



# Law Enforcement and Restorative Circles: Impacts on Educational Achievement

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## ABSTRACT

Connections have been observed between police involvement in school discipline and the utilization of suspensions as punishment. While proponents of school surveillance believe that police are necessary to provide safety in schools, education advocates question students' perception of safety and its effects on educational outcomes. This article examines the relationship between police officer presence and certain educational outcomes, including student attendance, access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates. Also included in this analysis is an exploration of the relationships between these variables and classroom restorative circles used to manage conflict and find alternative solutions to safety. Does police presence have a significant impact upon attendance, access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates for students? Does the use of restorative circles at school, an alternative to traditional student discipline, have a significant impact upon attendance, access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates for students? To address these inquiries, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis is used on both predictors with the School Survey on Crime and Safety collected by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Results demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between police officer presence and suspensions. Restorative circle use in schools has a significant impact upon decreased school suspensions and increased standardized test scores. To conclude the paper, real-world implications on school policy development are discussed.

*Keywords: police in schools, suspension rates, educational outcomes, restorative justice circles, standardized test scores*

**S**chool surveillance and the presence of law enforcement in schools contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, a connection of systems meant to criminalize predominantly Black and Latine students at an early age (Nance, 2016). By removing students from the classroom through suspension or arrests, students' academic performance and chances of graduating are severely impacted, ultimately causing complications in other life domains (Nance, 2016). Education advocates propose restorative circles and social-emotional learning (SEL) as alternative solutions to promoting school safety and better educational outcomes (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Researchers have explored the relationship between school safety practices and student academic performance in order to understand better the possible impact of school surveillance and restorative circles. This paper analyzes relevant data to explore this correlation and inform policy addressing academic performance and safety for students, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students disproportionately affected by such disciplinary practices.

## REVIEW OF EXTANT LITERATURE

### SCHOOL POLICING AND PUNISHMENT

Police have had a presence in U.S. public schools since the 1950s, but gained prominence following several school shootings in the 1990s. With increased funding from the Department of Justice (DOJ), many schools have hired additional police officers to maintain order and protect students within classrooms (Coon & Travis, 2012; Weiler & Cray, 2011). Many schools associate student safety with increased policing and the use of punishment to enforce school policy. While this method is prevalent, it does not always ensure student safety—especially when “safety” is defined as free of carceral force—and it can have significant academic repercussions.

A side effect of increased police presence is increased nonviolent offenses and exclusionary punishment. A 2020 study by Gottfredson et

al. observed 33 public California middle and high schools that increased their police presence by hiring officers through the DOJ's Community Oriented Policing Services Hiring Program. In this longitudinal analysis, the 33 schools were compared to 72 matched public schools within the state based on similar school characteristics, such as metropolitan status, percentage of students on free or reduced-priced lunch, and rate of suspensions for the year prior to an increase in SRO staff. This study utilized monthly data to evaluate the impact of increased police officers on the school environment over three months. Findings demonstrated a correlation between expanded police presence and increased identified drug and weapons-related offenses compared to schools that did not increase police staff. The study also found a rise in disciplinary action within schools that had increased police presence (Gottfredson et al., 2020). With increased policing, students were more likely to be referred to law enforcement for nonviolent offenses. As a result, punished students had potential legal system consequences at a younger age, increasing the risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that punishments involving removal from school settings impact academic achievement (Tucker & Vance, 2016).

## POLICING'S DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS

While this study does not address race due to data set limitations, the implications of increased policing and school punishment cannot be ignored when it comes to young students of color, particularly Black and Latine students. Schools that primarily serve students of color are more likely to use strict surveillance measures than other schools, creating disproportionate suspension rates and arrests for students of color compared to their white classmates (DOE, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education data snapshot of school discipline in 2014 reported that "Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students" (DOE, 2014). A higher suspension rate for students of color could cause a direct negative impact on their academic achievement. Tucker and Vance (2016) found that "school suspensions have been linked with academic disengagement,

delinquency, and school dropouts” (p. 12). Increasing police presence in schools equates to an increase in punitive measures such as suspension, and could contribute to disparate impacts on Black and Latine students in U.S. public schools.

Perceptions of safety are also important to consider, especially for students of color. Johnson et al. (2018) surveyed 54,350 students from 98 middle and high schools in Maryland to determine whether a correlation existed between observed security measures in school and students’ perceptions of safety, equity, and support. Security measures included the addition of both internal and external surveillance cameras, as well as police officers in schools. This study found that Black and Latine students felt less safe than their white counterparts in schools with more police officers; however, all students still had an overall higher perception of school safety. Perceived school safety was low in schools with high numbers of low-income students of color, especially Black students (Johnson et al., 2018). Even student perception regarding police presences was disparate, as it did not always make Black and Latine students feel safer in school. Therefore, a new alternative for safety should be made that includes the safety of all students of color.

## SCHOOL SAFETY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Chaotic or unsafe school environments strongly influence truancy (Gase et al., 2016). As previously noted, the definition of a safe school environment varies from student to student, and can be dependent on students’ identities. Students might feel unsafe if they consider school policies to be violating their right to privacy or perceive school surveillance as having disciplinary motives. Research has proven over the last twenty years that attendance in class and lectures correlates with higher high school GPAs, standardized test scores, and even final grades in college (Gump, 2005; Rendlemen, 2017). Based on this research, it can be presumed that suspensions often lead to lower grades because they result in significant missed class time.

Furthermore, Tanner-Smith and Fisher (2016) highlight the impact of visible school security measures, such as security guards, metal detectors, and cameras, on academic performance, attendance, and

postsecondary aspirations. The data for this study came from the following two extensive national surveys: the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (N = 38,707 students; 51% male, 77% white, Age = 14.72) and the School Survey on Crime and Safety (N = 10,340 schools; 50% male, 57% white). Results indicated no consistent beneficial effects of security measures on academic outcomes. Trends showed heavy surveillance had a moderately harmful impact on academic success in a small sample of high schools that contain a large low-income student population; however, visible security measures such as fences or cameras did not have any substantial positive or negative effect on multiple education outcomes (Tanner-Smith & Fisher, 2016).

## RESTORATIVE PRACTICE IN SCHOOL SETTINGS: AN ALTERNATIVE

Restorative justice, an alternative to the deeply rooted colonialism and white supremacy present in carcerality, has roots in indigenous cultures around the world and encourages reparation and accountability for wrongdoing in a non-punitive way (Wachtel, 2016). Schools are beginning to utilize this practice instead of suspensions and detentions, which remove students from the classroom. Restorative circles provide space for students and teachers to develop relationships, build community, and manage conflict through honest and constructive communication (Ortega et al., 2016). A restorative circle is a meeting between a student who has caused harm and individuals impacted by the student's actions. Such circles are facilitated by a moderator and can include teachers, school administrators, parents, and classmates. Members of the circle take turns sharing how they felt harmed by the student's behavior. The student whose actions are in question is given a chance to discuss their decision-making, mitigate the harm they caused by taking accountability, and commit to changing their behavior to better meet the needs of their community. When performed in a group setting with a trained counselor, the restorative alternative enables everyone to be heard and has been used "to address truancy, bullying, disciplinary issues, and interpersonal conflict" (Ortega et al., 2016).

In their study, Ortega et al. (2016) explored the mitigating outcomes of restorative circles on high school student and teacher experiences. This study included 35 students and 25 school staff and administrators from a large city in the southeastern United States. Restorative circles were facilitated in response to adverse behavior and qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 open-ended questions at the immediate end of each restorative circle. Interview questions focused both on the conflict and the restorative circle experience for students and school staff. This study produced the following favorable themes: supporting students in taking ownership and engaging with the reconciliation process, improving relationships, engaging in meaningful dialogue, preventing destructive ways of engaging conflict, yielding better academic and social achievement, and interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. There were two unfavorable outcomes discovered in the study, however: student frustration with the process and disappointment due to the inability for some students to be vulnerable in those spaces. The adults in this study believe comfort and trust could have been established if there was “time to build relationships with the facilitators” (Ortega et al., 2016). Despite this, the overall impact implies that less punitive methods, such as using restorative circles to navigate conflicts and behavioral problems, effectively reduce behavioral issues among students.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Our research questions inquired whether there is a negative correlation between the presence of school security officers in schools and student academic achievement. Specifically, these inquiries examined whether police officers in schools have a significant impact upon attendance, students’ access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates. This analysis also sought to determine whether the use of restorative circles in schools has a significant impact upon attendance, access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates for students. Finally, this statistical study explored implications for disciplinary alternatives that could prevent students from becoming involved in the criminal legal system and increase their access to the safety net of education.



## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A regression model was used to identify and explore the relationship between school surveillance and conflict mediation, and between student academic performance and suspension. One independent variable examined is the presence of police officers in school, statistically controlling for crime at the school's location and whether the school is in a metropolitan area. Student involvement in restorative circles is the second predictor analyzed, after controlling for sworn law enforcement officials' participation in discipline, teacher crisis intervention training, and student SEL. Dependent variables include the average percentage of (1) daily attendance, (2) students likely to attend higher education after high school, (3) students who score below the 15th percentile on standardized tests, and (4) students receiving out-of-school suspension with no continuing school services provided for the remainder of the punishment. Exploring these relationships will allow for better understanding of the connection between discipline and student performance.

## HYPOTHESES

After analyzing literature addressing two disciplinary options for schools and establishing the variables being tested, two hypotheses were formulated. First, police officer presence does not significantly relate directly to testing scores and access to higher education, but does have a significant negative relationship with attendance and suspension rates. Second, the use of restorative circles in school has a significant positive relationship with attendance, access to higher education, test scores, and a decrease in suspension rates.

## METHOD

### DATA SOURCE AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This study used the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), a nationally representative cross-sectional survey on U.S. K-12 public schools (Padgett et al., 2020). The SSOCS examines school crime and safety issues, including school policies and programs, disciplinary practices, parent/community

involvement, school security presence, and staff training. Using SSOCS 2017-2018 data, the following analyses have examined the relationship between school academic achievement and the programs, procedures, and policies that schools implement to prevent and reduce crime. The data was collected between February 20, 2018 and July 18, 2018.

## METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Two OLS regressions were used to test the predictability of attendance, access to higher education, standardized test scores, and suspension rates, one based on the predictor of police officer presence on school grounds and another on the use of restorative justice circles as an alternative to discipline.

## RESULTS

Table 1 addresses the descriptive statistics for each dependent and independent variable, without controlling for other factors. Tables 2 and 3 display the regressions with controls to ensure a more accurate description of the correlation.

## POLICE OFFICER PRESENCE

The included regressions yielded varying results. On average, when a police officer was present in schools, there was no significant change in attendance with a point estimate of -0.16 (0.31). Attendance and officer presence in the school had a statistically non-significant correlation. After controlling for crime rates in the school's location and the school setting's population density, as seen in Table 2, 0.98% of the variance in attendance rates was explained by the presence of police officers in the school setting, rate of crime in the area, and population density of the school neighborhood. Attendance had a strong statistically significant positive correlation with a low level of crime in the school neighborhood ( $p < .001$ ). Schools with police officer presence had, on average, -1.69 (0.93) fewer students accessing higher education after controlling for crime rates in the school's location and the school setting's population density. Police officer presence in the school setting, the area's crime rate, and the school neighborhood's population density explain 11.51%

of student variance in achieving higher education. Higher education achievement and officer presence in school had a statistically non-significant correlation. Utilizing high crime rates as the reference group, attending higher education was positively correlated with low and moderate crime levels in the school neighborhood, with a strong statistical significance ( $p < .001$ ). When densely-populated cities are also the reference group, students living in towns and rural communities were less likely to pursue a higher education, with a statistically significant negative correlation ( $p < .001$ ).

Table 2 illustrates that schools with police officer presence earned 0.79 (0.67) higher on standardized test scores, on average, after controlling for crime rates at the school's location and the school setting's population density. The variance of 12.65% in standardized test scores was explained by police officer presence in school settings, rate of crime in the area, and school neighborhood population density. Standardized test scores and officer presence in school had a statistically non-significant correlation. Higher test scores had a strong statistically significant negative correlation with low and moderate crime levels in the school neighborhood ( $p < .001$ ) when high crime rates were the reference group. With metropolitan cities as the reference group, suburbs and rural communities had a statistically significant negative correlation with the likelihood of having higher standardized test scores ( $p < .001$ ).

After controlling for school crime rates and population density, there were 0.06 (0.02) more suspensions when a police officer was present in school. Police officer presence in the school, crime rate in the area, and population density of the school neighborhood explained 97% of the variance in suspension rates. As shown in Table 2, the number of suspensions and the presence of officers at school revealed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation ( $p < .01$ ). When metropolitan cities were the reference group, suspension rates were positively correlated with towns and rural communities, with a strong statistical significance ( $p < .01$ ).

## RESTORATIVE CIRCLES

Regarding restorative circles, teacher training, student SEL, and officer

involvement in discipline, school attendance, could be determined with a 0.26% variance. In Table 3, restorative justice use had a statistically non-significant correlation of -0.45 (0.33) with school attendance. Restorative justice use had a statistically insignificant positive correlation with higher education attainment, as seen in Table 3. Teacher training in crisis intervention and prevention had a statistically significant positive relationship of 3.04 (1.32) with higher education attendance ( $p < .05$ ). Student SEL also had a strong statistically significant positive relationship of 4.32 (1.59) with higher education attainment across the school ( $p < .001$ ). Police officers involved in student discipline had a statistically significant negative correlation of -2.47 (1.11) with higher education rates ( $p < .05$ ).

When examining interventions of restorative justice use, teacher training, student SEL, and officer involvement in discipline to determine standardized test scores, there was a 1.57% variance. Restorative justice use had a strong, statistically significant positive correlation of 4.12 (0.85) with higher standardized test scores ( $p < .001$ ). Recent teacher training in crisis intervention and prevention had a statistically significant negative relationship of -2.12 (0.97) with higher standardized test scores ( $p < .05$ ).

When changing the predictor and controls to restorative justice use, teacher training, student SEL, and officer involvement in discipline, the suspension rates' variance was 1.30%. As shown in Table 3, when controlling for teacher training, student SEL, and officer involvement, restorative circles in the classroom had a weak, statistically significant negative relationship of -0.05 (0.02) with high suspension rates ( $p < .05$ ). Student SEL and officer involvement in discipline also had statistically significant relationships with suspension rates ( $p < .05$ ). More student SEL meant -0.08 (0.03) fewer suspensions. When officers were involved in discipline, suspension rates increased by 0.05 (0.02).

## DISCUSSION

The presence of police in K-12 public schools first began in the 1950s and has risen steadily since the Safe School Act of 1994 (Brown, 2006; Coon & Travis, 2012). The authors are not aware of existing literature

examining the likelihood of particular schools hiring police officers; however, information on the demographics, prior disciplinary practices, and socio-economic statuses of schools most likely to incorporate law enforcement would be useful for future research.

Police presence in school is predictive of greater odds of suspension, which can push students through the school-to-prison pipeline (McKenna & White, 2017). Alternatives to traditional discipline, such as restorative justice circles, can mitigate the effects that lead students to entering this pipeline. This paper's analysis demonstrates that the use of restorative justice, teacher training, and student SEL had a positive correlation with higher education attainment and attendance and decreased suspension rates.

Furthermore, policymakers, police departments, and school officials continue to expand policing programs such as the DOJ, Community Oriented Policing Services program (COPS), and more (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022). COPS, which is part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, hires and trains community policing professionals through government funded grants (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022). This money could potentially have been used instead to fund research-supported programs like SEL. Overall, on a systemic level, the U.S. federal government is failing to provide adequate resources to schools to properly educate the growing population of students with differing behavioral needs (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Investing millions of dollars in law enforcement programs may contribute to increasing student chances of criminal legal system involvement (Gottfredson et al., 2020). The same funding could be utilized to promote restorative justice and alternative means of discipline that keep students in school. It is crucial to recognize more pedagogically sound practices to address school violence and help students maximize their educational opportunities, such as restorative circles, which were shown to decrease suspension rates and increase standardized test scores. Policymakers should enact legislation to provide students with counseling services, mental health services, and SEL programs that promote anger-management strategies and conflict resolution. Improving the quality and strength of teaching approaches and classroom management skills

have proven to be among the most effective ways to enhance school safety (Nickerson et al., 2021).

This paper's analysis demonstrates that suspensions decrease when schools implement crisis prevention and intervention training, restorative justice practices, and SEL programs. Additionally, the findings indicate that restorative justice practices have a positive impact on standardized test scores. This reinforces themes presented in previous literature, such as the connections between increased suspension, school police officer presence, and decreased access to higher education (Petrosino et al., 2012; Weisburst, 2019). This paper contributes to existing literature by measuring the impact of school police officer presence and restorative justice circles on attendance and standardized test scores.

## LIMITATIONS

Police presence and restorative circles in schools were examined to build on existing literature addressing the school-to-prison pipeline and its disproportionately negative impact on students of color. Unfortunately, student demographics were not available within the data set used, making it impossible to determine potential relationships outside of the area's crime level and population density. The dataset did not indicate the student to school police officer ratio or any other indication of school characteristics that hired school police officers in percentages. The dataset only provided the number of public schools tabulated into school characteristics such as neighborhood crime level, school size, diversity, and student approximate household income level. Additional limitations include the varying quality of restorative justice circles across schools that participated in the survey, potentially affecting the regression outcome since facilitator competency could shift the outcome of the restorative justice circles.

## CONCLUSION

The role police officers play in schools negatively impacts student learning, thereby affecting their future educational, employment, and criminal legal involvement. It is crucial to understand better ways to hold students accountable for their decisions, address school violence, and

meet student needs. In order to engage students without perpetuating pathways to the juvenile legal system, schools need to provide SEL programs and regular training to teachers, principals, and staff to support positive behavior. This analysis has shown that restorative justice use was tied to higher standardized testing scores and has the ability to mitigate the impacts of suspension rates. Considering the impact that the school-to-prison pipeline can have on youth, changes must be made to transition to pedagogically sound practices that are proven to improve academic outcomes.

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## APPENDIX A

| Table 1: Descriptive Statistics |        |  |   |  |   |
|---------------------------------|--------|--|---|--|---|
| VARIABLES                       | Total  | School Resource Officers Participate in Discipline | No School Resource Officers Participate in Discipline | Student Involvement in Restorative Circles | No Student Involvement in Restorative Circles |
| Attendance                      | 93.156 | 93.123   | 93.225  | 93.110                                     | 93.196  |
| Higher Education                | 62.693 | 62.276   | 63.550  | 63.900                                     | 61.922  |
| Standardized Tests              | 18.263 | 18.324   | 18.137  | 20.318                                     | 16.949  |
| Suspension Rates                | 0.489  | 0.508  | 0.451   | 0.438                                      | 0.522   |
| Observations                    | 2,762  | 1,859  | 903   | 1,077                                      | 1,685   |

## APPENDIX B

| Table 2: Law Enforcement and Academic Achievement |                    |                     |                     |                   |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| VARIABLES   | Attendance         | Higher Education    | Standardized Tests  | Suspension Rates  |
| Sworn law enforcement participate in discipline   | -0.16<br>(0.31)    | -1.69<br>(0.93)     | 0.79<br>(0.67)      | 0.06**<br>(0.02)  |
| Moderate crime level                              | 1.35+<br>(0.69)    | 9.56***<br>(2.07)   | -12.29***<br>(1.49) | 0.00<br>(0.05)    |
| Low crime level                                   | 2.51***<br>(0.65)  | 21.70***<br>(1.96)  | -20.85***<br>(1.41) | 0.01<br>(0.04)    |
| Suburb locale                                     | 0.42<br>(0.38)     | 1.51<br>(1.15)      | -4.05***<br>(0.83)  | 0.00<br>(0.03)    |
| Town locale                                       | -0.01<br>(0.49)    | -12.95***<br>(1.49) | -2.10+<br>(1.07)    | 0.10**<br>(0.03)  |
| Rural locale                                      | 0.19<br>(0.44)     | -11.46***<br>(1.31) | -3.47***<br>(0.94)  | 0.08**<br>(0.03)  |
| Constant  | 90.95***<br>(0.64) | 49.68***<br>(1.93)  | 38.22***<br>(1.39)  | 0.42***<br>(0.04) |
| Observations                                      | 2,762              | 2,762               | 2,762               | 2,762             |
| R-squared   | 0.01               | 0.12                | 0.13                | 0.01              |

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.001, \*\* p&lt;0.01, \* p&lt;0.05, + p&lt;0.10

## APPENDIX C

| Table 3: Restorative Circles and Academic Achievement |                    |                    |                    |                   |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| VARIABLES   | Attendance         | Higher Education   | Standardized Tests | Suspension Rates  |
| Restorative Circles                                   | -0.45<br>(0.33)    | 1.38<br>(1.16)     | 4.12***<br>(0.85)  | -0.05*<br>(0.02)  |
| Teacher Training                                      | -0.38<br>(0.38)    | 3.04*<br>(1.32)    | -2.12*<br>(0.97)   | -0.05+<br>(0.03)  |
| Student SEL   | -0.32<br>(0.46)    | 4.32**<br>(1.59)   | 0.81<br>(1.16)     | -0.08*<br>(0.03)  |
| Sworn Law Enforcement                                 | -0.14<br>(0.32)    | -2.47*<br>(1.11)   | 0.75<br>(0.81)     | 0.05*<br>(0.02)   |
| Constant  | 93.94***<br>(0.49) | 57.19***<br>(1.70) | 17.24***<br>(1.24) | 0.66***<br>(0.04) |
| Observations  | 1,859              | 1,859              | 1,859              | 1,859             |
| R-squared   | 0.00               | 0.01               | 0.02               | 0.01              |

Standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, + p<0.10