

Communities across the country have come together to demand meaningful changes to law enforcement practices in the wake of the tragic murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks at the hands of the police. The focus has rightly been on how deadly police actions have had an outsized impact on communities of color. These calls for action have delivered some immediate victories, including changes in leadership in some law enforcement agencies as well as cultural paradigm shifts, such as calls to defund the police and invest those resources into community-designed and community-owned public safety strategies. Minneapolis, the epicenter of the movement, passed legislation to dismantle the police department and revisit that city's law enforcement and public safety strategies.ⁱ This movement for reform extends beyond municipal police departments. In fact, one of the first demands from community advocates in Minneapolis was to remove police from within city schools.

The presence of law enforcement in schools has been a controversial issue for decades. Dual concerns about rising rates of violence among youth coupled with increased attention paid to school shootings were a catalyst for federal funding for more police, frequently referred to as "School Resource Officers" (SROs), in schools. In fact, rates of youth violence were plummeting independent of law enforcement interventions and the impact of SROs on school shootings has been dubious at best. Additionally, SROs have been linked with exacerbating racial disparities in justice involvement and youth being driven deeper into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. Rather than preventing crime, SROs have been linked with *increased* arrests for non-criminal, youthful behavior, commonly known as the school-to-prison pipeline.ⁱⁱ

The Presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) in America's Schools

The deployment of SROs is typically established by a partnership agreement among local leadership, such as the Board of Education and the local law enforcement agency. SROs are, by definition, career sworn officers who receive the same academy training for street patrol as other police officers but are stationed in a school building. Since they are affiliated with the local police department, there is no national database tracking the number of SROs in America. However, according to the National Association of School Resource Officers, estimates range between

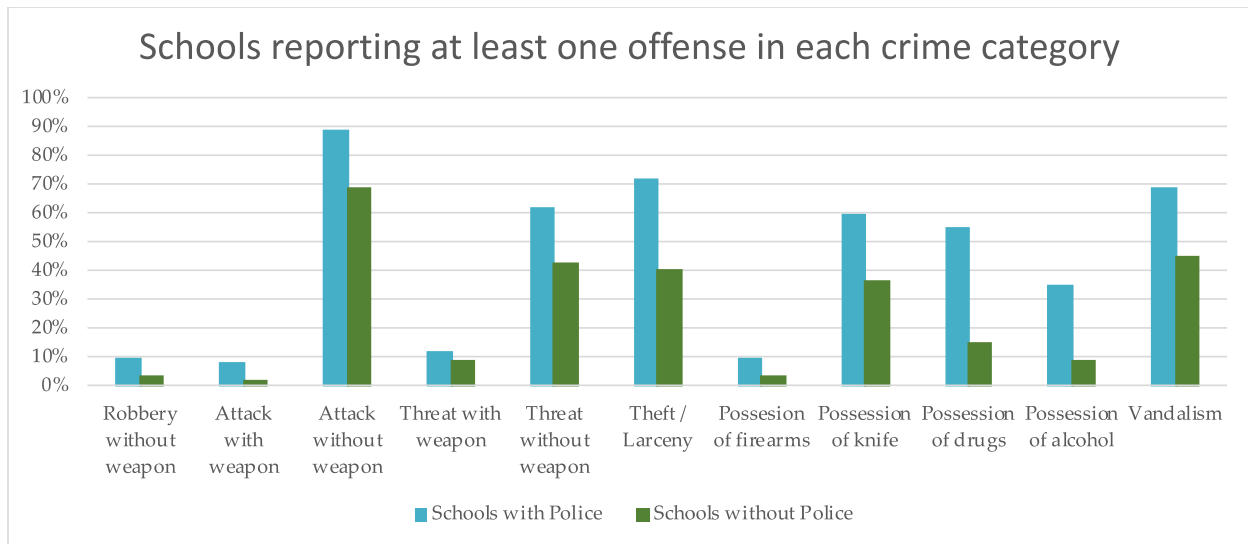
14,000 and 20,000 SROs in America's schools at any given time.ⁱⁱⁱ SROs are concentrated in certain school districts, in certain neighborhoods – so while many students may never see an SRO, those communities that do are significantly impacted by their daily presence.

The expansion of SROs in schools goes back to 1999 in response to the school shooting at Columbine High School. The federal Community Oriented Policing Services in Schools Program distributed \$68 million to jurisdictions in 2000, resulting in the hiring of 599 SROs in 289 communities across the country.^{iv} The federal government has since decreased its resource allocation to SRO programs but state and local governments have continued to support the hiring of more officers.

Estimates suggest that close to \$1 billion has been invested from state and local budgets since 1999 to continue the presence of SROs in schools, particularly in communities of color.^v A 2018 analysis by the Urban Institute found that SROs are disproportionately placed in school systems that are predominantly Black or Latinx. As part of the study, it was noted that two-thirds of high school students attend a school with a police officer on staff. High schools with a population comprised of 25 to 50 percent Black or Latinx youth had a higher rate of SROs compared to schools with fewer than 10 percent Black or Latinx youth.^{vi}

Implications for Safety

Similar to the declines in national crime rates in recent decades, school-based offenses have also been steadily falling. As of 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that victimization, theft, and violent crimes are at a multi-decade low.^{vii} In the 2015–2016 school year, there were 18 homicides at schools, accounting for 1.2 percent of all youth homicides. Despite the rarity of serious violence in schools, a major policy argument in favor of SROs has been the claim that they are needed to respond to active shooter situations. Those events remain extremely rare, and in 2015-2016 accounted for 43 deaths on school property, including 10 deaths by suicide.^{viii} This is not to minimize the importance of efforts to respond to school shootings, but there are little data supporting the efficacy of SROs in preventing these rare events.



Even with school-based crimes at historic lows, the presence of police in schools often increases the likelihood of ordinary youthful behavior resulting in referrals to the juvenile justice system. In cases of violence, the police typically respond to the behavior regardless of an SRO presence. However, schools with SROs have a disproportionate rate of arrests for non-violent behavior. The available research concludes that the higher rates are based on SROs reporting low-level behaviors as a crime.^{ix} For example, when controlling for poverty, it has been reported that disorderly conduct arrests were double at schools with SROs compared to non-SRO schools.^x This finding is important as it demonstrates how SROs can use their discretion to criminalize ordinary youthful behavior that would otherwise be handled by school administrators in the absence of a law enforcement presence.^{xi} These policing practices are what drive the school-to-prison pipeline.

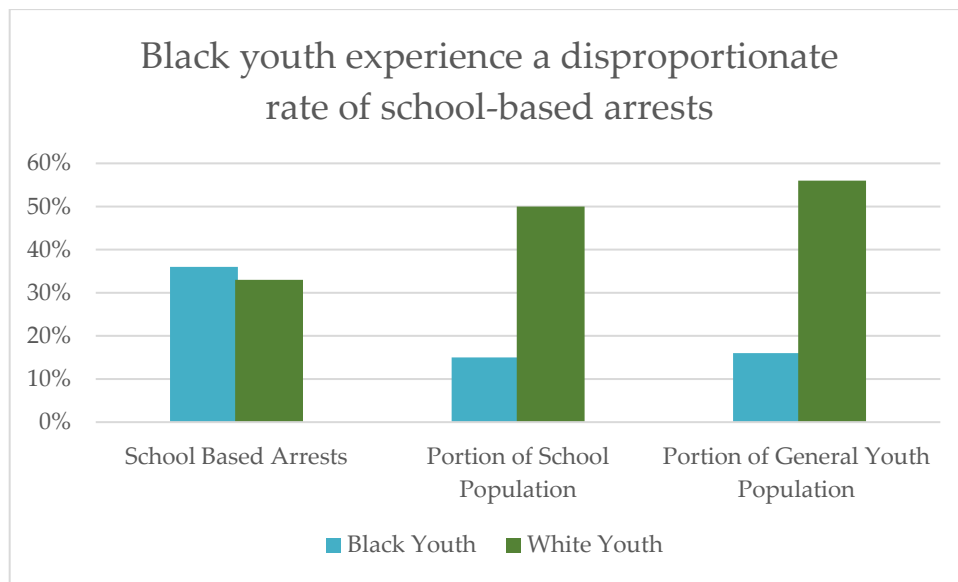
Expediting the school-to-prison pipeline

Despite the decreasing numbers of crimes reported in school settings, school-based arrests are disproportionately impacting youth of color. Deployment of police in schools has contributed to an environment of rising referrals to the juvenile justice system for incidents related to school discipline. In 2010, over a quarter-million students received misdemeanor citations from SROs for behavior that previously would only have merited a meeting with school administrative personnel.^{xii} In some cases, these citations could lead to being charged with a Class C misdemeanor and trigger criminal and fiscal consequences.^{xiii} This issue of escalating minor infractions to criminal justice matters has been recognized as a risk of SROs in schools by the U.S. Department of Justice.^{xiv}

“Children — particularly children with disabilities — risk experiencing lasting and severe consequences if SROs unnecessarily criminalize school-related misbehavior by taking a disproportionate law enforcement response to minor disciplinary infractions.”^{xv}

Allowing police officers to needlessly handle minor infractions in schools often marks a student's first contact with the criminal justice system, potentially setting them up for a lifetime of collateral consequences. Nationwide, there were 44,370 school-based arrests during the 2013–2014 school year, which increased to 51,780 arrests in the 2015–2016 school year.^{xvi} Seven percent of all youth arrests occurred at schools and many of these incidents could have effectively been handled by school personnel rather than SROs. A *Washington Post* review found that many students were charged with crimes for minor offenses, such as throwing a paper airplane, kicking a trashcan, wearing sagging pants, and throwing a carrot at a teacher.^{xvii}

These zero-tolerance policies are impacting youth of color by placing them in the justice system. Black students comprised 36 percent of arrests in the 2015-2016 school year, despite accounting for only 15 percent of the student body. Meanwhile, 33 percent of those arrested were white, despite representing 50 percent of students. While many of these school arrests may not ultimately end up processed in court, they do lead to long-term consequences. A single arrest impacts a student's achievements and leads to a 25 percent increase in the likelihood of dropping out of school.^{xviii} Lack of educational attainment can also have dire consequences in obtaining adequate employment.^{xix} All of these are components of the school-to-prison pipeline.



The school-to-prison pipeline is further exacerbated by the limited constitutional protections given to students.¹ Courts have limited students' rights against searches

¹ In *New Jersey v. T.L.O.* (1985), the Supreme Court ruled that school officials, including school resource officers, only need a "reasonable suspicion" to search a student and their belongings,¹ a significantly lower standard than the probable cause required

and seizures, privacy, and interrogation procedures. When a student is prosecuted, school officials and SROs can provide evidence to prosecutors they obtained under circumstances that would render it inadmissible if it were seized from an adult or youth outside of the school context.^{xx}

These constitutional limits are compounded by the heightened security environments found in most schools. Furthermore, the SRO's dual role as law enforcement and school administrator has blurred their legal status in interactions with students and the courts have not provided much clarity on the issue.^{xxi}

Going Forward

As communities reckon with reexamining the role of policing, some jurisdictions have already begun to divest their schools' interest from the local or county law enforcement agency, with the potential for substantial reinvestment opportunities. On average, the COPS Office Hiring Program distributed \$125,000 per new hire for a 3-year grant cycle. Per the funding regulation, it can include 75 percent of the entry-level salary and fringe benefits over the duration of the grant. According to the Economic Research Institute, the average SRO salary can cost a locality \$70,000. This is deeply unfortunate as many schools lack funding for basic supports such as counselors, nurses, and school psychologists. For example, a report by the American Civil Liberties Union found that nearly 2 million students attend a school with an SRO but no counselor.^{xxii} That same report revealed that 6 million students attend a school with an SRO and no school psychologist. Finally, 1 in 4 students are in schools with an SRO but no counselor, nurse, school psychologist, or social worker. When people are calling for divestment from police and investment in other proven solutions that work, this is precisely the funding imbalance that fuels those demands. That investment in SROs would be much better targeted toward qualified school personnel that have proven to be better suited to deal with problematic student behavior.^{xxiii}

Position	Average Annual Salary^{xxiv}	Percentage of salary covered by one SRO
School Resource Officer	\$ 70,348	N.A.
School Psychologist	\$ 78,713	89.37%
School Counselor	\$ 63,627	110.56%
School Nurse	\$ 68,086	103.32%
School Principal	\$ 98,858	71.16%

under the 4th amendment. In *J.B.D. v. North Carolina* (2011), the Supreme Court then ruled the rights of a 13-year-old student were violated because he was not warned of his right to remain silent and age must be factored into the custody analysis.¹ However, often times, without proper explanation, a youth can be challenged to fully comprehend *Miranda* rights.

School Teacher (Secondary Education)	\$ 67,945	103.53%
Special Education Teacher (Secondary Education)	\$ 55,559	126.61%

Portland, Maine, which just recently voted to eliminate SROs from the school district, said it would reinvest the \$150,000 budget savings into de-escalation training for school personnel. This is the type of discussion that should be part of any defunding conversation.

There are also potential lessons learned from the COVID-19 global pandemic as it has potentially provided a glimpse into a world where SROs do not exist. As schools have shut down across the country — with the result being no school-based arrests — between February 1st and April 1st, youth admissions to secure detention have decreased by 52 percent.^{xv} During that same timeframe, racial disparities were narrowed. Admissions of Black youth to secure detention decreased by 30 percent, compared to 26 percent for white youth. While there are many reasons this drop occurred, the impact of reduced student and police interactions should not be ignored.

Policymakers should be informed by the research and recent experiences to redirect resources from the deployment of SROs and instead invest in communities and the types of approaches that are more likely to make schools safe, such as well-trained counselors, social workers and teachers, and alternative and restorative justice practices to address problematic behavior.

An increasing number of jurisdictions are moving away from having law enforcement officers in schools, with the list seeming to grow by the day, including districts that have eliminated or reformed their SRO programs.

Check out this [interactive tool](#) for an updated look at policy and legislative movement in School Resource Officers



ⁱ Don Haney, "Another move forward in attempt to defund Minneapolis Police Department," *KFGO*, (Minneapolis, MN) July 7, 2020.

ⁱⁱ "Dana Goldstein, "Do police officers make schools safer or more dangerous?" *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), June 12, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Association of School Resource Officers, "Frequently Asked Questions," Accessed on July 8, 2020.

<https://www.nasro.org/faq/>

^{iv} Cathy Girouard, "School Resource Officer Training Program," March 2001, U.S. Department of Justice – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/fs200105.pdf

^v N.A., *Two Billion Dollars Later – Executive Summary* (Strategies for Youth, Boston, MA: n.d.).

^{vi} Constance A. Lindsay, Victoria Lee & Tracey Lloyd, *The prevalence of police officers in US schools* (Washington, D.C. 2018: Urban Institute).

^{vii} N.A., *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: Prevalence of victimization at schools* (Washington D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

^{viii} Everytown for Gun Safety, "Gunfire on school grounds in the United States," Accessed July 8, 2020.

<https://everytownresearch.org/gunfire-in-school/#ns>

^{ix} Radley Balko, "Putting more cops in schools won't make schools safer, and it will likely inflict a lot of harm," *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC): February 22, 2018.

^x Matthew T. Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, January 2009.

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- ^{xi} Matthew T. Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, January 2009.
- ^{xii} Ryan et al. 2017. "The Growing Concerns Regarding School Resource Officers." *Intervention in School and Clinic* 53(3): 188-192
- ^{xiii} Jody Serrano, "School officers can no longer issue on-campus misdemeanor citations," *The Texas Tribune*, (Austin, TX), August 29, 2013).
- ^{xiv} Statement of Interest of the United States – S.R. & L.G. v. Kenton County et al. (2015). Case No: 2:15 – CV-143.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, Statement of Interest (2015).
- ^{xvi} Ella Torres, "Calls to defund police shine light on the school-to-prison pipeline," *ABC News*, (New York, NY), June 18, 2020.
- ^{xvii} Radley Balko, "Putting more cops in schools won't make schools safer, and it will likely inflict a lot of harm," *The Washington Post*, (Washington, DC), February 22, 2018.
- ^{xviii} Webbink D, Koning P, Vujić S, Martin NG. Why Are Criminals Less Educated than Non-Criminals? Evidence from a Cohort of Young Australian Twins. CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, The Hague, the Netherlands.; 2008.
- ^{xix} Human Impact Partners, *Reducing Youth Arrests Keeps Kids Healthy and Successful Fact Sheet* (Oakland, CA: Human Impact Partners, 2017) .
- ^{xx} Jason P. Nance, Students, Police, and the School-To-Prison Pipeline, 93 Wash. U. L. Rev. 919 (2016).
- ^{xxi} Kerrin C. Wolf, Assessing Students' Civil Rights Claims Against School Resource Officers, 38 Pace L. Rev. 215 (2018)
- ^{xxii} American Civil Liberties Union, "COPS AND NO COUNSELORS," aclu.org, Accessed July 7, 2020.
- ^{xxiii} Dignity in Schools, *Counselors not Cops: Ending the Regular Presence of Law Enforcement in Schools* (Dignity in Schools, 2016).
- ^{xxiv} "Salary Data," Salary Expert – Powered by Economic Research Institute, Accessed July 9, 2020. <https://www.salaryexpert.com/>
- ^{xxv} The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Survey: 52% Drop in Admissions to Youth Detention in Two Months Matches Reduction Over 13 Years," aefc.org, Accessed July 7, 2020.