

School Police Research Briefing Series (# 2, November, 2021)

The School Policing Research to Policy Collaborative and
The Federal School Discipline and Climate Coalition

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

While some argue that school police are needed to maintain the safety of schools, in reality there is no substantial evidence that law enforcement presence contributes to student safety. Indeed, school policing appears to be associated with a variety of harms, which fall disproportionately on students of color. Here is what we have learned from extensive school policing research:

1. **School police do not reduce levels of school crime, nor prevent or reduce the severity of school shootings.** Contrary to claims, school police presence does not contribute to school safety. The preponderance of evidence shows that police presence in schools leads to no change or an *increase* in reports of serious crime,¹ as well as non-serious infractions.² A study of 179 school shootings between 1999 and 2019 found no evidence that SRO presence lessened the severity of school shooting incidents.³
2. **School police are frequently involved in day-to-day discipline, contributing to criminalization and the school-to-prison pipeline.** Despite consistent calls that SROs “should not be involved in classroom management issues or school discipline of any kind from a law enforcement perspective,”⁴ police in schools are often involved in day-to-day school discipline⁵ One recent study found that over 50% of police in schools report responding to school disciplinary incidents.⁶

School police presence has been consistently found to make strong contributions to the school-to-prison pipeline.⁷ The presence of school police is associated with lower student attendance,⁸ increased school suspension⁹ and loss of instructional time,¹⁰ failure to graduate on time,¹¹ and increased arrests for both major and minor behavior.¹² Research has found that the contribution of school police to the school-to-prison pipeline holds regardless of the level of school poverty or levels of school and community crime.¹³

3. **Over-aggressive policing often harms or injures students, particularly students of color.** On September 27, 2021 Mona Rodriguez, an 18 year-old mother of a five month old baby, was killed by a school safety officer who fired at her through a car window as she left the scene of a fight. 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.¹⁴ Sadly, these are not isolated incidents: Over 150 incidents of police violence or assault on students have been documented since 2007.¹⁵
4. **The harms caused by school police presence fall more heavily on Black and Brown students.** Racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion have been widely documented.¹⁶ Research has found similar disparities in schools with school police present:
 - Police in disadvantaged schools are more likely to engage primarily in law enforcement roles; those in more well-resourced schools more often engage in education and mentoring.¹⁷
 - Black and Latinx students report feeling *less* safe in the presence of, school police.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

- Adding school police leads to an increase in exclusionary discipline for Black and Latinx students as compared to White students.²⁰
- When police are present, the arrest rate is higher for all students, but more so for Black students than White or Latinx students.²¹

5. School police are trained for law enforcement, not counseling or mentoring. Although advocates argue that SROs can provide mentoring and counseling to students, school police receive far less training in counseling and supportive methods to de-escalate conflict than school-based mental health personnel.²² Mixing counseling and enforcement can place students at risk for law enforcement referral if they share personal information. In contrast, school social workers, counselors and school psychologists receive extensive training and experience in learning to work in a supportive role.

6. There is no evidence that problems associated with school policing can be fixed through increased training. Since police in schools programs were first implemented in the 1950s,²³ reports of overaggressive policing and unfair treatment of students of color have consistently led to calls for improved SRO training. Yet in over 60 years, there is no published research showing that police performance in schools is improved by increased training.

Summary

Our nation has spent over \$1 billion on school police in the last 20 years.²⁴ That investment has not improved school safety. Rather, school policing is linked to serious negative outcomes for our nation's students, especially students of color. Nor is there any published research demonstrating that more training can reduce school policing's negative impacts. 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 that shows evidence of discriminatory effect for Black and Brown students. In short, available data suggests that redirecting federal funds from school police to personnel trained in student mental health issues would clearly represent a wiser investment, and a more effective approach to maintain safe and supportive school climates.

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 Federal School Discipline and Climate Coalition (FedSDC), a diverse group of organizations and individuals committed to advocating for legislative and federal action to protect the interests and educational rights of Black and Brown students and youth through a racial justice and educational equity lens. Establishing police-free schools and ending the use of seclusion, harmful and dangerous restraints, and corporal punishment while implementing effective, non-punitive, and culturally-sustaining practices in schools and alternatives to school discipline is a core value for FedSDC.

Endnotes

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