



What impact does the presence of school police have on school safety?

Part 1 of a 3 part series | MORE AT: researchforaction.org/police



Concerns for student safety are a commonly cited reason for the presence of police in schools. But as the nation grapples with the appropriate roles and responsibilities of police more broadly, the time is right to shine a light on what we know about the effects of police in schools. This brief summarizes the research related to this question. **Research is inconclusive about whether police presence in schools improves safety.**

By “police presence” we are referencing school police officers, School Resource Officers (SROs), and local law enforcement that may be called to schools. Though most research focuses on police presence generally, we note below when the research focuses on a specific role, such as SROs. Findings provide insight into the potential impact of police presence but may or may not be generalizable across school security personnel roles.

Research is inconclusive about the effect of police presence on crime or violence. The Congressional Research Service reported in 2013 that existing studies lacked methodological rigor and, therefore, that the effect of SROs on school safety was still unclear.¹ The findings of the limited existing studies show a mix of results, with some showing the presence of law enforcement to be associated with an increase in crime and violence and some showing association with a decrease in crime and violence.²

Evidence is limited regarding whether police presence reduces the likelihood of a school shooting. Some advocates of school police presence argue that police officers are more prepared to reduce or prevent violence due to specialized training that is not provided to school staff.³ Researchers have highlighted that schools with police

on campus may be more likely to have written emergency plans about how to handle potential school shootings but have not found conclusive evidence that police presence reduces school shootings.⁴ An analysis of about 200 school shooting incidents found that at least 68 of those schools employed a police officer or security guard; almost all of those incidents ended before police or security interceded.⁵

Police presence is associated with increased student arrests and referrals to law enforcement.⁶ Law enforcement has increasingly been involved in student conduct issues that historically were resolved by school administrators.⁷ At schools with greater police presence, students are arrested at higher rates for reasons like “disorderly conduct”, suggesting that students who encounter police at school may be more likely to be criminally charged for behaviors otherwise seen as “normal adolescent misbehavior.”⁸ Researchers have extensively documented both short and long-term negative impacts on youth who experience criminal charges.⁹

Police presence is also associated with increased rates of exclusionary discipline, or out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.¹⁰ Although evidence is mixed,¹¹ a systematic review found that SRO presence was associated with 21% more incidents

School Security Personnel: Defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education

School Police Officer – A law enforcement officer at a school, employed or contracted directly by the school. The officer’s responsibilities are established by the school or district.

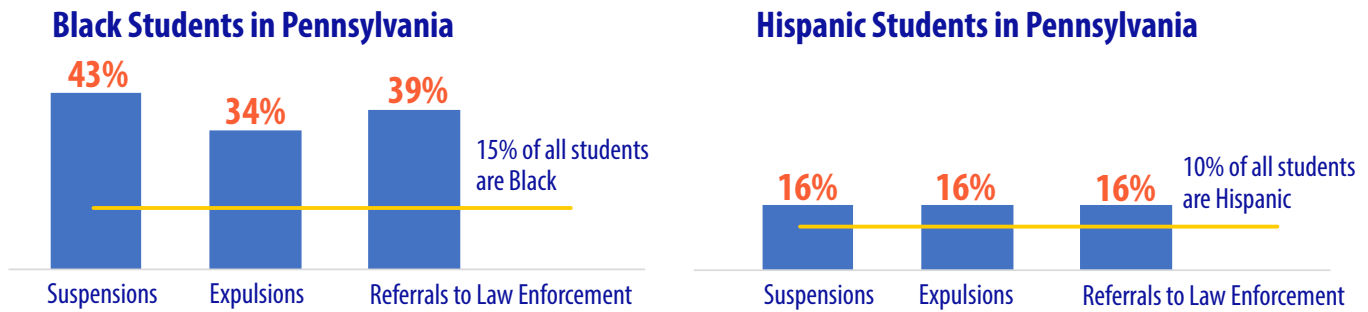
School Resource Officer – A law enforcement officer employed by a law enforcement agency and stationed at a school through an agreement between the agency and school or district.

School Security Guard – An individual stationed at a school for safety duties but does not have the powers and responsibilities of school police officers.

School security personnel may be armed or unarmed. Schools may have additional police presence from local police who are not contracted with the school.

of exclusionary discipline.¹² Exclusionary discipline is also associated with significant negative outcomes including school drop-out and increased likelihood of future involvement with the criminal justice system.¹³

School-based arrests, exclusionary discipline, and their associated negative consequences disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities.¹⁴ Research has also found that Black students are disciplined and arrested at greater rates, even for the same or less serious behavior as white students.¹⁵



Exclusionary discipline. In Pennsylvania, although 15% of students are Black and 10% are Hispanic, Black and Hispanic students make up 43% and 16% of all out-of-school suspensions, respectively. Black and Hispanic students make up 34% and 16% of all expulsions, respectively.¹⁶

School-based arrests. RFA's analysis of Civil Rights Data Collection found that, while 15% of all PA students are Black and 10% are Hispanic, 39% of students who received referrals to law enforcement from PA schools are Black and 16% are Hispanic.¹⁷ Pennsylvania has the third highest student arrest rate in the country and is second highest for both Black and Hispanic student arrests.¹⁸

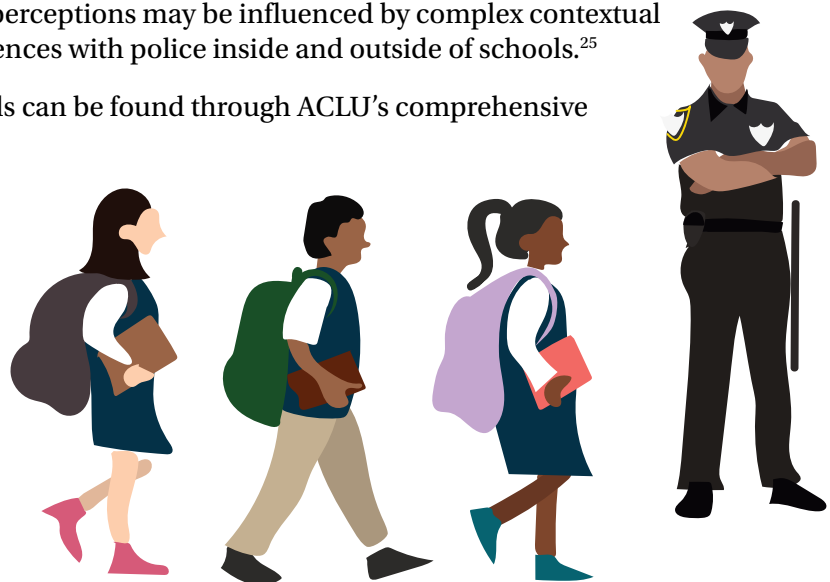
Available evidence shows mixed perceptions from teachers about how police impact safety. Some teacher unions across the country, including the American Federation of Teachers, have recently called for reforming or removing police from schools.¹⁹ A recent national EdWeek survey found that about half of teachers completely or partially disagreed that *armed* police officers belonged in the schools in their district, although most teachers opposed removing armed police officers from U.S. schools entirely.²⁰ In Pittsburgh, a recent survey found that most members of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers opposed eliminating police from Pittsburgh schools.²¹

Students have mixed perceptions about the impact of police presence on their safety.²² In one study, some students reported that their school was already safe or that students might commit crimes regardless of SRO presence.²³ A survey of California high school students found that 61% of White students reported feeling “pretty much” or “very much” safer with the police officer at their school compared to 41% of Black students – a statistically significant difference.²⁴ These disparities in students’ perceptions may be influenced by complex contextual factors and linked to history and differences in experiences with police inside and outside of schools.²⁵

More information about the impact of police in schools can be found through ACLU’s comprehensive resource <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/>

Implications

School decision-makers should clearly define their goals for school safety and weigh the purposes, costs, and consequences of existing and potential strategies. When deciding whether to continue to invest in school policing, school decision-makers should consider the limited evidence on the effectiveness of police presence on school safety and the evidence of the negative impact of police presence on students of color.



Future research should rigorously evaluate existing and alternative strategies for school safety. In the third part of this series from RFA, we provide concrete examples of alternative approaches for school safety.

Endnotes

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- 25 *For example, there have been some highly publicized examples of violence associated with police in Philadelphia and Allegheny County schools. In 2008, a high school in West Philadelphia with a predominantly Black student population faced a lockdown during which over 30 armed police officers came into the school. This lockdown began because school police told two students who were late to school to go home because they were not in uniform. The students tried to enter anyway. Students were locked in classrooms, in the lunchroom, and in hallways. Over 20 students were arrested during this incident. In 2016, at another Philadelphia high school with a primarily Black student population, a student was told by a school police officer that he could not use the bathroom without a pass. The student responded with frustration and anger, throwing an orange. The officer responded with violence. In 2017, five Black students and their parents sued an Allegheny County high school with evidence that the school resource officer used excessive force over several years, shoving a student into a locker and shocked him with a stun gun, punching another student and knocking out his tooth, and "body-slammng" a student.*
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