

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 13, 2022

Attorney General Merrick Garland
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Attorney General Garland, Secretary Cardona, and Secretary Becerra,

We write in the aftermath of yet another horrific and tragic school shooting. On May 24, 2022 we were shocked and horrified to learn that an 18-year old gunman had opened fire at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas killing 21 people — including 19 children and 2 teachers — injuring more than a dozen others, and traumatizing an entire nation, school, and South Texas community. Gun violence is now a leading cause of death for children and teens,¹ and since Uvalde, there have been at least 19 mass shootings in the United States. Our most fundamental role as policymakers and leaders is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our children. We therefore write to request that your agencies each conduct a review of gun violence prevention strategies that you are utilizing in schools and establish a comprehensive plan to meet the holistic emotional, health, and safety needs of our nation’s students.

Schools are supposed to be safe havens for children, parents, educators, custodial and cafeteria staff, and communities. But for far too many people they are not. The massacre at Robb Elementary School marks the deadliest U.S. school shooting in nearly a decade and was at least the thirtieth school shooting in 2022.² In the six days following the Uvalde massacre, there have been at least 18 mass shootings in communities across the country. Over the years, federal, state, and local government officials have justified the allocation of tens of billions of dollars in school and public safety measures, particularly the recruitment, hiring, and retention of community- and school-based law enforcement officials under the false premise that increased police presence will keep our children and communities safe.

¹ Bates, Josiah. *Guns Became the Leading Cause of Death for American Children and Teens in 2020*. TIME Magazine: April 27, 2022. <https://time.com/6170864/cause-of-death-children-guns/>

² Sutton, Joe, Yan, Holly and Eric Levenson. *Uvalde mass shooter was not confronted by police before he entered the school, Texas official says*. CNN: May 27, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/26/us/uvalde-texas-elementary-school-shooting-thursday/index.html>

The misguided federal response to preventing such atrocities has traditionally been to increase the scale and scope of law enforcement in schools. We can look to past incidents of school gun violence to know this approach is counterproductive and harmful. In the more than two decades since the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, and following dozens of school shootings, the federal government has supplied billions in resources for school resource officers. In the first year it was authorized, the federal Community Oriented Policing Services in Schools Program (COPS) dispersed \$68 million to jurisdictions, resulting in the hiring of 599 SROs in 289 communities across the country.³ Research on the effectiveness of SROs has indicated that the rate of death was higher in schools with armed officers during school shootings.⁴ Rather than preventing violence in schools, the use of school resource officers has resulted in an increase in youth arrests, expulsions, and physical restraint.⁵

Armed officers in schools are, at best, an inadequate response to violence that has already occurred, not a prevention strategy. Even worse, police responses and the lack of oversight can undermine active investigations, obstruct efforts to seek accountability, further mislead the public, and erode trust with the American people. As lawmakers, we are alarmed by the horrifying accounts of law enforcement negligence in Uvalde.⁶ This is particularly troubling as funding for law enforcement increases. Uvalde spent 40 percent of its budget on its police force last year.⁷ The school district had a safety plan in place that included its own police force – staffed with a chief, five cops, and a security guard – monitoring of social media, and a reporting system for threats to “provide a safe and secure environment” for students. Additionally, in January 2022, the Uvalde P.D. received half-million dollars from the state of Texas’ “Operation Lone Star.”⁸ In the Department of Justice’s FY 2023 budget, the White House proposed about \$30 billion to support state and local law enforcement agencies.⁹ This staggering increase in funding did not secure our children in Uvalde; in fact, it endangered them.¹⁰

³ Id. In the years since, the Department of Justice provides more than half a billion dollars each year for state and local law enforcement through its COPS grant, including more than \$50 million for school violence prevention programs.

⁴ Peterson J, Densley J, Erickson G. Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019.

⁵ Strauss, Valerie. *There are now more police officers in Florida’s schools than nurses*. The Washington Post: September 3, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/09/03/there-are-now-more-police-officers-floridas-schools-than-nurses-student-arrests-are-rising/>

⁶ Contrary to common protocol established after the Columbine school shooting of 1999, police officers did not stop the 18-year-old gunman from unleashing carnage inside Robb Elementary School last month. Instead, as many as 19 armed and trained law enforcement officers stood in the hallway outside the classroom for over an hour as trapped students and teachers made 911 calls begging for help. Outside of the school, law enforcement officials blocked, apprehended, and even threatened with stun guns desperate parents attempting to enter the school, all the while, off-duty law enforcement officials went inside to rescue their children.

⁷ Pierce, Charles P. *There Were Good Guys With Guns and It Didn’t Matter*. Esquire Magazine: May 26, 2022. [Bystanders Urged Police to Enter Robb Elementary School While Shooting Took Place \(esquire.com\)](https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/news/a43888889/bystanders-urged-police-to-enter-robb-elementary-school-while-shooting-took-place/)

⁸ Id.

⁹ Budget of the U.S. Government. FY 2023: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/budget_fy2023.pdf

¹⁰ Chappell, Bill and Cheryl Corely. *Here’s what experts say police should have done in the Uvalde school shooting*. NPR: May 27, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/27/1101812648/ualde-texas-school-shooting-experts->

The lack of comprehensive, holistic and trauma-informed services in schools also falls hardest on students of color and students with disabilities who are much likelier to attend schools without adequate resources and support. All the while, students today are reporting more stress and mental health issues than any other generation.¹¹ According to the American Civil Liberties Union,¹² 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker at a time when the majority of students report having mental health needs, including school-based health and trauma resources.¹³ This is a matter that each of us have pushed on in Congress and we look forward to working with your agencies, our fellow colleagues in Congress, and the Biden administration to appropriate funding and advance legislation that will consider the holistic needs of children and keep them safe.

We recognize that even when law enforcement responses are functioning optimally, they cannot prevent atrocities from occurring. To that end, we urge you to break this cycle of violence and recommit to public health and safety strategies that will ensure our schools are safe for all students. This requires thinking comprehensively about violence in our schools to ensure that we prevent violence – by resolving the root causes of conflict that can escalate into violence – not simply remedy its impact. As a starting point, we ask that the Department of Education, in concert with Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice conduct a holistic review of any and all non-punitive, non-law enforcement preventative safety measures currently in schools, the health and safety impacts of such measures, and steps your agencies intend to take to meet the needs of our child and prevent the onslaught of violence we are currently witnessing in our schools. Further we ask that the results of this review be made available to the public.

As lawmakers, we are deeply troubled by the inability to keep our children and communities safe, the bedrock on which any country rests. It is time to undo the harm and trauma tragedies like the Ulvade massacre leave behind in our schools and with our children. Thank you for your cooperation and we look forward to working collaboratively on this review.

Sincerely,



Cori Bush
Member of Congress



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress

[police-tactics](#)

¹¹ *The Cost of School Policing*. The American Civil Liberties Union, Florida: September 2, 2020. _

<https://www.aclufl.org/en/publications/cost-school-policing#jump>

¹² *Cops and not counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students*. The American Civil Liberties Union: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors>

¹³ *The Cost of School Policing*. The American Civil Liberties Union, Florida: September 2, 2020. _

<https://www.aclufl.org/en/publications/cost-school-policing#jump>



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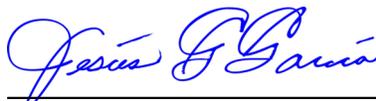
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