

Why it is Time to Remove Police From Our Schools



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February 7, 2021

Following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer last summer, school districts around the country are facing pressure from their communities to eliminate police presences from their schools. Schools are supposed to be safe zones for young people to receive an education and learn how to behave and interact with others in the outside world. However, students are increasingly punished and criminalized by law enforcement in school hallways rather than learning how to resolve behavioral issues and disputes with their peers. School resource officers (SROs) are intended to protect students from acts of violence and provide security, as frequent school shootings and threats of violence loom over this generation of students; but in reality, the presence of SROs poses strong physical and psychological threats to students, particularly students of color.

Police have not always played prominent roles in the school community, but their increasing presence in the last two decades as a result of frequent school shootings has been correlated with a dramatic rise of the criminalization of young, nonwhite students. Now with 71% of public high schools in the U.S. routinely having at least one armed officer on campus at all times, it is crucial that school boards fully understand the negative effects of hiring police to patrol school grounds.

We must consider these important questions that are not asked enough when hiring SROs: How are students affected by the increased police presences in their schools? Are all students impacted in the

same ways, or do minority students suffer more? Do SROs prevent violence? What are the long-term consequences of SRO implementation? And lastly, are there any safer alternatives to SROs?

How SROs are Ineffective and Discriminatory

SROs do not typically prevent school violence or shootings, and they may have the potential to incite violence.

SROs were originally placed in schools to deescalate aggressions between students and deter outside perpetrators of violence; however, schools are safer right now than they have ever been, and there are more meaningful ways to make students feel safe than having armed law enforcement on campus. Despite the rhetoric perpetuating the need for SROs on our campuses, the reported incidences of violence and crime in schools is at an all-time low since the 1990s.

Additionally, there is no evidence that SROs deter active shooters or perpetrators of violence. 2018 was a year full of devastating school shootings, occurring at Marshall County High School in Kentucky, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, Great Mills High School in Maryland, and Santa Fe High School in Texas. In all four of these shootings, the active shooters attacked these campuses even though armed guards were on school grounds, indicating that SROs do not really deter violence as they are intended. These shootings also demonstrated the futility of armed security on campus, as all of the guards involved failed to stop the active shooters from causing widespread devastation; and infamously, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School's guard fled the scene to safety instead of fighting to protect the students under attack.

Arming school security is ineffective, and it can backfire by placing guns in the wrong hands. Having guns in schools, whether in the hands of officers, security guards, administrators, or teachers, is dangerous and has the potential to incite violence, as seen in a Giffords Law Center report on frequent gun mishandling incidents. There have been over 90 reported mishandling episodes in the last five years, most notably students grabbing officers' guns when the officers utilized force against them. These acts could result in serious injury or fatality, and it can place a deadly weapon in the hands of a young child.

SROs reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the criminalization of young students by law enforcement, occurring when police officers are called in to handle behavioral disputes that would typically be dealt with internally by school disciplinary professionals. When SROs are given the power to punish school children, young people are being formally placed within the criminal justice system instead of resolving behavioral issues in schools with teachers and trained school resource professionals. Transferring disciplinary authority to police officers changes the dynamic of

punishment and accountability within schools, and law enforcement are not equipped or trained to handle behavioral disputes regarding children.

Despite the rising safety of schools in the U.S., arrests of students into the juvenile justice system are increasing, since SROs criminalize behavior that is often not violent or criminal. The presence of SROs was found to have a significant impact on the criminalization of students, as one study from the University of Tennessee found that students in schools with hired on-site police were four times more likely to be arrested or referred to law enforcement for a disorderly conduct charge, which can be anything from engaging in a fight to swearing at a teacher.

The introduction of students to the criminal justice system has major, long term consequences for students. Classrooms teach us how to be successful and interact well with others, as well as provide opportunities for students to pursue a bright future. Removing children from schools and placing them into juvenile justice facilities stunts their ability to learn from their mistakes and grow into well-prepared and working adults.

Arrests typically lead to suspensions and expulsions in addition to a lasting record of criminal involvement. Students who have been repeatedly suspended or referred to law enforcement are more likely to drop out of school, increasing their chances of becoming more involved with the criminal justice system. This removes them from school environments that build strong adult relationships and separates them from programs that prepare students for a positive future, potentially setting them up for struggles in finding employment and obtaining educational opportunities later in life.

The presence of SROs disproportionately targets and threatens students of color.

The purpose of SROs is to maintain order and safety within schools, but their presence has disproportionately targeted students of color, making school a threatening environment for nonwhite communities on campus. The system in place is predisposed to target students of color, since the more nonwhite a school's population is, the more likely it is that the school has hired armed police officers and security guards. The arrest rate is also significantly higher for Black students than students of other communities. The Justice Policy Institute's report on the criminalization of youths in schools reveals that black students are disciplined more frequently and severely than their white counterparts, and that black and Hispanic students are disproportionately suspended from school at higher frequencies.

These experiences have long-lasting effects on students, as one study from Harvard University found that the educational performance of young black boys was significantly impaired by the increase of school police in New York City. The researchers found that arrests and the threat of arrests had a notable effect on school attendance, reporting that young black boys were more

frequently absent from school by about 1.5 days per year. This further heightens the racial divide in educational opportunity in our schools, and it will affect the ability for these students to be successful in the future.

Additionally, there have been devastating acts of police violence against black students in schools since the implementation of SROs. A recent incident revealed a Florida police officer handcuffing and arresting a six-year-old black girl as she begged and wailed for him to stop. This heartbreaking case is not rare, and it shows the need for SROs to be trained to work with children and thoughtfully selected to be as non-violent and non-discriminatory as possible.

Alternatives to Armed School Security

Many school districts have promised to remove SROs from their schools, including school boards in Denver, Portland, Seattle, and Minneapolis. Although some school districts are already making efforts to begin eliminating police from their schools, many are concerned about safety and remain resistant to completely eliminating law enforcement. For those that cannot remove SROs entirely, there are many improvements to SRO training and selection procedures that can make them more effective and sensitive to the needs of students. Also, SROs are very expensive to employ, and there are other ways to utilize our resources to protect our students in a more meaningful and effective way that will prepare students for a brighter future.

Improving School Resources and Staffing

The Advancement Project, a civil rights group, suggests increasing the number of social workers, psychologists, and counselors to keep an eye on students. Approximately 1.7 million students are in schools with SROs but no counselors, and it is important that supportive adults are in place for students to turn to when in distress. The increased employment of conflict de-escalation staff and additional mental health resources will allow students to get the help they need without sending them into the juvenile justice system.

Better Selection and Training of Officers

Under the current system, officers have the final say on prosecuting a student for a criminal charge with the authority to override a teacher or administrator. SROs are also only accountable to the police department, not to the local school boards to which they serve. In order to curb criminal charges against students for behavioral issues, one study from the University of Tennessee suggests making the arrest of a student a last resort of intervention, and any punishment or charge of a student should be made in agreement with the school principal, administrators, and teachers involved.

Also, SROs are not trained to work with children and do not adjust their communication and conduct when working in a school environment. Teachers and administrators must receive training in child psychology, effective disciplinary action, and education, and are accountable to local school

boards. SROs, if they must be implemented, must receive these trainings and be selected carefully based on suitability to work with children from various backgrounds. SROs must also be equipped to deal with active shooter situations in order to be prepared and serve their purpose, and need a skillset that includes knowledge and understanding about when to intervene in a conflict.

More Effective Security Measures

There are better ways to secure our school buildings than armed security guards. The Advancement Project also advocates for secure entrances, security cameras, panic buttons, and better communication systems to keep the entire school community safe and in communication with one another. Also, the group recommends the utilization of identification procedures and improved visitor registration procedures, as well as a trained safety team or official to evaluate student behavior and notifications of threats of an attack.

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