

March 2023

Budget Eliminates Hundreds of Vacant School Safety Positions, Following More Than 20 Percent Decline in Safety Agent Staffing in City’s Public Schools Over Three Years

As of late February 2023, the number of active New York City Police Department school safety agents totaled almost 3,900, or nearly 1,200 (24 percent) fewer than those active on the same date in 2020, just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ Overall, the Mayor’s Preliminary Budget includes funding for almost 4,000 school safety agent positions, reflecting a reduction of nearly 300 vacant positions since the Mayor’s November Financial Plan. School safety agents provide security services in public school buildings, with duties including monitoring school entrances, responding to student behavioral or safety incidents, and operating metal detectors.

The decline in school safety agent active staffing within the NYPD is a result of attrition, as well as restrictions put on city hiring early in the pandemic. The reduction in total budgeted positions is due to the elimination of hundreds of vacant positions as part of the city’s cost saving measures, known as the Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG), over several financial plans.

Rounds of PEGs. In January, Mayor Adams’ Preliminary Budget proposed eliminating 282 currently vacant school safety agent positions to save \$10 million in 2023, rising to \$21 million in 2027 (unless otherwise noted, years refer to city fiscal years). This reduction followed prior cuts to the safety agent program in the November 2022 financial plan and last year’s Preliminary Budget released in February 2022. In total, these cuts result in the reduction of 832 vacant positions in each year of the financial plan from 2023 through 2027. After three years of overbudgeting for the safety agents, in which the difference between the budget and actual expenditures grew from \$12 million up to \$73 million, these changes bring the current school safety agent budget—\$356 million—to its lowest level in several years.

School Safety Background. School safety agents are employed by the NYPD and wear NYPD uniforms, but they are considered civilian NYPD employees and unlike police officers do not carry guns. The current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Education (DOE) and NYPD, signed in 2019, emphasizes a more restrained approach to school safety. In the MOU, the agencies set guidelines that school safety agents should not intervene in most low-level misconduct, use alternative responses to issuing arrests or summonses in most circumstances, and use the minimal amount of physical restraints necessary. Although IBO has requested quarterly reports on the number of school safety agents assigned to each school building, the NYPD has not provided this information.

While school safety agents work in the city’s school buildings, DOE has not directly employed these staff since 1998. (In June 2021, in his last adopted budget former Mayor de Blasio proposed returning the safety agents to the DOE in the summer of 2022, but Mayor Adams reversed this decision in his first budget in February 2022.) Instead, DOE pays for school safety agent personal costs through an intra-city transfer to NYPD. DOE also pays for their fringe benefits with a transfer of funds to the citywide budget for fringe benefits, not the NYPD budget.

The NYPD covers some costs associated with the NYPD School Safety Division, primarily for the uniformed school safety supervisors. NYPD also provides some school safety functions outside of the School Safety Division. Since 2020, NYPD has operated the Youth Coordination Officer (YCO) program, consisting of precinct-based uniformed officers who are meant to address crimes committed by youth and monitor “at risk youth” and connect them to social services. The YCO program was recently expanded from 350 to 462



officers. Additionally, NYPD sometimes provides uniformed officers to monitor school dismissal in what are called safe corridors. Both the YCO and safe corridor programs are funded by NYPD and provide different functions than the full-time school security guard role of the safety agents.

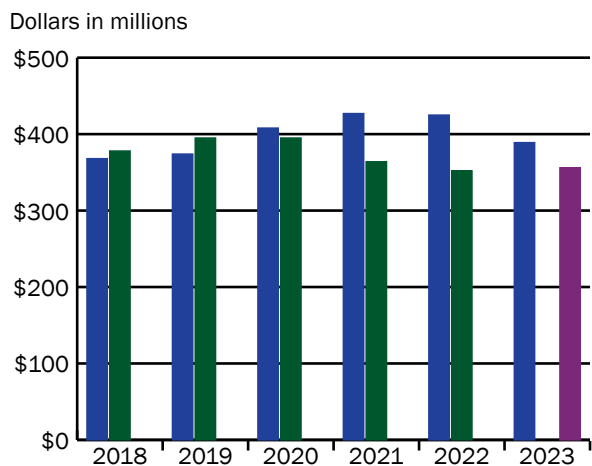
School Safety Agent Budget and Headcount Fall after a High in 2019 and 2020. In the years before the Covid-19 pandemic, DOE spending on school safety agents increased steadily, growing from \$310 million in 2014 to \$395 million in 2019. At that point—the final school year before the pandemic—the number of active school safety agents, based on city payroll data, peaked at around 5,050.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic brought school safety agent spending increases to a halt. School closures and cuts to overtime left school safety agent spending flat at \$395 million in 2020, \$12 million short of the \$407 million budgeted at adoption at the start of the fiscal year.

With high attrition rates and restrictions put on city hiring early in the pandemic, the number of active school safety agents fell substantially for the first time in several years, by about 21 percent—from 5,000 in April 2020 to less than 4,000 in October 2021. In the year and four months since then, the number of agents has declined more slowly. As of February 22, 2023, there were almost 3,900 active safety

DOE's School Safety Agent Budget Now Reflects the Decreased Spending and Headcount of the Past Two Years

■ Adopted Budget ■ Expenditures (2018-2022)
■ Current Modified Budget (2023)



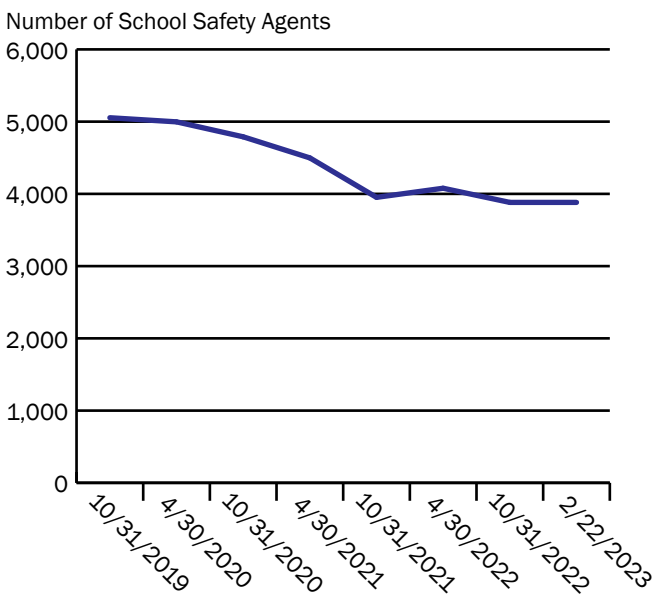
SOURCE: New York City Financial Management System
New York City Independent Budget Office

agents. Without the more granular data from NYPD, IBO is unable to provide a more precise characterization of the decline in agents across the city's five boroughs and 32 community school districts. Additionally, without information on how these staff are allocated to schools and/or buildings, IBO cannot assess how current staffing levels compare to NYPD's school safety staffing goals.

The divergence between DOE's adopted school safety budget and actual spending widened further in 2021 and 2022. Despite an increase in the amount initially budgeted for school safety agents in 2021 to \$427 million, spending declined year-over-year to \$364 million, falling \$63 million short of what was budgeted. A similar story unfolded in 2022. With an adopted budget of \$425 million for school safety agents, actual spending fell further to \$352 million, \$73 million below budget, as the safety agent headcount dropped below 4,000.

After two years of overbudgeting, the school safety agent budget has been reduced to be more in line with recent spending and now reflects the decline in headcount over the past two years. A total of 832 vacant positions were cut over multiple financial plans. The first cut came in last year's Preliminary Budget in February 2022, when 550 vacant positions were eliminated, saving the DOE between \$35 million and \$37 million per year from 2023 on, bringing the budget for 2023 down to \$389 million. Next, the November 2022 budget cut \$24 million in 2023

The Number of Active NYPD School Safety Agents Declined by Over 20 Percent Between April 2020 and October 2021



SOURCE: New York City payroll data (CHRMS)
NOTE: Chart shows the number of active school safety agents at two points in each year, April and October.
New York City Independent Budget Office



and \$13 million in 2024 reflecting lower recruitment and higher attrition than projected. Finally, in January 2023, the most recent budget eliminated 282 more vacant positions for \$10 million to \$21 million per year, bringing the current year's budget to \$356 million.

School Safety Budget Remains Below Prior Highs in Financial Plan Outyears. The current budget also plans for school safety agent spending to remain below 2020's spending peak and increase only modestly in the next few years. Because the vacancy reductions were applied to

both current and future years, spending on school safety agents is budgeted to increase to \$367 million by the end of the financial plan in 2027, well below the highest level budgeted, \$427 million in 2021, and short of the highest actual expenditures of \$395 million in 2019 and 2020. Increasing spending beyond this level would require additional funds in future budgets.

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Endnote

⁴Includes all NYPD civilian personnel classified under Title Code 60817 and active according to City Human Resource Management System (CHRMS).