

## Police Presence in Schools Does Not Increase School Safety and Harms Students of Color

Although school police are widely perceived to be a necessary component of school safety efforts, recent rigorous research has shown that sworn law enforcement does not contribute to safe schools. Indeed, school policing appears to be associated with a variety of harms, and those fall disproportionately on students of color. Here is what we have learned from research on school policing:

1. **The presence of school police does not reduce levels of school crime.** Contrary to conventional thought, school police presence does not enhance school safety. Data consistently show that police presence in schools leads to no change or an *increase* in reports of serious crime,<sup>1</sup> as well as non-serious crimes.<sup>2</sup> A study of 179 school shootings between 1999 and 2019 found no evidence that SRO presence lessened the severity of school shooting incidents.<sup>3</sup>
2. **School police remain involved in school discipline.** Despite ongoing calls for SROs not to be engaged in day-to-day school discipline issues, research has found that a majority of them still report responding to school disciplinary incidents.<sup>4</sup>
3. **Reports in the media have highlighted severe reactions to student misbehavior by school police officers.** In December, 2019, an SRO at a North Carolina middle school was fired after being caught on video repeatedly slamming an 11-year-old to the ground.<sup>5</sup> In Orlando, Florida in September, 2019, a six year old girl having a temper tantrum was restrained by school police with zip-ties, arrested, and led away in a squad car.<sup>6</sup> These are not isolated incidents: The Advancement Project documented 62 cases of violent assault of students by school police between 1999 and 2016.<sup>7</sup>
4. **School police presence is associated with an increase in exclusionary discipline, thus contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.** The majority of recent research shows that the presence of school police is associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline, in particular school suspensions.<sup>8</sup> This is an important finding: Suspension and expulsion have been found to be key contributors to the school-to-prison pipeline, increasing the likelihood of school disengagement, dropout, and involvement with the juvenile justice system.<sup>9</sup> School police presence has also been found to be associated with lower high school graduation rates<sup>10</sup> and poorer school attendance.<sup>11</sup>
5. **The presence of school police disproportionately harms Black and Brown students.** Racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion have been widely documented.<sup>12</sup> Research, especially recent research, has found similar disparities in schools with school police present:
  - School police in disadvantaged schools are more likely to engage primarily in law enforcement activities, while those in more well-resourced schools more often have an expanded role, including education and mentoring.<sup>13</sup>
  - Black and Latinx students report less positive attitudes towards, and feel less safe in the presence of, school police.<sup>14</sup> In a study published in June, 2021, parents of students of color

were less likely than parents of White children to feel their child was safer in school with a police presence.<sup>15</sup>

- As police presence in schools increases, exclusionary discipline goes up for Black and Latinx students as compared to White students.<sup>16</sup>
- When police are present, the arrest rate is higher for all students, but more so for Black students than White or Latinx students.<sup>17</sup>

6. **There is no evidence that the problems associated with school policing can be fixed through increased training.** Since the first police in schools program was implemented in the 1950s,<sup>18</sup> reports of overaggressive policing and unfair treatment of students of color have consistently led to calls for increased SRO training. Yet in over 60 years, there is no published research showing that school police performance can be improved by increased training.

## Summary

Our nation has spent over \$1 billion on school police in the last 20 years.<sup>19</sup> Yet this investment has not increased school safety. In fact, school policing is linked to a number of serious negative consequences for our nation's students, especially students of color. Nor is there any evidence that more training can diminish the negative impact of school policing. As far as we know, there is no other federal program in American schools that has been present for over 60 years; has cost over a billion dollars; has provided no evidence of positive effects and some of harm; and shows evidence of discriminatory effect for Black and Brown students. In short, the available data suggests that redirecting federal funds from school police to personnel trained in student mental health issues would clearly represent a wiser investment.

### About the Authors

*This brief was developed and authored by the School Policing Research to Policy Collaborative, a group of nationally-recognized researchers in criminology, education, sociology, juvenile justice and law. Our goal is to bring the best available research findings to bear on issues of policing in schools, school discipline, and racial equity. The members of the collaborative are:*

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## Endnotes

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