

A YOUTH POLICY AGENDA

DRAFTED BY STUDENTS OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH IMPACT SUMMIT



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CLOSE UP[®]
WASHINGTON DC



National Network
OF SCHOOLS IN PARTNERSHIP

Stanford | Center for Deliberative Democracy

We are a group of 68 determined, diverse students who want to see change. We aim to come together to bridge the gap between a polarized nation and listen to each other. We have seen how politicians are hesitant to make change in our country, and that can't happen anymore. In a nation of extremes, we aim to become more united and to respect each other, even though we have different opinions.

Young people are the future. This generation has faced trials, and many of the difficulties that have rocked this world disproportionately affect young people. The COVID-19 pandemic, mass shootings at our schools and in our communities, and the ever-present and looming threat of climate change have shaped our generation. We are rising up. We have the capacity to inspire generations. Our willingness to put in the time and effort has a cascading effect, to produce a product greater than we could ever create by ourselves. We will outlive every other generation that came before, and we are the people who will experience what is to come. Young people are the voice we need to hear.

We met each other on June 20, 2022. Close Up gave us an opportunity and a platform to talk about pressing issues that we are often told not to talk about. It is a space where people want to listen and that empowers us to do more. A space of openness and respect. Students traveled from across the nation to work together with people they didn't know because they all shared common beliefs and values.

Participants deliberated and agreed on 12 pressing issues as the center of our focus. Students then split into two groups, one focusing on Economy, Labor, and Poverty, and the other focusing on Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and Social Issues. Students formed subcommittees in these groups to focus on what they were passionate about, and laid out plans for how to address these problems. The topics they selected are the contents of our proposal and appear in order of committees.

We are calling on politicians to take action on these pressing issues and to listen to the voices of youth who are the future of our democracy. Students shared dreams of equality and freedom, beliefs in justice and equity, a common longing for safety and security, and a respect for and desire to form a democracy filled with representation.

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In order to analyze the issues surrounding the economy, labor, and poverty in the United States, Close Up students engaged in a comprehensive evaluation of the nation's current predicament. Through extensive research and debate, this committee found a need to address concerns in K-12 education funding, pre-K education funding, renewable energy, investments in underserved communities, and workers' rights. The following subcommittees were created to address the critical issues that affect our society today and our future tomorrow.

The subcommittees of the 2022 Close Up National Youth Impact Summit include the following:

K-12 Education Funding

Addressing the lack of equity and federal funding in public education, which has disproportionately affected low-income and people of color (POC) communities, by redistributing federal educational funds and educating school officials.

Pre-K Education Funding

Addressing the lack of federal funding for pre-K education by allocating federal funds to pay for a national public preschool education system.

Renewable Energy

Creating a thorough, proactive, national public structure to deal with the rapid expansion of climate change by focusing on transit, energy, and jobs.

Investing in Underserved Communities

Addressing the institutional and social neglect of Black and Brown communities by reforming, informing, and modernizing national policies to mitigate incarceration and support those after incarceration.

Workers' Rights

Addressing the lack of support for American unions by modernizing the systems and mechanisms to enforce anti-union behavior by companies and bring the rights of workers into the 21st century.



Issue Statement

The lack of equity and federal funding in public education has disproportionately affected low-income and POC communities. Over the last decades, the federal government has used various acts, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), and different federal programs within the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other agencies to improve upon the issue. However, low graduation rates, a lack of student resources, and decreasing quality of education continue to cause hardship for individuals experiencing systemic poverty. Educational funding is unevenly distributed among school districts across the country because it is incorrectly allocated at state and local levels, causing financial discrepancies in school systems from state to state.

The root of this issue is systematic racism. Blame continues to fall on POC for their lack of success, but in reality, they are placed in a system that is designed for their failure. Funding continues to be distributed to schools that are in predominantly white, wealthy neighborhoods. This creates a lack of opportunity for diverse populations and a lack of equity in public education. The funding for K-12 education is adequate, with an estimated \$1.15 trillion being spent nationwide on education at all levels with obvious room for improvement. There are many opportunities to improve through more funding, better organization, and ensuring proper spending. Allowing the development and renovation of public school buildings and enhancing technological tools, such as laptops, internet access, and state-of-the-art school buses, would increase the value and worth of public education. These measures help ensure upward mobility and fairness throughout the country.

Policy Proposal

To confront these challenges, our educational policy goals during the 117th Congress are to:

- ❖ Create more funding and scholarships for underprivileged students in lower-income communities. Schools would provide more options for learning and participating in extracurricular activities and community-building clubs. Students would also receive resources to take home, such as food and school supplies.
- ❖ Fund the creation of more specialized programs for people with special learning needs. This funding, generally speaking, would apply to students with special or additional needs that are income-, disability-, or otherwise-based. Additionally, there should be programs supporting English-learning individuals.
 - Allow for tutors and more personalized help.
 - Create more opportunities for specialized classes and learning.
- ❖ Propose agreements, indirectly, between schools and Congress surrounding additional federal educational funding. These agreements would be between individual schools and their respective districts, said districts and their respective states, and said states and the U.S. Congress.
- ❖ Educate school districts on eligible grants and scholarships through advertisements and informational resources issued by the government.
 - This would include educating students and families on internal district schools with helpful grants and scholarship opportunities through emails and home letters.
- ❖ Reconsider increasing Title I school funding by 120 percent.
 - A bill was introduced to more than double the Title I budget but was not passed. We propose increasing the budget by another 20 percent, thereby allocating more money to schools in need but still giving a sensible amount.
 - Title I needs more funding so it can better serve schools in lower-income communities, ensuring that more students in those communities meet challenging content and achievement standards.
- ❖ Educate district leaders on allocating Title I money.

- Hold seminars for school administrators and district leaders to learn about ways to allocate money given by Title I.
- Seminars can be led by financial experts educated in Title I.
- ❖ Create a need-based program.
 - Need-based qualification.
 - Cap family income at less than \$65,000 a year.
 - Section 504.

Subcommittee Members

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Issue Statement

Early education is fundamental to the development of pre-kindergarten children. Studies have shown that neural development is at its most critical stage from birth to the age of five years old. If children do not have any education prior to kindergarten, they risk being less intellectually, socially, and physically developed.

Furthermore, preschool can double as daycare for working parents. Many parents cannot afford to send their children to preschool because most preschools are expensive, private institutions.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of kids in preschool declined drastically, creating a need for a new system entirely. The education system is deemed a state responsibility, which is why the federal government does not directly fund educational programs.

In order to combat the recent decrease in preschool enrollment, the federal government must take action by creating a supportive system to supplement state funds. Children aged one to five are incapable of advocating on behalf of themselves and consequently, their needs are ignored. There must be physical and emotional space for the children of American society by setting aside more than the current eight percent of the total national budget, according to the Department of Education. Because private preschool education continues to drive gaps between class groups, there is an obligation to create more economically and geographically accessible early-learning opportunities. Additionally, the need for child care and supervision paralyzes many families; it forces one parent to stay home and rely on a single income. Alternatively, for double-income families or single parents who cannot afford preschool, children are left educationally neglected and remain underdeveloped and unprepared for elementary school. The federal government must address the unmet needs of the youngest people in America through direct monetary assistance to each state.

Policy Proposal

To meet these challenges, our public policy goals are to:

- ❖ Allocate federal funds to pay for a national public preschool education system. Funding from the federal government should adequately support, but not supplant, state funding for early learning. This system must be checked by the series of quality benchmarks stated below, provided by the National Institute for Early Education Research:
 - Comprehensive early-learning standards
 - Bachelor's degrees required for lead teachers
 - Specialized training in pre-K for teachers
 - Assistant teachers with Child Development Associate Credentials or equivalent
 - At least 15 hours per year of professional learning
 - Maximum class size of 20 students
 - Maximum staff-to-child ratio of 1:10
 - Vision, hearing, and health screenings for children, and at least one support service
 - At least one meal per day
 - Regular site visit monitoring
- ❖ All of the above must be adhered to in every public preschool to ensure equal opportunity for all children. It is fundamental that each child begins with a basic understanding of social, intellectual, and physical skills prior to kindergarten to avoid educational inequities between class groups.
- ❖ Preschools will be required to aid children on the basis of their specific needs, especially in areas with high rates

of immigrants, minority groups, and poverty, to help better their school experience and make sure they do not lag behind due to adversities.

- ❖ It is common for preschool teachers to receive lower salaries than teachers in elementary schools, even when they possess the same qualifications. It would be appropriate to increase salaries for preschool teachers so that existing teachers are supported and there are incentives for potential teachers.
- ❖ President Joe Biden’s administration created the Build Back Better Act as a way to spend money to subsidize independent companies. This plan has flaws. Specifically, it is presented as short-term, as the funds only cover six years. Also, the Biden administration has not provided a clear plan as to how to implement this agenda and has yet to take action toward this plan. It is essential that the federal government change the course of these plans, moving for immediate action toward public preschool education funds in all states.

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Issue Statement

Environmental and health concerns now affect the United States as a result of the continuous release of greenhouse gases into our atmosphere, particularly by corporations and the transportation industry. However, the country hasn't had a thorough, proactive, national public structure to deal with the rapid expansion of climate change. Existing corporations are part of what is causing our environment to lose stability quickly. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), carbon dioxide (CO₂) accounted for approximately 79 percent of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions in the United States in 2020. The deterioration of our ecosystem, loss of habitats, poor air quality, increased health concerns, and rising sea levels are all progressively exacerbated by greenhouse gases, CO₂ emissions, and our reliance on oil and coal.

The federal government must act and take the lead on creating financial incentives for businesses and consumers to combat greenhouse gas emissions, such as CO₂ from energy sources like gas and oil. These policies must simultaneously reflect sustainability and economic stability in order to fight climate change and address it on a national level. In addition to the regulation of corporations which emit a large portion of these greenhouse gases, there must be accessible, environmentally friendly options available to aid customers who receive services from these corporations.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ Increase tax credits for companies that manufacture parts for, or focus on, green energy, with further increased tax credits for renewable energy businesses that employ a certain percentage of workers previously in fossil fuel industries.
 - Renewable energy will have countless job opportunities for those who may potentially lose their occupations in the fossil fuel industry. Employment in renewables provides much safer and healthier working conditions than jobs in fossil fuels. For example, workers involved in coal mining are commonly diagnosed with coal workers' pneumoconiosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, as well as many other conditions including cancer and heart damage.
- ❖ Invest in research and development for renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, hydroelectric, and biomass, as well as nuclear energy to bring advanced renewable energy technology to commercial use through programs like the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E).
 - These types of energy do not produce harmful greenhouse gases and therefore are very beneficial to the environment to reach CO₂ neutrality. These forms of energy are also more cost-efficient and more abundant to all living areas.
- ❖ Increase categorical grants for state, county, and city governments that invest in renewable energy or generate a certain percentage of their energy from renewable energy.
- ❖ Increase funding to the Department of Energy and the EPA for their programs which aid renewable energy businesses.
 - Help the Department of Energy and EPA set up training programs, similar to programs by Coalfield and Goldwind that train fossil fuel workers to work as solar and wind energy workers, that provide adequate jobs for otherwise structurally unemployed workers.
- ❖ Pass environmental legislation such as the Green New Deal or the climate provisions in the Build Back Better Act, including electric vehicle tax credits of up to \$12,500 for vehicles made in unionized factories and more research and development for carbon capture technology.

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Issue Statement

In the United States, the demand for preventive and rehabilitative measures for incarceration is at an all-time high. In the 40 years following President Richard Nixon's aggressive policies regarding crime, law and order, and the War on Drugs, the incarceration rate has increased by 500 percent, making America the largest incarcerator globally. Our current justice system includes discriminatory discipline policies in schools, inadequate funding in rehabilitation centers, and a lack of public recreation centers. Our current approach to criminal correction is one that inordinately impacts underserved communities and requires immediate reform, both in the realms of prevention and rehabilitation.

With increasing numbers of incarcerated citizens, the importance of investment in underserved communities is mandatory to lower these numbers. Evidence of the positive impact of this policy is seen in Mississippi, through the enactment of House Bill 796 and Senate Bill 2795. The bills eliminate mandatory life sentences for nonviolent convictions, allow people to be considered for parole if they are currently serving a life sentence for a drug or property crime, and expand parole eligibility. Although there is no guarantee of release, it's an opportunity for a second chance at life.

According to the Government Accountability Office, the Bureau of Prisons has not reviewed or set a recidivism reduction goal in over two decades. Considering the lack of political incentive to curtail recidivism and incarceration, as seen in the Bureau of Prisons, our policy aims to address the abandoned issue at hand.

The institutional and social neglect of Black and Brown communities has existed since the conception of the United States and, with the exponential growth of political consciousness, the need for systemic change has become even more apparent. A prominent way in which we see this injustice is through the incarceration rates of Black and Brown U.S. citizens and residents. The proposal reflects initiatives needed to alter the rehabilitative measures for incarceration in the United States.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ Our policies aim to support, protect, and invest in individuals living in underserved communities. We must reform, inform, and modernize national policies to mitigate incarceration and support those after incarceration. These policies will grant individuals the ability to live to their fullest potential because they will no longer be systemically held down. These federal services must be:
 - Accessible to all in need of support.
 - Widely publicized and known.
 - Specified to individual needs and struggles.
 - Unbiased.
 - Funded and altered based on rates of incarceration and demand.
- ❖ Unduly harsh school discipline policies, namely zero-tolerance policies, have proven to be discriminatory. These policies mandate either expulsion or referral to juvenile detention and criminal courts, and they act as conduits from schools to prisons. They must be abolished and replaced with deliberate, thoughtful, and productive alternatives that give regard to each student's circumstances.
- ❖ The National Center for Educational Statistics states that students from low-income households participate in extracurriculars half as much as their wealthier counterparts. The disparity in communal engagement results in dropouts being 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than their peers who partake in extracurriculars. The development of extracurricular activities and educational programs is essential, through the promotion and implementation of Boys & Girls Clubs, recreation centers, and parks in low-income areas.
- ❖ We must increase federal funding and the specific allocation of federal funds to transitional housing for previously incarcerated individuals through:
 - Funding rehabilitation centers (which aid in job search, training, and advisory measures).

- Financing continuous housing units until members reach financial stability.
 - Allocating federal funds for mental health and therapy programs within transitional centers. With optional resources for support post-imprisonment or post-conviction, inmates can regain autonomy over their lives while also relying on a government support system if needed.
- ❖ We must implement a federal mandate for employers and corporations to offer space to elucidate when an individual checks the box on a job application for previous felonies, allowing the option to explain reasons for and severity of past incarcerations. This would humanize previously incarcerated individuals in the eyes of their potential employer because this space allows them to tell their story and viewpoint.
- ❖ We must increase federal funding for public attorneys so the rate of wrongly convicted individuals decreases. Of the country's 1.33 million lawyers, 243,378 are public defense attorneys. This is important to note, as Black and Brown clients are typically assigned public defense attorneys because private attorneys are too expensive. The onset of wrongful convictions begins with lower-end lawyers and weak cases. Funding will help public defense attorneys better prepare for their cases and, in turn, support Black and Brown defendants.

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Issue Statement

Following the Industrial Revolution, the United States implemented laws that effectively suppressed workers' voices and restricted their ability to form labor unions. Beginning with the rise of pro-corporation sentiment in Congress after World War II, both the Taft-Hartley Act and the Landrum-Griffin Act contributed to the disenfranchisement and destabilization of labor unions. They did so by prohibiting unions from providing monetary contributions to campaigns and overregulating union activity. These acts effectively stripped worker unions of their power and influence over elections and employers. Additionally, this enabled large-scale corporations to prioritize profit over their employees' safety, security, and well-being. Consequently, according to the International Trade Union Confederation, the United States is consistently ranked as one of the worst countries for workers' rights. Today, large corporations have turned to union-busting tactics, such as hiring union-busting consultants and spreading anti-union messaging, to prevent their employees from exercising their right to unionize and create crucial change.

In turn, unions have become an increasingly vital outlet for employees to display their concerns and struggles in the workforce and contribute to setting safety and wage standards. The prevention of workers' formation of labor unions is unconstitutional, as it opposes the guaranteed freedoms of assembly and petition in the First Amendment. The First Amendment allows citizens to come together over shared interests and concerns, and gives them the freedom to protest peacefully and the right to free speech justifying all union activities. The services that unions provide are indispensable. However, due to the restrictive policies and laws in place, union membership has declined. According to the Census Bureau, following the Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffin Acts, union strikes fell by 97 percent from 1970 to 2011, contributing to America's position as one of the worst high-income countries for workers' rights. The federal government's responsibility and obligation are to protect workers' rights by regulating the industry and supporting labor unions.

Policy Proposal

To address the challenges faced by workers, the 117th Congress should prioritize the following:

- ❖ Passing the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act to modernize the systems and mechanisms in place to penalize anti-union behavior by companies and bring the rights of workers into the 21st century. The PRO Act would:
 - Increase the ability of the federal government to punish companies for misconduct through monetary fines and personal disciplinary measures.
 - Prohibit the interference of companies in union elections when selecting union leaders and forming unions.
 - Define the implementation of long-term punishments for strikes, employee coercion, and discriminating against employees who have participated in strikes or collective bargaining in the past as "unfair labor practices."
 - Allow workers to advocate for themselves by taking their cases to court, rather than the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) General Counsel.
 - Address the suppression of workers through the overregulation of labor unions, giving appropriate power and influence to labor unions in accordance with the First Amendment.
- ❖ Passing portions of the Build Back Better Act to supplement legislation included in the PRO Act. This includes increasing monetary punishment for union-busting to discourage large corporations that carry out this illegal yet common strategy.
- ❖ Overturning or amending laws that limit and overregulate the power of labor unions. These laws include the Taft-Hartley Act and the Landrum-Griffin Act.
 - This will reinforce labor unions' freedom of assembly and give these groups back the power they once had to advocate for workers' rights within a company.
- ❖ Promoting the education and outreach of unions through federal programs inside the workplace, with the goal

of recognizing the act of union-busting, understanding the process of unionization, and knowing the rights and laws surrounding unionization.

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These subcommittees were created by Close Up students in the Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and Social Issues Committee to address the critical issues that affect our society today and our future tomorrow. Much thought and care went into the creation of subcommittees focused on specific issues that are prevalent today. These include Censorship in Education, Systemic Racism in Policing, Gun Policy, Immigration, Secularized Government, Microplastics and Environmental Justice, and Reproductive Rights. After detailed dialogue, we came to a consensus that these specific topics had to be addressed and confronted through federal action. We are proud to present our proposals through much dedication, research, and perseverance.



Issue Statement

In the 21st century, students find themselves with limited access to an array of information addressing historical events and sexual education. With limited access to information, students are prevented from seeking and discovering their own personal interests, values, and opinions. This encourages conformity and silences the minds of our future. Keeping students from certain education spaces can cause them to suffer the effects of a limited perspective that may hinder their decision-making abilities and help to form prejudices.

The necessity for sexual education in school communities has been excessively neglected and poses critical difficulties for teenagers living in the 21st century. State governments have continued to make sexual education optional and the federal government has declined efforts to instill sexual education in learning communities. Currently, individual states are tasked with the option of mandating the curriculum for sex education via the state Department of Education. Due to these unregulated issues, some students find themselves ill-informed about sex and life-altering decisions. Around 80 percent of teens aged 15-17 are sexually active without having been formally taught about sex education before sexual intercourse. Teens find themselves spreading unreliable information on social media, seeing illegitimate sources in pop culture, and living in situations of sexual violence and abuse. Ultimately, increased scenarios of unwanted teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted disease in those aged 15-24 show a wrenching need for the implementation of sexual education to young adults in educational settings.

The decline in the accessibility of books providing a variety of detailed historical information has left a wide rift in the minds of students. State and local governments have school boards and panel systems that have failed to give students an unbiased curriculum, teaching them a one-way view of history based on personal opinions of religion, politics, and personal interest, rather than allowing students to find their own opinions and values. Governor-appointed public school boards have created an undemocratic process of deciding who gets to represent students and alter their forming ideas. Due to the extreme polarization of the two-party system in the United States, there is less and less overlap between the curricula of the states due to the differing values and beliefs of their residents.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ We call on Congress to direct the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Administration for Children and Families to provide an in-school program delivered by individual states. This program would provide students with sexual education and life skills informed by social-emotional health disciplines. Programs that adhere to the following teaching requirements would receive funds from the federal government:
 - Basic sexual information
 - Contraceptives
 - LGBTQIA+ relations
 - Body image
 - Healthy relationships
 - Decision-making
 - Pregnancy
 - Diseases
 - Communication and consent
 - Gender expression and gender identity
- ❖ To allow better educational access within a public school curriculum, we encourage Congress to authorize a Race-to-the-Top-style grant program to encourage schools and districts to:
 - Adopt the guidelines of the National Coalition Against Censorship's *Response to Challenges to Instructional and Library Materials*, allowing for parents to raise concerns about their children's education without

overruling the learning experience in the classroom. The guideline follows a robust structure of parents writing a form about a book complaint to a committee consisting of teachers, librarians, school administrators, students, and community members. There are review criteria that the committee must follow. With the panel and criteria, the committee makes a final decision about whether or not the book stays in the curriculum.

- Diversify staff and resources by having people of different religions, cultures, and experiences to correctly represent groups of people within the curriculum.
- Offer professional development for teachers to learn how to teach and converse about “difficult” topics, such as slavery, LGBTQIA+ rights, and acts of hate.

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Issue Statement

Racial bias within institutions and society continues to be a prevalent issue that has captured media focus in these past years. It shows its face in policing tactics and police brutality. Advocacy and awareness among youth have skyrocketed, slowly changing the societal dynamics of normalization and ignorance. However, although many notions of progress have been discussed, our nation lacks the concrete, aggressive action needed to break through on such a convoluted issue. Structural racism is entrenched in the functions of our democracy and policymaking. Therefore, combating police brutality through legislatures is not prioritized.

Police brutality affects minority communities in our nation. Individuals of all ages from these communities are experiencing this racial trauma. In turn, youth are growing up in fear, creating divided and mistrusting communities. Communities are starting to lose hope, as they believe they will live and die in political bondage.

Minority communities have been traumatized by the devastating effects of police brutality. Ideally, police forces are meant to protect the citizens of the United States. Specifically, in many Black communities, this ideal is not the reality. Due to the consistent terrorizing of the Black community, a continuous mistrust in the police force is present. Police brutality has evolved through time, from slave patrols in the 1700s to the normalization of state-supported violence today, which continues to put many minorities at risk. Numerous individuals in the United States believe that increasing the number of police officers is beneficial for the country, especially when combating high levels of crime in recent years. However, bills such as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 have shown that a major police presence can make matters worse. Therefore, in order to combat this growingly severe issue, we, as a nation, must act with urgency.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ In order to address said issue, Congress should pass H.R.1280, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020, with its main priorities listed below.
 - Working to end racial and religious profiling.
 - Saving lives by banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants.
 - Limiting military equipment on American streets and requiring police body cameras.
 - Holding police accountable in court.
 - Investigating police misconduct.
 - Empowering our communities to reimagine public safety in an equitable and just way.
 - Changing the culture of law enforcement with training to build integrity and trust.
 - Improving transparency by collecting data on police misconduct and use of force.
 - Stopping sexual assault in law enforcement custody.
- ❖ The legislation passed by Congress should include the following amendments:
 - Resources and funding going to the police should be reallocated to communities in need.
 - Mental health and drug rehabilitation centers
 - Support for low-income communities
 - Increased job offers for low-income communities
 - Support for the homeless
 - A reduction of increased police protection and protester penalties.
 - Mass unfair arrests during protests (example: the 2020 protests over George Floyd) add to the

divide between citizens and police. According to the *Washington Post*, between May 27 and June 22, 2020, over 14,000 arrests were reported during those protests and a large portion of the arrests were individuals who committed nonviolent acts such as violating curfews and failing to disperse in certain areas.

- Reminder: We are not talking about those who have looted and robbed, since those other incidents should result in charges brought upon those individuals.

Subcommittee Members

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Issue Statement

America's stark neglect of gun violence leads to shattered lives of our family, friends, community, and loved ones. Mass shootings increase annually along with a lack of civilian protection, inadequate background checks, and the sale of semiautomatic weapons. When the states ratified the Second Amendment allowing citizens to bear arms, today's violent climate did not exist. In the 1790s, the idea of an "arm" included a single-barrel, one-round rifle and a sword. The flintlock rifle took around three minutes to load. The technology of early America is significantly different from the semi-assault weapons and handguns we see today. Modern-day gun violence and possession are unprecedented and out of hand.

Every day, around 500 people die from gun homicide or suicide worldwide. On average in 2020, 124 Americans died from gun homicide or suicide each day, or one-fifth of the world average. In many U.S. states, gun carriers are not required to register their firearms and can purchase a weapon without a background check. No current legislation is suitable to fix this problem, and the government needs a new policy.

Our founding documents guarantee Americans the rights to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," yet gun violence strips these basic liberties. School lockdown drills, banning video games, and "being the good guy with the gun" are inadequate solutions to our gun violence epidemic. Putting a band-aid over the effects of gun violence is not a long-term solution. New Zealand, Australia, Norway, and the United Kingdom each implemented restrictive gun laws in response to a single mass shooting. The United States continues to endure an average of two mass shootings per day without addressing the issue of easily accessible firearms. In order for there to be a proper sense of national change, we must go to the systemic roots of the issues at hand. The lack of control in the ammunition and firearms market affects all 329.5 million Americans.

Policy Proposal

To meet these challenges, our public policy goals during the 117th Congress are to:

- ❖ Expand and adjust the Gun Control Act of 1968.
 - Raise the legal age to purchase **all** weapons and ammunition to 21 years.
 - Implement 1-2 days of background checks, gun education, and mental health screening to ensure the people purchasing firearms are mentally stable and well educated.
 - Ensure no gun will be sold legally to anyone with a history of violent criminal behavior, including but not limited to rape, battery, assault, and domestic violence.
 - In Virginia, for example, no one can legally purchase a gun up to three years after a conviction of one of the aforementioned crimes.
 - In New York, lawmakers recently implemented a policy that bans people under the age of 21 from purchasing a semiautomatic rifle. The rest of the United States should follow New York and take a strong step to creating a safe country for everybody,
- ❖ Limit the type of guns available.
 - Heavily restrict the sale of military-grade weapons by requiring a genuine and approved reason for owning such a weapon. Approval for owning such a weapon would come from a government-appointed position and be entered into a computer system to track exactly who these weapons belong to. The most obvious firearm feature that we can universally consider "military-grade" is the capacity for full-automatic fire or the ability to simulate or approach full-automatic fire.
 - Limit the amount of ammunition an individual can purchase in one transaction. This is based on the United Kingdom's (minus Northern Ireland) policy to limit the amount of ammunition that can be purchased at one time. Thus, the opportunity to purchase hundreds of rounds of ammunition on a whim or during a rage would be limited.

- ❖ Require cable trigger locks, gun safes, or other safety measure to limit gun-related accidents.
 - Gun sellers would be required to include a government-issued and funded cable trigger lock (or adequate substitute) when selling firearms. Breaking this rule would be punishable by fine or jail time.
 - Necessary funding to implement cable trigger locks in each legal gun purchase would be funded by the U.S. military budget during non-war times. Further association and collaboration are necessary to confirm the partnership between the military and the protection of U.S. citizens.
 - All households with children under 13 would be required to safely store their guns with a cable trigger (or adequate substitute). Breaking this rule would be punishable by fine or jail time.
 - There is an average of 110 accidental child firearm deaths each year in America (ages 0-14). A simple trigger lock can bring that number down significantly.

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Issue Statement

A stagnated immigration process has led thousands of asylum-seekers to lose out on civilian opportunities. The asylum backlog deprives of opportunities those people who seek U.S. protection from their home country as political refugees.

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), it is supposed to take 180 days, or half a year, between an application for asylum and receiving approval. However, in reality, it takes an average of nearly 4.5 years. Even though asylum-seekers pay taxes, they are not able to have the same opportunities—such as applying for FAFSA-funded scholarships or joining the military—as citizens and green-card holders. This backlog affects asylum-seekers' socioeconomic status. In 2014-2017, a scheduling system called “first in, first out” (FIFO) was put into place, which delayed older cases for later review and extended those asylum-seekers' backlog time. Furthermore, with the onset of COVID-19, immigration offices were closed and asylum cases were significantly stalled.

The broad-spectrum antidote to this problem is fairly straightforward: pour more funding into USCIS and get more asylum officers on the bankroll. Some say that these improvements have already been made, but, in truth, the system has only further derailed. Whatever money USCIS did receive looks to have dried up. If USCIS had greater financial resources, as well as more oversight of its leadership, thousands of troubled lives could be changed for the better. For every one immigration officer, there are 176 more asylum-seekers waiting to be processed. The USCIS annual budget stands at \$904 million, a mere fraction compared to what most other government agencies run on. The Department of State, for example, receives about \$81.64 billion each and every year.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ **Committee of Congressional Oversight:** Implement a committee of congressional oversight to understand and evaluate how funding in USCIS is allocated, and whether the budget should be increased or the system reevaluated.
- ❖ **Budget Increase:** Ensure that funds are being used appropriately so more USCIS officers and facilities can be hired and obtained.
 - The USCIS annual budget stands at \$904 million, which is a mere fraction compared to most other government agencies. The Department of State receives about \$81.64 billion each year. Even less resource-reliant organizations like USAID and the Department of Agriculture receive \$1.9-2.5 billion. Given this information, a massive budget increase is more than warranted.
- ❖ **Increase USCIS Officers:** Decrease the ratio between cases and officers.
 - In 2020, asylum officers had to take on 145,989 cases (approximately 174 cases per officer). An officer would need to complete a case in two days, not including weekends, holidays, and emergencies. These cases are complicated and require time. If we had more officers per case, time would be cut, thus making USCIS faster and more efficient.

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The United States was founded on equality of opportunities and rights for all. Today, laws are in effect that allow groups of individuals and organizations to discriminate on the basis of religious freedom. We, as a nation, honor the basis of individuality and diversity that define our country. If we pride ourselves on these differences, why are they not protected?

Americans are protected in their practice of religion against the infringement of the government, in the First Amendment of the Constitution. In 1964, to protect these rights, the first true religious “shield” laws as we understand them were put into place, such as the Civil Rights Act which prevented discrimination based on religion, race, sex, or national origin. Up until the mid-1990s, these shield laws largely worked as intended: to protect religious minorities from persecution. As the years progressed, issues such as sexuality and gender identity became more widely debated. This led to the exploitation of these shield laws, such as the refusal of home rentals to homosexual couples and unmarried heterosexual couples on religious grounds. Although many of these laws have been reformed, there are still similar instances that occur citing modern shield laws as legal protection. For example, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act does not prohibit discrimination by religious groups. This has led to the passage of laws allowing religious groups and other organizations to refuse individuals service on the basis of their religious rights. The flaws in this legislation allow discriminatory practices towards U.S. citizens, some of whom the laws were intended to protect.

It is critical that Congress take the necessary steps to redefine and narrow these laws to ensure the protection of religion in our nation while also ensuring that discrimination—defined as “unjust actions, including refusal of service, upon a certain type of person”—is not a viable consequence of these freedoms. In order to form a more perfect union, the loopholes that allow prejudiced actions toward citizens through religious claims and beliefs must be revised to promote inclusion and equality for all who live here, regardless of religious, racial, gender, sexual, or ethnic identity. As supported by the American Civil Liberties Union and the National LGBTQ Task Force, the addition of measures to prevent discrimination on the basis of religious freedom is a necessary and crucial action of Congress.

Policy Proposal

- ❖ Prevent organizations and religious groups from abusing these laws to discriminate on the basis of sexuality, gender identity, religious affiliation, national origin, and/or race through laws meant to protect an individual’s right to religion.
- ❖ Specify and explicitly dictate, through clear language, the limitations of said shield laws.

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We're all going to die.

This fact seems nihilistic, but it is an agreed-upon certainty among many environmental justice advocates. While we all have the inherent responsibility to preserve our communities, Congress has access to indispensable tools that can expedite this process. We want to see you in action rather than be plagued by inaction. For this reason, microplastics, specifically those in cosmetic products, are the focus of this policy proposal.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines a cosmetic as a product (excluding pure soap) intended to be applied to the human body for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering the appearance. One example of a commonly used cosmetic product that contains microplastics, specifically microbeads, is face wash. In one 16-ounce bottle of face wash, there are an estimated 109,120,000 microbeads, all of which are washed down the drain and contribute to the presence of microplastics in the ocean. Not only does this form of pollution affect marine populations through their ingestion of the plastics, it affects humans as the marine life that eat these microplastics often end up on our plates. If we do not address the universal problem of microplastics in cosmetics, both as an environmental and public health issue, all other issues become obsolete.

While many social justice matters afflict a specific population, microplastics do not discriminate. There is a direct link between plastic and a myriad of health issues in the U.S. population, a connection acknowledged by both the FDA and the EPA. Microplastics and nanoplastics pose a significant health risk as they pollute multiple biospheres: land, water, and air (Padervand et al, 2020). The chemicals used to manufacture plastics, as well as the chemicals in the polymers themselves, contain toxic additives such as phthalates, PCBs, and BPAs. These harmful toxins infiltrate human organs, leading to several health risks including, but not limited to, respiratory, reproductive, psychological, and allergenic illnesses (Ragusa et al, 2021). These facts designate plastic as a threat to the American public and cultivate a sense of urgency to resolve this growing problem.

Because of their direct application, and even ingestion, microplastics in the cosmetic industry are of major concern. Narrowing the focus of this proposal allows for maximized benefits, and grants more time to legislators to pass the policies outlined below. Each week, at least one quintillion particles of microplastics, found in the form of microbeads, are used on the faces of over 16 million Americans, and then those particles are washed into the ocean.

We must act now to address microplastics before they become a macro-problem.

Issue Statement

Microplastics, or particles made up of plastic material less than five millimeters in size, have been circumnavigating the globe for decades. These particles have found their way into the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. Since its invention in 1907, plastic—as well as subsequent microplastics and their effects—has been the focus of many environmental studies and policies, especially in cosmetics. Because of their minuscule size, microplastics easily seep into physical barriers, including our pores. For this reason, the cosmetic industry uses them as an abrasive to help exfoliate. The harmful effects of microplastics transcend all nine dimensions of wellness: emotional, social, spiritual, environmental, financial, cultural, intellectual, occupational, and physical.

When plastics break down, they don't wholly dissolve like other waste. They form tiny particles that seep into surrounding ecosystems. While America boasts its high global ranking, it is severely lacking in environmental protection. The United Kingdom, for example, has taken broad steps to remove microplastics from the environment and prevent the release of microplastics into the environment. But the United States has failed to address this critical problem. This language should sound familiar because it is directly derived from Senator Jeff Merkley's, D-Ore., bill, the MICRO Plastics Act of 2020.

In order to address this national issue, the federal government must begin taking steps to implement and enforce legislation that will effectively ban the use of microplastics in cosmetics, reflecting the importance of public health in this nation. Despite there being previously established legislation, subsequent legislation must be effective in stopping and preventing the production of cosmetics containing microplastics.

Policy Proposal

To meet these challenges, our public policy goals during the 117th Congress are to:

- ❖ Amend H.R.1321, the **Microbead-Free Waters Act of 2015**, to
 - Include a ban of **(1) chemical agents, (2) polymer additives, and (3) other plastic derivatives** in all cosmetic products.
 - Be amended in the future to ensure compliance with consumer safety laws.
 - Collect all profits from products that violate the above act.
 - Fine corporations that deal with the production and/or use of plastic-based products in the amount of two percent of their annual net profits, the proceeds of which would be used to do the following:
 - Provide tax breaks to cosmetic product manufacturers who utilize sustainable practices. Sustainable practices include but are not limited to:
 - Use of sustainable materials in packaging and in product ingredients.
 - Making of recyclable product packaging and ingredients.
 - Creating products in concordance with consumer safety laws.
 - Sustainability Stamps
 - These would be used in a similar fashion as food stamps to help alleviate the massive price gap between sustainable capital and plastic products.



<https://chg.it/yjyCDCnJ4c>

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Issue Statement

A post-*Roe* America would put millions of lives in danger due to restricted access to abortion. Those most impacted by bans on safe and legal abortions include women of color, those living in poverty, and young people. According to the Guttmacher Institute, 27.1 out of 1,000 Black women, 18.1 out of 1,000 Hispanic women, and 16.3 out of 1,000 other non-Hispanic women have had abortions. In a 2005 study by the Guttmacher Institute, “73% of women undergoing an abortion said not being able to afford a baby was a reason for the abortion. ... 57% of women surveyed for their reason for abortion said that it was because they were in their 20s.” However, none of the impacted parties are actually making the legislative decisions, which takes away a fundamental right: bodily autonomy.

In May of this year, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito introduced a draft opinion to overturn the precedent of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). If this decision is issued, states would have discretion in whether or not they choose to ban abortion. In states with conservative legislatures, this could lead to higher rates of maternal mortality and rising numbers of children in the broken foster care system. Additionally, without the option of abortion, the result could be a mother who is forced to keep a baby following a trauma such as domestic or sexual abuse. Ultimately, many women who go through with unwanted pregnancies are not entirely prepared for parenthood.

To protect the safety of women in America, the federal government must take action to develop a system that protects, represents, and ensures accountability in the leaders of our country. Women need advocates who support them and promote a society in which they can freely have ownership of their bodies.

Policy Proposal

To meet these challenges, our public policy goals during the 117th Congress are to:

- ❖ Expand on precedent established in *Roe v. Wade* in a congressional bill to increase access to legal abortions (especially in more conservative states).
- ❖ Establish a constitutional amendment in support of *Roe v. Wade* to supplement and expand on the constitutional right to privacy.
- ❖ Expand on Acts currently in Congress:
 - Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance Act of 2021 (H.R.2234)
 - Women’s Health Protection Act of 2021 (H.R.3755)
 - Reproductive Rights are Human Rights Act of 2021 (S.1864)

Additionally, we have several goals regarding policy that fall outside the domain of Congress:

- ❖ Establish universal free abortion clinics in all 50 states and make reproductive health care easily available.
- ❖ Promote comprehensive sex education courses in schools to ensure that kids are well informed on how to prevent pregnancy.

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