

# The Geography of Violence: Over-Policing, Learned Helplessness, and the Case for the Enabling School

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A Policy Paper by TeacherWorld Global Cooperative

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*“The budget is not a neutral document. It is a moral statement — a declaration of what a society believes its people are worth, and what it expects them to become.”*

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## Abstract

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This paper examines the relationship between over-policing, community safety, and the neurobiological production of learned helplessness in urban communities. Drawing on peer-reviewed research in neuroscience, criminology, public health, and developmental psychology, it argues that the dominant public safety model — characterized by disproportionate investment in law enforcement relative to social infrastructure — does not produce safety. It produces the neurobiological, psychological, and social conditions that make violence more likely, while simultaneously failing to address the form of mass violence — school shootings — that occurs most frequently in the communities least subject to its interventions. The paper presents the Enabling School and the cooperative economy as the evidence-based structural alternative, grounded in a front-end investment model whose return on public safety investment exceeds that of policing by a documented order of magnitude.

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## I. The Budget as a Diagnostic Instrument

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In fiscal year 2023–24, the City of Los Angeles allocated approximately **\$3.2 billion** to the Los Angeles Police Department out of a total city budget of \$13 billion —

representing roughly **24.6% of the total expense budget** and the single largest departmental allocation in the city’s operating expenditure. <sup>1</sup> When pension obligations, legal settlements, and related criminal justice costs are included, the effective share of public resources devoted to the policing apparatus rises substantially higher.

This allocation is not a recent anomaly. For decades, Los Angeles — like most major American cities — has structured its public investment around the premise that the primary threat to community safety is criminal behavior that must be deterred, detected, and punished through the deployment of uniformed force. The budget is, in this sense, a diagnostic instrument: it reveals, with more precision than any mission statement or strategic plan, what the institution believes about the people it governs and what it expects them to become.

The question this paper addresses is straightforward: **Does the investment produce the outcome it claims to produce?** And if it does not — if the evidence demonstrates that the policing model fails on its own terms while simultaneously generating the conditions it claims to prevent — then the question of what should replace it becomes not merely academic but urgent.

The evidence, examined across multiple disciplines and decades of research, is unambiguous. The policing model does not produce safety. It produces helplessness. And helplessness, as the neuroscience has established with increasing precision, is the neurobiological substrate from which violence grows.

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## II. The Geography of Mass School Violence

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The most revealing evidence against the premises of the over-policing model comes not from criminological statistics about street crime, but from the geography of the most spectacular form of school violence in American life: the mass school shooting.

The United States Government Accountability Office’s 2020 analysis of school shooting characteristics found that **suburban and rural, wealthier, and low-minority schools** were disproportionately represented among sites of targeted school shootings. <sup>2</sup> This finding is consistent with the epidemiological literature: Shultz et al. (2013), in a peer-reviewed analysis published in *Disaster Health*, found that random mass shootings “tended to occur in either suburban or rural school settings rather than urban inner

city locales.” <sup>3</sup> The Violence Project’s comprehensive mass shooter database — which covers every mass shooting in the United States since 1966 — confirms this pattern: the iconic incidents that have defined the national conversation about school violence occurred overwhelmingly in communities that were, by conventional metrics, the *least* dangerous. <sup>4</sup>

Columbine High School, Jefferson County, Colorado. Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Connecticut. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, Florida. Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, Texas. Oxford High School, Oxford Township, Michigan.

These are not inner-city schools. They are not schools embedded in heavily policed, economically marginalized communities. They are schools in communities that were presumed — by the logic of the policing model — to be safe.

The children who have been treated as the threat — who have been subjected to metal detectors, school resource officers, stop-and-frisk encounters, and the full apparatus of the security state — are not the children committing mass school shootings. The children who were never treated as a threat are.

This is not a coincidence. It is a diagnostic. And it reveals, with uncomfortable precision, the racial and economic premises on which the over-policing model is built.

Characteristic	Inner-City School	Suburban/Rural School
Police/security presence	High — metal detectors, SROs, surveillance	Low to moderate
Presumed threat level	High	Low
Incidence of mass shootings	Low	High
Incidence of daily gun violence (near schools)	High	Low
Dominant policy response	Increased policing	Mental health discussion
Shooter profile in mass incidents	Rare	Consistent with research profile

Sources: GAO (2020) <sup>2</sup>; Shultz et al. (2013) <sup>3</sup>; The Violence Project (2024) <sup>4</sup>; The Trace (2024) <sup>5</sup>

The asymmetry in policy response is equally revealing. When mass violence occurs in a suburban school, the national conversation turns immediately to mental health, social isolation, and the need to understand what went wrong with the shooter. The shooter is humanized; his childhood is examined; his suffering is documented. When violence occurs in an inner-city school — not a mass shooting but the daily, grinding, individual violence that is the product of structural conditions — the response is a policing budget. The question asked is not *what happened to them?* It is *how do we contain them?*

**This is not a difference in the nature of the violence. It is a difference in the race and class of the child committing it.**

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### III. The Neuroscience of Chronic Threat

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To understand why the policing model fails — and why it produces the conditions it claims to prevent — it is necessary to understand what chronic threat exposure does to the human brain.

#### A. The Amygdala and the Threat-Response Cascade

The human brain's threat-detection system — centered in the amygdala — operates on a principle that is ancient, efficient, and, in the context of chronic institutional stress, catastrophically counterproductive. When the amygdala detects threat, it initiates a cascade of neurobiological responses: the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis floods the body with cortisol and adrenaline; the prefrontal cortex — the seat of executive function, long-term planning, empathy, and complex reasoning — is suppressed; and attention narrows to the immediate threat, eliminating the broad, associative thinking that learning and creativity require. <sup>6</sup>

This response is adaptive in the presence of acute, escapable threat. It is neurobiologically destructive in the presence of chronic, inescapable threat. McEwen and Morrison (2013), in a landmark review published in *Neuron*, documented that chronic stress causes measurable structural damage to the prefrontal cortex — loss of dendritic spines, reduced synaptic connectivity, and impaired glutamate receptor function — that compromises executive function and emotional regulation in ways that persist long after the stressor has been removed. <sup>7</sup>

Van der Kolk's foundational research, synthesized in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), established that traumatic stress is not stored as coherent narrative memory in the left hemisphere's language centers. It is stored as fragmented sensory impressions, somatic responses, and emotional charges in the right hemisphere and subcortical regions — the very regions that the arts, music, movement, and physical play access most directly. <sup>8</sup> This is the neurobiological basis for the trauma-creativity connection: the arts are not a supplement to healing. They are the primary language through which the traumatized brain can process and integrate what language cannot reach.

## **B. Adverse Childhood Experiences and Brain Development**

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study — one of the largest investigations of childhood trauma and long-term health outcomes ever conducted — established a dose-response relationship between the number of adverse childhood experiences and a range of negative outcomes including educational failure, substance abuse, mental illness, and early death. <sup>9</sup> Subsequent neuroimaging research has confirmed the structural basis of these outcomes: children with high ACE scores show measurable differences in the volume and connectivity of the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala — the neural architecture of learning, memory, and emotional regulation. <sup>10</sup>

Dudley's (2021) doctoral research specifically examined the relationship between late childhood stress, neurocognitive development, and school safety, finding that the school environment itself — its safety, its relational quality, its capacity to activate or suppress the threat-response system — is a primary determinant of neurocognitive outcomes. <sup>11</sup> The implication is direct: a school that is experienced as threatening — whether because of poverty, violence, or the presence of an over-policing apparatus — is a school that is actively impairing the neurocognitive development of the children within it.

## **C. Chronic Stress and BDNF Depletion**

Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) — the protein responsible for neuronal growth, survival, and synaptic plasticity — is directly suppressed by chronic cortisol elevation. Research published in *Neuropharmacology* and related journals has established that chronic restraint stress consistently reduces BDNF levels in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, impairing learning, memory consolidation, and the brain's capacity for neuroplastic repair. <sup>12</sup> For children growing up in chronically

stressed environments — environments characterized by poverty, violence, food insecurity, housing instability, and the constant presence of an apparatus of surveillance and control — BDNF depletion is not a clinical abstraction. It is the neurobiological mechanism through which structural inequality is written into the developing brain.

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## IV. Learned Helplessness: The Neuropsychological Product of Over-Policing

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### A. Seligman's Foundational Research

Martin Seligman and Steven Maier's foundational research on learned helplessness — originally conducted with animals in the 1960s and subsequently confirmed across decades of human psychology research — established a principle that the architects of the policing model have never adequately absorbed: **when a living organism is repeatedly subjected to aversive conditions it cannot control or escape, it stops trying to escape — even when escape becomes possible.** [13](#)

The organism does not become aggressive. It does not become defiant. It becomes passive, withdrawn, and neurobiologically altered in ways that persist long after the original conditions have changed. The hippocampus is measurably damaged. The prefrontal cortex — the seat of agency, planning, and the belief that one's actions can change one's circumstances — goes offline. The neurochemistry of motivation collapses.

Learned helplessness is not a character trait. It is not a cultural pathology. It is a neurological injury produced by a specific set of environmental conditions: repeated, unpredictable, uncontrollable, inescapable aversive stimulation.

Over-policing produces exactly those conditions — with precision, at scale, and across generations.

### B. Stop-and-Frisk as Mass Neurobiological Intervention

The New York City stop-and-frisk program — at its peak in 2011, when the NYPD conducted **685,724 stops**, 88% of them targeting Black or Latino individuals, and 88%

of those stops resulting in no arrest, summons, or other action — is not merely a civil liberties violation. <sup>14</sup> It is, from a neurobiological perspective, a mass intervention in the learned helplessness production system.

Each stop delivers, in the body and nervous system of the person stopped, the precise experiential components of learned helplessness: aversive stimulation (the physical and psychological experience of being stopped, searched, and treated as a suspect); unpredictability (the stop can occur at any time, in any location, for any reason); uncontrollability (the person stopped has no power to prevent, resist, or escape the encounter); and inescapability (the stops are not isolated incidents but a persistent feature of the environment).

The Vera Institute's research on the psychological impact of stop-and-frisk confirmed what the neuroscience predicted: the program did not make communities feel safer. It produced pervasive feelings of fear, humiliation, and powerlessness among the people subjected to it. It reduced trust in law enforcement to near zero. And it made community members *less* likely to report crimes — because reporting a crime means engaging with the same apparatus that has been the source of harm. <sup>15</sup>

**The policing model, in its most aggressive form, actively destroys the community cooperation that is the only thing that actually makes communities safer.**

### **C. Collective Efficacy and Its Destruction**

Robert Sampson's landmark research on neighborhood-level collective efficacy — conducted over decades in Chicago and published in foundational studies in *Science* and *American Journal of Sociology* — identified collective efficacy as the single strongest predictor of neighborhood safety, more powerful than poverty, demographics, or police presence. <sup>16</sup> Collective efficacy is defined as the shared belief among community members that they can work together to address common problems — the social cohesion and mutual trust that enable a community to govern itself.

Over-policing systematically destroys collective efficacy. It replaces the community's belief in its own capacity for self-governance with dependence on an external authority that has demonstrated, repeatedly, that it does not serve the community's interests. It signals, through every encounter, that the community is not trusted to manage its own affairs — and that signal, repeated over decades, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A community that has been made helpless cannot heal itself. Not because it lacks the will or the wisdom — it has both in abundance. But because the neurobiological and psychological conditions that helplessness produces — suppressed agency, dissolved collective efficacy, intergenerational transmission of powerlessness — are precisely the conditions that make self-directed community regeneration impossible without structural intervention.

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## V. The Return on Investment That Was Never There

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### A. The California Evidence

A 2024 analysis by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice examined 20 years of data across California’s 51 major cities and found that **increased law enforcement budgets and personnel correlated with significantly worse, not improved, crime-solving outcomes.** [17](#) This finding is consistent with the broader criminological literature: Beck’s (2025) comprehensive review in the *Annual Review of Criminology* concluded that “research suggests that education spending efficiently and durably reduces crime with fewer negative externalities than policing but with longer time horizons.” [18](#)

The Hazra (2022) analysis in *Children and Youth Services Review*, examining the comparative effectiveness of government spending on welfare and education versus law enforcement and corrections, found that social investment — particularly in education and welfare — produced more durable crime reductions than equivalent law enforcement spending. [19](#)

### B. The Perry Preschool Benchmark

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program — a two-year early childhood intervention targeting disadvantaged African-American children in Ypsilanti, Michigan, studied through age 40 — provides the most rigorously documented evidence of the return on front-end social investment. Heckman et al.’s (2010) cost-benefit analysis, published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, estimated a **7–12% annual return on investment**, with 88% of the public return derived from crime savings. [20](#) The program’s age-40 follow-up data showed that participants had significantly higher rates of employment,

homeownership, and educational attainment, and significantly lower rates of arrest and incarceration than the control group. [21](#)

The investment in early childhood education — estimated at approximately 15,166 per child in 1962 dollars—produced a public return of approximately \*\*195,621 per child\*\* by age 40, a ratio of roughly 13:1. [22](#) No policing intervention in the research literature approaches this return.

### C. Cure Violence: The Epidemiological Model

The Cure Violence program — which treats violence as a communicable disease and deploys trained community members as violence interrupters — provides evidence that community-based, non-policing interventions can produce dramatic reductions in shootings and killings. A systematic review published in *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* (Ransford et al., 2025) found that the Cure Violence model “consistently contributes to reductions in violence” across multiple sites and studies. [23](#) Individual site evaluations have documented reductions in shootings ranging from 25% to 88%, with the largest effects in the most heavily impacted communities. [24](#)

Critically, Cure Violence produces these outcomes not by increasing the police presence in affected communities but by restoring the community’s own capacity for conflict resolution — by rebuilding, from within, the collective efficacy that over-policing has destroyed.

### D. The CAHOOTS Model

Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) program — which dispatches two-person teams of crisis workers and medics to respond to behavioral health crises in lieu of armed police — handled **18,583 calls in 2019**, approximately 17% of the Eugene Police Department’s total call volume, at a fraction of the cost of a police response. [25](#) A 2025 NBER working paper found that CAHOOTS responses led to significant reductions in arrests, reflecting the program’s capacity to de-escalate situations that would otherwise result in criminalization. [26](#)

The CAHOOTS model demonstrates that the majority of calls currently handled by armed police — mental health crises, welfare checks, substance abuse incidents,

domestic disputes — do not require an armed response and are handled more effectively, more safely, and at lower cost by trained community health workers.

Intervention	Cost per Unit	Crime Reduction Evidence	Community Trust Impact
Additional police officers	High	Marginal, inconsistent	Negative in over-policed communities
Perry Preschool (early childhood)	15,166/ <i>child</i> (1962)	13:1 ROI; 88% from crime savings	Positive (community investment signal)
Cure Violence	Low-moderate	25–88% shooting reduction	Positive (community-led)
CAHOOTS (crisis response)	Low	Arrest reduction; de-escalation	Positive (non-punitive)
Education spending (general)	Moderate	Durable, long-term reduction	Positive

Sources: Heckman et al. (2010) [20](#); Ransford et al. (2025) [23](#); Cure Violence Global (2021) [24](#); Waters (2021) [25](#); Davis et al. (2025) [26](#); Beck (2025) [18](#)

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## VI. The Suburban School’s Hidden Trauma

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The mass school shooting data reveals something that the over-policing critique alone cannot: **the affluent suburban school is not a safe environment either.** It is a differently unsafe environment — one that produces its own form of unaddressed trauma, with its own catastrophic outcomes.

The research profile of the mass school shooter is consistent across the literature: social isolation, bullying or exclusion, untreated mental illness (most commonly depression or paranoid ideation), a profound sense of grievance and powerlessness, and access to weapons in a cultural context that mythologizes violence as the ultimate expression of agency. <sup>4</sup> These are not the conditions of poverty. They are the conditions of a different kind of institutional failure: the failure of the affluent school to see the suffering of the child who does not fit the profile of the child who is supposed to be suffering.

The inner-city school over-surveilles the children it has decided are dangerous. The suburban school under-surveilles the children it has decided are safe. Both failures are lethal. They are lethal in different ways, at different scales, and with different political responses — but they share a common root: **a school system that was never designed to see the whole child.**

The neurobiological needs of a child are not determined by their zip code. Every child — regardless of race, class, geography, or the presumptions of the policing apparatus — needs safety, belonging, identity, agency, and the experience of being genuinely known by a trusted adult. The school that provides these things does not produce mass shooters. It does not produce the outcomes that the policing budget was built to manage.

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## **VII. The Truth-Telling Curriculum and the Restoration of Agency**

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The most radical element of the Enabling School model — and the one most systematically absent from both the trauma-informed school movement and the over-policing apparatus — is the commitment to **telling children the truth about the source of their suffering.**

A child who grows up in an over-policed community, whose family has been subjected to stop-and-frisk, whose neighborhood has been treated as a containment zone, whose school has been equipped with metal detectors and armed officers — that child is not suffering because of a character deficit. They are not suffering because of a cultural pathology. They are suffering because of a set of deliberate political and economic decisions that were made by people with the power to make them, for reasons that have nothing to do with the child's well-being and everything to do with the maintenance of a social order that benefits from their containment.

A child who understands this — who has been given the historical, political, and economic literacy to name the system they are inside — is a child who has been given back their agency. Not the false agency of individual resilience in the face of structural injustice. The real agency of political consciousness: the understanding that the script they are acting in was written by someone else, that it can be rewritten, and that the cooperative economy is the institution through which the rewriting happens.

This is what the Village Center was always trying to do. This is what the arts and sports were always facilitating — not merely as therapeutic interventions, but as practices of agency restoration. The child who creates something — who paints, who writes, who performs, who competes, who builds — is a child who has experienced, in their body and their nervous system, the fundamental truth that their actions can change their circumstances. That is the antidote to learned helplessness. That is the neurobiological foundation of political consciousness. And that is what the Enabling School is designed to produce — not as an occasional program, but as the permanent architecture of the institution.

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## VIII. The Enabling School as Structural Alternative

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The Enabling School — as defined in the TeacherWorld Certification Framework — is not a reform of the existing school. It is a structural alternative, built from the neurobiological evidence up, that addresses the root causes of both the inner-city school's failures and the suburban school's failures simultaneously.

Its nine certification domains — Stress Hygiene and Psychological Safety, Brain Hygiene Practices, Creative Environment Design, Teacher Autonomy and Professional Agency, Restorative Community Practices, Holistic Student Development, Cooperative Governance, Family and Community Integration, and Ecological and Environmental Connection — are not aspirational values. They are neurobiologically grounded structural requirements for the creation of an environment in which the human brain can develop, learn, and flourish.

The cooperative economy that sustains the Enabling School — through FarmWorld, CareWorld, Camp Joy!, the Blue Zone Auto Care Club, and the other cooperative verticals of the TeacherWorld network — is not a supplement to the school. It is the economic infrastructure that makes the school's commitments permanent. It addresses the financial stress, the healthcare insecurity, the housing instability, and the social isolation that are the primary sources of the chronic threat activation that the school alone cannot resolve.

**The Enabling School is the institution that makes the policing budget irrelevant — not by reforming the system, but by building the conditions in which the outcomes the system claims to prevent do not occur.**

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## IX. Conclusion: The Budget Is the Curriculum

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The city of Los Angeles spends approximately \$3.2 billion per year on the Los Angeles Police Department. [1](#) The crime reduction does not match the investment. The communities most heavily policed do not feel safer — they feel like helpless victims, surveilled and contained by an apparatus that has never been designed to serve their interests. [15](#) The mass violence that dominates the national conversation about school safety does not occur in these communities. It occurs in the communities that were presumed to be safe — because the children in them were presumed to be safe. [2](#) [3](#)

The budget is not a failure of the system. It is the system working exactly as designed: investing in the management of the people it has already decided to give up on, while defunding the interventions — early childhood education, mental health infrastructure, arts programs, cooperative economic development — that the evidence consistently shows produce the outcomes the policing budget claims to produce.

The Perry Preschool data shows a 13:1 return on front-end investment. [20](#) The Cure Violence data shows 25–88% reductions in shootings through community-based intervention. [23](#) [24](#) The CAHOOTS data shows that 17% of police calls can be handled more effectively and at lower cost by trained community health workers. [25](#) The collective efficacy research shows that community social cohesion is a stronger predictor of neighborhood safety than police presence. [16](#) The neuroscience of chronic stress shows that the conditions produced by over-policing — learned helplessness, BDNF depletion, prefrontal cortex suppression, dissolved collective efficacy — are the neurobiological substrate from which violence grows. [6](#) [7](#) [12](#) [13](#)

The evidence is not ambiguous. The question is not what works. The question is who benefits from the continuation of what does not work — and who has the power to change it.

TeacherWorld is building the institution that changes it. Not by reforming the budget. Not by lobbying the system. But by constructing, cooperative vertical by cooperative vertical, the alternative civilization in which the conditions that produce violence — helplessness, invisibility, the absence of agency, the suppression of creative intelligence — do not exist.

**The opposite of over-policing is not under-policing. It is the Enabling School. It is the cooperative economy. It is the truth-telling curriculum. It is the Village Center**

**that finally has a permanent home.**

*The budget is the curriculum. And TeacherWorld is writing a different one.*

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## References

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