Reimagining School Safety

A look at the dangers posed to students by law enforcement and how to invest in real safety for our nation’s children

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................... 4  
  Key Findings ........................................................................................................... 5  
  Key Observations .................................................................................................... 6  
Militarized Schools ....................................................................................................... 7  
Targeted Policing in Schools ......................................................................................... 8  
Impacts of Youth Criminalization ............................................................................... 9  
Juvenile Policing Outside of Schools .......................................................................... 11  
Creating Safe and Educational School Environments ............................................. 12  
What Could Be: Trade-offs from Shifting Funds from Cops to Counselors ............... 15  
  Washington DC ...................................................................................................... 16  
  Chicago .................................................................................................................. 17  
  Philadelphia .......................................................................................................... 18  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 19  
Appendix ..................................................................................................................... 20  
  Methods for calculating trade-offs ........................................................................ 20  
  References ............................................................................................................. 21
Introduction

As the movement for racial justice forces a reckoning on police brutality, school districts across the country are reconsidering the place of police in our schools. Following the shocking shooting deaths of 17 students at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, many school districts rushed to hire more armed police officers for their schools. These officers, euphemistically called School Resource Officers, or SROs, are sworn-in police officers who are assigned to patrol the hallways of schools and have the capacity to both arrest and use force on students. Under the guise of maintaining student safety, their policing has disproportionately targeted low-income Black and brown students, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities.

The growing presence of police in schools has subjected marginalized students to higher rates of school-based arrests for nonviolent offenses, in turn providing a pathway from suspension to incarceration and increasing the frequency at which students are funneled from schools to prisons. In fact, students in schools where SROs are stationed are five times as likely to be arrested than students in schools without SROs.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has left public school budgets under heavy constraints, however, districts will have to decide whether they want to terminate their relationship with police departments or make cuts to counseling programs that have been shown to improve student outcomes. While school boards can spearhead initiatives to phase police out of schools, states with multi-level governance models, like Florida and Maryland, may require the approval of the county or state. Even so, any proposal to terminate a school's contract with the
police will likely be met with pushback from local police unions. Membership rates afford them financial power they can leverage to spend on campaigns and litigation to block reform. In fact, one police union in New York City has spent more than 1 million dollars on state and local political races since 2014. Cities such as Minneapolis, Portland, and Denver are moving forward to terminate school contracts with the police, but the D.C. chancellor says he is disinclined to do so even though two thirds of D.C voters surveyed support for removing police from schools.

Ultimately, studies on the effects of these stringent security measures have found no evidence that policing in schools is effective in preventing school violence or increasing student safety, yet there is substantial evidence to suggest that the presence of SROs harms students’ development.

This report explores the consequences of increased spending on school resource officers since our 2018 report, “Students Under Siege,” and how states should proceed to move cops out of schools entirely. We also present our original findings on the tradeoffs that can benefit students by disinvesting in policing and criminalization and instead investing in critical social, emotional and academic supports.

**Key Findings***

- If the $33.2 million “school security” budget allocated for 2021 in Washington, DC, was reinvested in hiring workers who can provide real support for student well-being and safety, it could instead fund up to 222 psychologists, 345 guidance counselors, or 332 social workers.

- If the $15 million “school security” budget approved for 2021 in Chicago was reinvested in hiring workers who can provide real support for student well-being and safety, it could instead fund up to 140 psychologists, 182 guidance counselors, or 192 social workers.

- If the $32.5 million “school security” budget allocated for 2021 in Philadelphia was reinvested in hiring workers who can provide real support for student wellbeing safety, it could instead fund up to 278 psychologists, 355 guidance counselors, or 467 social workers.

*These budget figures include funds currently allocated for school security in FY 2021, from both public school district budgets and available police department budgets.
Key Observations

● Since the Parkland, FL and Santa Fe, TX shootings, states have allocated an additional $965 million to law enforcement in schools.

● According to a 2019 ACLU study, 1.7 million students are in schools with cops, but no counselors. 3 million students are in schools with cops, but no nurses. 6 million students are in schools with cops, but no school psychologists. 10 million students are in schools with cops, but no social workers.

● As of 2020, nearly 60 percent of all schools and 90 percent of high schools now have a law enforcement officer at least part time.

● A 2019 study found that students at schools with higher relative suspension rates were 15-20% more likely to be arrested later in life.

● According to the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, for the 2015-2016 (the most recent data available) school year, over two and a half million students in U.S. public schools experienced out-of-school suspension. Black students, who represented 15.4% of all enrollment in the 201, were 40.6% of those suspensions.

● By excluding training on the psychological issues that youth face throughout adolescence and neglecting to train SROs on the best practices for communicating with them, student safety doesn’t improve at the hands of these officers; it suffers.
Militarized Schools

As of 2019, there are nearly 50,000 school resource officers who patrol the hallways of America’s schools. In schools that serve predominantly Black student populations, it is often much more than hallways that are patrolled. In D.C., police are deployed to nearly all high schools to monitor cafeterias, auditoriums, hallways, stairwells, restrooms, entrances and exits, as well as provide security for school-sponsored events. Such schools promote a learning environment that is more akin to that of a correctional institution than an educational one, as the number of students reporting a security guard or police officer in their school has increased from 16.4 percent to 70.9 percent between 1999 and 2017.

Additionally, heightened concerns about gun violence and school safety have brought the total investment since 1999 made by state and federal governments in SROs to almost 2 billion dollars. Since the 240 school shootings that have occurred since the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 alone, school districts have funneled millions of dollars into efforts to station police officers in schools throughout the country. Chicago Public Schools, for example, has a nearly 33 million dollar contract with the police, and in January of 2019, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp announced a program allocating 69 million additional dollars for “school security grants.”

Some states have taken these efforts one step further, with Florida mandating that an armed police officer to be stationed in every school in the state in the wake of the 2018 Parkland shooting. As troubling as the violence and the frequency at which these tragedies have occurred is, the likelihood of a student in the U.S. being killed by a school shooter is one in 614 million.

The disproportionate impacts of policing on Black students and students of color
in schools remain a greater threat to student safety than the prospect of a school shooting, especially since many of these officers are ill-equipped to proactively interact with youth. Roughly 25 percent of school police surveyed by Education Week stated that they had no experience with youth before working in schools. This lack of experience can be attributed to the fact that academies in 37 states spend one percent or less of their training hours on juvenile legal issues, with forty states focusing their training solely on legal issues and the juvenile legal code. By excluding training on the psychological issues that youth face throughout adolescence and neglecting to train SROs on the best practices for communicating with them, student safety doesn’t improve at the hands of these officers; it suffers.

**Targeted Policing in Schools**

Juvenile policing in schools disproportionately affects Black students, highlighting the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Starting with the school conditions, Black students are set up to be criminalized at higher rates from the outset: Black students are three times more likely than non-Black students to attend a school with more security staff than mental health personnel. In the 2015-2016 school year, the Office of Civil Rights reported 2.6 million total out-of-school suspensions. 40.6% of these suspensions were Black students, and just 31.7% were white students. In 2017, Black and Latinx students made up 40% of the US school population, while making up 58% of school arrests. Nationwide, Black students are 4 times more likely to be suspended than white students and 3.5 times more likely to be arrested within school than white students, despite exhibiting similar behavioral patterns. During that same year, the single-student suspension rate for Black students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (2.18%) was seven times that of white students (0.31%).

Poverty is also a key factor in the criminalization of students: According to data collected from more than 95,500 schools, the average arrest rate in California schools where more than 80% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch is seven times the average arrest rate in schools where fewer than 20% of students receive free or reduced price lunch.

Gender and sexuality are critical intersections which highlight the targeted policing of youth. As described in Students Under Siege, Black girls are subject to the deepest disparities compared to their white peers. Nationally, Black girls are arrested at 4 times the rate of white girls. In North Carolina, Iowa, and Michigan, that rate doubles. Black girls represent 43% of all girls arrested at school, despite constituting only 17% of public school enrollment. Black LGBTQ+ youth are also
much more likely to face targeted punishment and criminalization in schools. A 2020 study from the National Black Justice Coalition found that 44.7% of Black LGBTQ+ youth had experienced some form of punitive discipline, either detention, suspension, or expulsion. That same study reported that those who experienced such disciplinary action were less likely to pursue post-secondary education and had lower grade-point averages.

Students with disabilities account for 23% of students referred to law enforcement in schools, despite making up only 12% of the student population nationwide. Students with disabilities also face hugely disproportionate amounts of physical punishment in schools: they account for over 67% of all students placed in seclusion, involuntary confinement, or physical restraint at school.

Youth criminalization in schools is an incredibly discriminatory practice, and it encompasses nearly all intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. School police officers disproportionately use force on students of color when handling minor discipline issues such as “disorderly conduct,” and as we see in the next section, this targeted criminalization can have lasting effects on a student’s future outcomes.

**Impacts of Youth Criminalization**

The effects of juvenile policing and punitive discipline can have lasting impacts on a student’s emotional well-being and future outcomes. According to the ACLU, schools employing police officers have seen increases in student offenses and student arrests by as much as 400 percent. Although SROs, along with other stringent security measures, are employed to promote school safety and reduce instances of violence, studies show that their presence often has the opposite effect. A study of 98 middle and high schools in the state of Maryland with varied
levels of security found that students who attended schools with the most security cameras felt the least safe and supported. The targeted policing of Black, brown, disabled, and LGBTQ students harbors widespread mistrust between students and law enforcement, resulting in an increase of student offenses both in and outside of school.

Youth experiencing intrusive police stops are also at risk of heightened emotional distress and are much more likely to distance themselves from their learning environment, as the constant removal from and re-entry into school, in addition to the loss of classroom instruction time, has been shown to profoundly disrupt a student’s academic progress. Additional research published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2019 shows students attending schools with high suspension rates are upwards of 15-20 percent more likely to be arrested and incarcerated as adults. When mental health needs aren't addressed and adolescent behaviors are criminalized, students may find themselves entangled with the justice system for years to come and their home lives disrupted. A 2016 study by the Coalition of Juvenile Justice interviewed runaway and homeless youth in 11 U.S. cities and found that nearly 44 percent had spent time in a jail, prison, or juvenile detention center, that nearly 78 percent had at least one interaction with the police, and that nearly 62 percent had been arrested at some point in their lives.

Among those experiencing homelessness after exiting the juvenile legal system, Black, brown, and LGBTQ youth were disproportionately represented. The policing of youth in schools also has grave consequences on students’ abilities to achieve academically and lead fulfilling futures. A 2018 study by UCLA examining the impact of federal grants for school police on 2.5 million students in Texas found a 6 percent increase in middle school discipline rates, a 2.5 percent decrease in high school graduation rates, and a 4 percent decrease in college enrollment rates. The ability to enroll in college is a nearly impossible feat for criminalized youth, as 60 percent of American universities consider criminal history as part of their admissions process. Disparities in educational attainment for disproportionately policed youth also affect their projected socioeconomic status. According to a 2019 study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median weekly earnings for someone with a bachelor’s degree are $1,248 compared to $592 for someone with less than a high school diploma. Moreover, the influence of background checks on the hiring process of nearly 90 percent of American companies puts steady jobs further out of reach for criminalized youth that are beholden to permanent discrimination.
Juvenile Policing Outside of Schools

Disproportionate policing of children of color affects youth outside of school environments, as well. As of October 2015, Black youth were over five times more likely to be detained or committed to the carceral system than white youth. Native American youth were over three times more likely, and Hispanic youth were 61% more likely. Despite these higher levels of detainment and commitment, researchers have found few differences between Black and white youth regarding common areas of arrest for juveniles: they are roughly as likely to get into fights, carry weapons, steal property, use or sell illicit substances, and skip school.

As of 2019, over 48,000 youth are confined in carceral facilities at any given time. Of this, over 4,000 are held in adult prisons and jails, and nearly 1 in 5 are held in juvenile facilities for the lowest-level offenses possible: technical violations make up 15% and status offenses make up 4% of juvenile incarcerations. These include charges like truancy, violating curfew, failing to complete community service or report to probation officers, or being “ungovernable.” The racialized nature of such charges is evident when tying this back to the school system, seeing that school resource officers are more likely to use force on students of color for similar issues. This is clear when looking at the demographic makeup of juvenile legal facilities: 42% of all boys and 35% of all girls held in the juvenile carceral system are Black, despite only being 14% of all youth under 18 in the US.

Incarceration as a youth often has lifelong impacts and consequences. A 2015 MIT study found that those who were incarcerated as juveniles are 23% more likely to end up in jail as an adult compared to juvenile offenders who avoided incarceration. 40% of incarcerated youth were incarcerated in adult facilities by the age of 25. Over 90% of companies are influenced by background checks when making hiring decisions, putting jobs further out of reach for criminalized youth. Children of color are criminalized inside and outside of schools, and its impacts are far-reaching.
Creating Safe and Educational School Environments

The safety and well-being of students has been ill-served by SROs who are committed to a model of punitive discipline over providing students with the support they need to develop healthily alongside their peers. Several school districts have begun to experiment with alternative models of conflict resolution, such as restorative justice circles, that have been shown to foster safe environments and positive outcomes for students, especially for Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, and disabled youth. Our 2018 report, “Students Under Siege” defines restorative justice practices as those that reject models of punitive discipline by seeking to repair harm that has been done by involving all stakeholders in the resolution rather than punishing an offender for breaking a law or a rule.

The goal of restorative justice is to heal and learn in a manner that engages all stakeholders through a facilitated dialogue process, from the student responsible for the harm caused, to the person harmed, to guardians and school staff. Research has shown that the focus on growth rather than punishment through restorative justice practices has reduced suspensions, expulsions, and even referrals to the juvenile legal system due to declining recidivism rates in school districts that have implemented this model. A 2016 study by the University of Illinois examining the outcomes of a restorative justice circle program adopted by a large urban high school in the Southeast United States found that the circle resulted in overwhelmingly positive outcomes for both students and faculty. Students
discussed how they used the circle process as their preferred method of dealing with conflicts and taking ownership because it was better than the method they turned to before, which was physical fighting. In addition, the study found that the restorative justice circle interrupted the school’s pattern of referring students to law enforcement, improved relationships between students and staff, prevented destructive ways of engaging conflict, and conducted meaningful dialogue.

Another set of resources that districts can utilise are known as “Social, Emotional, and Academic Development” (SEAD) and “Social and Emotional Learning” (SEL). SEAD is “the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning in K-12 education,” according to the Aspen Institute. Decades of research have shown that not only is SEAD central to learning, it also results in huge benefits for students and society, including higher test scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary enrollment; reduced rates of delinquency; improved long-term employment, health, and civic engagement outcomes; and reduced rates of anxiety and depression.

Generational trauma in communities of color also needs to be taken into account. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, director of the Native American Disparities Research and Community Behavioral Health conceptualizes historical trauma as “a constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations.” Police presence in schools is not only retraumatizing students of color on an individual level, the traumatizing effects can reach into the students’ families and communities. The normalization and socialization of police presence in schools can reinforce this generational form of oppression.

The Crisis Prevention Center reports that more than half of all children in the US have had exposure to violence or abuse and at least two-thirds have been exposed to potential trauma by the age of 16. Addressing trauma in the early stages of education has proven critical to students well-being and success.

Some ways to address generational trauma would be to operate from a cultural healing and trauma-informed care lens. Viewing and understanding trauma opens and creates a space for dialogue where transformation happens. According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a Trauma Informed Care approach in schools, can provide a deeper understanding of what is going on in students’ families and communities and can positively impact students’ academic success.

A 2019 study by the ACLU finds that schools are stunningly understaffed when it comes to mental health and health professionals. The standards recommend
that for every 250 students there must be at least one counselor and one social worker. For every 750 students there must be at least one nurse and one school psychologist. These are already minimal standards, however the study finds that about 90% of students go to schools that fail to meet even these minimum requirements. Many states have up to three times as many law enforcement officers than social workers and several have more law enforcement officers than school nurses. When none or insufficient access to these supports are available, teachers turn to law enforcement officers in schools to meet needs that have nothing to do with criminal behavior and for which the SROs are not equipped to address in safe, healthy or professional ways.

In order to create institutional change for the health and safety of children, school districts and their larger communities will need to move towards models of transformative justice that promote student safety both inside and outside of school. While restorative and transformative justice essentially reach for the same goal, transformative justice takes a more systemic approach than restorative justice by providing ongoing safety and support to community members and developing sustainable strategies to help them account for their actions and transform their behavior. Instead of seeking to repair the harm caused to individual stakeholders through restorative justice practices that encourage the offender to acknowledge responsibility, transformative justice seeks to change the overall structure that created the circumstances underpinning the offense rather than just repairing the harm caused to those affected.

True health and safety requires that adequate mental health professionals, school nurses and restorative practitioners are available to students and families in schools and that the same principles of restorative justice and mental health and healthcare support extends outside of the schools to the communities in which children need similar supports.
What Could Be:  
Trade-offs from Shifting Funds  
from Cops to Counselors*

*The methodology we used for the findings in the section can be found in the appendix.

How can we move from criminalization of children to a school environment that instead supports their social, emotional and academic health and safety so that all school children may thrive? We can shift resources.

School Resource Officers are known by different names, and may be employees of the school district, police departments, or private contractors. Some districts employ language of support and community in descriptions of their security programs, but in each case, the investment in security officers represents funds that could have been re-deployed from a law enforcement framework to hire specially trained counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

We looked at three of the large city public school districts in the country, Washington DC, Chicago and Philadelphia, to see how many counselors and mental health professionals each district could hire if they shifted their funds from policing their students to creating healthier and safer environments through various forms of school counseling.
The city’s school security services are provided by a combination of private contractors and city police. School security officers are employed by a private contractor previously overseen by the Metropolitan Police Department. In response to public outcry, this year the city council determined the school district will assume oversight for the private security contract. In addition to the private security guards, the Metropolitan Police Department’s School Safety Division’s sworn police officers are specifically assigned to school security.

The MPD School Safety Division’s budget is $13 million in FY 2021. In addition, the school district will oversee a private security contract worth an estimated $18 million. This represents a $4 million decrease to the previous contract, slotted to be reallocated to school counseling.1

What Could Be: The combined $32 million in police department and school district security spending could have hired an additional 215 school psychologists, 335 guidance counselors, or 322 social workers. While new investments in mental health may have increased the staffing of counselors and psychologists in the intervening years, based on publicly reported 2015 staffing levels this would represent more than double the school psychologists, a nearly fourfold increase in counselors, or a nearly threefold increase in social workers.2 In this summer’s debates over the role and number of security guards and police officers in city schools, Councilmember David Grosso noted that the ratio of security guards and police officers per student is much higher than those for counselors, psychologists, or social workers.3
Chicago

School security in Chicago schools is provided by the Chicago Police Department under contract with Chicago Public Schools. A 2017 Justice Department investigation found frequent unconstitutional use of non-lethal force by CPD officers, including tasing students in public schools.4

The school budget for FY 2021 allows for $15 million for the school security contract with the MPD. This is a decrease from the $33 million FY 2020 budget. However, $10.5 million of the current decrease is attributable to savings from school closures during summer and remote learning - savings that are not likely to be replicated without a change to the underlying structure of school safety. An additional $7.5 million decrease is attributable to the school district’s decision to stop funding the police department’s mobile security units that policed neighborhoods as well as schools, a change that may be more robust.5

What Could Be: The planned $15 million budget for school security in FY 2021 could have hired an additional 140 school psychologists, 182 guidance counselors, or 192 social workers. Compared to the 536 social workers budgeted for 2021, an additional 192 personnel would represent a 35 percent increase.
Unlike in Chicago or Washington, DC, Philadelphia’s school security is provided by the school district itself. The program has promised a softer approach, and while its officers are unarmed and are not sworn police, they carry handcuffs.⁶

The school district has budgeted $32.5 million for school security in FY 2021.⁷

**What Could Be:** The planned $32.5 million budget for school security in FY 2021 could have hired an additional 278 school psychologists, 355 guidance counselors, or 467 social workers. Those resources would represent a near tripling of school psychologists, an 80 percent increase in counselors, or a 40-to-50 percent increase in counseling and social service positions.⁸
Conclusion

Under the auspices of promoting school safety, the policing of students has fueled a school to prison pipeline in which SROs disproportionately criminalize Black, Latinx, Muslim, LGBTQ, and disabled youth. When a law and order approach to education is upheld through the criminalization of adolescent behavior, students in policed schools may find themselves at greater risk of entanglement with the criminal legal system throughout their lives merely by virtue of attending school.

Instead, school districts can shift funds currently supporting the damaging over-criminalization of students and invest that money into needed social, emotional and psychological supports.

School districts should follow in the footsteps of cities such as Minneapolis, Portland, Denver, Oakland, and Madison, which have voted or proposed resolutions to terminate their relationship with local police departments as calls to defund the police gain momentum across the country. The grave budget cuts that public schools are facing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic should serve as an incentive to divest from counterproductive retributive justice and reinvest in evidence-based restorative practices and counseling programs whose services are most reliable in assessing students’ mental health needs and their safety risks to others.

Further, safety isn’t the only component of education that is improved when school districts trade cops for counselors. Individuals who attend schools with strong counseling programs have been shown to achieve higher academically, and report a greater sense of happiness, safety and security at their institution. Instead of employing SROs to patrol the hallways of elementary to high schools, districts should invest in mental health supports by adjusting staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of comprehensive services and school-community partnerships that integrate relationship-building and school safety efforts. Ultimately, if schools are to promote an environment in which their students can feel safe and have their social, academic, and emotional development nurtured simultaneously, removing police from schools is the necessary first step in beginning to reimagine school safety.
Appendix

Methods for calculating the trade-offs*

School and police spending on school security was drawn from approved FY 2021 budget documents and official press releases wherever available. In the case of Washington, DC, they were drawn from these sources as well as from the previous known value of the private security contract for the 2019-2020 school year.\(^9\)

Calculations for the number of psychologists, counselors and social workers were based on estimates of salaries plus benefits. Salaries for psychologists, counselors and social workers were drawn from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics for May 2019 for the metropolitan area for Philadelphia and Chicago, and for the city for the District of Columbia. Average annual salaries were adjusted upward by a factor of 40\% to account for the cost of employee benefits.

Average annual salaries were compared for (Title/ BLS Code):

Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychologists (193031)

Educational, Guidance, and Career Counselors and Advisors (211012)

Child, Family, and School Social Workers (211021)
References


7 District of Philadelphia FY 2020-21 Consolidated Budget, accessed 9/1/2020 from https://cdn.philasd.org/offices/budget/FY21_Consolidated_Budget_Book_FINAL.pdf

8 District of Philadelphia FY 2020-21 Consolidated Budget, accessed 9/1/2020 from https://cdn.philasd.org/offices/budget/FY21_Consolidated_Budget_Book_FINAL.pdf
