

# BEARING STRANGE FRUIT



**How Baltimore Youth and Families Articulate and Cope  
with Underinvestment and Lack of Opportunity in  
Baltimore City Schools**

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**Nobody**  
*Asked*  
**Me**





## “STRANGE FRUIT”

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather  
For the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot  
For the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Nobody  
*Asked*  
Me

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# BEARING STRANGE FRUIT



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **How Baltimore Youth and Families Articulate and Cope with Underinvestment and Lack of Opportunity in Baltimore City Schools**

*Richard Lofton, Ph.D.*

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Throughout its history, Baltimore has been a city where Black people have built communities and have attempted to thrive. Despite their best efforts, Black Baltimoreans have faced physical and structural violence that has created barriers for youth attempting to reach their academic, economic, and personal aspirations. The anti-Black roots of these structural impediments prevent Black people, particularly youth and their families, from having their voices heard and their experiences validated in ways that would improve their lives. The Nobody Asked Me (NAM) campaign seeks to disrupt these historical and contemporary manifestations of oppressions by highlighting youth perspectives of their day-to-day lives and how they would change systems to reach their dreams for better life and community outcomes.

Since 2020, the NAM research team has conducted over 135 interviews with youth and their family members to illuminate their voices and joys, highlight their struggles and distill potential solutions to get lawmakers, academics and community leaders closer to fulfilling Maryland State's constitutional promise of providing all youth a "thorough and efficient" education. Interviewed participants came from various socio-economic and neighborhood backgrounds and provided our team with data from a wide range of experiences for rigorous



and nuanced analysis. Our interviews, and their words, highlight issues and solutions related to four pillars of concern for Baltimoreans: Transportation, School Infrastructure, Safety and Violence, and Pathways to Postsecondary Success. This data helped us identify themes that emphasize the ways structural racism appears in explicit and mundane ways.

Youth and family interviews revealed that public transportation is unreliable and unsafe for students traversing the city to attend school and connect to other parts of the city. We also found that under-resourced and poorly maintained school buildings may be creating public health issues that affect student academic progress and physical well-being. More findings unearthed the ways that youth and their families believe that law enforcement perpetuates violence in their community; and highlight those feelings that communal and community violence is so common that it feels normal. Lastly, we were able to develop themes that showed that there is a misalignment of resources between youths' post-school aspirations and their preparation for postsecondary success. In sum, our findings highlight the ways that youth and their families are burdened by under-resourced systems that reflect a devaluation of Black lives and prevent opportunity to build hopeful futures.

Despite the pervasive issues that Black youth in Baltimore face across the four pillars, they remained hopeful for themselves and their communities. Young people and their families continually provided solutions that both looked at systemic changes, as well as improvements that could be made for their day-to-day lives. Building upon these ideas, NAM created strategy groups for each pillar that consisted of youth, community organizers, public servants, and scholars to generate interventions and programs as recommendations to improve the lives Black Baltimoreans. These groups are guided by the voices that have been historically silenced by various governmental and non-governmental institutions. Our strategy group recommendations point that the (re)allocation of funding to generate programs and build safe infrastructure will help youth align their dreams with opportunity.

This report begins by highlighting the historical and structural violence through the analogy of strange fruit and the possibilities of bearing new fruit. This is followed by the presentation of our findings via each of the four pillars. We then build upon the themes that emerged from the data by highlighting strategy group interventions and recommendations for policy that will help Black youth and communities thrive in Baltimore.

## SUMMARY OF THE STRANGE FRUIT

After reviewing the historical and empirical literature about structural racism in Baltimore, our interviews and conversations with students, parents, school district leaders, mayoral cabinet members, community activists, and strategy group members helped identify seven strange fruits that we must confront to fulfill Maryland's State educational promise. This section highlights these fruits to help us capture what students are experiencing and its impact on their concepts of education, their educational outcomes, and their potential for career and adult success.

## **STRANGE FRUIT:**

### **Racial Segregation**

Housing policies and practices, such as redlining, restricted Black people access to neighborhoods that has produced the “Black butterfly”

### **White Flight**

White people fled the urban center to create homogenous racial and economic enclaves

### **Gratuitous Violence**

Densely populated areas deprived of resources create dangerous environments

### **Inequities in Transportation**

Options for mobility are limited, unsafe, and unreliable in Black neighborhoods that are underfunded

### **Neoliberalist Reforms/Strategies**

Privatization of public goods creates inequality and places blame on individuals for decision-making

### **Respectability Politics**

Non-Eurocentric and upper-middle class values/culture are viewed as inferior and deviant and unrespectable

### **Invisibility of Black Placemaking**

Inability to acknowledge the historical and current humanistic qualities that Black people produce that relate to agency, resilience, joy, love, knowledge, culture, beauty, and places they foster to endure racial oppression

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The goal of the Nobody Asked Me campaign is to make visible the experiences of Black youth and communities in Baltimore. The strange fruit that Baltimore residents have been subjected to in conjunction with the neglect of their brilliance, hard work, and aspirations have, in short, created a political silencing of their everyday lives. To disrupt this cycle and bear new fruit of possibilities, we interviewed 135 youths and their families about their experiences in four specific domains: Safety and Violence, Transportation, School Infrastructure, and Postsecondary Pathways. In this section, we identify themes related to each of these pillars and elevate the voices of Black Baltimoreans.

## **LIVING IN MUNDANE TERROR:**

**Theme 1: Youth navigate violence and bullying in schools, which disrupt their educational experiences and their ability to pursue educational goals.**

Conflict in schools takes a psychological and social, as well as an academic, toll on students. In the context of violence and bullying, relationships with adults and peers alike can deteriorate in ways that negatively affect youth's education.

**Theme 2: The potential for violence in neighborhoods and across the city shapes students' sense of well-being and their ability to navigate daily life.**

Youth navigate an uneven geography in Baltimore, in which efforts to avoid victimization shape how they interact with people and places and their sense that their city is a safe place for them.

**Theme 3: Police often increase, rather than address, youth and parental concerns around neighborhood violence.**

On top of the physical and psychological safety concerns that youth regularly confront in schools and in neighborhoods, they often express a racialized sense of anxiety around the possibility of police contact.

## **THROWN UNDER THE BUS:**

**Theme 1: Drivers skipping stops lead to additional burdens and tardiness to school.**

Unreliable buses force students to plan for extra time during their commutes. Despite this additional planning, students may still get to school late.

**Theme 2: Violence on buses affects youth's physical, social, and academic well-being.**

Youth are victims and/or witness violence on buses with regularity. Some youth feel that they perform better in school when they commute to school through private transportation.

**Theme 3: Verbal and physical assaults, especially of feminine bodies, are prominent experiences on buses.**

Girls are subjected to gendered forms of harassment and assault. These students feel particularly unsafe, and some, avoid using public transportation when possible.

## **LEFT OUT IN THE COLD: UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN INFRASTRUCTURE**

**Theme 1: Extreme temperatures and poor school conditions cause a loss of learning time and can challenge their ability to concentrate.**

Students went into great detail about how their classrooms were too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. Regardless of location or student population, students reported serious temperature issues that prevented them from learning. In discussing this issue, students focused in particular on how these extreme temperatures and poor physical conditions hindered meaningful school time and challenged their ability to concentrate

**Theme 2: Poor school conditions are not incidental but rather part of a *hidden infrastructure* that normalizes disinvestment in Black education.**

Students perceived that school infrastructure is not only about the physical environments that house schools. These youth made a connection between how society valued them and how they navigate their place in the world by the way their school buildings are run and maintained. Students are aware that school buildings are places of investment, where norms, values, and appreciations are legitimized.

**Theme 3: Basic human needs are neglected and denied because of state-sponsored underfunded school buildings.**

Students discussed how poor conditions in schools not only hinder academic excellence but also are a public health concern. In our interviews with youth and their family members, we discovered that youth experience public health concerns when they are in unsanitary restrooms that lack resources and school buildings that fester rodents because of poor infrastructure.

## **MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCESS PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS**

**Theme 1: Missing resources within schools result in missed opportunities to support students.**

Students indicate that a lack of supportive resources within schools and unequal access to educational opportunity from an early age cause them to feel unprepared to navigate educational challenges. This lack of support translates into feelings of disillusionment and disengagement from the educational system.

**Theme 2: Missing interactions with staff result in missed opportunities to connect to students.**

Students struggle to form close connections with many of their teachers and the transition to virtual classrooms worsened this situation. Students share positive comments on their connections with Black teachers and teachers from Baltimore but feel there are not enough of these teachers in the district.

**Theme 3: Missing careers in Baltimore result in missed opportunities to motivate students.**

Students do not see enough employment opportunities available within Baltimore that will allow them to



benefit from education with a job that offers a living wage. These missing economic opportunities block pathways to success for students and the residents of their communities.

## PLANTING NEW SEEDS

Alongside the empirical evidence and identification of strange fruit that the Nobody Asked Me campaign has unearthed, there is also hope to bear new fruit by planting the seeds of youth and family aspirations for a reimagined future for Black Baltimore. Throughout our interviews, youth and community members provided insights and solutions for how they envision eliminating the structural oppressions they encounter. These solutions were directly tied to the governance and finance infrastructure of Baltimore and were supported by imaginings of the tangible realities they would create in the lives of youth.

**Recommendation 1:** Safety & Violence: Promote community-school models that provide wraparound support for youth and their families to support basic needs and aspirations through connection to respected members and organizations in their neighborhoods.

**Recommendation 2:** Transportation: Form Transportation Advisory Council (TCA) consisting of youth and community members that develops a transportation infrastructure where buses are reliable and safe, particularly for students traveling to and from school/school-related events.

**Recommendation 3:** School Infrastructure: Ensure that students are in healthy and conducive environments for learning by developing community co-constructed policy that prioritizes equity gaps in school building and maintenance in Baltimore City Public Schools.

**Recommendation 4:** Pathways to Promise: Develop new pathways to postsecondary success for 3200 students by teaming with youth and community members to develop programs geared specifically towards funneling their aspirations into the local and global job markets.



**BEARING STRANGE FRUIT**

# BEARING STRANGE FRUIT

*Dr. Richard Lofton, Ph.D.*

In 1937, Jewish high school teacher and poet Abel Meeropol authored the seminal poem “Strange Fruit” as an outcry against lynching in the early 20th century. Two years later, beloved Baltimore native Billie Holiday’s recording of the song drew further attention to the gratuitous violence Black Bodies endure in the United States. “Strange Fruit” explores the terror that lynching brought to the lives of Black people as White citizens gathered around to see Black Bodies hung from trees as punishment for a litany of “crimes” against (White) society. The communal act of lynching is now reviled in society, but the initial acceptance of such draconian punishments by angry White mobs has, in part, continued to spread the seeds of this “strange fruit” throughout 21st century America. In today’s society, physical violence persists, accompanied by structures that enable harm to Black people through underinvestment and lack of academic opportunities for career and adult success. For our Baltimore youth and their families, this strange fruit continues to grow in ways that hinder their natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Within the educational context, this insidious fruit prevents students from receiving their educational promise laid out in Maryland’s state constitution, which demands all students receive a “thorough and efficient” education.

Over 70 years after Meeropol’ and Holiday’s verses illustrated the ripening of this “strange fruit,” Black and minority students in Baltimore are fully aware that the consumption of this fruit represents a biblical paradox of freedom at the expense of life. This consumption has provided White middle-class school districts in Maryland the benefits of yellow school buses, lower rates of violence and crime in their schools and communities, and effective paths for adult and career success. This becomes especially obvious when one examines differences in school districts infrastructure as well as availability of enrichment programs and AP/Honor courses in every high school. This structural violence that, in turn, impacts Black and minority students in Baltimore produces substantial barriers to adult and career success, including employment opportunities after graduation. For example, 6 years after graduating from high school, the median annual income for Baltimore students who earn a 2-year or 4-year degree is \$19,332, much lower than peers nationwide; for those with a high school diploma, this number is \$13,374 (Baltimore’s Promise, 2018). Therefore, rooted in the stark racial inequalities of the early 20th century, the seeds of this strange fruit continue to grow in a way that transfers the physical murderous act of lynching to another type of lynching—of educational promise in the 21st century. As such, this peculiar fruit cannot render the structural support needed for all Baltimore students’ aspirations, high teacher expectations, healthy social and emotional development, safe transportation, nurturing school environments, and promising adult and career success pathways.



Over the last 2 years, the Nobody Asked Me Campaign research team has conducted 135 interviews with youth and their family members to illuminate their voices and highlight their struggles and joys as well as potential solutions to move us closer to fulfilling Maryland’s constitutional educational promise. Ignoring the historical and current conditions that hinder academic success for many students in Baltimore, people have often viewed Black students and their parents as the root of the problem. In this way, researchers and policymakers often impose bureaucratically neat, one-size-fits-all solutions without meaningfully asking Baltimore students about their educational experiences and their solutions to receiving a “thorough and efficient” educational experience. Aware of this missing essential dialogue, Hopkins researchers conducted what is, on the surface, very simple: they asked questions. They asked youth and their family members about their multifaceted experiences, including aspirations, educational challenges, social and emotional development, safety, homes, neighborhoods, and perspectives of school. These students and their families identified the barriers they encountered that have prevented many of them from academic achievement and offered solutions to obtaining a quality education. As a result, the Johns Hopkins researchers developed four pillars from these in-depth interviews: Transportation, Postsecondary Pathways, Violence, and Learning Environments. Moreover, the research team examined the relevant literature regarding each pillar to position youths’ experiences within the larger conversation of student success.

In concert with these four pillars, the research team facilitated four strategy groups that centered students’ and parents’ experiences. Each pillar had a strategy group that met over six times to consider students’ and parents’ structural barriers and solutions for improving schooling. The strategy groups were composed of diverse stakeholders, including community members, students, researchers, school district members, nonprofit organizers, and concerned citizens. During these meetings, the research team observed, took notes, and uncovered major assumptions and spirited conversations that centered on the experiences of youth and their family members. The culmination of meaningfully listening to and grappling with students’ and parents’ voices, observing and facilitating strategy group discussions, and reviewing pertinent literature on student success has resulted in this report to bring Baltimore students’ experiences to the attention of policymakers, politicians, researchers, school district leaders, teachers, administrators, and concerned citizens.

This report consists of four sections. In the first section, we present the historical and contemporary context from which the Nobody Asked Me campaign emerged. Specifically, we consider the misguided framing of problems that prevent youth from accessing supportive learning environments, enrichment programs, safety, and living wages. In the second section, the voices of youth and their families are elevated to draw attention to our four pillars. This highlights how current conditions continue to fail to provide students with the “thorough and efficient” education that is constitutionally mandated. In the third section, we present policy recommendations and strategies that address the problems that students and their families discussed. These recommendations, generated by the four strategy groups, are the product of a co-creative

effort to find new interventions and strategies for progress. Finally, in the fourth section, we highlight the methodology that we used to give clear insight into how we captured the lived experiences of youth and their families.

In this report, we contend that to prevent the structural violence that lynches the successful educational experiences of our students, we must not continue to consume strange fruit. Instead, we must plant new seeds by creating postsecondary pathways of promise for young Baltimoreans. This work includes creating nurturing educational support structures and establishing an economy that provides students with meaningful employment after they graduate from high school and college. To allow for students to walk down this new path, there first needs to be environments that are conducive to learning. These environments must allow students to feel comfort, safety, and a sense of belonging so they may self-actualize their academic and personal potential.

## UPROOTING THE STRANGE FRUIT

**The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.**

*W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903a*

**Blacks should be quarantined in isolated slums in order to reduce the incidence of civil disturbance, to prevent the spread of communicable disease into the nearby White neighborhoods, and to protect property values among the White majority.**

*J. Barry Mahool, 1910*

*Mayor of Baltimore 1907-1911*

To understand the strange fruits that prevent students in Baltimore from reaching their educational promise, one must understand the root of the structural problems. As W. E. B. Du Bois famously stated, “a color line” between White and Black people was drawn not only because of the complexion of Black skin, but also because Blackness was viewed as destructive and risky for White health, White safety, and White property. As spoken by Mayor Mahool more than a century ago, many Americans felt that Black people should be quarantined into isolated slums to protect White people from riots, crime, infectious diseases, and lower property value. This prevented Black people from crossing the color line because they were viewed as the problem. Mahool’s words and positionality represented large swaths of White Maryland culture, and eventually helped the passage of the United States’ first racially segregated zoning law in 1911, which restricted Black residents from buying property in many Baltimore City neighborhoods (Boger, 2009; Power, 1983). This left newly freed Black people in a conundrum. They sought to take full advantage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which promised them freedom, equal protection, and political power under the

law. Still, they confronted a color line in cities like Baltimore that confined them into government-sponsored segregated neighborhoods. These neighborhoods structured inequality in a way that limited Black people's access to resources, capital, and opportunities.

Confinement behind this color line did not stop Black people from cultivating cultural knowledge, developing a determination to educate themselves, and producing a small middle-class population within these isolated slums. But the color line still prevented them from fully benefiting from governmental programs, full employment, and equity in schools. While the color line has been around since the inception of this country, no atonement, debt, or collective actions have taken place to reckon with these wrongdoings meaningfully. As a result, we are still haunted by the color line in the 21st century. This color line has produced strange fruits in our current era that lynches equity in education, home values, neighborhood investments, and employment.

Through interviews and conversations with students, parents, school district leaders, mayoral cabinet members, community activists, and strategy group members, we have identified seven strange fruits that we must confront to fulfill Maryland's state educational promise. This section highlights these fruits to help us capture what students are experiencing and its impact on their concepts of education, their educational outcomes, and their potential for career and adult success. Our findings suggest that to address the uprooting of the problem, we must move away from blaming and shaming students, parents, teachers, administrators, and school district leaders.

## **STRANGE FRUIT I: RACIAL HOUSING SEGREGATION**

Since Mayor Mahool's words in 1910 and the aforementioned neighborhood racial segregation law passed shortly after, Black people have endured and suffered from state and federal-sponsored policies, practices, and ideas that aimed to produce racially segregated housing. Baltimore was the first city to implement the racial ordinance, but the Supreme Court in *Buchanan v. Warley* in 1917 ruled that racial housing ordinances were unconstitutional (Power, 1983). After this judicial victory, Black people in Baltimore suffered from government-sponsored segregation through the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), which used residential maps that redlined Black neighborhoods and denied them access to capital and bank loans (Mitchell & Franco, 2018). Black neighborhoods in Baltimore were deemed risky during the underwriting and approval process, while many White communities benefited from exchanging resources, opportunities, and capital. Throughout the 1940s and into the 1960s, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) participated in the same dehumanizing practices by redlining Black neighborhoods (Perry & Harshbarger, 2019). By contrast, White families in Baltimore were able to obtain loans and move to better places of opportunity with suburban schools. Government-sponsored redlining unjustly singled out Black people as harming property values without objective marketing criteria (Imbroscio, 2020). Over 50 years after Mayor Mahool spoke his words, our government has continued to participate in the quarantining of Black Bodies in isolated communities.



Today, most Black people in Baltimore live within the Black Butterfly, while Whites live within the L shape of the city. The Black Butterfly, according to Lawrence Brown (2021), “denotes not only where Black Baltimoreans are geographically clustered but also where capital is denied, and structural disadvantages have accumulated due to the lack of capital access” (p. 9). The ideology normalized by government-sponsored redlining haunts Black people by blocking their access to resources, opportunities, and capital. Subprime and Adjustable-Rate Loans, which were the primary borrowing instruments offered to Black homeowners in Baltimore, are six times more likely to be the primary loan instrument in Black neighborhoods in Baltimore than in White communities. Even more devastating, the default on these loans by Black people further hurt the Black Butterfly in the early 21st century, and many in these Black communities lost their homes during the global financial crisis starting in 2008. To this day, Black homeowners in Baltimore are still paying more for loans than their White counterparts and getting less.

Racial segregation is a strange fruit and connects to the root of the problem when it comes to quarantining Black people. Present-day racial segregation prevents youth from fully accessing and participating in a global economy and developing the academic skills necessary for adult and career success. This segregation is done through the school funding formulas, which are based on state and local property tax revenue. Government-sponsored racial segregation has produced housing markets that devalue Black homes and property, which leads to fewer local property taxes and fosters a racial wealth gap (Shapiro, 2017). Some educational scholars call this structural racism in education (Noguera & Alicea, 2020). Today, predominantly Black school districts like Baltimore City Public Schools are suffering from the harms of yesterday through policies that continue to allow an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and capital. Students and their parents should not, and cannot, be blamed for this structural violence inflicted on them. Currently, Baltimore City Public Schools do not have the capital to provide all their high school students with enrichment programs and social, emotional, and cultural curricula and training. Also, courses such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dance, music, theater, art, and world languages are essential for acceptance into college and the acquisition of skills necessary for leadership in a democracy, but underfunding has led to fewer of these important classes for students in Baltimore. The strange fruit of racial segregation and the mentality that justify it hinders students from fully developing the skills to participate in a global economy and to be agents of change in our society.

## **STRANGE FRUIT II: WHITE FLIGHT**

White flight erupted in the 1970s and 1980s in Baltimore City and prevented racially diverse schools in the district. Black communities were once again regarded as the burden and causing risk to White schools and White property. While government-sponsored programs led to racial segregation, the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), as well as subsequent court rulings, held that separate is inherently unequal in schools. After many years of coming to terms with this decision, Baltimore City Public Schools were forced to desegregate in the 1970s, but seeds from the root of this

problem of segregation produced another strange fruit—White flight, or the movement of White people out of urban areas populated by minority populations. With the help of federal and state-sponsored repressive mortgage programs, the construction of the federal highway system, and the view that poor Black people were the problem, White flight maintained racially segregated and disinvested neighborhoods and schools.

During this period of White flight, Black people endured protests, marches, and cruel taunts to prevent them and White students from attending racially diverse schools. White students and parents who aimed to keep their schools exclusively White participated in several protests. For example, students from seven White schools left schools to march to City Hall to protest the desegregation plan (Theodore Hendrick, *Baltimore Sun*, May 31, 1974). Less than a month later, parents got involved by having “Freedom Day,” when 5,000 of their children were absent to protest school desegregation plans (Antero Pietila, *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 1974). Also, over 1,500 students were truant in the fall of 1974 to stop desegregation efforts (*Baltimore Sun*, December 31, 1974).

During all the protests and marches in the 1970s to end desegregation in schools, many people failed to realize the impact this had on students related to their social and emotional development. Isaiah E. White, then principal at Gwynns Falls Park Junior High School, wrote an op-ed in the *Baltimore Sun* (June 26, 1974) to show how these demonstrations can negatively impact Black students. He stated:

*Has anyone stopped to think about the negative impact these responses and demonstrations had on the masses of Black students who attend our public schools? Do we realize that no group wants to be considered as the dirt or filth of a public school system? Does anyone understand that thousands of us who are Black and work in these Black schools are proud of these children and the efforts they are making to get an education? We are dedicated and plan to make this school system survive whether all Black or desegregated and have not great fears about those students who will leave the system and parents who will move from the city. Baltimore still continues to survive, even though a vast majority of whites have left already.*

White’s words undermined the social and emotional well-being of Black students who saw White families protecting racially segregated schools, to the detriment of their own educational opportunities. White understood the importance of a sense of belonging and developing meaningful relationships in schools where adults are proud of their students’ student’s efforts. Moreover, some perceived Blackness as the “dirt or filth of a public school system,” which impacted students’ educational experiences and denied them their rightful place in this country’s democracy

When the city’s desegregation plan was eventually implemented, many White families drew another color line that would come to mark the divide between prosperous and predominantly White suburbs and under-resourced and predominantly Black city neighborhoods and schools. The fear of integrated schools and

higher local taxes became common practice (Orr, 1999). According to Orr, “Between 1950 and 1990, the number of white school-age children dropped from 140,061 to 41,294, a decrease of 70 percent. During the same period, the number of Black children rose from 52,334 to 101,399, an increase of 94 percent.” The strange fruit of White flight must be associated with not allowing meaningful integration in schools and allowing Black students and parents to deal with how they are viewed in society. White flight prevented students from benefiting from what Civil Rights lawyers considered tangible and intangible benefits (Sweatt v. Painter, 1950) before the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Black students could not benefit from the tangible resources and opportunities in well-funded schools. But even more devastating was that they had to contend with being viewed as both a tangible and an intangible risk to White schools. The strange fruit of White flight is not only about the tangible benefits of resources and opportunities clustered in predominantly White schools throughout Maryland; it is also connected to how Maryland views its Black students and how these students must cope with the lack of resources and opportunities in their schools.

### **STRANGE FRUIT III: NEOLIBERAL REFORMS**

After White flight occurred and urban school districts became predominantly Black, these cities and schools were led by Black individuals. Around the same time, public discourse around the nation’s schools began to reflect an anxiety that America’s public schools were falling behind in educating youth. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) released *A Nation at Risk*, which suggested that public schools were inferior educational systems, and a “tide of mediocrity” has harmed the future of our nation’s workforce and economy. This way of thinking introduced a new school reform, in which academic standards, accountability, and privatization within school districts gained more traction and support. What was overlooked and forgotten was the root of the strange fruit that permitted underfunding and predominantly Black schools as well as an economic market that failed to provide qualified Black people with jobs after graduating from high school and college.

Three years after *A Nation at Risk*, the Baltimore-based Goldseker Foundation (Szanton, 1986) authored the report *Baltimore 2000*, which found connections with similar ideas of blaming school district leaders, teachers, students, and parents and issued a scathing review of the condition of Baltimore City Public Schools. Written by Dr. Peter Szanton, who did not interview school district leaders, teachers, students, or parents, he suggested that the city schools were “ineffective, undisciplined and dangerous.” Moreover, “there are more guns than books in some of those schools. The system is simply a disaster, commented one of the advisers” (p. 10). Baltimore City Public Schools, now a predominantly Black school district, were viewed as an ineffective, dangerous, and violent place where students cannot develop employment skills after graduation. While the school district had been losing resources for 20 years due to a lack of tax revenue from White flight, district leaders, teachers, students, and parents were ultimately left with the blame. Once



again, connecting with Mayor Mahool's words of 1910, Black people were seen as the burden who were risking the public good.

Many within the Black middle-class community asked Baltimoreans to think more deeply about the framing of the problem. For example, Pete Rawling, a state legislator from the 40th District, spoke to the problem's roots. He pointed to corporate racism and the limited employment that Black people received after graduating from high school or college as being major contributors to Baltimore's problems.

As Rawling stated:

*Corporate racism in Baltimore and the surrounding areas has generated a feeling and atmosphere that is not receptive to blacks in the black middle class. Unless the corporate community changes its orientation and becomes more responsive to the community and more responsive to bringing blacks in beyond secretaries and janitors, we're going to reach the year 2000 in worse shape than we're in now.*

While Rawling spoke these words over 35 years ago, these words linger to haunt the city and its youth who try to pursue paths to adult and career success upon graduation. Instead of addressing corporate racism, employment, and funding in schools, neoliberal reforms developed in the 1980s and 1990s blamed social ills on public schools and the government in general. In 2001, when the No Child Left Behind Act became law, the Secretary of Education Rod Paige called this legislation a part of the "new" Civil Rights Movement (Hursh, 2007). Since this legislation was enacted, standards, accountability, and school choice have become a core of educational policy. Reformers may use the words "equality" and "justice" but still fail to meet the educational promise of the state constitution.

As researchers in the 1990s and 2000s have shown, these reforms in Baltimore have been unsuccessful in meeting students' educational and developmental needs (Semerd & Cohen, 2009; Stringfield & Yakimowski-Sreblick, 2005). Once again, school district leaders, administrators, teachers, and students have been quarantined and blamed, without having access to the resources, opportunities, and job placement that guarantee students' educational promise and career success.

Neoliberal reforms that are only focused on standards, accountability, and private interests have subsequently been hyper-aware of Black leaders, surveilling them for corruption, rather than acknowledging the inequalities in dilapidated school infrastructure, unreliable transportation, and ineffective pathways to success. Today, while our administrators aim to instruct students, they are constantly approached by powerful citizens seeking to uncover corruption in order to "protect tax dollars". This neoliberal reform is a strange fruit in how it meets the educational needs of our students. As Morgan State University professor of Economics Homer Favor stated over 35 years ago old, "I will not join in blaming the victims" (Kathy Lally, *Baltimore Sun*, April 27, 1987). Today, the fruit continues to spread through neoliberal reforms that often bandy about the words "equality" and "justice" without addressing our youth's educational, social, cultural,

and emotional needs. As a result, the strange fruit has again lynched many of our students from obtaining a “thorough and efficient” educational system in the 21st century.

## **STRANGE FRUIT IV: INEQUITIES IN TRANSPORTATION**

The aforementioned Black Butterfly created by racial segregation in Baltimore City plays a large role in the use of and access to public transportation (Brown, 2021). In 1971, the Baltimore City Public Schools System (BCPSS) began using Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) buses as the exclusive provider of public transportation for students. The additional strain of carrying students to and from school along with commuters caused strains on the busing infrastructure.

In 2015, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan canceled plans for the east-to-west “red line,” a light rail system in Baltimore. Federal authorities investigated this decision because it diverted funds for public transportation away from Black working-class communities to wealthy White suburban areas. Although the investigation closed without significant findings, the outcome remained: \$736 million were disinvested from Black community transportation (Campbell, 2021). In 2017, MTA implemented the BaltimoreLink Plan that intended to improve public transportation across the city (Stein et al., 2017). Despite this plan, disparities in access and experiences with transportation still exist, specifically across racial lines. According to Baltimore Community Change (2022), Black Baltimoreans rely on public transportations at higher rates than other groups, and their commute times are longer than 45 minutes. These inequities in public transportation are related to the city’s segregation and divestment from Black communities.

In addition to the continued quarantine of Black communities from the city’s economic centers, students using MTA to attend school have difficult commutes that include long bus rides and complicated transfers that can contribute to school transfer (Stein et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2020). These issues are further compounded because students often feel unsafe on MTA buses going to and from school (Schoenberg et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2017). The gratuitous violence that youth and community members endure when using public transportation in Baltimore is a physical manifestation of the historical and structural violence Black communities have endured as part of the state’s neglect and disinvestment in particular areas.

## **STRANGE FRUIT V: GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE**

Gratuitous violence is the unnecessary and unrelenting violence that Black people have endured throughout American history. This violence has often been normalized because it is perceived as contingent on bad individual choices rather than gratuitous violence that aims to quarantine Black people from fully benefiting from and participating in a global economy and developing the academic skills to support their well-being, property, and citizenship. Many have attempted to cross the color line and survive in a job market that has historically discriminated against Black people. Black people in Baltimore are forced into a structural arrangement that devalues their participation in housing markets in order to maintain racial segregation.

Moreover, this political and structural configuration fails to provide students in Baltimore with the necessary funding and safe environments that will guarantee a “thorough and efficient” educational system.

Since enslavement, Black Baltimoreans have been situated to endure gratuitous violence to support and interact with an economic market (Malka, 2018). It is important to note that during slavery, enslavers used anti-literacy laws to justify physical violence such as beatings and amputation of fingers and toes (Grant, 2020). Freed Black people during this time also encountered another form of violence. They were unable to freely participate in accumulating their own wealth, property, and ensuring their own employment. Aiming to be an integral part of Maryland society Black people were subjected to structural violence that manifested physically and politically to confine their aspirations and their economic progress. This was blatantly done through employment and housing practices. For example, Baltimore in the 1850s had the largest population of freed Black people, some of whom became skilled at caulking (reinforcing a ship’s structure to prevent leaking) and found well-paid jobs. Intimidated by and jealous of these free, economically empowered Black people, a group of Whites called “The Tigers” burned down Black workers’ homes and inspired fear through violence. As a result, White bosses fired all their Black caulkers and gave the jobs to Whites (Towers, 2000).

After Emancipation, Black people started developing social, political, and economic power, which angered some Whites and triggered violence throughout many U.S. cities. In Baltimore, race riots in the late 1800s and early 1900s were fueled as White community members viciously attacked Black communities that were beginning to thrive and obtain their constitutional promises (Fuke, 2002). White men formed mobs that policed Black bodies and strengthened the Baltimore Police Department into what was then essentially a racialized instrument of state-sponsored terror and enforcement (Malka, 2018). Black people could not depend on these mobs or the police to protect their lives, property, or full citizenship. Black people were positioned as the enemy to protect property rights and employment of other Americans. After World War II, there was a migration of Black people from Deep South states and citizens returning from the war who wanted jobs in the city. In the 1940s and 50s, Baltimore had the highest proportion of Black residents (Breihan, 2002). When they returned from the war and left the deep southern states to access the promised land (Lemann, 1982), they recognized that the promise was denied. Instead, they were greeted with high unemployment and forced into concentrated poverty, which led many Blacks to protest in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. This was further exacerbated in the 60s-80s with the decline in manufacturing jobs and the lack of working-class opportunities within Baltimore and other “Rust Belt” communities.

To examine violence in Baltimore, one must consider both the individual acts of violence and the structural arrangements that have allowed violence to take place. Our society remains fixated on individual acts without acknowledging the structural arrangements that position Black people as seen as “super-predators” and cause harm and risk to people and property. By contrast, our youth and their families are concerned about the structural violence that leads to the violence that has become the norm in their



schools and communities. Navigating this violence has denied many young people the chance to enjoy their neighborhoods, parks, extracurricular activities, and after-school programs fully. The cycle of violence perpetuates our racial past, as students finishing high school and college are not valued in the modern Baltimore job market and receive no benefit from well-paying jobs. According to an analysis by Baltimore's Promise (2018), one in four Black Baltimoreans has neither enrolled in higher education nor entered the workforce. Those who have attended or completed a 2-year or 4-year degree or diploma do not earn an annual income equivalent to a full-time living wage, "regardless of college degree attainment" (p. 1). We can no longer assume that our society is competing with the streets. Rather, our society is structured so that the streets and unlivable wages have become the context in which Black youth are forced to experience gratuitous violence. In essence, the everyday violence that students endure and witness on the streets of Baltimore must be linked to how they are positioned and valued within economic markets in relation to jobs and housing.

## **STRANGE FRUIT VI: RESPECTABILITY POLITICS**

Within the Black community, there has always been a politics of respectability. Such politics concentrates on instilling "purity, self-restraint and moral discipline" (Ouer, 2018) to address the systemic oppression that Black people face. From Du Bois's (1903b) "Talented Tenth" to Bill Cosby's (2004) "pound cake speech," Black people have always aimed to make their communities better by stressing middle-class values and norms to help working-class Black people escape their poverty. This has often given some within the Black community a belief of meritocracy and moral superiority over less respectable Black people who have not developed the norms, styles, rhythms, dialects, and education that they perceive constitute the middle-class. Another strange fruit that we discovered is that many people, regardless of race, have bought into political respectability? to ensure equity, but this may prevent them from seeing the struggles, dilemmas, and potential solutions for youth and their families.

After reviewing notes and observing 24 strategy group meetings, the research team discovered that some of the comments made by some participants did not acknowledge the lived experiences of our youth in Baltimore. While not all, a few of these perceived middle-class professionals, only focused on specific Black students' norms, behaviors, and personal traits. Even when shown qualitative and quantitative data to the contrary, a few could not move away from personal responsibility. For example, the *Nobody Asked Me* research team structured strategy group meetings so members would receive fresh data from the study in order to devise interventions and strategies. After strategy group members heard the students' voices, they still could not express empathy to issues of homelessness, food insecurities, male and female sexual harassment on school buses, poor school infrastructure, and unsuccessful pathways leading to middle-class jobs in Baltimore. As a result, many strategy group members who worked directly with youth became frustrated, and several decided not to continue participating. The research team reviewed all emails from participants who stopped attending and discovered their main reason for leaving was a sense of being

insulted by strategy group members who they felt were insensitive to the voices of students and their families, despite seeing these issues every day.

From these strategy group meetings, we learned the importance of employment after graduation. Research suggests Baltimore has been unsuccessful in guaranteeing living wages (estimated to be \$13.28 per hour) to students who graduate with AA or BA degrees. Less than 30% do not go to college nor appear in the Maryland workforce (Baltimore Promise, 2018). Thus, the key issue is not about respectability politics but rather about ensuring living wages and middle-class jobs for the over 70% who graduate from high school and enter college with the hope of adult and career success. Thanks to neoliberal framing and media, respectability politics prevents us from seeing this structural problem. As a result, conversations only shed light on mentoring programs and “squeegee kids.” To this point, one professor suggested that the name of this report should be *Nobody Sees Me* because a few still could not recognize Black youth’s structural problems even after seeing qualitative and quantitative data evidence. Current respectability politics, which is supported by the neoliberal media, have caused many within the Black community to feed their own strange fruit—not fully seeing and loving our Black youth.

## **STRANGE FRUIT VII: THE INVISIBILITY OF BLACK PLACEMAKING**

To suggest that Black people in Baltimore are only victims is misleading. Black communities have always resisted, endured, and overcome multiple forms of oppression to educate themselves. Through these actions, they have found their joy and cultural knowledge and developed leadership skills to participate in democracy. This is particularly the case in Baltimore. However, another strange fruit that we discovered is the victimization of Black people without acknowledging the holistic and individual efforts they have produced to do more than just survive, but also thrive. We call this strange fruit the invisibility of Black placemaking.

Because they were excluded from the public school district in the early and mid-1800s, Black people in Baltimore obtained primary, secondary, and limited postsecondary education through Church-led day and Sabbath schools that taught essential reading and writing skills. As critical community resources, Black people, specifically the Black gentry, used their collectivized wealth to develop and sustain these institutions. By the 1850 Census, over half of Maryland’s Black residents identified as literate. After the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), Black community leaders and community members organized and protested so their children could attend public schools within the city. Their primary argument was that Black Baltimoreans were paying taxes for these schools that their children could not benefit from and were also supporting their children’s education through contributions, often made weekly, to churches and social clubs. Through grassroots organization, Black people in the late 1860s were able to gain a public education. However, it was not until the *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1954 decision that Blacks in Baltimore were allowed to integrate White schools legally, albeit still segregated. While their

segregated schools in Baltimore lacked resources, Black youth were fully aware that their teachers cared about them and the institution was attempting to provide them with nurturing environments to grow academically (Walker, 1996). Today, after many years of disinvestment, neoliberal state and federal school reforms, however, our research suggests that many youth and family members of Baltimore City Public Schools do not perceive that their teachers care for them or that their school culture produces a nurturing environment. Youth and families in the Baltimore City Public Schools System feel “invisible” within these institutions and even among each other. It is time for curricula and instruction to visualize Black placemaking as a way to create the connectedness needed for Black students to succeed educationally and to reimagine their potential.

It is important to mention this invisibility because many students, regardless of race, are unaware of the Black brilliance that is often not taught or fostered in schools throughout Maryland. Black people are often seen as a problem or burden, especially regarding violence, crime, and property value. Students, regardless of race, are unaware of the multiple sacrifices and struggles that multiple generations of Black individuals have endured to be treated equally. Thus, students must come to terms with racial disparities without the support of curricula and instruction that would help them understand the root causes of these inequalities. Visualizing Black placemaking can help students understand Black culture, knowledge, resiliency, beauty, styles, dialects, humor, and venues that humanize them, despite the multiple forms of hate and violence obstructing them from crossing the color line.

Another consideration of this strange fruit is that Black students do not need saviors; rather, they are asking for structural support that promises clear opportunities and careers. They are looking for systems, curricula, practices, and adult behaviors that support their well-being meaningfully and authentically. Proponents of neoliberal school reforms, specifically charter schools, evoke savior mentalities as they attempt to save Black students by using words of equity and inclusion without acknowledging the importance of resources and opportunities that are actually missing from their educational experiences. These missing experiences could positively transfer directly to their homes, schools, and communities. Without realizing the visibility of Black placemaking, students can default to agreeing either unconsciously or consciously with stereotypical images of Black life. All students must understand that Black communities have always thrived to empower themselves despite the color line and that the current status quo in Black communities is a historically and externally created aberration.



# FINDINGS



# FINDINGS

## LIVING IN MUNDANE TERROR: HOW BALTIMORE CITY SCHOOLS STUDENTS DEAL WITH VIOLENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY

*Joseph L. Boselovic*

Across our interviews with youth and families, safety and violence at school, in communities, and across Baltimore were regular concerns that shaped how respondents navigated their daily lives and aspirations for the future. Youth often described a sense of mundane terror, in which the possibility of violence was an everyday reality. These narratives reveal how Black youth are exposed to gratuitous violence that shapes daily life in neighborhoods and schools where possibilities for economic mobility and resources for personal development are often lacking. In this section, we look at what youth and families had to say about these concerns and focus specifically on three overarching themes:

**Theme 1:** Youth navigate violence and bullying in schools, which disrupt their educational experiences and their ability to pursue educational goals.

**Theme 2:** The potential for violence in neighborhoods and across the city shapes students' sense of well-being and their ability to navigate daily life.

**Theme 3:** Police often increase, rather than address, youth and parental concerns around neighborhood violence.

In their assessments of safety and violence at school, in neighborhoods, and in encounters with the police, youth shared how the stress of managing their personal safety affected their navigation of daily life and relationships. Not surprisingly, given their assessments, the youth often described addressing neighborhood violence and providing more resources to schools as ways to improve their own lives and the lives of other youth in Baltimore.

**Theme 1: Youth navigate violence and bullying in schools, which disrupt their educational experiences and their ability to pursue educational goals.**

Youth described a range of challenges facing them as they navigated school that shaped both their daily lives and their long-term educational trajectories and aspirations. One recurring theme in their descriptions of school life was having to pursue academic success within the context of regular or unexpected fights and

bullying. For example, Kim, 17, highlighted the ways in which students understood fights as disruptive and how they could often reveal challenges that schools faced in fostering a healthy and supportive learning environment:

*Fighting, it was a lot of fighting, I'm not going to lie. There were weapons being brought in. And I was like, 'Wow, how you didn't get caught in the metal detectors?' And it was just so crazy. Fighting and they wouldn't get suspended. They would fight and come back the next day.*

Although weapons were not often mentioned in other youth accounts, this experience does resonate with what others shared in that fighting in schools often came with consequences, thus deteriorating students' sense that school was a safe and caring place.

Fighting was often connected to broader problems of bullying in students' accounts. Christy, 18, who attended a private high school, shared her experiences with bullying by comparing her current school to her public middle school:

*Bullying is definitely present in public school. It's present in private school, but it's kind of in a different way. In public school, people are just outwardly mean, they outwardly degrade you, they outwardly make you feel inferior. And teachers are just like, 'Oh, this is normal behavior.' Nothing about bullying is normal. Obviously, there's something going on at home. Obviously, there's something going on within that person themselves. I was definitely at times bullied for my looks or maybe for being a girl, being skinny.*

Christy's perspective echoed what other youth told us: while bullying and fighting could become normalized in schools, youth perceived how they also reflected the struggles and lack of support that students often identified both inside and outside of school.

The sense that bullying and fighting were normalized and that school staff had limited capacity to address students' academic and non-academic needs often resulted in individualized responses from the youth. As one youth succinctly put it: "If you mind your business, you'll be good." Another youth, Sky, 16, explained how he took it upon himself to take control of uncertain situations by isolating himself from relationships that might get him involved in fighting or trouble more generally:

*I just stayed out of the way. During stuff like that, you got to stay to yourself. It's more of who you hang around and who you surround yourself around.... It could be some people that hang around people that they have bad things in their lives. Now, I can see if they got over it and they changed first, but if you know that they keep doing this, and they keep repeating it, and they never stop, then I feel like you should just.... That's not the person for you.*

Rather than seeing fights in schools as random or inevitable, Sky showed how youth themselves often saw external reasons for why students lashed out in school and felt that without real solutions to these problems, they needed to adopt a strategy of going it alone.

*I felt like if I tried to speak to people then it would get worse. But I'd say, I don't know. The teachers, I know that they see kids bullying other kids. I know they see it because it's in class in front of their faces. So, then I guess they should try to speak up for the kids that are being bullied. It's hard to speak up.*

When youth like Cameron feel stuck in this kind of situation, the need to protect themselves and stay out of trouble often become concerns that weigh on their mind, limit their abilities to form strong relationships with peers and adults, and impede focusing on learning.

Moreover, the struggles that some youth described in their relationships with peers and adults also limited the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging and recognized their true selves in school. Given the weight that some youth carried, this lack of recognition and focus on trivial matters by adults in school increasingly strained these relationships. For example, Tessie, 15, explained her frustration with the issue of what students wore:

*The administration thinks that their job is their entire life. If I have a movement hoodie on, because either I'm cold, because the A/C is blasting, or because I'm upset and I don't want people to see my face, you don't have to yank my hood off, you don't have to look at me to take it off. If you're allowing us to have hoodies in school, don't get mad at us for using those hoodies. It's so pointless.... It's just frustrating.*

Such moments, like Tessie described, where youth feel a lack of belonging or recognition of their personal experiences on any given day only serve to strain relationships with adults that are already challenged by the realities of ongoing bullying and violence.

## **Theme 2: The potential for violence in neighborhoods and across the city shapes students' sense of well-being and their ability to navigate daily life.**

Whether talking about taking a walk or a bus to school, visiting friends in their neighborhood, or making other journeys, youth often detailed concerns around the possibility of violence that clouded their daily activities and relationships. In describing specific safety concerns, students recounted incidents that had happened to friends, family members, and strangers. They detailed the reality that safety was a constant concern for many Black youth coming of age in Baltimore. Similarly, neighborhood safety and the need to protect children from violence was in the forefront of many parents' minds.

For example, Tyler, 16, detailed the uneven geography that many youth navigate each day in their neighborhoods and the city more generally: "My block is not that bad, but the blocks around it, it can be

pretty bad, with shootings and all that stuff. Natural things that happen in Baltimore City.” This experience—that one block might be safe but that the neighborhood is not—was common for youth who often had to travel such blocks to get to school or work or broader parts of the city. Importantly, Tyler’s perspective also emphasizes that youth have come to regard violence in the city as a ‘natural’ rather than an exceptional characteristic of their world.

Echoing what the youth said about keeping to themselves in the wake of fighting at school, students also described the need to keep a distance in their own neighborhoods, especially when they did not know many of the people around them. Similar to Tyler, Tonya, 17, described the possibility of violence as pervasive and the go-it-alone response she has to take to navigating the city:

*The city is dangerous. But do I have to worry about it being directly [dangerous] to me? No. But being out and about, yes. Because anything can happen at any time. The crime rate, police brutality, a lot of racial stuff still going on.... You just got to be cautious in this city because it’s dangerous, because you don’t know nobody mindset. But here, it’s every man for himself.*

As Tonya elaborated, youth often did not feel a sense of being personally targeted in their neighborhoods. Rather, the fear was around getting caught in random acts of violence and feeling a fundamental lack of protection in many aspects of their daily lives.

The parents we interviewed reflected similar concerns about the unpredictability of violence in their neighborhoods, which necessitated more caution in letting their family members go out alone. One parent, Kayla, spoke of how a teenager had recently been shot walking out of a recreational center in the city:

*It is very, very scary. Sometimes I’m even scared to leave my house.... The crime rate just on young people is so crazy.... Right now, we are very overprotective of my nephews. They don’t even catch the bus or walk.*

This sense of youth needing to isolate themselves or of parents taking extra steps to protect their children commonly resulted in parents describing specific choices—avoiding public transit, not letting children out on their own, monitoring who they spent time with—to decrease exposure to violence. Beyond these everyday measures, some parents also reflected on how they felt neighborhood violence in Baltimore limited the extent to which their children could experience childhood more fundamentally. Another parent, Tami, stated: “A lot of kids nowadays don’t get that experience of being outside.... It’s dangerous now. You got kids outside sitting on their porch and they get shot, it’s terrible and it’s sad.” Asked to compare her son’s childhood to her own, Tami said:

*I don’t feel like he really got to be a child due to the simple fact because of that.... But to just be*



*outside, I never was okay with that because like I said, you can just be outside sitting on your porch, and somebody could be shooting. They kill in the daytime now, used to be at night. Now it's the daytime, they don't care anymore. I just wish he could really have had more of a childhood growing up.*

Tami's experiences reflected those of other parents particularly in how the potential for violence and lack of protection presented acute concerns for Black youth to experience childhood and grow up in a safe environment.

Fundamentally, youth concerns over neighborhood violence were often connected to their aspirations and sense of whether they could achieve their dreams in a place like Baltimore. As Calvin, 16, put it: "[One thing] I worry about the most is that I just make it out of Baltimore safely.... I worry about that every time I walk out my door. But I try not to let fear hold me back from doing things." This kind of balancing act—imagining one's future while managing possible dangers in the present—was a harsh reality that many youth shared in their accounts of coming of age.

### **Theme 3: Police often increase, rather than address, youth and parent concerns around neighborhood violence.**

In addition to describing the realities of navigating neighborhoods where the possibility of violence is omnipresent, youth and families described another source of concern about safety: the police. In interviews, the youth spoke about their experiences with police contact, negative experiences of friends and family at the hands of police, and a broader concern with a racialized system of crime and punishment that they perceived in the murders of George Floyd and Freddie Gray. A fear of police contact was also a paramount concern for many parents, who described specific parenting strategies they used to keep their children safe not only from neighborhood violence but also from the police.

While some youth recounted specific incidents they had with police and parents shared stories of their children coming into contact with the police, the fear of potential contact alone was often an animated concern for the youth we interviewed. Their fear was often explicitly racialized, as Brianna 17, expressed: "I don't want to say I don't like police officers, but I just don't really care for them. I just feel like they only protect White people. They don't really care to protect us." As Brianna explicitly stated, the police were often not seen as a source of protection for Black youth. Instead, youth generally described the police as adding to, rather than alleviating, their concerns about safety. Similar to Brianna, Jasmin, 20, told us: "They [the police] give me anxiety. Just everything about the police just ruffles my feathers." These feelings of a lack of protection and generalized anxiety were common in the youth's assessments of the police.

Youth fears of police contact were often exacerbated by how they processed the deaths of George Floyd, Freddie Gray, and others at the hands of the police. Reflecting on an instance in which the neighbors called

the police on him and officers responded with guns drawn, John, 21, explained the connections that youth often made between national stories of police brutality and their personal experiences:

*Everybody has that experience with the police, and they shouldn't be armed, obviously. But our country has done a really, really good job of sensationalizing specific instances of violence so that we don't start to question the larger systems of violence.... [E]very police officer is part of that, no just the guys who decide to kill Freddie Gray.*

This reflection shows how Black individuals have come to perceive events like the murder of Freddie Gray as not isolated but as part of a larger, national pattern in which the police use their authority to harm, and even kill, Black people.

This connection between highly publicized accounts of police brutality and daily life was also a common topic for parents. For example, the perspective of one parent, Traci, captured the sentiments about and reactions of many parents to seeing video footage of Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin killing George Floyd:

*When I saw that video, the first thing I did was cry thinking how that could've been one of my children. It could have been someone close I know. I am very protective over them, so the first thing I thought: that could've been one of them.*

As with John's statement, Traci's words show how the possibility of police brutality was not an abstraction for both parents and youth, but a visceral concern that cast a shadow over their lives.

In addition to their accounts of police in Baltimore and high-profile murders, youth also described concerns with the criminal justice system that go beyond the police. Kim, introduced previously, explained:

*I am scared of the law as well because it's just so unfair. The rules, okay, cool. But the people who enforce the rules and the people who get to sentence you to punishment.... Whatever the situation may be, I'm not going to get a fair trial because of my skin color.*

In this instance, Kim perceived that not only individual police but the criminal justice system itself were set up in ways that would always mark her and others like her as guilty.

Parents also shared concerns about police as a source of potential harm, rather than protection, for their family members. One parent, Ellen, summarized this perspective: "The police is supposed to be a go-between to solve problems, to negotiate, to bring peace. But when the police is at the forefront, rather, igniting trouble, we have question marks." Describing the Baltimore Police Department more generally, another parent, Robyn, shared:

*They are known for their tactics and their reputation, I will say nationally, is recognized as being a little bit over the top. I would say I don't really have a positive association with the police. And I'm sure that there are good people in the police force, but personally, I feel like that you just being a good person is not enough. If it's my uncle or my cousin who's gunned down, it's not good enough for me that one person is good.*

For Robyn, it was less significant to understand whether the police were good or bad on the whole; it was more important to reckon with the fact that it only takes one officer, not a whole police force, to bring irreparable harm to a family.

The narratives that youth and family members shared with us revealed myriad ways in which a mundane terror shapes everyday life in Baltimore—another form of strange fruit that has grown from the roots of the city's history of inequality. Whether witnessing fights in schools, hearing about neighborhood violence, or anxiously encountering police, these stories show the burdens that Black Baltimoreans carry that are compounded by the city's underinvestment in Black neighborhoods. These narratives also point to the fundamental importance of feeling safe and cared for—in school specifically and the city generally—to reinforce youth's ability to pursue their dreams.

## THROWN UNDER THE BUS: FINDINGS ON TRANSPORTATION IN BALTIMORE

*Dr. Joshua Schuschke*

The Nobody Asked Me campaign's findings on transportation found that youth and their families are generally unhappy with and burdened by the use of the MTA as school transportation. Specifically, these buses are unsafe, particularly for girls, and are unreliable in ensuring punctual arrivals to school. Families with resources can bypass the MTA by dropping their students off by car; however, many in these communities do not have that luxury. Our analysis of the data identified three key themes:

**Theme 1:** Drivers skipping stops lead to additional burdens and tardiness to school.

**Theme 2:** Violence on buses affects youth's physical, social, and academic well-being.

**Theme 3:** Verbal and physical assaults, especially of feminine bodies, are prominent experiences on buses.

The inability to access safe and timely transportation across the city creates mobility issues for youth and their families that impacts their daily routines, education, and livelihoods.

## Theme 1: Drivers skipping stops leads to additional burdens and tardiness to school.

Across our interviews, the youth routinely described how overcrowded buses lead to issues with timely arrivals to schools and other destinations. In the following quotes, Shantia, 16, and Jasmine, 15, talked about their routines in riding the bus:

*Every day they would ride past you if they (were) too full or if....sometimes they will take you off the bus if you don't have your bus card, or they will ride past you. Or sometimes the bus will come late, or sometimes the bus drivers will take a break for half-an-hour.*

I will wake up a bit early but sometimes the buses, they'll be packed. So there's really not a way I can improve it.... Like some buses they'll go right past you, if you're not right there because he [bus driver] might be packed or some bus drivers are rude.

In their respective quotes, Shantia and Jasmine described buses as being “too full” and “packed”; however, they both suggested that bus drivers’ decisions to skip stops or alter routes as the result of reasons other than a lack of room on the bus. Overcrowded buses clearly create a perennial likelihood that students will not reach school on time. The youth have had to factor these persistent challenges into their daily routines. For instance, Kayla, 23, explained:

*I mostly took the bus. I didn't like it because it was cold outside and sometimes the buses, especially in the morning.... That should be a resource is the fact that it's a rush hour.... If you have to be in school by 7:45, you take that 7:00 bus.... The bus will skip you, will most likely skip you.... If there's just too many people on the bus, the bus will just drive right by you. Sometimes if they see too many kids on the bus stop, the bus might not be that crowded but they'll still skip you because it's too many kids on the bus stop.*

Kayla's quote reiterates the issues raised by Shantia and Jasmine while also shedding light on the amount of time students factor into their daily commute. This extra time simply waiting for a bus—which may or may not pick them up—could be spent in getting extra rest for the school day, eating a proper breakfast, completing class assignments, and so on. Even with factoring in additional time, tardiness can still occur, as Rachel, 17, described:

*Because it's like once the bus get filled and they have somewhat kids and a majority of adults, all the kids from school can't get on the bus. So now, everybody's parents are, “Where you at? Why are you coming in the house late?” Things of that nature because of adults getting on and off the bus and kids can't really get to where they need to be, especially in the morning.*

The overcrowding and/or skipping of stops has direct consequences for youth's academic experiences and can leave them vulnerable in public spaces as they attempt to traverse the city. Overall, this theme revealed that youth are factoring in additional time for their commutes to school, despite their expectation that they



will be bypassed or delayed. This then impacts student attendance, learning, and physical well-being.

## **Theme 2: Violence on buses affects youth's physical, social, and academic well-being.**

The second theme stems from the aforementioned overcrowding which leads to riding unsafe buses. Safety issues here include unsanitary spaces, physical violence, and sexual violence, particularly against girls. These overt forms of violence on the MTA not only affect the youth's physical well-being but their academic and socioemotional lives as well. In the following quote, Latrice, 20, described his experience riding the bus during his time in high school:

*I've seen somebody pee in a bus, I've seen somebody hawk spit on a bus, I've seen fights on a bus, I've seen like people nodding off on a bus, I've seen people get into it, almost fight a bus driver. I've seen everything. I've been catching the bus my whole life pretty much. I've seen everything there is to see on a bus. I've seen a mouse on a bus, literally. There's nothing that I have not seen on a bus. Like I said, some of them are really dirty.*

The range of health concerns raised by Latrice indicates that buses are unclean spaces that are compounded by the overcrowding problem. In addition to the “really dirty” buses, Latrice also described fights among passengers or with drivers as common occurrences—a frequent topic of discussion. Violence on the bus and at bus stops were recounted by many, including Amy, 21:

*I could not even tell you the amount of times students got jumped on the way home from school.... It was a very, very regular occurrence, especially because we had to use the public school buses. And so, my parents would say, “You should use the bus to get home, but if it's getting a little late, just call us. We'll come pick you up.” I had several friends who were followed [home].*

Amy described not only how violence regularly occurs during transportation to and from school, but also how parents had additional safety concerns when their children used public transportation. In the following quote, Jae described the hard choices his mother made to ensure that he would not have to go to school on a bus:

*Actually, she just stopped working to do that because she didn't want us to get on the bus, so she's trying to maneuver around and get that together because she needs to get back to work, but she is also worrying about our safety too.*

Youth with privileged means or families who assume the extra burden of driving their children to school expressed both a relief in having alternate transportation and improvement in their academic outcomes. In the following quote, Alicia, 18, explained:

*It's good, because I know that I'm safe in the car with my uncle and my grades is better. I have As and Bs.... Because one time I heard that...this person was on the bus stop, they got robbed because they were on bus stop at a certain time. And I don't want that to be me. So, ninth grade year I used to get up at 5:00 and I used to leave at 6:00 and it will still be dark outside.*

Alicia's quote is indicative of the general fear and extra responsibility families have to assume when relying on the MTA. The youth described the danger of physical violence that is present with public transportation and the additional burden imposed on families who respond to these dangers by driving their children to school. Many students do not have this option, however, and so their physical safety and, ultimately, their educational achievements are compromised.

Violence, along with sanitation, was the most prevalent finding in the transportation data, with numerous descriptions of danger and violence as evidence.

### **Theme 3: Verbal and physical assault, especially of feminine bodies, are prominent experiences on buses.**

While violence and general feelings of unsafety were concerns for many participants, our findings showed that girls, in particular, are frequently subjected to harassment on the bus or at bus stops by adults. These unwanted advances include physical and verbal assaults. Here, Sarah, 23, described harassment that younger girls face when riding the MTA:

*So, there were just these group of older girls who just harassed and berated all the other girls who were waiting at that stop for no reason, just dissing their appearance and everything. I felt really bad. They were crying and stuff.... It was just bullying for no reason just because they were like, here's some high schoolers that are kind of away from the main pack. They left me alone, though.*

The socioemotional toll on girls using public transportation in Baltimore is alarming. Sarah's quote highlighted the ways that girls are targeted when they are not in large groups or with their parents when trying to go to school. This verbal harassment of girls also includes sexual comments and physical abuse. In the following quote, Robyn, 20, described the behavior of adults on the bus and their actions directed towards the girls. In this instance, she explained the interactions she has seen with intoxicated individuals who are also onboard:

*A lot of times there's people not actively smoking but you could tell that they were just smoking, and they will say or do inappropriate things and there's not really someone to be a barrier in between*

*that.... Like sexual comments or grabbing you and stuff like that. Just weird sexual harassment I would say it is.*

Robyn actively avoids the MTA because she is aware of the behavior of adults towards women and she does not trust strangers on the bus. She noted that “there’s not really someone there to be a barrier” to highlight the lack of protection in this space.

The general lack of safety on buses is further compounded when viewed through a gendered lens which shows that girls are particularly vulnerable and attacked when traversing the city. Public transportation, especially when it comes to youth traveling to and from school, can be time-consuming, inconvenient, and treacherous. Youth and their families are burdened by the lack of safe and efficient service that connects them to education and other opportunities throughout the city.

## LEFT OUT IN THE COLD: UNMASKING THE HIDDEN INFRASTRUCTURE

**Richard Lofton**

*Richard: All right. Well thank you so much for this interview. Is there anything else you would like to add or anything else I missed?*

*Don: Can you please talk to the school to fix the toilet and to fix the building?*

*Richard: Thank you, I surely will.*

When I ended the interview, tears fell from my eyes. Don’s was the sixty-eighth interview I had conducted with students and parents. It was a Friday evening, and I was not expecting Don’s last words to be about fixing the school’s toilets and building. Before that comment, Don had discussed how his father had died at an early age because of gun violence. In an earlier interview, Don’s grandmother had informed me that his uncle had acted as a father figure after this loss. But Don’s uncle was falsely accused of burglary and spent several years in prison. After his release, he was deported to Jamaica. With all the difficulties Don has endured, I was surprised to hear him dwell on something that many take for granted in schools.

When people think of education and achievement, they often overlook the physical building that houses the school and its vital influence on the learning environment. In 1921, George D. Strayer, a Teachers College, Columbia University professor, reported that students in Baltimore encountered decaying school building infrastructure, non-existent libraries, a lack of places for physical activities, and a lack of career training

(Strayer Report, 1921). One hundred years later, our research team discovered some of the same problems rooted in a lack of adequate investment in the Baltimore City Public Schools System.

After Don's surprising comment, our research team reviewed interview transcripts for participants' experiences with school infrastructure. We discovered that many students like Don were concerned about their school environments and felt the school buildings were not conducive for effective learning. Some expressed aspects of their school environments as additional burdens to bear in their everyday learning experiences. Moreover, they felt their school buildings reflected the common perception of students like them within the Baltimore City and Baltimore City Public Schools System. Students often felt that because they attended a predominantly Black school district, their quarantining to a school building equivalent to the slums was inevitable.

Don's words help people to understand that many of the structural changes students want are connected to the role poor school buildings play in relation to their own humanity. For them, the school building represents not only tangible resources, but also an intangible *hidden infrastructure* that represents where they believe their state and city think they belong. In teacher preparation programs, educators and researchers learn of a *hidden curriculum*, which refers to the unwritten, unspoken, and unofficial lessons that students learn in school (Jackson, 1968; Snyder, 1970). Our data revealed that school buildings are, in fact, not just school buildings; rather, they are connected to and part of a *hidden infrastructure* that leads students to understand where they belong in the world and whose knowledge, insight, and humanity we must protect, value, and support.

While the hidden curriculum helps us understand the norms and practices within pedagogy, the *hidden infrastructure* underscores and illuminates the unwritten, unspoken, and unofficial lessons that students learn via personal experiences with their school building. For example, youth and their family members want their humanity—both physical and intellectual—protected by the simple assurance that mid-winter or mid-summer, their learning environment offers appropriate classroom temperatures that allow them to concentrate effectively on their work. They want to be valued for their efforts so that they are not forced to miss learning opportunities or risk their health because of poor building maintenance. In short, students want their school building infrastructure and hidden infrastructure to literally not leave them out in the cold (or heat).

This report highlights how students make sense of school infrastructure and its importance to shaping their perception of belonging and mattering in the world. Here, we illuminate three themes that emerged from the data on school infrastructure.



**Theme 1:** Poor school conditions (e.g., extreme temperatures) cause a loss of learning time and challenge students' ability to concentrate.

**Theme 2:** Students believe that poor school conditions are not incidental or accidental but, rather, are rooted in strange fruit.

**Theme 3:** Students' basic human needs are neglected because of poor school conditions.

**Theme 1: Poor school conditions (e.g., extreme temperatures) cause a loss of learning time and challenge students' ability to concentrate.**

Don's words at the beginning of this section about fixing the school building were echoed throughout many of the interviews by the students in their own words. Students went into great detail about how their classrooms were too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. Regardless of location or student population, students reported serious temperature issues that prevented them from learning. In discussing this issue, students focused in particular on how these extreme temperatures and poor physical conditions hindered meaningful school time. For example, Jim (age 20) made this point:

*We didn't have working air conditioning, to the point where we had so many off days of school because it was just too hot for us to be inside the building. So, we actually got a lot of time off [from school]. And even in the wintertime for the opposite reason, it was freezing in there and we didn't have any heat.*

Angel (age 17) reaffirmed the same concerns:

*It's very cold in that building. Either it's super cold or it's super hot.*

Tony (age 19) continued in the same vein:

*They made us wear jackets when it was too cold and when it was too hot, they just let us go, but it was really hot...*

Jim, Angel, and Tony brought to awareness how ineffective air conditioning and heating disrupts consistent school attendance and learning. Several interviewees also highlighted how they missed many important, meaningful moments in school because of time lost to inhospitable classroom temperatures. Researchers who study chronic absenteeism understand the importance of daily attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Moreover, other researchers have argued that hot school days disproportionately impact minority students, accounting for roughly 5% of the racial achievement gap (Park et al., 2020). This social science research, coupled with the voices of students, helps us understand that poorly maintained school buildings with faulty heating and cooling systems make schools unreliable learning environments and directly impact students'

academic achievement—in essence, betraying the promise of a “thorough and efficient” education.

Teshia added to the infrastructure conversation by discussing her school’s plumbing. For her and other students at her school, broken pipes lead to missed learning, as Teshia said:

*Then we had a lot of pipes broken and things like that. We got a lot of time off for that. Probably once a month, we had a pipe burst and we had to be sent home early from school.... And like I said, from first glance, if a visitor was to come to our school, they would look at it and think, “Okay, this is a pretty nice school,” but they don’t know the actual truth.*

In this statement, Teshia let us know that at first glance, a person might consider the school building “pretty nice.” However, a longer stay and closer relationship with the infrastructure would lead them to deduce that looks are deceiving. Teshia’s truth is that the pipes, hidden within the infrastructure and often overlooked, are limiting her and other students from regularly enjoying normal school days.

Students are not the only ones who are aware of how old, broken-down equipment in their school buildings leads to missed learning opportunities. Family members are equally frustrated when poor building conditions cause extended absences. Lillian (age 59) shared her thoughts:

*And a lot of times, that’s what has happened. It’s just been a lot of patchwork. And so, I mean, that just happened this year with some pipes bursting. I know when things get cold, that can happen. But the pipes are old and that’s going to happen more. And not having heat. School’s having to shut down because they’re too hot. I mean, that’s not acceptable. Our kids can’t learn that way. And so, I agree with that and there needs to be something done.*

Lillian connected missed learning opportunities with the school’s “patchwork” or superficial approach to solving larger structural issues. For Lillian, school days will continue to be lost unless the equipment in school buildings is updated and made more dependable and durable. She contended that students cannot learn if school buildings must be closed because of poor infrastructure. Lillian does not want Baltimore students to be abandoned in the cold because of this patchwork history. For Lillian and many other family members, the hidden infrastructure is tied to the underfunded school district that lacks state support to help them construct quality school environments for their students.

Youth like Don, Jim, Angel, Tony, and Teshia, as well as family members like Lillian, invite us to ask entirely different questions when considering student success and the hidden school infrastructure. With such questions, the blame of lost class time no longer falls on the students, parents, or neighborhoods. Instead, the blame lands directly on state leaders, politicians, and researchers who neither talk to students nor examine the social science research on the importance of effective school buildings for minority

students. Our data drawn directly from students and family members compelled us to ask and continue understanding: What do we do when students make efforts to go to school, but the state under-supplies resources and encourages poor attendance because of poor building conditions that would be remedied with greater attention and haste in other preferable environments?

Attendance is not the only factor affected by temperature that impacts educational promise: Inappropriate temperature conditions also impede concentration, according to the students. Janet, who graduated from high school 3 years ago, reflected on her experiences in a Baltimore City Public Schools high school. She discussed how the extreme temperatures within her school building stopped her and her classmates from focusing on the subject matter:

*I wouldn't just say having heat, but that is a big part, because you will be cold. Some people can't really focus under certain conditions. I wouldn't be able to focus...if I was freezing cold.*

When I asked Janet to elaborate, she said cold temperatures prevent students from focusing directly on the material being taught. Janet was not alone in her view. Several interviewees reported that extreme temperatures hindered their concentration; to this point, Zane said, “You can’t really focus when you’re cold so, it is pretty bad.” While researchers have suggested that students are confronted with out-of-school factors (Coleman Report, 1966; Sharkey, 2010) that prevent them from concentrating, the students in this study asserted that the school building itself was a prime obstacle to learning during times of extreme temperatures.

By the same token, we learned that students demonstrated resilience when it came to these extreme temperatures. Students did not wish to be stopped in their goals by such harsh conditions, as Latoya indicated:

*I thought the heat was worse when we didn't have.... Learning in the heat was worse than being in the cold because at least you could put your jacket on and a hat, but...and it wasn't super, super cold, it was pretty cold in there. It wasn't we were sitting outside. But when it's hot in that building, it's hot.*

Latoya’s words suggested that students are doing their best when coping with unfavorable temperatures—and, in essence, navigating their constitutional betrayal—by, for example, putting on jackets and hats to stay warm and maintain focus. But that only works with the cold; Latoya mentioned they cannot do much about extreme heat. We discovered that students during cold months bring hoodies, sweaters, hats, gloves, and jackets to protect themselves and to focus on learning. According to our interviewees, this sometimes leads to conflict with the adults who demand that students not wear certain clothes to school. Nonetheless, the strength and resilience of students to remain in school and persist in learning despite extreme temperatures

speaks to their commitment to attendance and academic success. Students are, in fact, doing their part but lack the structures to support them fully.

To the flip side of the issue, Brian illuminated how his determination to stay in school and stay warm sometimes led to other problems:

*Sometimes we didn't have no heat or it was extremely cold. And then you have restrictions about what you can wear, but it's like, well, I'm wearing a hoodie, that's not a part of my uniform, but it's cold. So how can I focus? Stuff like that. I mean, teachers and principals worry about what we had on too much. And that's not even the main problem.*

Brian knows clearly that he is not the problem. He is fully aware that as a student in the school, his main role is to focus and learn. He implied that state-sponsored betrayal has put him in an environment that is not conducive to productive learning. For him, wearing a hoodie helps him keep warm and focus. For the adults, the hoodie represents a problem and even a threat. Brian's thoughts invite deeper thinking: He wants adults to know that he is not the issue; rather, the root is the normalization of the hidden infrastructure. Students are keenly aware of this "main problem" and produce their own resilience strategies and agency to combat the obstacles. By asking students about their experiences in school, we not only uncover additional burdens causing missed learning opportunities, but we expose a significant struggle: once again, and on many levels, being left out in the cold.

## **Theme 2: Students believe that poor school conditions are not incidental or accidental but, rather, are rooted in strange fruit.**

For many students, being left out in the cold is no accident. For them, adults and students in other school districts in Maryland are granted immunity from structural issues, while Baltimore students continue to be denied comfortability in their schools. Students associated this hidden infrastructure with their perceived lack of value simply because they attend public school in Baltimore. For example, Kyle, a student who went to City high school in Baltimore but then transferred to the "elite" career high school, explained the broad gulf between resources in each school, which is further compounded by observations of disparity in how students are treated:

*I remember when the seniors were taking their SATs in the building, it was cold. They were literally taking their SATs with their coats on. I remember all throughout my time at City, like during the winter, we would just have to wear coats and they required you to wear.... We'll buy a City-approved jacket because you needed a jacket to be inside of the school. When they did renovations on the school only certain classrooms had air conditioning or heating all throughout the year. I never had a problem at Career [high school] because that's where the Baltimore City Office of Workforce Development is. They have actual employees there, so they actually have to be comfortable.*

Kyle not only illuminated this state-sponsored betrayal but also mentioned a city agency that does not have temperature issues because they have employees who the agency feels “actually have to be comfortable.” For Kyle and other students, however, there is a distrust of school authorities in their so-called fair treatment and fostering of comfortable school environments that center on academic work.

Other youth pointed to student experiences in other school districts and how their comfortable and conducive environments allowed them to concentrate and learn academic skills. Zane, who has a half-sister who attended Montgomery County, said:

*It's really disheartening. My half-sister went to high school in Montgomery County. They had really nice stuff, and I always wanted her to know how bad we had it. When I went there, I almost felt resentful of them for having all of these nice things. They had all these...I don't know, new computer rooms. Even their school lunch was so much better, and I just felt like it didn't make sense that one district in Maryland should have a significantly better schooling experience than we were. I think both. We either got sent home or they came and fixed it our building.*

Zane graduated from City Schools around 3 years ago. While she is a White woman who attended a predominantly Black school district that continues to confront a hidden infrastructure, she was witness to differences in educational experiences based on district. She noted that her half-sister attended a school that had “nice things,” while she went to a school where some days were “either it was too hot or too cold.” For Zane, it did not make sense that one district in Maryland would have better schooling conditions than the ones she personally experienced.

While White students did not hold back on state-sponsored color lines that contribute to 21st century educational betrayal, many Black students felt that because they are Black students, Marylanders are nonchalant with their unfulfilled promises. Koby's interview made us realize that students are not only aware of their poor school conditions, but also that society does not care about their learning conditions purely because they are Black students. A Koby reflected:

*So I believe it's because of our skin color and because they don't really care about us because if they did, then they would actually fix our buildings. They're not fixing our school buildings. But they will fix White people buildings, their buildings.... It looks clean, it looks healthy. But our building got to look like trash.*

Koby went into detail regarding the differences between schools in Baltimore versus other school districts. When I asked Koby how these differences make him feel, he responded that the districts do this because of “our” skin color. While not directly answering my question, Koby focused instead on the root of the problem. For him, the color line is drawn by school buildings and school resources. It was Koby's contention that



society does not care about its Black students because they have not fixed their school buildings, despite knowing the deficiencies. Koby is not alone, given that many other students felt this lack of state and social care because they were Black students in a predominantly Black school district. Koby, Zane, and Kyle differed in their race, gender, socioeconomic background, and residence within the city, but their statements nonetheless collectively help us understand that students can recognize—and be impacted by—how the larger society views them.

It is important to note that school infrastructure is not only about the physical environments that house our schools. These youth made a connection between how society valued them and how they navigate their place in the world by the way their school buildings are run and maintained. Students are aware that school buildings are places of investment, where norms, values, and appreciations are legitimized. In other words, students are, in fact, devastated by poor school conditions, yet these are tangible hindrances. Even more painful is the hidden infrastructure that cannot be seen or touched but is nonetheless very real and pernicious. For example, when Zane went to a school in Montgomery County, she was resentful and disheartened because of her exposure to what in fact was the hidden infrastructure. Zane was not told through textbooks, politicians, or teachers that her school conditions were significantly poorer than in other school districts. Simply by living daily, she was not only made aware of the acute differences between schools, but also resented that her school district was denied resources and opportunities that students needed in the 21st century.

Through stories like Zane's, we can conclude that youth acknowledge a hidden infrastructure that is neither written nor spoken but comprise an unintended lesson from painful experiences. The lesson bitterly informs who is valued, privileged, rewarded, and normalized in and by society. According to our findings, the hidden infrastructure that students endure is inextricably linked to a tacit message that Marylanders are choosing to leave Baltimore students out in the cold by not investing in comfortable and safe learning environments so they can fully develop their skills for success.

### **Theme 3: Students' basic human needs are neglected because of poor school conditions.**

Another theme we discovered is that poor conditions in schools are not only hindrances to academic excellence but also public health concerns. In our interviews with youth and their family members, we discovered that youth experience public health concerns when they are in unsanitary restrooms that lack resources and fester rodents because of poor infrastructure.

As mentioned earlier, when Don ended our interview by asking me to talk to someone to fix the toilets and school building, he was not a lone voice. One disturbing finding uncovered by the research is that many school restrooms are missing equipment and necessary basic resources—toilet tissue, paper towels, soap, toilet stall locks, and even warm water to wash their hands. These disparities caused another potential

public health concern, as some students confronted with this constitutional betrayal forced themselves to wait until returning home to their more comfortable restroom. These experiences indicate that beyond a lack of physical resources, untended restrooms pose potential public health concerns for students. This section of the report on school infrastructure highlights inequities that perpetuate unhealthy environments, including toxic drinking fountains and rampant vermin that infiltrate the dilapidated infrastructure.

While many students generally take these basic necessities for granted, students who attend Baltimore City Public Schools cannot do so. The lack of basic resources and underlying concern is immediately apparent. Alisha, Jane, and James spoke to this situation:

*My middle school, it was an old building at City. The ceilings were falling in sometimes. We never had toilet paper or soap. Yeah. We'd never really had toilet paper. I mean, we have it, but they'd always be out. We never really had soap. My middle school building... it was a school before. It was a different middle school before it was our middle school. So, it was a pretty old building. (Alisha, age 21)*

*Honestly, it's not that clean at all. It's just nasty. The water, I wouldn't...I don't know. The bathrooms don't even have hand soap. No, not at all. The stall are all written up on, broken knobs. Honestly, I wouldn't even recommend using the bathrooms. (Jane, age 16)*

*Drawing on the wall, the toilet cannot flush, the pipes, flies. It's just too much...nine times out of ten the toilet cannot flush...some of the doors cannot lock, so you have to use your hand to hold it. It's bad. (James, age 16)*

These statements are examples of many voices we heard when youth discussed their school restrooms. Some of these youths stressed that their school restrooms were “dirty,” “nasty,” and “disgusting.” They discussed dirty toilets, graffiti on the walls, and toilets that are unflushable. Some youth reported missing soap, warm water, paper towels, and toilet tissue. James made the point that the vast majority of toilets did not work; while he may have exaggerated the number (nine out of 10), he nonetheless aligned with other comments on the lack of privacy in these restrooms because of broken locks and missing knobs—not to mention the discomfort of having to hold the door closed while using the facilities.

Another rampant public health concern that students discussed were the vermin in old school buildings. Emory brought attention to this problem that plagues is plaguing even two of the most prestigious public high schools in Baltimore. Given their age, the buildings need help to ensure that rodents do not multiply. As Emory illustrated:

*And it's not even just with my school. I would say one of our biggest competitors in the city, everybody knows Poly in city, but Poly in city, we have a lot of rats, a lot of rodents, cockroaches, specifically popping up in all sorts of places. And it breeds a sense of just being uncomfortable in a space where I feel like I should be able to learn in a way that I should feel comfortable.*

Emory's words clarify how the vermin problem occurs in even some of the best schools in Baltimore. Many students who do not attend these schools often believe that the school district gives these schools additional funding, although this counters the BCPSS Fair Student Funding Formula that offers other resources to schools based on student population. In this plan, schools with a higher percentage of students confronted with concentrated poverty or students needing special education will receive more funding. As emphasized throughout this report, students need to be in healthy, safe, and comfortable environments to learn. As Emory stated, discomfort of any sort for any reason makes it more challenging for students to be comfortable and focused.

While Emory pointed out the rodent problem at the most selective schools, other students, such as Jackie, voiced their opinions on how this problem impacts them:

*I'm not trying to come to school to make friends with bugs and mice, like I'm here to learn.  
I'm just trying to get my good grades, make a good impression and get up out of here.*

Jackie attended another high school but experienced similar issues. In our interview, she discussed being uncomfortable at seeing bugs and mice at her school. Her school is not receiving the funding needed to address the problem. What both Emory and Jackie bring to the table is the fact that their focus is mainly on education. Jackie's effort to obtain good grades is not to make a good impression, and Emory simply wants to learn. These cases illustrate that poor school conditions lacking sufficient funding can hinder focus and destroy comfort. By mentioning this problem, students are not making an extraordinary demand; they are, in fact, asking for what they are entitled to: comfort, safety, and opportunities to learn effectively.

Timothy is another student who expressed concerns about his school building. When I asked him what we should do to ensure students have environments that are conducive to learning, he paused before stating: "I would try to change people's mindset." At 16 years of age, Timothy already understands the hidden infrastructure in society, which is both tangible and intangible. Many of our participating students wanted adults to shift their mindset and perception of youth in Baltimore and, instead, value youth for all they can offer to society from schools that should guarantee quality learning environments.

# MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCESS PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

*Justin Hill*

Students within Baltimore City Public Schools possess dreams and aspirations spanning a spectrum from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Interviews conducted with some of these students revealed a simple desire for contentment, safety, and financial security. However, other students in Baltimore aspire to change both their communities and the world. As Keisha, 17, Keisha envisioned her future, she emphasized how she wants her life to be anything but mundane. Her focus is on changing the world:

*And it's just like I really want to be that person, that female, that Black female to make changes. To come up with a formula, a new product and everything like that, and just change something.*

*The professional goals of these students varied greatly, but they generally displayed a desire to live a comfortable life as well as help members of the wider community. The professions mentioned in the interviews included doctors, nurses, engineers, business owners, military members, and others. Not every student had a clear understanding of their life path, but many aspired to goals that require some level of advanced education or postsecondary training. For example, one 15-year-old student named Isabella indicated, "I want to be a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer. I'm still in my dream phase right now."*

*Beyond professional goals, these are students who aspire to work hard, own homes, start families, travel the world, and even "climb Mt. Everest." A strong educational foundation is needed for many of them to achieve their aspirations, but the question remains: Is Baltimore providing the pathways to success that these students need? Three themes emerged from the data on this point:*

**Theme 1:** Missing resources within schools result in missed opportunities to support students.

**Theme 2:** Missing interactions with staff result in missed opportunities to connect to students.

**Theme 3:** Missing careers in Baltimore result in missed opportunities to motivate students.

The aspirations of students in Baltimore align with the aspirations of students across the state of Maryland. Unfortunately, it is apparent in both statistical data and student interviews that most students in Baltimore are unable to access or fully benefit from strong primary and secondary educational opportunities (Baltimore's Promise, 2018). These missed opportunities for educational success damage the prospects for these students as well as for those in the wider Baltimore community. "As Christy, age 18, stated: "There's kids who are in the hood in West Baltimore struggling. But they have the greatest minds but they don't have

the resources to put their minds to use.”

**Theme 1: Missing resources within schools result in missed opportunities to support students.**

The historical lack of opportunity for residents in certain areas of Baltimore and the difficulties detailed in other areas of this report, including community violence and inadequate transportation, present roadblocks for students who wish to pursue improved life outcomes. Many students see education as a potential pathway to success, but also realize the difficulty of fulfilling educational aspirations in Baltimore. As Kary, a 14-year-old student, described it:

*Education is like the foundation. So, when you go to a school that has less resources or when you are unable to.... If you have bad teachers who don't support you and you're unable to get your grades up then that is a roadblock. And college is almost fundamental now, you need a degree to do basically everything. If you don't do great in school, then you don't do great in high school. And then if you don't do great in high school, you can't go to college and that kind of stops you from being able to do whatever you want.*

In this quote, Kary clearly articulated a value for education, but also demonstrated an understanding that eventual success in college is supported by a structure of effective schooling that begins in kindergarten. In another part of the interview, Kary expanded on what she viewed as unequal educational opportunities beginning from an early age:

*Depending on what zone you're in or where you are, you could be getting a completely different type of education than another student. When I came into middle school from elementary school, I kind of recognized that I was at a deficit where other people were able to get things or they already knew things I had no idea existed.*

Kary felt ill-prepared upon entering middle school and attributed this lack of preparation to her elementary school. Jory, a 19-year-old former student, felt the location of her school played a role in the lack of resources she observed: “I mean, it’s an inner-city school, not in the best of neighborhoods, and those schools don’t really get the attention that they need.” Brooke, a 50-year-old family member, described the location of an elementary school as an area with worn-down infrastructure and “drug addicts.” She used this description to emphasize the importance of afterschool activities to provide a safe setting for children and help them cope with the difficulties they encounter:

*Well, with some of them, they worry a lot. A lot of them are stressed out, a lot of the children, because of the crime and the neighborhoods that they live in. And this school right here is in a fairly bad neighborhood, because the kids can't come outside and play like they normally would.*



Taken together, these comments convey a perception that students in certain areas of Baltimore are not receiving the resources they need to develop a firm educational foundation; moreover, this lack of solid educational opportunities in elementary school contributes to worse outcomes as students progress throughout their educational careers.

The previous comment also speaks to a concern about stress and mental health that was reiterated throughout many of the interviews. Students were open about struggles with mental health, bullying, and the stressors they encountered both inside and outside of school. However, many students indicated schools did not have the necessary staff and resources to support students through these struggles. For example, 17-year-old Tonya detailed a time when she was forced to miss school for an extended period, but then felt unsupported by her teachers upon her return. After remarking that school now feels different, she expanded on this and communicated the change that has taken place in her attitude toward school:

*Before, I used to be happy to go to school. Grades was better and school wasn't much as a stressor. It was actually a reliever, and I was able to get my work done, be passing easily, get help when needed and the workload wasn't a lot. Now, it's just like you're literally going.... You're hanging on a string.*

Tonya later concluded this thought by describing her feeling in school: “And then when you there, the class is just draining. It's dull. It's not like before. Back when I was younger, life seemed so brighter. Now everything's just dull and dead.”

The sentiment expressed in this interview conveys disillusionment with the educational system—a sentiment that many participants echoed. These responses are from students who perhaps at one time saw the promise that education might hold for their future, but see little or no relevance and find no place for themselves within the educational system. Thus, there is a serious mismatch between their personal needs and the resources their schools provide, culminating in many missed opportunities for improved student success.

## **Theme 2: Missing interactions with staff result in missed opportunities to connect to students.**

Positive relationships with adults in schools can foster a student's sense of belonging, improve student motivation, and help a student navigate many pathways to success. Connections within schools are perhaps more important than ever as students continue to confront and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicated that 44% of high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless in 2021 (Jones et al., 2022). However, students with strong connections at school were significantly less likely than students without strong connections at school to report feeling sad or hopeless, to report seriously consider suicide, or to attempt suicide (Jones et al., 2022). Unfortunately, less than half of students reported feeling connected at school in 2021 (Jones et al., 2022).

Highlighting the lack of connection during the pandemic in Baltimore, Charles, 17, described his virtual classroom as “mostly quiet, blank screens and the teacher just talking.” This statement appears to convey a sense of total disengagement on the part of the students. Others remarked how the transition to virtual classrooms disrupted not only their learning but also their ability to interact with teachers and peers. Iris, a 15-year-old student, shared a story about her sister’s experience with virtual learning:

*She cried. “I don’t want to fail fourth grade.” It’s like, you’re not going to fail fourth grade. But to see that she cares that much about her grade, and these teachers are acting like this grade means nothing. It’s like “she’ll be fine, we’ve just got to move her along.” That’s what I think that her teachers believe, that they just have to keep her moving.*

Iris seemed to perceive apathy from the teachers, as it pertains to both students’ learning and emotional well-being. This perceived sense of teacher apathy, which other students also communicated when describing both virtual and in-person learning, may contribute to students not being invested in learning or feeling connected to school. As Franklin, 20, stated, “Because teachers don’t care about students, the students don’t care about the teachers.” Kara, a 17-year-old student, described feeling disconnected from any adults within the school: “We get treated as if we’re dumb basically, young-minded and can’t learn and don’t want to.”

Rather than serving as sources of support, many students suggested that interactions with teachers were one of the primary sources of frustration and discontent with the educational system. Another former student, Kenneth, 23, explained that a mismatch exists between the teachers hired to teach in the district and the needs of students in Baltimore, suggesting this leads to teacher turnover and prevents teachers and students from developing strong relationships:

*The issue, we get a lot of teachers, one, who aren’t from the city, who have never really been in contact with students with the needs such as those in the City of Baltimore. Oftentimes, it’d be as if they were scared of the students. You’d get the ones who had the breakdowns in class, who don’t necessarily know how to keep the classes in control or who don’t know how to talk to the students and they leave.*

By contrast, when asked to describe teachers with whom they felt a strong connection, many students discussed their interactions with Black teachers or with teachers from Baltimore. The students typically explained they felt the sense of a shared lived experience with these teachers, as exemplified in this statement by Tessie, a 15-year-old student:

*All of my favorite teachers were Black, it was fitting. I feel like I connected with them on a different level because of our shared experience and what they could do for me and what they helped me learn without worrying about the curriculum. It wasn’t about what they needed to teach, it was about what they wanted to teach, and it made me feel great to learn.*

According to the Black Teacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group (2019), the number of Black teachers in the Baltimore City Public Schools System has been consistently increasing in recent years and now stands above 45%. However, even with this increase, many students still conveyed a desire to have more Black teachers who were born and raised in Baltimore. Students who were fortunate enough to form strong relationships with teachers emphasized these relationships as one of the most important aspects of their educational success. Unfortunately, relatively few students experienced these relationships on a regular basis, resulting in missed opportunities to connect.

**Theme 3: Missing careers in Baltimore result in missed opportunities to motivate students.**

*A report from Baltimore's Promise (2018) analyzed life outcomes of high school graduates from BCPS, finding only 23% of students who had earned a postsecondary degree were earning a living wage 6 years after high school graduation. The situation was even worse among those who had enrolled in postsecondary education but not graduated and among those who had never enrolled in postsecondary education. The inability of students to secure employment that provides a living wage (listed in the report at only \$13.28 per hour) 6 years after high school graduation highlights a dearth of well-paying jobs throughout Baltimore. This lack of employment opportunities was also highlighted throughout many of our interviews.*

*Students had observed disinvestment throughout Baltimore and found it difficult to understand how they could improve their life prospects when decent jobs seemed so hard to find. In his interview, Bill, a 16-year-old student, felt the need to clarify that the money he was making was through legal means; when asked why he specified that, he responded, "Because I feel like we, especially our type of community within black men, we feel as though there aren't a lot of opportunities for us to make money, especially legally." This mindset seemed to arise from Bill's lived experience in which jobs and legal methods of making money are not considered viable options for youth in certain areas of the city. Amy, a 17-year-old student, acknowledged the presence of well-paying jobs in Baltimore, but did not see the residents of Baltimore as the ones benefiting from those jobs:*

*Because the high-paying jobs aren't for people, like the people that work in high-paying jobs in Baltimore don't live here. They come in from different states and stuff, to work here. I just feel sad that the people that actually live here can't work in those places.*

The lack of good jobs available to residents in many of Baltimore's communities results in missed opportunities for students to benefit from their education. Interviews revealed that many students are well aware of this lack of opportunity, and this may contribute to a lack of motivation in school. Baltimore clearly needs new middle-class jobs that will help provide a living wage for residents, demonstrate the opportunities that education may provide, and keep Baltimore students in the city after they graduate from college. Otherwise, many areas of the city will continue to serve as dead ends for opportunity. A 21-year-old former student named Emmanuel described certain areas of Baltimore in this way:

*One of the things that always sticks out to me the most about the differences in the parts of Baltimore is that if you go to the poorer parts of Baltimore, it's really like a cracked concrete jungle. You feel like you're in a city and you feel like you're stuck in the city. It doesn't feel like there's any escape from the very short radius around where you are.*

In this quote, Emmanuel described a neighborhood with no exits and no pathways provided by strong educational opportunities, decent jobs, or support structures. While many students recommended increased educational support and resources as a starting point for improving pathways to success, investment must extend beyond the school walls to demonstrate the value of educational accomplishment.

These interviews revealed that students are missing out on educational support, educational resources, meaningful relationships with teachers, and opportunities to benefit from education. As the strange fruits of racial housing segregation, structural violence, and disinvestment in Black communities have grown larger and larger, they have served to further obstruct pathways to success for residents of many neighborhoods in Baltimore. The students interviewed were aware of these obstacles and the missed opportunities associated with them, both in the past and the present. Missed opportunities for these students translates into missed opportunities for the future of Baltimore. As students envisioned their futures in these interviews, many of them held high aspirations and life goals, but far too few of them saw an educational system and employment opportunities that would allow them to navigate pathways to success.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Across our interviews, the Nobody Asked Me campaign located numerous issues raised by youth and their families that coalesced into themes across four pillars. These themes tied directly to the strange fruit that the state of Maryland has produced throughout its history. Specifically, segregation and White flight have created an unreliable and unsafe transportation system on which Black Baltimoreans, especially youth attending school, depend for their day-to-day habits. This lack of safety on buses also pervades their schools and neighborhoods, where they experience daily and gratuitous violence from peers and police. Structural violence also occurs in the physical learning environment that the youth inhabit. They are subject to public health risks by unmaintained roofs, a lack of sanitation resources, and lack of comfortable temperatures that affect their learning experiences. Finally, Baltimore youth have encountered the strange fruit of neoliberal reforms that have left their aspirations unrealized and unsupported due to a misalignment between their life goals and their school resources, relationships, and postsecondary opportunities.

The structural violence that Black Baltimoreans experience forces them to endure a racial caste system that relies on respectability politics, which normalizes a White middle-class aesthetic and values in order to have their humanity worthy of consideration. Despite these enormous and deeply ingrained structural barriers, Black youth and communities continue to strive, remain resilient, and aspire into the future





**PLANTING NEW SEEDS**



# PLANTING NEW SEEDS

Alongside the empirical evidence and identification of strange fruit that the Nobody Asked Me campaign has unearthed, there also is hope to bear new fruit by planting the seeds of youth and family aspirations for a reimagined future for Black Baltimore. Throughout our interviews, youth and community members provided insights and solutions for how they envision eliminating the structural oppressions they encounter. These solutions were directly tied to the governance and finance infrastructure of Baltimore and were supported by imaginings of the tangible realities they would create in the lives of youth.

By centering the voices of these youth and their families, the Nobody Asked Me campaign constructed strategy groups around the four pillars that consisted of youth, grassroots organizers, government officials, and scholars. These strategy groups were tasked with developing interventions and recommendations based on the solutions and experiences of our participants in order to create actionable items. In this section, we provide data highlighting youth solutions, followed by our strategy group recommendations. This work is imperative to the ideological disposition of the Nobody Asked Me campaign as we highlight the voices of youth to create structural change in Baltimore and plant new seeds for a city looking to bear new possibilities for the future of Black communities.

## SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGY

In this section we highlight solutions provided by youth and their families that informed our strategy group recommendations. In addition to this, we also acknowledge the commonly held assumptions about youth in Baltimore. This was important to foreground in our solution as our strategy groups had to consider the popular deficit beliefs about Baltimore youth that our recommendations are in competition with. Our data shows that youth dream of possibilities and solutions for a better life in Baltimore, and the NAM strategy recommendations are constructed in support of the future.

## YOUTH SOLUTIONS

### Safety & Violence

In their analyses of the causes and solutions to violence in their communities, youth investigated the socio-emotional and structural contexts for why violence occurs. Their visions of safety included multilevel perspectives that highlighted the need for investment in programs that generate equitable financial outcomes and community leadership building to create connected neighborhoods. In the following quote from Maria, 16, she highlights the need for people and policymakers to dig deeper to understand the root causes of violence:

*Anger is like a shield. Under anger, its emotion, it's sadness. And I feel like there are a lot of people who just go to the streets for a reason. There's a reason that you just don't go on the streets just because it's fun. You got there because you don't have any place to do. You sell drugs because you don't have*

*the job. You argue and just kill people because there's something mentally wrong. I feel like there's a disconnection... We need to understand that there are reasons why violence happens. There's always a reason behind anger.*

Within this quote, Maria, highlights that drug dealing and violence is uniquely tied to the lack of opportunity and the sense of hopelessness that people internalize, which leads to people making decisions out of necessity and “sadness”. Building upon this, Donte, 17, suggests that building connection with reputable community leaders can help youth deal with the aforementioned emotions:

*I feel like everybody needs that one person in our life to help them see the bigger light or to talk to them about their emotions. And somebody who will tell you, ‘Hey, you shouldn’t do this or that’s not right.’ Or you need to control your emotions because sometimes got to think before your do things. Some people don’t think.*

Again, Donte reiterates Maria’s point about the socio-emotional element that undergirds street crime in their opinions. Donte believes that having the right individuals that can provide guidance does not just lead to only stopping violence, but also helps youth regulate emotions and envision better futures for themselves.

## **Transportation**

Youth and community solutions to transportation issues are filtered through racialized lenses that include structural changes for improving funding and infrastructure to transport students safely and efficiently. (Re) allocating and investing in transportation infrastructure from an equity-minded lens are at the forefront of ideas and solutions for youth. Jaleel, 16, recognized the continued neglect of financial investment for transportation in Black communities:

*And so, I think that ties into the city’s budget where as though they don’t give transportation for especially buses, for kids to be able to make it to school on time, mainly because the budget’s being cut short and we’re not getting a lot of funding because we don’t have the best reputation, so that can literally lead into so many other things that I could talk about.... So, with the city’s budget, I would say specifically with that, that comes with how I was saying our reputation and our reputation being completely destroyed by the reputation of black people, due to our history and with our history being tied into now and how gang violence and drug distribution, mainly throughout the Black community, Black men specifically. That ties into how much the government wants to control our budget and how much money is flowing into our city because they don’t necessarily want it to go into the wrong place.*

Alongside Jaleel raising issues about the city’s transportation budget for Black neighborhoods, Wendy, 21, provided ideas about potential solutions:

*So, either maybe have a bus system where it’s school buses where there’s some infrastructure to design routes where you could get kids from different neighborhoods to different schools. I could see how with*

*Baltimore City there's a lot of different schools, a lot of different students and areas. But I think that that's something that could be implemented or either.... The other thing is if they are just going to rely on MTA buses, maybe still use the MTA buses, but make specific routes just for students and almost use that as a school bus system. Not just tell the students that they have to rely on public transport to get them to and from school.*

Broadly speaking, discussions about issues with transportation carried explicit and implicit racial tones. The solutions to these issues, at the structural level, account for the histories of racism in underfunding and segregation in public transportation in ways that were both overt and subversive. While most solutions offered by participants were some variation of “adding more” buses, more robust responses added key changes to the busing infrastructure that included more funding for better buses, hiring more bus drivers, and improving routes dedicated specifically for students.

### **School Infrastructure**

Youth and their family members offered many solutions to address the poor school conditions that they endured. They suggest hiring more janitors and fully compensating them for the work that they do. They also mentioned getting brand new HVAC systems in old schools to ensure that they are in comfortable conditions for them to learn. Moreover, they offered to address holes in walls and broken pipes. What we discovered in the data is students want mentality changes that would lead to structural change. Timothy, 16, said “I would try to change people’s mindset” in order to make stakeholders care about their school conditions.

This youth desire to have people care about their school buildings was backed by parents’ attitudes towards investment in infrastructures. Some of the parents we spoke to that offered solutions discussed enough funding to address the issues that their children were facing in schools. Lillian, 59, states:

*So we have to have the money to fix. And if we're going to start over with some new buildings, then it has to be a system where this is a regular routine so that you can maintain these buildings. We can't do patchwork. You just can't. It's not going to survive. And it's too many of them. And that's what's happened. You're talking about the history with the building. Like City, it's very old. So you got a building that's old and needs work, that you got to constantly go in and make sure that things are routinely done so that it can stand like the cathedrals and all of those that are two or 300 years old, but they're still standing.*

Lillian’s comments highlight the costly and inefficient ways that older school buildings are maintained. Perpetually fixing old HVACs, roofs, etc. leaves students in unsafe learning environments, when investing an equitable amount of money to renovate old schools would create a safer experience for students.

## Pathways to Success

Throughout the interviews, youth and community members articulated a need for investment in postsecondary options and training programs. The solutions Baltimore youth advocated for highlighted the structural changes in resource allocation and community investment needed for more students to access pathways to success. Kenneth, 23, took an historical approach to understanding how Baltimore's job industry has evolved and the type of training that youth need now to compete in this market:

*There needs to be a push on the government level to try to bring in more industries, more corporations that are requiring general labor. The city before, it was a factory city, it was a port city. A lot of the factories in the ports moved out, many didn't come back and the city really lost a lot of its population and character from that. But I do still believe that there's a benefit to bringing ports or factories to the city. One, there's a lot of space. There are abandoned factories all across the city. Not saying that they have to renovate them, they can tear them down but the space is there. There are thousands, tens of thousands of people, eligible workers who want to work but the jobs aren't really there. Everyone says the jobs are here but we all know, one, exactly what's been going in the past few years. There have been a lot of tech jobs and corporations that have been coming to the city and they're all centered Downtown. And these are a lot of jobs that require certain skills or degrees. I'm talking about the jobs that don't require degrees, that don't require high education.*

Beyond jobs, participants also advocated for investment into the basic needs of youth. Gigi, 17, noted that students need proper transportation and food resources to learn. Specifically, Gigi highlighted how students with different abilities should be equitably resourced in order to ensure fair opportunities in school and beyond.

*I would say they need access to finances, access to a bus to bring him [a classmate with mental health issues] to school. And access to tutors that could help him outside of school. Access to food. The school food in high school I would not eat.*

The solutions presented by students to support pathways to success included changes both inside and outside of schools. A comprehensive strategy is needed that provides connections and resources within schools to address student needs adequately while also supporting communities with improved infrastructure, transportation, and employment opportunities. A point reiterated throughout multiple interviews was the need for decent jobs providing a living wage and targeted toward the residents of Baltimore. There was a general understanding that improvement in employment opportunities, communities, and schools were all intertwined and that a structural shift in the allocation of resources would be necessary to provide opportunities for many of Baltimore's students.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUTH IN BALTIMORE

After reviewing our findings and proposed solutions by participants, the four strategy groups began work to develop interventions to address the needs of youth. The goal was to create policy that could help students reach their educational aspirations. During the meetings, strategy group members had to not only contend with the structural violence highlighted in the data, but with the societal assumptions about youth in Baltimore. In this section, we highlight some of these assumptions that were part of the group considerations when constructing policy and desired outcomes.

### **Assumption 1: Youth are to blame for their predicaments and the pathologization of criminality**

Some assume that “poor” Black youth are part of a cycle of poverty that contributes to criminal and violent behavior. Advocacy for behavioral changes and programs that assimilate Black youth into white middle class norms are typical solutions. Various programs provide training for jobs that do not allow for social mobility or provide skills for a 21st century job market. Additionally, punitive approaches to addressing behavior, rather than the system that young people are forced to exist in, is the most common approach to address the needs of youth.

### **Assumption 2: Youth lack aspirations or the will to achieve academically or socially**

Some assume that Black youth do not want to succeed in school or that these students do not have aspirations to become successful contributors to society. Beliefs about oppositional culture and the trope of “acting white” positions Blackness in competition with success. The privatization of education has played a major role in solidifying this belief system as students and their parents are forced into a choice (and expulsion) system that signals their level of care for school, even when those choices are out of their control. Rather than rebuilding education as a public good that aligns with youth and their communities, these neoliberal reforms reinforce the structural violence that affects Black students.

### **Assumption 3: Youth are unable to articulate their ideas and work productively with policy makers and scholars**

Some assume that youth are too young or too uninformed to properly advocate for their own policies related to their experiences. Specifically, politicians and academics respond to issues or academics with minimal input from young people who their policies and research affect. This belief system treats youth as political pawns or research subjects that lack agency and innovation to envision new possibilities beyond the one constructed around their oppression. Policies and programs that lack connection to youth needs are perpetually failed ventures that are limited in their capacity to create structural change.

### **Reality: That students see the world not as it is but as it should be.**

It’s often difficult for leaders and researchers to acknowledge students’ experiences, even with quantitative and qualitative data being provided, beyond their own worldview and life experiences. Our society is



structured such that we have created our own blinders to only see our own experience, which have guided our thinking. These privileged blindspots and assumptions lead to, even well intentioned people, not understanding or accepting that students are aware of the systems affecting their progress.

The fact is, students are very aware of the state of the world and their communities. They have grand aspirations and dreams of success and can provide the recommendations to bring those ideas to life. Beyond providing experiential data, youth served as prominent voices in our strategy groups and were featured prominently in the formulation of our recommendations provided below:

## **STRATEGY GROUP RECOMMENDATION**

### **Strategy Group #1 Recommendation**

*Safety & Violence*

*Chaired by Dylan Jackson*

**To address the need for a thorough and efficient education in the 21st century in Baltimore, we recommend that community-school models for Baltimore city, as these models involve coordinated and integrated wraparound supports for students and families (addressing hunger, housing, medical care, etc.).** Must be done through trusting relationships, credible messengers, and a healing-centered lens (leveraging existing community resources). This model of education builds on youth basic needs to ensure safety and the freedom to reach aspirations.

**Community schools convey the symbolic message that students and families are loved and valued and that the school is committed to addressing basic needs and the trauma that comes from a long history of blocked access to fundamental needs. This can mitigate safety and violence concerns in schools by promote whole child, family, and school health.** This involves providing a robust and well-rounded education to staff and students about the ways that structural violence in their communities has caused harm (including blocked access to basic needs) and encourage the school community to develop critical consciousness and engage in advocacy for change. This involves building on existing curriculum in ways that will transform school climate.

**This recommendation represents a broader investment in community residents' career opportunities and pathways will reduce violence, in part by involving community organizations in carrying out these tasks in schools (and allocating funds to do so).** Must involve investment in local residents (not only experts from elite institutions) as efficacy depends on messenger credibility. Thus, schools should be evaluated based on how well they work with and engage the community and community organizations in ways that support the flourishing and success of both community residents and students. Doing so will promote both community and school safety by creating viable pathways for success, and thriving, and stable employment/careers for residents and students.

## Strategy Group #2 Recommendation

*Inequities in Transportation*

*Chaired By Dr. Keshia Pollack Porter*

**To address the need for a thorough and efficient education in the 21st century in Baltimore, we recommend the development of a Transportation Advisory Council (TAC) to facilitate collaboration between the MTA, school district, and local transportation department.** The TAC should include youth representatives, so they are involved in decision-making (Colorado has implemented this approach).

**The TCA will increase access to active commuting through Safe Routes to Schools so youth who are able, can safely walk or bike to/from school, including through “walking school buses.”** These efforts must involve partnerships with the BCDOT and other nonprofit partners to address issues with traffic safety, access to affordable bicycles, installation of dedicated bike lanes, access to micromobility such as scooters, and ongoing maintenance. We must improve the physical transit environment, with a focus on maintenance of transit stops and routes, having well-light paths and stops, cleanliness of buses, etc.

**Part of this safety route plan is to designate existing MTA buses for students during before school and after school hours. This would essentially create specific routes for students using the existing MTA infrastructure.** We must also make it easier to report harassment and safety concerns while riding and traveling to/from public transit, including using smartphone apps and dedicated phone numbers. This starts with increasing the visibility of transit support staff as a way to keep community safe through an “eyes on the street” approach. We also have a plan to institutionalize collection of harassment data in transit passenger surveys, including having youth complete safety audits of transit routes to target safety efforts. The data will support the launch a public awareness campaign that involves youth in developing and testing messages related to anti-harassment, including verbal, nonverbal, and physical harassment, coupled with anti-harassment signage.

## Strategy Group #3 Recommendation

*School Infrastructure*

*Chaired by: Josh Sharfstein*

**To address the need for a thorough and efficient education in the 21st century in Baltimore, we recommend that the State of Maryland close equity gap in school conditions for students in order to ensure student learning, health, and well-being in their educational environments.** Specifically, The State should allocate sufficient funds to close gaps in school conditions across the state, paying special attention to longstanding inequities affecting low-income students and students of color in Baltimore City and elsewhere.

**Our recommendation advocates for prioritization systems adopted by the State of Maryland recognize the longstanding inequities affecting low-income students and students of color in Baltimore City and elsewhere,** with special attention to the most extreme conditions that have harmed the learning environment. Students in Baltimore City schools are facing health risk and learning deprivation because of older and unsafe buildings. Improving these facilitates has implications for the overall wellbeing of students.

**With this recommendation in mind, students and families should participate in the process of addressing inadequate school conditions.** This community-policy construction effort will work to ensure that State funding should compensate for the unequal ability of Maryland counties to provide resources for school building. It is critical that policy makers engage with youth and communities to understand the learning experiences associated with unequal school infrastructure and work collaboratively for equitable solutions.

#### **Strategy Group #4 Recommendation**

*Pathways to Promise Draft Recommendations*

*Chaired Dr. Robert Balfanz*

**To address the need for a thorough and efficient education in the 21st century in Baltimore, we recommend that all students need to be provided a secure pathway to post-secondary schooling or training that leads to a family supporting wage-a pathway to promise.** Each year about 5200 students start 9th grade, currently 72% are graduating with 5 years. Which leaves 1400 not graduating with one extra year. Of those that graduate about half enroll in college within 2 years. Which leaves 1800 not enrolling in college within 2 years.

**We need to create new pathways to promise for 3200 students each year, while improving existing traditional pathways to and through higher education and into the global economy for the 2,000 students per cohort currently on this pathway.** Specifically, new Pathways should be co-created with the community to both achieve local goals and connections to global economy, build on strengths, meet student aspirations while expanding their horizons and lead to a family supporting wage.

**These pathways need to ensure that youth build connections to mentors, foster a sense of belonging in schools and the community, and develop mastery in 21st century skills.** This can be made possible by ensuring that youth and the associated organizations/mentors are provided with designated spaces that are safe to learn in and travel to in order to create optimal environments for aspiration attainment.



# **METHODOLOGY AND APPENDICES**

# METHODOLOGY AND APPENDICES

*Aaron Thompson*

## **MATERIALS**

Semi-structured interviews were employed and conducted with youths (aged 14 to 24) and family members (aged 18 to 61). All participants were asked to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and issues concerning life as a Baltimore City Schools student, former student, or family member of a student. All the interviews were conducted in English and completed between December 2020 and April 2022.

## **SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE**

Data for this project consists of interviews conducted from 132 Black, White, American Indigenous or Alaskan-native and Asian individuals between the ages of 14 to 61 years old. 109 interviews were conducted with youths, while 23 interviews were conducted with family members of youths. 107 participants identified their race as Black, 7 identified as White, 4 identified as Bi-racial, 4 identified as American Indian or Alaskan native, 3 identified as Asian and 7 identified as unknown. 113 participants were ages 14 to 24 at time of interview, while 19 were between the ages of 25 and 61 giving a total participant pool of  $n=132$  at time of analysis and writing. Participants were recruited primarily through word of mouth, school partnerships, social media and through community channels and networks with Baltimore City. The only elimination factor employed was that participants must have been or been a relative of a person attending a Baltimore City Schools institution. Participants who completed the interviews were compensated with a \$50 Amazon gift card.

Interview protocols were employed and centered the participants around open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions from the participants. As numerous participants were under the age of 18, parental assent and consent was obtained before interviews could begin. All interviews were given over Zoom and were recorded for audio and transcription purposes and were later transcribed by a third-party transcription service (REV). Finally, the data was consolidated, and participants were assigned pseudonyms names to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

## **SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE**

Participant interview transcripts were uploaded to the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Dedoose for analysis. Interviews were coded by a collaborative team of race and gender-diverse researchers that included professors, post-doctoral researchers, graduate and an undergraduate research assistant. Thematic codes were developed both inductively and deductively that explored topical areas identified in previous research while also allowing novel findings to emerge through the process of data analysis.



The research team met weekly to ensure inter-coder reliability, share salient insights from the coding process and specific cases, and to generate additional codes and subcodes and discuss emergent and divergent themes and findings. For example, after beginning with one code to capture descriptions of the built and physical environment in schools, the team subsequently created a series of subcodes to pinpoint specific themes that were identified in the data such as classrooms that were too hot or cold and unsanitary conditions in bathrooms. Given the Nobody Asked Me Campaign's specific focus on both understanding the experiences of Baltimore youth and families navigating Baltimore City Public Schools and generating potential solutions or interventions to address the obstacles they face, the research team developed specific codes to identify the language that respondents used to describe potential solutions to problems they perceived in their schools, neighborhoods, and the city more broadly.

Quotes from participants that are included throughout this report section were transcribed verbatim without alteration or edits. Due to the exploratory nature of the project, and the use of qualitative research methods, the findings presented are not meant to be generalizable to all Baltimore City Schools students or Baltimore City residents. Thus, the narratives, themes and findings discussed aim to center and highlight the voices of youths and family members who have had experiences within the Baltimore City Schools system.

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