



Investing in Evidence-Based Alternatives to Policing:

Creating Supportive School Environments

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In the United States, at least 67 percent of high school students attend a school with a police officer. Yet, police presence in schools does not necessarily help students. Students need support, not punishment.

From 1999, when the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) created the Cops in School program as a misguided response to crime and mass shootings at schools, to today, more than \$1 billion in grant funding from the federal government has gone to hiring school resource officers (SROs).¹ Although decision makers justify police presence in schools as a way to manage and prevent serious violent incidents, SROs often end up responding to behavioral issues and low-level infractions instead.² Thus, police presence in schools does not necessarily make students feel safer.³

School policing can also disrupt learning and development, lead to negative encounters that harm the mental and physical health of students, increase the surveillance and criminalization of students of color, and fuel the “school-to-prison pipeline.”⁴ In fact, schools with a higher percentage of Black students are more heavily policed.⁵ Arrests for low-level misconduct like alcohol possession or vandalism go up in schools with police, and Black students are disproportionately likely to be suspended, expelled, or arrested. This leads to lower graduation rates and a higher chance of future incarceration.⁶ At least 14 million students—more than one-fourth of K-12 students in the United States—attend schools that have police officers on site but not counselors, nurses, or social workers.⁷

Restorative justice programs, mental health and counseling services, and youth development are more effective strategies to help students and save communities money.

There is no clear evidence that SROs improve school safety.⁸ However, there are other trauma-informed options that have shown promise in improving behavioral, health, and educational outcomes for students—without the presence of police. Many of these are cost effective and offer considerable benefits for communities. School districts and other government actors should:

1 **Build emotional and mental health screening programs and crisis prevention plans to help identify students with complex behavioral needs and connect them to services.**

After Baltimore County Public Schools implemented the Emotional and Behavioral Health Crisis Response and Prevention program from 2015 to 2017, suspensions fell by 56 percent and disciplinary office referrals by 75 percent between 2015 and 2017. The program cost about \$1.4 million over two years, with the allocation declining in year two.⁹ Between 2016 and 2020, Baltimore City Public Schools spent an average of \$11.2 million on police in schools annually, nearly 10 times the amount spent on the Emotional and Behavioral Health Crisis Response and Prevention program.¹⁰

2 **Hire mental health counselors and nurses to support vulnerable students, including students who are exposed to or involved in violence.**

Trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy in schools costs about \$430 per participant, or about \$90,000 per year for a group of 210 students. This practice significantly reduces PTSD and depression caused by exposure to violence.¹¹ A 2014 study of a \$79 million school nursing services program in Massachusetts found that the program generated \$177 million in savings in medical care costs and recovered time for teachers and parents, for a net savings of \$98 million.¹²

3 **Fund after-school and youth development programs, which are proven to improve educational and employment outcomes and reduce crime.**

¹³ After-school programs provide a substantial return on investment, in part by reducing childcare costs for working families and improving the school performance of students.¹⁴ As one study in California found, for every \$1 spent on programs, schools and families saved between \$8.92 and \$12.90. These savings come from a reduction in school personnel time spent on behavioral needs and the avoidance of childcare expenditures, and by preventing lost wages when parents have to disrupt work to address their children's behavioral needs.¹⁵ A review of summer youth employment programs in Chicago found that SYEPs reduced violent crime substantially, with between \$5 and \$30 in savings related to crime reduction for every \$1 spent on these programs.¹⁶

4 **Provide individualized and family-driven care by implementing wraparound service plans.**

These plans serve students with complex behavioral needs by incorporating their natural support systems and community-based services to address their needs inside and outside their school environments.¹⁷ New Jersey saved \$40 million in statewide inpatient psychiatric costs from 2007 to 2010 using a wraparound approach.¹⁸ An analysis of 16 years of data on the use of wraparound services in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, demonstrated a 96 percent decline in psychiatric hospitalization and an 87 percent decline in residential treatment placement.¹⁹ The program served 1,536 children at a cost of \$3,200 per child per month in 2012 and has been able to cut costs by more than 50 percent since 1996, when costs per child per month were \$8,000.²⁰

5 **Design restorative justice programs in schools to address safety and disciplinary challenges, rather than resorting to punitive measures.**

Restorative justice focuses on how crime and conflict affect all parties involved, with the goal of repairing the harm that someone has caused. It includes accountability and inquiry into the harm caused so that it can be repaired. Rooted in Indigenous practices, restorative justice programs require active participation and work to meet the needs of people who have been harmed and those who have caused harm alike. Schools that have implemented restorative justice plans have seen school violence and expulsions fall by as much as 70–80 percent.²¹

Recommendations

- **School boards should hire more behavioral health and special education specialists.** They should engage in collaborative hiring processes with members of each school community and shift the mission of security staff from punitiveness to peace-keeping and restorative justice. According to *Interrupting Criminalization*, more than 25 cities and school boards across the country have ended contracts with local police departments since the murder of George Floyd.²²
- **Schools should implement a trauma-informed curriculum to train and ensure coordination between peace builders, who resolve conflict and build trust with students and counselors.**²³ This ought to include self-reflection and accountability, de-escalation, restorative justice, and instruction on working with students with behavioral health issues.
- **Districts should install a community oversight board or committee to review all complaints related to student interactions with police or school security officials.** Such bodies should have the capacity to conduct investigations, issue public reports, and make recommendations to school boards and city agencies concerning disciplinary policy.
- **Lawmakers should help schools hire support personnel, including counselors, social workers, and others trained in youth development and trauma-informed care,** to foster safety and reduce overpolicing.²⁴
- **Residents and advocates can join local and national coalitions, such as the Dignity in Schools campaign, to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, implement policies to end the criminalization of students, and end school “pushout,”** which are practices that contribute to students not graduating. Pushout disproportionately impact students of color, students who are poor, LGBTQ+ students, and system-impacted youth.



Endnotes

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For more information

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