

### INTRODUCTION

In light of the horrific school shootings this month in Newtown, Connecticut, some have called for increasing armed police presence in schools.

School safety should be a priority: it is not only important for protecting the physical well-being of students, teachers, and staff, but also for maintaining a productive learning environment.

However, as our research report, [Education Under Arrest](#) showed, having law enforcement in schools is not the best nor most cost-effective way to achieve those goals; this also can result in more youth becoming involved in the juvenile justice system for often minor misbehavior, with a lifetime of negative effects.

### EXPANDING LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS HAS BEEN AN EXPENSIVE, FAILED EXPERIMENT.

There is no need to repeat the past. The dramatic growth in the number of school resource officers (SROs) and other school-based law enforcement over the past 20 years was supported by the allocation of \$68 million through the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) In Schools Program. The COPS In Schools Program led to the hiring of 599 SROs in 289 communities in 2000, which fostered a continued growth in SROs from 9,446 in 1997 to an all time high of 14,337 in 2003. Since that time, COPS has contributed a total of \$905 million to hire 6,300 SROs and develop other school safety measures. COPS

funds awarded under the Secure Our Schools and the COPS In Schools programs increased dramatically from 2000 to 2002, not including some funds that may have been directed to localities from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act directly through COPS but not recorded as Secure Our Schools or COPS In Schools; these funds have dropped since, and many local school districts have cut their SROs in favor of more effective public safety and educational policies.

### THERE IS NO CLEAR CORRELATION BETWEEN POLICE IN SCHOOLS AND STUDENT SAFETY

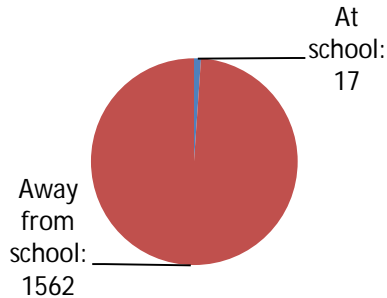
At their most prevalent, there were 3,360 students per SROs and 73 student-reported crimes in 2003; while in 2007 there were fewer SROs and the lowest levels of student-reported incidents of theft and violence since 1997. At the same time, there were slightly more students per SRO in 2000, but a slightly lower rate of student reported incidents of theft and violence.

### YOUTH ARE AT GREATER RISK OF HOMICIDE WHEN NOT AT SCHOOL.

It is important to place tragic but rare events such as the Newtown, Connecticut shooting within the national context, especially compared to the risk of victimization that children face outside school. In particular, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011, the percentage of youth homicides occurring at school is less than 2 percent of the total

number of youth homicides over all available survey years. Within the last 20 years, the rate of self-reported incidents of violence or theft in schools per 1,000 students has decreased 69 percent from 155 in 1993 to a rate of 47 in 2008. That trend corresponds with drops in overall reported crime rates.

**Less than 2% of youth homicides in 2008-09 occurred at school.**



<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs11.pdf>

## LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS HAS NEGATIVE IMPACTS

School law enforcement officers interfere with the responsibility of schools to educate all students in three ways. First, officers frequently directly send youth into the justice system, which carries with it a lifetime of negative repercussions and barriers to education and employment. Second, in many school districts, an arrest or referral to the justice system also means suspension and expulsion from school. Suspensions and expulsions cut off students from the positive interactions of schools, also setting students up for a variety of negative life outcomes. Third, having a law enforcement presence in school can create a hostile environment, in some cases creating the very sense of fear and violence that they are supposed to prevent. For example, a survey of 131 students in a Palm Beach County, Florida, school showed that 35 percent of students said they felt protected, while 65 percent said that they felt “something other than protected, including

intimidated and harassed.” Causing students to miss school or otherwise become disengaged from school sets off a chain reaction of missed opportunity that leads to a “school-to-prison-pipeline” that ends in future justice involvement.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS CAUSES MORE YOUTH TO BE ARRESTED AND REFERRED TO THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

As the presence of law enforcement and SROs in schools has increased, arrests and referrals to the juvenile justice system generally have also increased. Researchers at the University of Maryland and the University of Massachusetts analyzed data from five states in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive. They found that in four of the five states, referrals from schools made up a greater proportion of all referrals to juvenile courts in 2004 than in 1995. And research in specific school districts shows that since law enforcement has become common-place in schools, arrests and referrals to the juvenile justice system have increased. In a study directly concerning SROs, Judge Steven Teske of Clayton County, Georgia, found that with the placement of SROs in schools, the number of referrals directly to the juvenile justice system increased dramatically, from approximately 89 referrals per year in the 1990s to 1,400 per year in 2004. Another study found that even when controlling for school poverty, schools with an SRO had nearly five times the rate of arrests for disorderly conduct as schools without an SRO.

### 3 MEASURED RESPONSES

## THERE ARE BETTER WAYS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL SAFETY AND REDUCE CHILD VICTIMIZATION

Reducing youth violence from within schools can be achieved without law enforcement. Prevention and intervention comes in many forms, and includes Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Social and Emotional Learning, student conflict resolution programs, mentoring, cognitive behavioral therapy in schools, and any number of peace resolutions in schools. In addition, schools should use alternatives to removing students from school if they are displaying disruptive behaviors. All are just as effective for maintaining safety in schools and support the primary objective of schools: to provide education. In addition to system-level interventions, schools should make sure that students with individual mental health or

other special needs receive appropriate services.

Violence against school students from the outside can be better reduced by other means than “fighting fire with fire.” The best way to reduce victimization is to address the root causes of violent behavior. While much is not known about the Newtown shooter, there is extensive evidence that shows improving access to treatment for people with mental health and substance abuse problems is an effective public safety strategy. In particular, a growing body of research is showing that many youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system, as well as adults in the criminal justice system, have experienced serious trauma. Identifying and treating people with trauma-related health problems, and ensuring that our social and justice systems are trauma-informed, must also become priorities.

## ABOUT THE JUSTICE POLICY INSTITUTE

Justice Policy Institute is a national organization dedicated to reducing the use of incarceration and the justice system and promoting policies that improve the well-being of all people and communities. Our full report on police in schools, *Education Under Arrest*, as well as our other reports on criminal and juvenile justice, can be downloaded at [www.justicepolicy.org](http://www.justicepolicy.org).



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