

## Youth Perspectives on:

# Physical & Psychological Safety



### Overview

This theme captures young people's lived experiences and concerns about safety across their schools, neighborhoods, and daily lives. Students shared over 675 times that safety is not only about protection from violence, but also about being respected, included, and supported in their environments. While some students described feeling secure, many raised concerns about bullying, fights, harassment, gun violence, and inadequate adult responses to these issues.



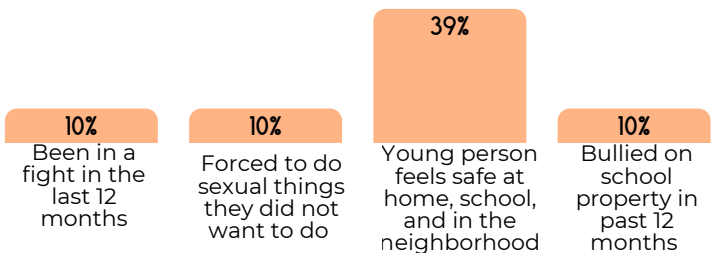
## WHY IT MATTERS

A safe environment is foundational to youth development, learning, and well-being. When students feel unsafe, whether due to physical violence, emotional neglect, or systemic inequities, their ability to concentrate, connect with others, and engage meaningfully in their communities is diminished. Creating physically and psychologically safe spaces requires more than rules and protocols; it requires responsive relationships, equitable systems, and environments that affirm the dignity and humanity of every young person.

## WHAT THE DATA SAY

### Youth Safety Measures

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Alexandria, 2023



## WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

### Bullying Prevention

"My ideal Alexandria is for bullying to be more of a concern so kids feel safer going to school."

- Bully-free environments with clear, consistent responses from adults
- Peer cultures rooted in dignity, inclusion, and kindness

115+ mentions

### Safe & Walkable Neighborhoods

"No crime."

"Safer crosswalks."

- Neighborhoods that feel safe to walk through, with good lighting and infrastructure
- Less exposure to crime and greater investment in safe public spaces

75+ mentions

### Interpersonal & School-Based Violence Prevention

"More afterschool clubs so kids can be in a community and have a safe space."

"More safe spaces for queer/trans youth."

- Reduced exposure to gun and gang violence, abuse, and school fights
- Trusted systems for reporting and responding to violence and harassment

55+ mentions

### School Safety & Security

"Security guards fighting with students."

- School safety strategies that are effective, fair, and student-centered
- Trusting relationships with school security and staff

## WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

65+ mentions

### Bullying

"Bullying isn't taken seriously."

- Persistent bullying, often unaddressed or inconsistently handled
- Cyberbullying, name-calling, and social exclusion

90+ mentions

### Neighborhood Safety

"Kids are afraid to go outside (especially at night)."

- Fear of walking alone, especially at night
- Concerns about theft, vandalism, and poorly maintained public areas

150+ mentions

### Interpersonal & School-Based Violence

"People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report."

- Firsthand accounts of violence in school and community
- Concerns about intimate partner and sexual violence
- Desire for help but uncertainty about where to turn

80+ mentions

### School Safety & Security

"Security guards fighting with students."

"Only one entrance for lunch makes me late and miss food."

- Mixed feedback on safety protocols; some feel protected, others feel restricted or surveilled
- Frustration with facility issues and single-entry access policies
- Reports of uneven treatment from school security personnel



# Barriers to Improvement

*Students shared several challenges that make it harder to feel safe at school*

## Communication and Trust

- Many students said it's hard to be heard. They feel that some school leaders and staff don't listen when students raise concerns or seem more focused on the school's reputation than on fixing problems.

## Security That Doesn't Always Work

- Students worry that security measures aren't used in the right way. Some security staff don't feel approachable, metal detectors don't always work well, and safety rules aren't clear or consistent.

## Outside Pressures

- Students also pointed to issues that start beyond the classroom, things like social media drama, peer pressure, and sometimes even gang activity that can spill over into school and lead to fights or bullying.

## School Culture and Stereotypes

- Some students said that stereotypes, cliques, and a lack of community support make things worse. When people don't feel accepted or understood, conflict and unsafe behavior can grow.





## Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students School Safety & Security

*When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to improve school safety and security at ACPs, students proposed the following strategies.*

### **Listen to Student Voices**

- Ask students what's working and what's not through regular surveys and listening sessions.
- Create anonymous ways to report safety concerns or share ideas for improvement.
- Hold student-led safety committees that help plan and review policies.
- Make it easier to talk to school leaders and ensure students get real answers, not just promises.
- Include families in conversations about safety and mental health.

### **Build a Positive School Culture**

- Get rid of rules that feel unfair or don't make sense, like locked bathrooms or strict ID checks.
- Balance structure and freedom: rules should keep us safe, not make us feel controlled.
- Train teachers and staff on how to build trust and respect in classrooms.
- Support student-led projects and clubs that promote kindness, belonging, and inclusion.

### **Work Together as a Community**

- Keep strong partnerships between schools, the Alexandria Police Department, and the School & Law Enforcement Partnership (SLEP) but make sure student voices help shape those relationships.
- Involve parents, guardians, and local groups in safety and wellness efforts.
- Partner with nonprofits and mental health organizations to bring more support and training into schools.

### **Make Our Schools Physically Safe**

- Add more cameras and staff at main entrances to keep everyone safe when coming and going.
- Fix and maintain doors, stairways, and other parts of school buildings so they're sturdy and safe.
- Use better metal detectors and alarms to prevent unsafe items from entering the building.
- Make sure all doors can be used to exit quickly during emergencies.
- Add more trained safety officers in hallways and common spaces so students feel protected and supported, not policed.

### **Prevent Bullying and Violence Before It Happens**

- Start peer mediation programs so students can solve conflicts peacefully.
- Run kindness and anti-bullying campaigns to build a more respectful school culture.
- Focus on helping students learn from mistakes and improve behavior, not just punishing them.
- Recognize and reward positive behavior to encourage respect and accountability.

### **Be Ready for Any Emergency**

- Hold regular safety drills and make sure students understand why they matter.
- Train teachers and staff every year so everyone knows what to do in an emergency.
- Use clear, easy-to-understand safety alerts across phones, intercoms, and emails.
- Create short safety lessons for students to build awareness without causing fear.

### **Support Mental Health and Well-Being**

- Hire more counselors and make it easy for students to reach them when they need help.
- Offer virtual counseling (like Hazel Health) and advertise it widely so everyone knows it's available.
- Create safe spaces in school — quiet rooms or wellness centers where students can take a break and talk to someone they trust.
- Make sure safety and mental health are talked about together