn Ginwright. "Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism." Social Science Research Council Youth Activism Forum, June 7, 2006. <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>.

Ultimately, this project poses an intervention in scholarship by focusing on inadequately documented and analyzed high school youth movements. It contributes important voices and ideas to literature focusing on abolitionist movements, racial justice organizing, and youth activism. Current research in these areas, for the most part, contains one or more of the following factors:

1. When discussing high-school-aged youth of color in cities across the country, scholarship tends to rely on social disintegration theories that victimized or pathologize BIPOC youth as members of society whose behaviors are static and whose choices are “maladaptive responses to the social, economic, and cultural decay of neighborhoods.”⁸²
2. Literature focused on youth activism among non-college students, specifically campaigns dealing with suppression, police brutality, and discriminatory policies, is in the minority because the scholarship places more focus on organizing and protesting among college students.⁸³
3. It is hard, if not impossible, to encounter archives that collect student activist narratives. Although there is scholarship discussing youth activism, some of which have methodologies that use some form of interviewing, the words and reflections of high school student organizers are not a central piece.⁸⁴ This project de-prioritizes the need to

⁸² Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota.

⁸³ Banales, Samuel. “Decolonizing Being, Knowledge, and Power: Youth Activism in California at the Turn of the 21st Century.” UC Berkeley, 2012. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1g51b118>.

⁸⁴ Clay, Andreana. *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back: Youth, Activism and Post-Civil Rights Politics*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/193/monograph/book/17920>; Tilton, Jennifer. *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America*. New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865928>. HoSang, Daniel. “Beyond Policy: Ideology, Race, and the Reimagining of Youth”. In *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change*, ed. Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright. New York: Routledge, 2006.; Shawn Ginwright. “Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism.” Social Science Research Council Youth Activism Forum, June 7, 2006. <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>; Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. “New Terrain in Youth Development: The Promise of a Social Justice Approach”. *Social Justice* 29 (4): 82-95 (2002); Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James. “From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>.

study or talk *about* students and instead holds space for them to talk about themselves in their own voice and on their own terms.

4. In the few instances when literature centers youth's politics and political identities within the context of discussing youth organizing and mobilization, the research is often mediated/done by (if not formulated from structures within) community organizations that often house and resource youth movements.⁸⁵ These works have contributed immensely to discussions of political consciousness building, and pedagogical innovations that exist in these organizations. They continue to provide great insight and theorize on the development of critical civic praxis among youth. It is to this generative area of work that this capstone project seeks to intervene by adding student voices. This capstone allows more expression and freedom for students to reflect on dynamics and challenges they encountered in organizing since this project exists outside of the expectations or limitations they may face when speaking to people invested in the organizations that they may criticize or challenge. For example, some of these studies are conducted by the founders or leaders of community organizations that house these movements. As a result, there is a possibility for students to fear jeopardizing the resources and connections that the organization provides to the movement in case they say the wrong things (like being overly critical of dynamics or situations that existed).
5. Literature on abolitionist movements and praxis, especially concerning structures of policing, often acknowledges the need to value young people and their agency/power to

⁸⁵ Noguera, Pedro, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright, eds. *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*. New York: Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203961001>.

fight for a just and free future. However, it is rare for the scholarship in this field to center the voices of youth and hold their contributions in the same light as other campaigns that aim to work toward the same goals.⁸⁶

It is for this reason that a capstone looking at high school-aged youth across two multi-racial, multi-ethnic student-led justice movements pushing back against racialized state violence in Chicago is essential. It is also important to note that there is a lack of contemporary/recent scholarship that documents community mobilizing by high-school students by foregrounding their own narrations. Although effectively covered by mainstream media in Chicago, #NoCopAcademy and #CopsoutCPS are sites of negotiation, political identity formation, reimagination, critical consciousness, community building, and abolitionist resistance worth studying and taking seriously. The way that students talk about how these involvements impact their worldview and fight for an abolitionist future is important.

I look to the methodologies and conclusions of scholars who have thought deeply about youth activism as a generative site of movement building, theorizing, and freedom dreaming. The work of people like Jennifer Tilton, Jessica Tufts, Shawn Ginwright, and Andreama Clay in addition to critical scholarship by Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Daniel HoSang has allowed me to situate this project in important research because their work is born out of direct interaction with and involvement in youth movements. **It is within such conversations between scholars and activists that I hope to ground my research and contribute to an archive that looks at youth, not as collateral damage of civic problems but as civic problem-solvers.**⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Banales, Samuel. "Decolonizing Being, Knowledge, and Power: Youth Activism in California at the Turn of the 21st Century." UC Berkeley, 2012. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1g51b118>.

⁸⁷ Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. "Youth Activism in the Urban Community: Learning Critical Civic Praxis within Community Organizations." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 6 (November 2007): 693–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630833>; Ginwright, Shawn, and Taj James.

“From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002, no. 96 (2002): 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.25>

Chicago Youth Resisting the School/Prison Nexus: #NoCopAcademy & #CopsoutCPS

Along with its history of housing prominent movement leaders and organizations, Chicago has been a hotbed for community organizing and activism. These developments have not missed high school students across the city who have protested different issues and created their own campaigns starting from the 60s and 70s where they challenged segregation and the quality of their education.⁸⁸ Since the turn of the century, different youth empowerment and violence prevention programs have been established across the city, effectively catalyzing youth civic engagement and community organizing. Operating in similar spaces as adult-run and popular movements in the city, this activism has been focused on racial justice, economic investment, and educational equity. In the last two years, resistance against police brutality, immigrant detention, and carceral logic in educational institutions has been a large focus of student activism in the city.⁸⁹ The relevance of looking into Chicago youth organizing against structures of policing within their neighborhood and schools is important and an especially pressing issue given the school/prison nexus outlined in this essay.

The story of two youth-led movements in the last decade allows us to understand the conditions within which thousands of Chicago youth grow up. Since the 2012 murder of Laquan McDonald, youth campaigns in the city focused on the school/prison nexus have mobilized thousands of students and garnered significant attention to alter the trajectory of CPS and CPD

⁸⁸ “We’re Not Just Students, We Are Organizers’ | Perspectives on History | AHA.” Accessed October 25, 2022. [https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/were-not-just-students-we-are-organizers-black-youth-activism-in-chicago.](https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/were-not-just-students-we-are-organizers-black-youth-activism-in-chicago;); Danna, Dionne. “Chicago High School Students’ Movement for Quality Public Education, 1966-1971.” *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (April 2003): 138–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3559062>.

⁸⁹ Chicago Sun-Times. “Youth Activists in Chicago Area Reimagining the Future,” August 17, 2020. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/8/16/21368915/chicago-youth-activists-community-immigration-racism>.

policies. As discussed in the introduction, the No Cop Academy campaign was created by a coalition of students across the city who has also protested countless acts of police brutality targeting Black and Brown children. Just as protests had broken out following the cover-up of the McDonald's murder, students have spoken out about the constant use of force against Black people, the construction of police facilities, and the need for increased funding and investment in the healthcare and education systems. Additionally, student organizers have mobilized to increase voter registration and rallied for local and national campaigns to elect officials who advance their vision for their communities.

Chicago youth organizers have not only endorsed and influenced mayoral and aldermanic races but have managed to make their campaign issues central to mayoral debates and platforms. This was exemplified by how the No Cop Academy campaign targeted Mayor Rham Emanuel and highlighted a pattern of the educational and police-related policies he spearheaded at the cost of students' wellbeing. Furthermore, students have played active roles in larger campaigns that target city council and mayoral agendas. From those who represented their wards in a city-wide effort to push for a "People's Budget" during the covid-19 pandemic to students who demanded that the most recent mayor (Lori Lightfoot) be held accountable for fulfilling Rham's vision and goal to increase carceral solutions to public health issues of gun violence and crime.

The No Cop Academy organizers agitated officials and power structures through direct action, popular education, and protest. As detailed in the introduction of this essay, this campaign catalyzed a culture of resistance among CPS students who stood up against the education and police systems. They crafted a coalition of students across the city and centered narratives and strategies that synthesized seemingly disconnected policies. When the mayor made a public announcement about his plans, it had only been 2 years since he made history and closed down

over 50 schools in Black neighborhoods (mostly in the south and west sides). Although he did this under the logic that it would help improve the system, studies have proven that these school closings were not beneficial and instead harmful to these communities.⁹⁰ Researchers emphasized that the consequences of these closings were exacerbated by, and layered with, budgetary crises that caused these neighborhoods to lose social services and many violence prevention and economic development initiatives.

West Garfield Park, which had the city's highest violent crime rate, and where young people experienced daily surveillance from the neighborhood's overwhelming police presence, was, especially hard hit."⁹¹ Youth organizers who spearheaded the fight against the Cop Academy pointed out the irony of Emanuel's proposal. They pushed the residents of the city to ask: what does it mean for the mayor to close down numerous public schools in nearly all-black neighborhoods throughout the city (after disregarding explicit calls from community members and parents) and then return to those same neighborhoods and invest \$95 million dollars for a cop academy of all things.

Ultimately, the city council voted to approve the Cop Academy that youth organizers had fought so hard to resist. In the pivotal 2019 vote, the aldermen also approved the zoning changes needed to construct the facility in West Garfield Park. Repeatedly chanting "No cop academy, 95 mil for the community," multiple organizers were outraged and removed from the city council chambers. Despite the fact that the project was not completely halted, the campaign was able to delay the construction for years, causing the city to do its ribbon cutting in 2023. In the process of building out this opposition, the youth created beautiful communities and produced art,

⁹⁰ UChicago Consortium on School Research. "School Closings in Chicago." Accessed December 7, 2022. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/school-closings-chicago-staff-and-student-experiences-and-academic-outcomes>.

⁹¹ Misra, K. (2020, September 11). #NoCopAcademy and the Movement to Defund the Police. *Belt Magazine*.

speeches, workshops, and political education that was abolitionist. They not only asked to defund and dismantle but articulated a vision and solution that reimagines safety, well-being, and community vitality. Furthermore, Chicago youth who spearheaded the campaign effectively positioned the cop academy debate at the intersection of commonplace issues discussed in city politics; they played an active role in discussions of police brutality, carceral expansion, and lack of community investment for years. It is through their hard work and honest narratives that they exposed the opaque and inaccessible ways in which policies were created, implemented, and challenged.

Pointing out the contradictions, layered consequences of, and irrational logic behind numerous policies related to CPD and CPS has been a continued result of youth organizing in the city. The student campaign to remove cops from CPS similarly exposed illogical policymaking. Before detailing how this occurred, more context regarding the emergence and results of this movement is necessary to detail. During the summer of 2020, the U.S. dealt with nationwide protests and calls to defund the police after George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. Discussions of police abolition, reimagining what public safety looks like and the role that policing structures have on the day-to-day lives of Black and Brown Americans became front and center. These discussions did not overlook the school house and conditions that uphold and undergird the school/prison nexus. In no time, different youth campaigns emerged across the country asking for their school districts to break their contracts with police departments and remove SROs from schools.

Young activists in Chicago have long called for the removal of police from their schools, even before the summer of 2020 and nationwide calls to remove SROs.⁹² Converging with the

⁹² Rhodes, Dawn. "CPS Board Votes To Keep Police Officers In Schools — Again." Block Club Chicago, August 26, 2020. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2020/08/26/cps-board-votes-to-keep-police-officers-in-schools-again/>.

rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, however, this summer created more urgency and mobilization around the SRO issue in the city. This increase in urgency led to a more united and organized campaign in which a coalition of youth across the city began to apply pressure on the Chicago Board of Education (BOE) to end CPS's \$33 million contract with CPD to keep officers in schools.⁹³ Operating under the "Students Strike Back" title and coalition, students quickly identified their targets and began amplifying narratives surrounding their cause. They constantly pointed out the harm caused by having school discipline interlinked with the police in addition to pointing out the mental, physical, and emotional pain caused by their presence in school buildings. Journalists have uplifted these messages and pointed to the kinds of statistics that showcase these experiences. In a short piece for Loyola University's Law and Education Institute, Jennifer Babisak gives an example of this saying that "between 2012 and 2016, SROs assigned to Chicago schools amassed \$2,030,652 in misconduct settlements for their harmful conduct on and off school grounds."⁹⁴

Recognizing the need to increase mental health resources and personnel in their schools, Chicago Public School students called the board of education to defund this partnership with CPD and put money towards student wellbeing. Although a good number of the high school students in the No Cop Academy movement had graduated from CPS by this time, some of them joined as concerned alumni and bolstered the work of a new generation of high school student organizers. These organizers protested in front of the CPS headquarters, went to the Board of

⁹³ laurence, Justin. "CPS Board Approves Smaller Contract To Keep Cops In High Schools That Want Them." Block Club Chicago, September 23, 2021. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2021/09/22/cps-board-approves-smaller-contract-to-keep-cops-in-high-schools-that-want-them/>.

⁹⁴ Babisak, Jennifer. "The New MOU between CPD and CPS: A Step in the Right Direction?" *Loyola University Education Law and Policy Institute* (blog), July 31, 2020. <https://blogs.luc.edu/edlawinstitute/2020/07/31/the-new-mou-between-cpd-and-cps-a-step-in-the-right-direction-by-andy-froelich/>.

Education, Protested in front of committee members' homes, wrote emails, mobilized their communities, and held workshops. All of these activities were occurring either in person or online given the covid-19 pandemic. Despite the economic, mental, and physical hardships that these students—mostly BIPOC and low-income— were facing, they rallied one another and cultivated a campaign that got the attention of public officials and put pressure on Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the BOE.

Refusing the calls of community organizers and CPS students protesting outside of the headquarters while the issue came up for a vote, the Board of Education reaffirmed the police in schools program. The seven-member board had a 4-2 final vote and effectively renewed the contract between CPS and CPD. While the vote occurred, hundreds gathered outside and gave multiple speeches regarding the pain that CPD and its officers cause children across the city. One of the things they brought up involved the arrest of 2 youth organizers who were engaged in a peaceful peaceful protest at CPS's headquarters two days prior.⁹⁵ Although the youth pleaded with the board and CPS officials to stand up for them, the board “punted the decision [to keep SROs in a school] to local school councils. This then led to a chaotic month of school council votes and criticism of a lack of transparency of the process.”

Youth organizers criticized these results and exposed the ways in which their voices were dismissed and the real issues were left unaddressed. The board made arguments that the contract would be slashed to \$12 million dollars but it was evident that the lack of in-person instruction days due to the pandemic underlays this move. Agreeing with these conclusions, one of the two members of the BOE who opposed this resolution said, “While [local school council]

⁹⁵ Chicago Sun-Times. “Youth Activists among 13 Arrested Outside Downtown CPS Headquarters during School Police Protest,” August 25, 2020. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/8/24/21400413/chicago-public-schools-headquarters-protests-arrests>.

involvement is critical, it does not take a necessary whole system view of what's an issue of justice and a civil rights issue. The research is conclusive that police in schools perpetuate trauma and harm, and contribute to the criminalization of Black students.”

The move by the BOE and Mayor Lightfoot to have these decisions made by each LSC was not only a calculated decision that allows them to evade responsibility, but one that effectively silenced opposition against the police in schools program. This is primarily due to the fact that the LSCs were little-known structures and entities that did not have enough time or direction on how to effectively listen to the community and students on this issue. Furthermore, the demands that students made to reinvest in their schools using the funds that keep cops in their schools were blatantly disregarded in this process. When the BOE voted to punt the issues to LSCs, they ensured that the local school councils “weren’t given the option to redirect funding that would have been spent on officers towards other approaches to school safety.”⁹⁶ Although the case was conveniently fractured across many local school councils (LSCs) in August of 2020, youth organizers pivoted and created more localized efforts to push their respective councils to stand with them.

The Cops Out CPS campaign not only showcased a tremendous organizing effort that united kids from across the city during a global pandemic but also highlights the adaptive strategies youth employ when agitating against stubborn and seemingly immutable systems. Accompanied by other CPS alumni and seasoned youth organizers, CPS high school students took the charge and capitalized on their previous engagement with their Schools’ Student Voice Committees. Organizing within their school communities to push local targets, they collected

⁹⁶ laurence, Justin. “CPS Board Approves Smaller Contract To Keep Cops In High Schools That Want Them.” Block Club Chicago, September 23, 2021. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2021/09/22/cps-board-approves-smaller-contract-to-keep-cops-in-high-schools-that-want-them/>.

testimonies from their peers and mobilized their communities to support them during LSC votes. Out of 70 local school councils that held a vote, 17 successfully expelled Police officers from their hallways.

As an alumnus of CPS, I was encouraged by my sister to show up to the Local School Council meeting in which they would vote to either keep or remove the police officers in my old high school. I joined that Zoom meeting and was incredibly excited and shocked to see how many people had joined the call. Countless Zoom profile images depicted the campaign logo or statements declaring the need to remove cops from schools. One by one, current students and alumni gave testimonies and speeches regarding their experiences and support of the student organizers.

After the time allotted to public testimony was up, my high school's LSC proceeded to make the final decision and had a majority vote to remove the two SROs who had been stationed there throughout my high school career. It is important to note, however, that my high school is a selective enrollment school that is not predominantly Black or Latine. In addition to having more resources, it does not have nearly as many school discipline cases when compared to traditional high schools across the city. This is especially the case when comparing it to schools that serve more Black and impoverished communities in the South and West Sides. As a result, organizers that went to those schools had an incredibly difficult time changing the final results. These trends showcased that there are certain communities where the school district and the police department are more reluctant to scale back on surveillance, punishment, and policing. As noted earlier in this essay, these motivations and reluctance have deeply racialized foundations. Motivated by some of their victories, students continued to agitate and ensured that their voices regarding

policing in schools would remain relevant in politics surrounding CPS, the city's BOE, and Mayor Lori Lightfoot's policing and education policies.

By the time students started the 2021-22 school year, another wave of LSC votes took place. In addition to the 17 that had removed officers in the previous year, 10 more opted to remove both officers, 23 voted to retain just one officer, and 20 school councils voted to keep two officers. Answering criticisms regarding the use of funds previously allotted to the police in school programs, CPS was called to allocate a total of \$3.21 million to schools that voted out at least one SRO. According to a CPS presentation at a BOE meeting, "schools have re-invested that funding toward positions aligned with alternative proactive safety strategies including restorative justice coordinators, climate and culture coordinators, and mental health support."⁹⁷

Although young organizers are rarely acknowledged and credited for the policy changes they cause, it is difficult to say that any of these police removals would have happened without the work of students who protested and mobilized on the ground. In their quest to fight against racialized violence in schools, these students were dismissed, villainized, harassed, and even arrested. These student activists also continued to fall victim to the gun violence that city officials and carceral solutions continuously fail to address. Caleb Reed, a Mather High School was gunned down just weeks after speaking at a rally protesting CPS's contract with CPD and talking about his traumatizing experience with SROs. These organizers also had conflicts within the movement on what their goals were, how to best advance a campaign for equity, and how the organizing scene in the city can simultaneously uplift and limit youth. Ultimately, the students involved in both the #NoCopAcademy and the #CopsOutSchools (Students Strike Back,

⁹⁷ laurence, Justin. "CPS Board Approves Smaller Contract To Keep Cops In High Schools That Want Them." Block Club Chicago, September 23, 2021. <https://blockclubchicago.org/2021/09/22/cps-board-approves-smaller-contract-to-keep-cops-in-high-schools-that-want-them/>.

#CopsoutCPS) campaigns teach us an important lesson on racialized state violence and the powerful resistance that young people spearhead through revolutionary politics of love, care, transparency, agitation.

As outlined in this paper, student organizers in Chicago have created a space for themselves within the city's complex, messy, and chaotic political scene. In addition to the notorious Chicago Teacher's Union, these students have captured media attention and managed to put their agenda on the table at local election events and campaigns. This is especially true for those who are affiliated with established youth organizations like Assata's Daughters, The Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), GoodKid MadCity, Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), KINETIC Youth, and the Chicago Freedom School. Through their activism, these organizers created a separate political structure and space that is distinct from the more established and adult-run civil rights organizations. Similar to early 2000s movements in California,⁹⁸ Chicago student organizers in the No Cop Academy and Cops Out CPS campaigns formed a new political opposition that was rooted in their identity as youth—the future generation— and those who not only are failed by the system but committed to advocating for their dismissed and neglected communities.

⁹⁸ Tilton, Jennifer. *Dangerous or Endangered?: Race and the Politics of Youth in Urban America*. New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865928>.

Methodology

I conducted oral history-style interviews with 7 current and former Chicago Public School students who have been involved in either one or both of the aforementioned youth movements: No Cop Academy and Cops Out CPS. I identified these organizers by reaching out to some people in my pre-existing network of young activists in the city. These connections emerged out of my work as a high school student organizer in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood through AAJ's KINETIC program. Throughout this outreach, I compiled a list of students who have been involved in these movements, are above 18 years old, and were interested in being potential interviewees. I then reached out to each person with information regarding the person who referred them to me, along with the purpose and context of the project. If the person expressed interest, I sent them more specific details and two consent forms that effectively outlined the interviewing, recording, and preservation process. It is important to note that the time constraints of this project did not allow me to have an interview with every single person who showed interest in participating. If presented with the opportunity in the future, I will continue to build out this collection of interviews or work with other youth organizers to engage in their own oral history interview creation.

Ultimately, the snowball sampling resulted in a participant pool that comprised of students who, either independently or through affiliation with youth-led (and adult-supported organizations in the city), have organized around school safety, over-policing, and increased investment in impoverished communities of color. Of the 7 people that I talked to, three are current CPS high school students and the remaining 4 were college-age. They all mentioned a wide range of neighborhoods, schools, and youth-led orgs within which they built community, experienced severe inequities, and enacted their resistance. They came from homes and schools

in Uptown, Back of the Yards, West Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, Marshall Square, North Lawndale, Rogers Park, and Greater Grand Crossing. In addition to schools, structured youth organizing spaces across the city were brought up in these interviews—examples include Assata’s Daughters, GoodKid MadCity, STOP, BPNC, Chicago Freedom School (CFS), and Uptown’s KINETIC.

Four of the interviewees identified as Black and three as Latinx. Of those who provided an answer, 3 identified as cisgender women, and 3 identified as non-binary or gender fluid. All the interviewees came from low-income backgrounds; they were all eligible for free/reduced lunch and detailed experiences living in government buildings, the projects, and coming from communities that have been systematically neglected and disinvested from. They came from households where the highest level of education completed by parents varied from middle school to graduate-level study. Furthermore, at least 4 of the students expressed coming from either mixed-status families or having refugee backgrounds. These demographics, across markers of race, gender, class, and migration status, mirror that of the student organizer population in the city who pour labor, love, and imagination into these transformative spaces. Having spent most, if not all, of their childhoods in the south, west, and north sides of Chicago— all interviewees have done public-facing community organizing that addresses policies and practices of the Chicago Public School District or Chicago Police Department between the years of 2017 and 2021.

The conditions surrounding the interviews, how they were conducted, and what was prioritized were rooted in the goal of celebrating and documenting the work of these youth organizers. The decisions surrounding these conditions aimed to facilitate deep reflection, affirm their experiences and cultivate space to bring light to the practices, values, challenges, and

strategies they encountered through their student activism. All of these considerations were made with the understanding that a lot could be learned from 1) what the students share and 2) how they shared these experiences and feelings. The way that the students talked about their conception of freedom and liberation, within the context of schooling, especially helps illuminate important answers to some of the research questions. It is through these priorities that this project worked to document and analyze extremely important narratives. The next section will explain why creating an oral history collection of student narratives accomplished the goals of this project. It will also detail what this archive looks like and explain the community archive that these interviews will contribute to.

Documenting through the Oral History Tradition

This capstone project specifically emerges from the oral history tradition in order to 1) create agentic spaces for students to reflect on their experience, 2) to present the conversations emerging from this space with minimal interference or interruption, and 3) document their narratives for preservation in a community archive that celebrates their work and positions them as viable historians, activists, and political actors.⁹⁹ Beyond the goal of contributing knowledge on the two youth movements and how organizing influences one's relationship with formal education and policing structures, the project centers on documentation. Here, I emphasize the creation of the archive to be an effort to literally center student activists' voices and to have their narratives located in a truly accessible and community-driven collection rather than a institutionalized archive.

⁹⁹ Leon, Jason De. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, 2015.

The conditions surrounding the student activism occurring in Chicago are meaningful historical events that need to be included in the history books. It is only when resistance movements are effectively documented that the political, economic, and cultural developments of the time will be accurately portrayed in the future. It is for these reasons that the oral history archive is the ideal approach to carrying out the project. It will both engage student organizers in reflective conversations but do so in a manner that will allow these narratives to be preserved in a community archive. Below, I will discuss what the actual collection looks like and how it will contribute to meaningful documentation.

The Chicago Youth Movements Oral History archive is a collection of video and audio recordings from each interview. These recordings are also supplemented with written transcriptions, making the collection more accessible and in line with oral history preservation methods. Therefore this is a digital archive where a collection of 7 folders, one for each interviewee, tell 7 different stories and experiences with two Chicago youth movements in the late 2010s. Each interview had a unique structure, tone, and length as I was intentional in giving each participant the agency to take the conversation where they would like. They ranged from 35 minutes to 2 hours and 15 minutes with most of them lasting an hour and a half.

During the interviews, each student was asked open-ended questions that sought to encourage in-depth personal reflection on their past experiences and perceptions of community organizing. After a series of questions focusing on their educational journeys and childhood experiences, they were prompted to reflect on their involvement in the organizing and then their perspective on how these engagements shaped their abolitionist politics and relationship to schooling, if at all. At the end of most interviews, we discussed their future and how their organizing work has shaped their dreams and goals.

The flexibility and agency that the oral history methodology provides for interviewees are important here. I was not only concerned about engaging in extractive research but also creating conditions that position these students as subjects to be studied rather than those who are storytelling and active agents in a society whose voices and narratives we should celebrate. Oral Historians have emphasized that their work is attuned to power differentials and extremely respectful of the life experiences shared in the interviews.¹⁰⁰ As a result, this archive includes a collection of interviews where participants were provided agency and flexibility to share what they want in a manner that made the most sense.

In *Oral History and Qualitative Methodologies: Education Research for Social Justice*, oral history interviews are deemed to be “co-crafted” storytelling products that emerge from a collaborative process between the interviewer and narrator. The authors argue that “although the process is usually led by the researcher through the asking of interview questions, it is equally within the purview of the narrator who may choose to lead the interview in a particular direction through relating experiences that are of relevance and meaning to the narrator.”¹⁰¹ It is for these reasons that the Oral History methodology has been deemed an empowering tool and an approach that is extremely sensitive to how power operates.¹⁰²

In addition to the agentic and collaborative nature of the oral history tradition, this project adopts this methodology because it is not widely used in education research especially when it concerns younger people. Most of the literature that has to do with oral history and education tends to focus on the use of oral history in educational activities or curricula. Specifically, this

¹⁰⁰Abrams, Lynn. “Power and Empowerment.” In *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edition., 153–75. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁰¹Mulvihill, Thalia M., and Raji Swaminathan, eds. *Oral History and Qualitative Methodologies: Educational Research for Social Justice*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.

¹⁰² Abrams, Lynn. “Power and Empowerment.” In *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edition., 153–75. Routledge, 2016.

rich area of literature is concerned with developing the use of oral history as a culturally responsive and community-based pedagogical tool in the elementary or secondary classroom.¹⁰³ Current literature illuminates the generative nature and limiting aspects of this practice in its ability to empower students as historians and active agents in the documentation and interpretation of past events.¹⁰⁴ However, there is a need for more scholarship that focuses on the use of oral history as a methodology for documenting and preserving (hi)stories of past events and experiences that have to do with education.

Multiple scholars who wrote *Oral History and Qualitative Methodologies Educational Research for Social Justice* in 2022 are in the minority. They effectively discuss the “messy”¹⁰⁵ and untraditional applications of oral history and life history methodologies in research that seeks to capture activist spaces, familial histories, and teacher organizing.¹⁰⁶ Francena Turner’s discussion of her work with oral history to (re)collect histories of activism by Black Women at Fayetteville State University illuminates the complexity of conducting and explaining the use of

¹⁰³ Kachaturroff, Grace, and Frances Greenebaum. “Oral History in the Social Studies Classroom.” *The Social Studies* 72, no. 1 (January 1981): 18–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1944.11019685>; Shanks, Marilyn J., “Oral history in a kindergarten classroom” (2000). Graduate Research Papers. 1508. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1508>; Stanton, Christine Rogers, Brad Hall, and Lucia Ricciardelli. “Re-Visioning Self-Determination: Planning for Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Oral Histories with Indigenous Communities.” In *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices*, edited by Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, 207–30. Palgrave Studies in Oral History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95019-5_11.

¹⁰⁴ Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, eds. *Oral History, Education, and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.; Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, eds. *Oral History and Education Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices*. New York: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.; Stanton, Christine Rogers, Brad Hall, and Lucia Ricciardelli. “Re-Visioning Self-Determination: Planning for Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Oral Histories with Indigenous Communities.” In *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices*, edited by Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, 207–30. Palgrave Studies in Oral History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95019-5_11.

¹⁰⁵ Swaminathan, Raji, and Thalia M. Mulvihill. “Questions Along the Qualitative Research Journey.” In *Critical Approaches to Questions in Qualitative Research*. Routledge, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Mulvihill, Thalia M., and Raji Swaminathan, eds. *Oral History and Qualitative Methodologies: Educational Research for Social Justice*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.

oral history to tell and retell stories of resistance.¹⁰⁷ Such literature needs to be expanded upon to bolster memory and recollection from students who are engaged in more recent histories of youth organizing. This capstone seeks to fill this gap with a limited focus on two movements in Chicago and by taking a more untraditional path of doing this with young activists. There is no need for us to wait until they are old for us to document their words, learn from their memories, and document their work.

Community Archive

The Oral history interview collection will be housed in a public-facing and community-based archive that was created by members of the No Cop Academy coalition. Serving as the primary digital site for the movement, nocopacademy.com is a digital archive housing documents, toolkits, timelines, and videos relevant to the movement. In addition to their Instagram and Twitter presence, the website became a more established and permanent platform in which the student organizers shared their words. Composed of different pages, the website has both original content and links for articles and videos by media outlets mentioning the movement a list of periodical and media resources mentioning the movement.

From the website's components, it is important to highlight 1) a toolkit the student organizers created for future youth organizers, 2) a collection of audio capturing the creative and powerful chants the students used during protests, and 3) a trailer for a documentary some activists are currently working on regarding the No Cop Academy. When considering the contents of this archive, the oral history interviews with 7 Chicago youth organizers will

¹⁰⁷ Francena F.L. Turner. "'Bone by Bone': Re(Collecting) Stories of Black Female Student Activists at Fayetteville State Using Oral History Interviews with a Life History Approach." In *Oral History and Qualitative Methodologies: Educational Research for Social Justice*, edited by Thalia M. Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan, Chapter 4. Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.

supplement the kind of documentation already happening in these spaces. It will not only contribute personal and detailed narratives about the people engaged in the campaign but will also showcase the impact the movement had on interlinked campaigns by CPS students.

Ultimately, this project was conducted with the hopes of creating an oral history that documents and highlights the work of powerful youth organizers. Although the collection of these narratives is just one small step to bolstering the documentation of these struggles, its contents and greater context (the NoCop community archive) inform understanding of youth development, abolitionist learning environments, as well as racial justice movement building. It not only bolsters but exists in a larger archive that tells an important story regarding interlinked movements central to the development of a youth protest culture in the city of Chicago.

Limitations

Although it discusses scholarship concerned with youth activism and provides detail regarding two movements seeking racial justice, this paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of youth resistance to state violence. Instead, it will focus on youth agency and mobilization within a specific city and timeframe to ask questions regarding how these movements shape the students' perceptions of themselves and the world they navigate. In the process, the capstone will bring to light the systems and structures that work to criminalize and police youth and their communities. It will also detail the formation and impact that these movements have on those structures and the communities they seek to control.

The analysis and collection of narratives done in this capstone are also limited to one form of youth resistance to state violence: community organizing. There are a multitude of ways that students across the country engage in collective resistance against societal or structural manifestations of disinvestment and oppression— from volunteering and youth organizing to

spoken word events and working in structural civic affairs.¹⁰⁸ The project focuses on youth organizing and mobilizing because it allows for analysis of students engaging in collective learning and then sharing those experiences, stories, and knowledge with others to move them into action. Although this project doesn't concern the other ways in which youth intentionally address injustice in their communities, the epistemological, historical, and cultural significance of these practices is not lost on me.

This paper is limited to participant perception of their politics, and past experiences in order to illuminate their relationship to CPS and CPD. By interviewing 10 students, there are no generalizable claims were made regarding all student activists in Chicago or within these two movements, for that matter.

Lastly, the significant limitations of any academic work done within and using resources and concepts within the structures of the university are important to acknowledge when considering the ideological and political work done by this project. Adopting an Oral History methodology and collaborating with youth activists to guide and collect narratives for this project is an effort to push back against Western/colonial frameworks of research or academic work. The formation of an archive that only focuses on young students of color also resists the devaluation of certain knowledge and experiences. Despite these efforts, however, the impact and potential of this work to tangibly influence the work of liberatory struggles on the ground are limited.

¹⁰⁸ Ginwright, Shawn, and Julio Cammarota. "Youth Activism in the Urban Community: Learning Critical Civic Praxis within Community Organizations." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 6 (November 2007): 693–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630833>.

Conclusion

In her book *Troublemakers*, Carla Shalabay argues that “children will lead the way in reimagining a free and loving world.” I have been driven by this idea and grounded in the fact that young people are the least invested in systems of oppression and, as a result, the most equipped to imagine better futures. This commitment has shaped my commitment to working with youth and also led me to craft this project. The process of proposing, arranging, and conducting different parts of this capstone has taught me great lessons on agency, flexibility, and respect. I walked away from this work even more grounded in a deep respect for community organizing and affirmed in my belief that we have to engage in radical listening. It was especially meaningful for me to do this with student activists who have and continue to contribute great passion and love to spaces and communities that have genuinely changed my life.

Shalaby’s quote is scribbled on a notecard on my wall alongside a wrinkled piece of paper that reads, “Be the person you needed as a child.” In many ways, these message inform my path to teaching and hopes of contributing to abolitionist efforts to reimagine our world. Through this project, I got one step closer to being the kind of adult ally and support I needed as a young CPS student facilitating town halls, doing train takeovers, and protesting CPS and CPD policies. In an effort to celebrate these organizers, I showed deep interest in their work, gave them space for reflection, and expressed the need to have their voices and thoughts preserved for future generations. Although I did not do this perfectly, I am proud of what we accomplished together. We have cultivated reflections and conversations that bolster the work of numerous initiatives, documentary projects, and organizing that continue to happen in Chicago to celebrate youth organizers. I call on more scholars who are in higher education institutions to do the same.

Housed in the No Cop Academy digital archive, the oral history collection is in a meaningful community archive that continues to evolve. It is this very archive that keeps me inspired and solidifies my commitment to investing time and energy into youth organizing spaces. Answering the call of Black feminist scholars and abolitionist scholar-activists, I accept that solutions to societal issues will not emerge from within academia. Therefore, we must use such opportunities to focus on community organizing and on the voices of youth on the ground. Ultimately, this capstone project has reaffirmed my faith in youth as legitimate knowledge producers, agitators, and agents of revolutionary change. They are the most equipped to reimagine how we relate to one another and the people who effectively rebuild a more loving world. This oral history collection calls us to engage in radical listening—to let students tell us how they are doing just that.

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