

S.O.S... 'Save Our Students'

Community Leadership Lessons Towards Reimagining School Safety for Youth Health & Education Liberation

By

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ABSTRACT

A preliminary scoping review was undertaken to explore peer reviewed research and literature regarding the presence & effects of policing in K-12 schools. The institution of school policing created a pathway for youth to be criminalized on school grounds regularly. Research identified the use of policing quota systems, the stationing of school police in low-income black neighborhoods, & the intentional pushout of minority youth from education. Health effects for students experiencing policing in school range from physical, to mental, to emotional, to social; with childhood perspectives absent from research on school policing.

By relating public health models to the creation, implementation & sustainability of alternative solutions to policing, we can shift towards changing school community responses and promoting health equity for individual student education and schooling experiences. Community engaged alternatives to school policing lead to a healthier, equitable and more sustainable future for K-12 schools and youth served within them.

KEY WORDS

Youth-wellbeing, school policing, community health, criminalization, restorative justice

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
AFT	American Federation of Teachers
APHA	American Public Health Association
BLM-LA	Black Lives Matter - Los Angeles
CBPR	Community Based Participatory Research
CDC	Center for Disease Control and Prevention
CHCCS	Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools
CPS	Child Protective Services
GCC	Governor's Crime Commission
HHS	Health and Human Services
IEP	Individualized Education Program
LAUSD	Los Angeles Unified School District
LASPD	Los Angeles School Police Department
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, +
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCDPI	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
PJU	Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (Parents and Youth United)
PSL	Police School Liaison
SCHW	School Community Health Worker
S.O.S.	Saver Our Students or Save Our Schools
SRO	School Resource Officer
UNC	University of North Carolina
U.S.	United States
YEP	Youth Empowerment Program

INTRODUCTION

The sustained and increased ways in which youth are excluded from and denied their right to a free and fair public education throughout the United States is a growing humanitarian, youth and community health crisis. The origins of policing in schools are rooted within racist societal practices of policing to promote the exclusion of communities of color from social institutions. The current rise of school policing is largely attributed to the public safety response to combat a continued rise in gun violence¹ affecting our nation's school communities. After providing background on origins of school policing and exploring the context to which student-led community organizing engaged school reform efforts, this paper will work to explore the effects and health impacts associated with school policing and educational pushout experienced by minority youth. Pushout refers to punitive practices that schools use to exclude youth from their education through exclusionary discipline, fear-mongering or other harming practices; and often ultimately leads to an exodus of students from their schooling altogether. Two case studies in California and North Carolina, within the results section, will work to illuminate the similarities and differences of school policing including but not limited to availability of data, policing powers and tactics, and the experiences of youth policed in schools. By illuminating the vast presence of policing in K-12 education, one may find that while policing terminology may differ, youth experiences and impacts are consistent. To end, this paper will work to identify alternative solutions to policing that schools have or can utilize that are not associated with school pushout, negative student impact or worse community health outcomes.

As of 2019,² the majority of students in public K-12 schools across America are policed in hallways entrances and classrooms, but the effects of policing in schools have a much more disparate impact on the health and educational exclusion of minority youth. The increased presence of police in schools has led to higher black student suspension rates, billions of dollars in education funding diverted to law-enforcement departments, the institution of in-school youth criminalization,³ the erosion of protections for youth rights, and the increase of adverse health effects for minority students—including

¹ Gramlich, Pew Research Center, April 26, 2023

² U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019

³ Deanna N. Devlin and Denise C. Gottfredson, "Policing and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance, and Social Control*, 2018, 291–308, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71559-9_15

but not limited to increased levels of trauma and stress,⁴ the exposure to physical injury or violence,⁵ and the onset of mental health issues such as depression.⁶ Though information is limited regarding community health impact, a recent study showed youth adverse experiences with school policing also have secondhand effects on the anxiety, stress and sleeping abilities of mothers whose children are exposed to regular law enforcement interactions in their school environment.⁷

There is a growing public health and academic community understanding that there is a need for increased interdisciplinary and qualitative research on the effects of school policing on individual student and community health, outcomes associated with consistent adolescent exposure to policing, and the impact on youth who are criminalized for student behavior.⁸ However, there is also a growing need for community-led implementation of youth-approved alternatives to school policing so that experiences may be shared and researchers in education, youth criminal justice and public health may begin to identify restorative youth and community health benefits associated with alternative solutions in local school communities.

This preliminary scoping literature review examines current school policing practices and power, and the direct and indirect youth outcomes associated with school policing. The results will help to inform a discussion in which community-engaged alternative solutions in-line with protecting youth right to education and the health and well-being of students are recommended. As many solutions will be presented, it will be upon your community, along with currently enrolled and pushed-out students, to decide which public health informed recommendation may best fit the needs of your school community.

BACKGROUND

Origins & Evolution of Policing in Schools

School policing efforts were initially supported locally and state-wide with the intention of ‘protecting’ Public Schools from the looming threat of school desegregation. The LASPD (Los Angeles

⁴ Benjamin Perryman, “Crimmigration and Crossover Youth,” *Theorizing Local Migration Law and Governance*, September 22, 2022, 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009047661.002>

⁵ American Public Health Association. Addressing law enforcement violence as a public health issue. November 13, 2018.

⁶ Perryman, “Crimmigration and Crossover Youth,” 33-57

⁷ Dylan B. Jackson and Kristin Turney, “Sleep Problems among Mothers of Youth Stopped by the Police,” *Journal of Urban Health* 98, no. 2 (February 19, 2021): 163–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-021-00518-1>

⁸ Erika Gebo, “Intersectoral Violence Prevention: The Potential of Public Health–Criminal Justice Partnerships,” *Health Promotion International* 37, no. 3 (June 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daac062>

School Police Department) was the first school police department to be created in the country, back in 1948⁹ as a result of recent state-wide school desegregation legislation and mandates¹⁰. A school board member explained the impetus behind establishing the LASPD at the time as “to protect our schools and buildings from being damaged by the integration of [black, Latino & indigenous] youth.”¹¹

The first major distribution of federal funding to aid in continued educational desegregation efforts through the 1964 Civil Rights Act began the history of misplaced educational funding for communities¹². Rather than using funds to support restorative racial justice and peaceful integration, school boards across the nation funded efforts expanding school policing presence which initiated practices supporting the exclusion of minority youth in education through both punitive exclusionary discipline and the inception of in-school (or school-based) youth criminalization. In 1953, Flint, Michigan, formed an alternative to the LASPD with federal education funding with the program being called PSL, Police School Liaisons¹³. The impetus behind this program is also cited in school board meeting transcripts as, “a mechanism to reduce incoming school-based crime and to reach high school seniors who desire to become police officers.”¹⁴ So, while federal educational funding was being utilized by school districts across the nation, there were no stipulations regarding how this increase in educational funding allocation would be distributed. School districts seized the financial opportunity to divert education based funding towards school policing programs rather than to aid in school desegregation and student integration efforts.¹⁵ Eventually, by 1972, 91% of southern black children attended integrated schools.¹⁶ However, black students would not be entering the same schooling environments that white students benefitted from prior to desegregation. Rather, schools were increasingly becoming policed.

The second rise in federal and state funding towards policing in education was directed to aid in school gun violence prevention efforts. Within six months of the Florida Parkland High School shooting,

⁹ The People’s Plan & Police Free LaUSD Coalition: Safe Schools LA Report, 2022

¹⁰ Philippa Strum, *Mendez v. Westminster: School desegregation and Mexican-American rights* § (2010)

¹¹ LAUSD School Board Meeting Records, April 1948

¹² Sheila Bernard and Sarah Mondale, *School: The Story of American Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 130

¹³ Flint, Michigan State Archival Records, 1957

¹⁴ Genesee County School Board, Flint, MI, 1953

¹⁵ Ira M. Schwartz, “(In)Justice for Juveniles: Rethinking the Best Interests of the Child,” (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 29

¹⁶ Bernard & Mondale, “School,” 148

more than \$1 billion was added to school security budgets by state legislatures, with funding for school policing [predominantly titled School Resource Officers (SROs) across the nation] making up the majority of that allocation.¹⁷ The rise of re-directing education based funding towards the investment and deployment of school police is directly correlated to immediate governing responses after mass school shootings, yet the trend of school shootings has continued to rise annually¹⁸ and evidence shows school police are not associated with reducing risk of student injury or death.¹⁹

In 1975, only 1% of public schools contracted police, while in the 2019–20 school year over 51% of public schools employed at least 1 school police officer²⁰ and 85% of black students attend a school that is policed.²¹ The intentional deployment of police in racial minority communities is common, with evidence supporting historical and growing school police presence specifically within low-income black neighborhoods.²²

Historical data regarding youth impact associated with the origins of school policing is non-existent, therefore, we will look to the few studies containing contemporary data and evidence of individual and community impacts associated with current school policing presence and practices.

Whether or not policing in education funding increases were genuinely intended to promote school safety, these responses have been reactive, racist, and ineffective with recent research proving school police presence does not increase community safety or prevent student death from gun violence in comparison to schools that did not invest in an SRO.²³ Rather, the rise in school police presence and associated youth victimization has contributed to negative student health outcomes, increasing the prevalence of youth educational push-out, and beginning a pipeline of in-school youth criminalization.²⁴

¹⁷ ACLU, *Cops and No Counselors*, 2019

¹⁸ Luke J. Rapa et al., “School Shootings in the U.S.: 1997–2022,” *Pediatrics* 153, no. 4 (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2023-064311>

¹⁹ Jillian Peterson et. al., Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2021; 4(2):e2037394. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37394

²⁰ Damon Hewitt, Catherine Kim & Daniel Losen, *School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform* (New York University Press, 2010), 21

²¹ U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 2019

²² Terry Allen and Pedro Noguera, “A Web of Punishment: Examining Black Student Interactions with School Police in Los Angeles,” *Educational Researcher*, March 29, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x221095547>

²³ Lucy C. Sorensen et al., “The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-based Policing across the U.S.,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 42, no. 4 (July 4, 2023): 941–70, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22498>

²⁴ Devlin & Gottfredson, “Policing and the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” 291-308

Historical Youth-Led Educational Reform Movements: Crystal City & PJU

Throughout the origins of school policing and proliferation of youth pushout, community-engaged responses to re-integrate students back into educational environments reflect opportunities for youth to both reclaim permanent access to education rights and be supported in their schooling efforts.

In Texas, over 87% of Crystal City High School students in 1968 were Mexican American, many of them the children of farm workers. The high school principal and 75% of teachers were white, as were most school board members. Jose Angel Gutierrez, a student, said, “We were not allowed to speak Spanish. We would be given an option. Three days suspension or three licks with a paddle for speaking [Spanish].”²⁵ After graduating from Crystal City High, Jose stayed in Crystal City, where he helped students draw up a list of demands to the local school board. They demanded an end to exclusionary discipline or corporal punishment for speaking Spanish and they wanted administrators to create educational curriculum that acknowledged their lives as Mexican Americans. At the next Crystal City school board meeting, parents gathered in support but the school board president refused to listen and made a motion for adjournment. The next day, 500 students stayed out of school. Within a week, more than 2/3rds of Crystal City’s high school students were on strike. “Crystal City was not unique. There were over two hundred school walkouts across the nation, even in Los Angeles and other places”²⁶ said Gutierrez. Student protesters then shifted their attention to the upcoming school board election, to be held in April 1970. Throughout their organizing efforts, Mexican Americans were able to gain four of the seven seats (a majority) on Crystal City’s school board with Jose Angel Gutierrez, the recent Crystal City High School graduate, elected as school board president. In response, most white teachers and students left. But in the year after the takeover, 170 Mexican Americans who had dropped out returned to school.²⁷

The story of Crystal City, Gutierrez’s School Board Presidency and the youth-led, family and community-supported fight to reclaim their education can be replicated as a model for educational reclamation and liberation, now. The lessons include electing those who have been historically

²⁵ Bernard & Mondale, “School,” 149

²⁶ Ibid, 151

²⁷ Ibid, 157

unrepresented and culturally ignored to school boards, and helping to reintegrate students who have been educationally disenfranchised due to increased school police presence & punitive exclusionary discipline.



Figure 1. Source: Community Rights Campaign of the Labor/Community Strategy Center, October 2013

In the book, ‘A Match on Dry Grass’ Warren and Mapp spoke with former youth organizers of PJU, asking of the origins of their community organizing and educational transformation organization that has continued into their fourth decade of organizing for youth justice in the Denver, Colorado area.

“If you ask anyone familiar with Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (Parents and Youth United) how it got started, the answer will inevitably be in 1989 at Valverde Elementary, where a white principal punished Spanish-speaking children by making them eat their lunch while seated on the floor. Within a year, Latino parents had organized themselves as PJU and the principal was removed from the school.”²⁸

Getting rid of that principal was not the end of educational youth exploitation and racist practices in Suburban & Metro Denver Public Schools, but it was the beginning of a parent & student co-lead movement that would grow to change powers far beyond the effects of one administrator. The initiation of these coordinated efforts were rooted in collective community conversations and actions through sharing and learning the impact of inequalities and power structures within schools on student day-to-day lives. Through collective community conversations, more issues became identified and impacts were discussed and understood. Eventually, these conversations led to the creation of the North High School Survey.

In 2002, PJU parents and high-school-aged children developed a survey to see what students thought of Denver’s North High School and students began distributing it to peers who gathered along the 32nd street strip around the corner from North High during their lunch time. The 38% drop-out rate at North High School, served as a potent symbol of the historical failure of public education for Latinos. Dominant groups in Denver pushed to ban bilingual education, while Latinos remained largely excluded from decision-making in educational policy and practice. Though the survey was initially intended to gather general information regarding students' sense of safety, belonging, the school culture, climate and preparation for college; it also functioned as a way to help recruit other student members and families to PJU. Up until this point PJU had been largely led by parents, but eventually, young people took complete ownership of the process and designed a more informed and relevant survey.

“Reflecting on the results of the survey, youth organizer Julieta Quiñonez said she was most surprised by the testimonials in the surveys. She didn’t expect to read comments from so many students who compared North High to a prison. Julieta remembered doing political education sessions with PJU members in the mornings, and tallying/reading survey responses in the evening. Political education

²⁸ Mark Warren & Karen Mapp, “A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing for School Reform,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 116

trainings allowed her to move beyond anger and to deepen her analysis by zooming in on the situation at North High.”²⁹

In 2004, PJU youth leaders decided to write a report from the surveys, which yielded information that provided a substantial basis from which to discuss intuitions that individual students had felt about North High all along. “According to Luiz Rodriguez, a youth member at the time, being involved with the report writing helped him realize how ‘messed up’ things were at school, and motivated him to stay in school [in hopes of changing the system] rather than drop out.”³⁰

After establishing a list of recommendations for the school’s redesign and over half of the administration and staff (including teachers) in North High resigning due to student strikes, protests and demands; PJU’s youth workers, in 2006, redesigned their high school for future generations to come. They paved the way for the replacement of restorative justice over exclusionary discipline and policing in their school and the inclusion of culturally specific academic courses and electives for students. While their work should be recognized for what they did for North High’s community, the other part of their work was about empowering students and community members to dismantle systemic educational injustice and take agency in their own educational experience and environment—throughout the greater Denver area and across the US. And though their work was vital to changing educational conditions; it took four years, with no students who started the program left at the school to benefit from their work.

Padres y Jóvenes has since worked to promote alternative practices to policing in Denver Public Schools and surrounding school districts, defend bilingual education and provide in-state tuition for undocumented students to attend Colorado colleges and universities. PJU utilizes legal strategies and partnerships with other advocacy organizations to hold schools and districts accountable for discriminatory policies and practices. By mobilizing parents and youth, and building coalitions with other community organizations, PJU amplified its impact and continues to advocate for systemic change across multiple fronts. Overall, PJU's organizational efforts exemplify the power of youth grassroots organizing and community engagement in challenging inequities for transformative change in education.

²⁹ Ibid, 119

³⁰ Ibid, 122

Similarities of both historical youth-led educational reform movements include the intentional organizing and collective action of students to push for an education that is both reflective of practical student needs, and opportunities for the sustainability of continued school-based changes relevant to the desires of an ever-changing student body. Differences of both reform movements highlight differential mechanisms for instituting educational changes, with Crystal City working to establish a school board governing body representative of the student and community population and North High working to establish a sustainable community organized model towards continued collective action reflective of student voices and needs for school-based reform. Individual student communities should work towards identifying the plausibility of scalability and applicability of the aforementioned strategies within their specific school communities, though both reform efforts can feasibly be instituted in any community.

A student, Corky Gonzales, wrote a poem about his time working with PJU attending North High.³¹

Understanding PJU

*We face life together in sorrow,
anger, joy, faith and wishful
thoughts.
I shed the tears of anguish
as I see my children disappear
behind the shroud of mediocrity,
never to look back to remember me.
I am Joaquín.
I must fight
and win this struggle
for my sons, and they
must know from me
who I am.*

³¹ Ibid, 164

METHODS

A preliminary scoping review of the literature was conducted to explore recent evidence-based research during the past ten years (2014 to the present) on the topic of in-school policing in connection to student health impacts and outcomes. Databases included PubMed, ProQuest, Google Scholar & JMAEvidence. This review revealed only 10 peer-reviewed studies that were, in part, linked to the sought topic of examining current school policing practices and powers, tied to direct and indirect child health outcomes or youth impact associated with school policing. Due to the lack of peer reviewed evidence-based information regarding the impacts associated with school policing, this review filled gaps in the literature by including books from experts in education, youth justice, community organizing, and public health. This review also includes state archived school board information and finalized budgets, grey literature, articles, and other visual and published materials written in English and freely available to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Libraries.

Keywords used to search the literature included: School, youth, criminalization, school policing, zero-tolerance, race, community, public health, incarceration, education, reformation, organizing, liberation, abolition, restorative justice, safety, youth health.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of evidence are present within the lack of research on the impacts of school policing on individual student & community health outcomes. The majority of available identified research—10 peer reviewed studies—focus on direct individual student health effects instead of indirect, longitudinal or community health outcomes. Additionally, there is not enough research demonstrating community wide health effects, linking health outcomes to education push out, student experiences of school policing, and impacts of criminalization on children & families. Limitations are present within the restriction of research written in the English language, the potential for missing relevant studies inaccessible to UNC Chapel Hill's Libraries, and the impact of publication bias.

Limitations also include a lack of research on the effectiveness, quality, or health outcomes associated with alternative solutions to school policing, and roles necessary for facilitating educational reformation. Finally, the most pressing limitation in this study is the lack of qualitative research and student-centered data. Whether qualitative research is inhibited by IRB restrictions on studies with minors

or the lack of societal desire to include children’s perspectives on the conditions in which they are educated, the lack of student voices incorporated in research is a problem. Considering the limited amount of evidence-based research identified, future research could build upon these findings by working actively to research and include findings that mitigate these identified limitations.

RESULTS

Exposure & Effects of School Policing on Youth

The only available study working to identify whether or not school policing works as a valid response to student safety in the event of school shootings—classified as one or more students injured or killed by a firearm on school grounds—found that armed school police presence was not associated with significant reduction of student injury.³² Examining a total of 133 school shootings throughout the nation, researchers isolated and compared data from schools with and without armed police presence during a shooting event. Results showed that the rate of deaths was 2.83 times greater in schools with police present.³³ Surveillance videos from Uvalde, Texas show a similar pattern of policing being ineffective in protecting youth, but this study is the first and only of its kind to identify the adverse effects of policing in schools, debunking the reason for why police presence in schools has grown in recent years.

Studies show that schools with as little as one police officer in schools every week increases the likelihood of students becoming involved in the criminal justice system.³⁴ One longitudinal peer-reviewed study examined school-based police referrals of youth to the juvenile court system in 5 states between 1995 and 2004, to determine whether or not school staff were increasingly relying on school police when responding to student behavior. Researchers concluded that, “school police are continuing to defer a greater proportion of students overtime to the criminal justice system”.³⁵ Another study utilizing restricted data from the 2009-10 School Survey of Crime and Safety found “a police officer’s regular presence at a school is predictive of greater odds that school officials refer students to law enforcement for [behaviors]

³² Jillian Peterson et. al., Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021; 4(2):e2037394. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37394

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Erica O. Turner et. al., (2020). “Softening” school resource officers: The extension of police presence in schools in an era of Black Lives Matter, school shootings, and rising inequality. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(2), 221–240.

³⁵ Katie Dukes (2021). *The Prevalence of School Resource Officers in North Carolina's Public Schools*.

that school officials and teachers should handle themselves.”³⁶ Both studies represent a direct link between the rise of school policing and increased proportional rates of youth being pushed out of their education and criminalized for school behavior. This is because school policing presence results in more youth interactions with law enforcement. Behaviors and actions that do not require referral to law enforcement often get referred to law enforcement simply because police officers are present in schools.

Racial bias in school policing interactions is not the only reason for nationally disparate rates of black and brown youth experiencing school-based criminalization at the hands of school police officers. State maps throughout the country with accessible school policing data visualize the intentional deployment of police officers in schools in neighborhoods with higher populations of black children.

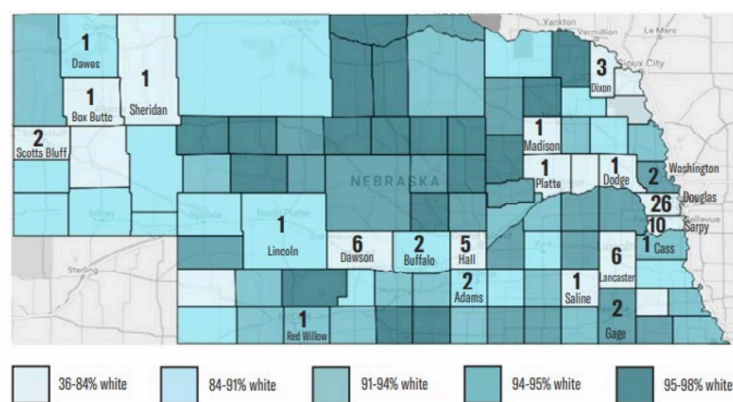


Figure 2. Source: ACLU, 2016. *Number is the amount of school police stationed in Nebraska Schools*

While school policing is currently present in 51% of K-12 schools, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 2019 reported 85% of Black students across the nation attend schools in which law enforcement officers are present, the highest percentage of students policed among all racial groups.³⁷

Zero-tolerance concepts began during the ‘war on drugs’ in the 1970’s, and eventually jumped the institutional line, with police themselves, from law and order to education. “At the state level, categories [for zero-tolerant behavior] were broadened to include alcohol, fighting, threats, swearing, dress codes [and hairstyles].”³⁸ A study estimated that only 10% of all school disciplinary exclusion cases were officially recorded, due to misreporting or non-reporting of figures to make schools look better.³⁹

³⁶ Jason Nance, *Rethinking Law Enforcement Officers in Schools*, 84 Geo. Wash. L. Rev. Arguendo 151 (2016)

³⁷ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019

³⁸ Brenda Morrison, *Restoring Safe School Communities: A Whole School Response to Violence & Alienation* (Sydney: Federation P., 2007), 57

³⁹ *Ibid*, 68

The use of truancy (absence) related charges amongst school police to exclude or criminalize youth from their education remains one of the most common reasons youth end up interacting with school police. “Family problems are the main reason children at the elementary level do not attend school. Even when children from violent homes do attend, they are often unable to concentrate. Often children either fake illness in order to stay home and “protect” the parent, or they may actually become [mentally or physically] sick from fear and worry.”⁴⁰

In a study on a school policing truancy intervention program, researchers identified both ineffectiveness of policing in reducing truancy, and the identification of a quota system associated with policing and criminalizing youth for non-violent behavior.

“Bazemore and associates evaluated a truancy intervention program initiated by the sheriff’s department with sheriff’s deputies and officers from a municipal police department taking students who were absent without an excuse to a central truancy unit, where they were processed and assessed by social service professionals to determine the need for follow-up and remedial programs.”⁴¹

Evaluation of the truancy intervention program revealed negative results correlated with policing intervention, proving youth with attendance problems who were not processed through the truancy center had better attendance rates overtime.

“The project [initially] began as a multiagency partnership with a broader focus than law enforcement, but the sheriff’s department staff eventually took the primary leadership, and the program moved away from a multi-dimensional model toward a crime-control model. Time spent with truant students, for example, was void of positive interaction beyond ‘just-the-facts’ questioning and warnings to sit still and be quiet. Officers did not seem to take much interest in understanding or supporting the services or the remedial education component of the program and spent very little time in informational interaction with the youth. Their primary motivation seemed to be to make as many truancy arrests as possible, exemplified by ‘sweep day.’ On the first Wednesday of the month the school resource officers presented a show of force and made large-scale pickups that resulted in four to five times more students processed. Sweep day resembled a quota system that supported a crime control approach to truancy.”⁴²

Bazemore’s truancy intervention program study illuminates many things, most importantly the identification of a quota system within school policing, at least in regard to truancy. The intervention also illuminated the program’s opposite from intended results and the force to which law enforcement took control of the intervention while simultaneously refusing to promote positive interaction or develop trust

⁴⁰ Sue Books, *Invisible Children in the Society and Its Schools* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 41

⁴¹ Richard Lawrence, *School Crime and Juvenile Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109

⁴² *Ibid*, 117

with youth. The results and processes of this intervention directly mirror powers and control law enforcement & school police exact over youth in public schools. While there was active record of a quota system implemented in the truancy intervention program, there is no public information available for whether school police continue to be financially incentivized through youth criminalizing quota systems.

The aforementioned policing practices in schools affect broader community relations by establishing a violent, punitive and criminalizing force within the lives of our nation's citizens from adolescence. These effects deteriorate individual student and school community trust in public institutions and work against public health missions of establishing broader social equity throughout institutions and our society as a whole. The following case studies work to identify specific community effects manifested through the differential and similar powers of violence that school police impart on school communities.

Case Study #1 Los Angeles, California

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has led the country in many achievements including being the 2nd largest school district in the nation. But, in the 2011-12 school year LAUSD led the country in a much more harrowing statistic; they led the country in reporting the largest school-based youth criminalization rate.⁴³ For over 75 years, LAUSD has worked to divert billions of dollars in education-based funding to the LASPD, with an additional \$82 million dollars allocated for the 23/24 school year.⁴⁴ As of 2020, the LASPD represents the 5th largest police department in Los Angeles County and the 14th largest in the state of California.⁴⁵

Negative student health effects are both directly and indirectly associated with school policing, with indirect practices relating to school board funding priorities. The Final Budget for the 2015/16 school year shows LAUSD spent 9.4 million on school nurses, 9.2 million on school psychologists and 5.7 million on psychiatric social workers across all 1000+ LAUSD public K-12 schools; amounting to a total of \$24.3 million spent on student health services. That same year, LAUSD spent \$59 million in policing, amounting to more than double the allocated spending for school health personnel & services.⁴⁶

⁴³ Black, Brown, and Over-Policed in L.A. Schools, 2013

⁴⁴ LAUSD Budget 2023/2024

⁴⁵ LASPD, 2020

⁴⁶ LAUSD Budget 2015/2016

In 2014, when California discovered that 43% of its suspensions in the 2012-2013 academic year were for willful defiance, the state became the nation's first to limit suspensions tied to this offense.⁴⁷ Willful defiance' (also known as 'disturbing the peace') is a widely used, subjective, and arbitrary category for student misbehavior that can include everything and has been shown to disproportionately be used in suspending black students.⁴⁸ It is an undefined, catchall category for school police to exclude students from receiving their education for failing to 'follow orders'. However, Despite increased California state protections for students, LAUSD's recently released disciplinary report for 2015-2016 shows the persistence of major racial disparities in arrests and expulsions. The single-student suspension rate for Black students (2.18%) was seven times that of white students (0.31%), and the per capita arrest rate for Black students (3.59 arrests per 1,000 students) was 17 times that of white students (0.44 arrests per 1,000 students).⁴⁹

Issues regarding the intentional underreporting and misreporting of LASPD officer presence has plagued LAUSD and its students. For example, LAUSD reported less than 220 school police to the federal government in the 2015-16 school year, while an ACLU of Southern California report found at least 378 LASPD officers were present in schools during the 2015-16 school year.⁵⁰

Further, California schools districts provide inadequate guidance to school staff on what they should do when police officers question students on campus. State-wide, less than 1% of schools provide that an adult (non-police officer) must be present to make sure a student's civil rights are observed during questioning. Only 1.3% of districts have a policy ensuring school police advise students of their constitutional right to remain silent. And an estimated 1/3 of districts do not require staff to keep any record of student-police interactions.

A 2023 study examining black student interactions with the LASPD concluded, "from the oral history interviews, we found two types of patterns with respect to how Black students experience [LASPD] school policing."⁵¹ The first pattern of LASPD policing was called identified as 'soft coercion'.

⁴⁷ ACLU Southern California, "Willful Defiance," ACLU of Southern California, September 28, 2014

⁴⁸ Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York: The New Press, 2018), 98

⁴⁹ LAUSD Disciplinary Report 2015/2016

⁵⁰ ACLU, *Cops and No Counselors*, 2019

⁵¹ Allen & Noguera, "A Web of Punishment"

“[Soft coercion] is experienced when Black students come into initial contact with school police officers in school and experience the full continuum of care, courtesy, and punitive social control, which are driven by preemptive criminalization by officers. [the second pattern was identified as] ‘shielding’, [which is] when Black students are referred to SPOs by teachers or other school personnel, which facilitates shifting the blame onto students and the denial of personhood and innocence through the *half continuum* of solely punitive policing by officers.”⁵²

‘Shielding’, as explained by the study, identifies the ease to which and culture promoting a deferring of all issues to the power of the present law enforcement; specifically amongst white teachers in regards towards black and brown students. James, a Black student who attended a South Central LAUSD school spoke of his supportive turned violent interaction with school police, which researchers Allen & Noguera identified as LASPD’s soft coercion strategies.

“After being late to school, I found myself in a whirlwind of dialogue with the police officer about structural racism, mental health resources, questions about my mother and siblings. I felt a sense of care in a [school] where there was little. However, this was all under the deficit guise that I was poor and from the hood and a criminal or soon to be one. Eventually I found myself face down on the floor, after being pushed to the ground by the officer for not wanting to engage in further conversation about my family. He hurt my arm, and a search of my home was conducted with a CPS [Child Protective Services] Investigation.”⁵³

Both ‘soft coercion’ and ‘shielding’ patterns exhibited by LASPD are harmful to youth, their education, their freedoms and their ability to remain in their families or communities in the case of CPS investigations, criminalization or incarceration. Studies that have qualitatively researched the experiences of youth interactions with LASPD are vital to understand the tactics of school police and understand the experienced ramifications of an over-resourced and under-reported presence within LAUSD schools; especially due to California’s juvenile detention holding laws. Originally introduced in 1995—the state of California does not collect data or record the amount of youth who have been arrested or criminalized if held for under a period of 6 hours.⁵⁴ The law was later updated to include an additional 12 hours for both juvenile court processing and release; meaning that youth can be held, arrested, charged and released within 30 hours without the need for LASPD or any other school based policing unit to report youth arrests in yearly published data.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Schwartz, “(In)Justice for Juveniles” 212

⁵⁵ California Rules of Court Rule 5.752

Case Study #2 Triangle Area, North Carolina

The ACLU’s Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools Report released in 2023 shows a harrowing picture of recently aggregated data and information on current educational policies throughout the state. Though North Carolina ranks 46th in per-pupil spending, “Over the past 7 years, North Carolina schools have devoted more than \$100,000,000 dollars to placing more police officers in more schools. According to 2015–2016 federal data, North Carolina ranks near the top nationally in terms of the presence of police officers in schools, but among the worst states in terms of school-based funding. [Additionally,] North Carolina recently ranked 42nd out of 50 states for overall youth mental health.”⁵⁶ The U.S. Department of Education recommends 1 nurse to 750 students⁵⁷ while in North Carolina, there is only 1 nurse per 1,578 students and nearly half of North Carolina public schools have no nurse at all.⁵⁸

In direct response to the Parkland, FL school shooting in February 2018, the NC General Assembly approved a \$35 million dollar education spending package that would increase the number of school police stationed in schools. Despite a lack of research on whether school police actually improve school safety—and newly published research showing policing’s adverse effects—, Governor Roy Cooper’s GCC (Governor’s Crime Commission) Special Committee on School Shootings recommended placing at least 1 school police officer in every K-12 public school across the state.⁵⁹ But, without NCDPI (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction) data on how many school police officers are stationed throughout NC schools, we are unable to see whether or not Governor Cooper’s GCC recommendations were fulfilled despite a lack of evidence suggesting school policing improves school safety.

One of the most utilized and concerning criminal laws associated with school-based arrests is N.C. Gen. Stat. § 14-288.4(a)(6), the ‘disorderly conduct in schools’ law⁶⁰. The law makes it a crime to “disrupt, disturb, or interfere with teaching,” or to “disturb the peace, order or discipline” at or around a school. By its own subjective terms, the ‘disorderly conduct in schools’ law allows for school police to make biased judgements in criminalizing youth. These vague laws like the disorderly conduct in schools

⁵⁶ ACLU NC, Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools, 2023

⁵⁷ CDC, Healthy People 2020 Mid-Course Review, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hpdata2020/HP2020MCR-B01-Introduction.pdf>

⁵⁸ ACLU NC, Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools, 2023

⁵⁹ North Carolina Governors Crime Commission, NC GCC Special Committee on School Shootings Recommendations, 2019

⁶⁰ NC General Assembly, 2013

—also referred to as “disturbing the peace” referenced in the previous Los Angeles case study—law gives school police full discretion to define when, and under what circumstances, normative childhood conduct becomes criminalizing behavior. From 2021 to 2023, law enforcement within North Carolina public schools referred Black students for disorderly conduct over 5 times the rate of white classmates.⁶¹

Recent issues between the Wake County school community and Wake County Police Department led to the drafting and finalizing of an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that was meant to keep youth safe from school hallway police interactions. But, due to the MOU being drafted by the Wake County Board of Education and the Wake County Police Department, both of whom do not stand to personally benefit from protections, there are extreme inadequacies in wording for youth protections. The Wake County Board of Education MOU governing police officers in schools states that “law enforcement and [school police] intervention should be limited to those incidents of student misconduct that present a threat to the school environment and are not more appropriately handled through referral to another resource (e.g., an administrator, school counselor, restorative justice-trained staff member).” But the MOU also states that police officers “may initiate appropriate law enforcement actions to address criminal matters, including matters that threaten the safety and security of the school . . . with or without a referral from school staff.”⁶² The limitations on police interventions are purposefully undefined meaning Wake County youth are not currently protected through their MOU. A recent ACLU legal case regarding MOU’s, described below, came from North Carolina’s Wilmington Public school district.

“A [6-year-old] first grader with an IEP [(Individualized Education Program)] was handcuffed by a sheriff’s deputy after running out of the cafeteria during lunchtime and refusing to go back to class. When asked whether the officer’s actions were consistent with school board policies concerning the use of restraints on young children, a spokesperson for the New Hanover County Sheriff’s Office explained that police officers in schools ‘are not beholden to school district policies’ and that there were ‘no guidelines’ specifying when it would be appropriate for officers to use handcuffs on elementary school students.”⁶³

Evidence from the Center for Children’s Law and Policy shows more than one-third of detained youth report school police had used unnecessary force in their interactions with them. Half of students reported that they were punished ‘without cause’.⁶⁴ Students with disabilities also face hugely

⁶¹ ACLU NC, Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools

⁶² Wake County Public School System, 2023

⁶³ ACLU NC, Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools

⁶⁴ Morris, “Pushout,” 111

disproportionate amounts of physical punishment in schools, accounting for over 67% of all students placed in seclusion, involuntary confinement, or physical restraint in-school.⁶⁵

Efforts have been made to monitor and report disproportionate impacts of school policing, but unfortunately NCDPI requires no checks or balances to ensure county sheriff's properly report data on the amount of school police, proportion of youth experiencing exclusionary discipline or in-school criminalization rates. School policing data in Durham County is not only contradictory and difficult to understand, but mainly remains unreported. Meanwhile, the only data available from Wake County shows alarmingly high rates of black and disabled student suspensions. Per every 100 disabled students, an average of 125 days of school per year were lost due to suspensions. Black girls in Wake County were reported to school police 8 times more than white female peers.⁶⁶

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice reported that in Orange County Schools, throughout the 2017-2022 school years, black students remained the only youth to be 'referred to law enforcement' in Orange County public schools. Further, Orange County is 1 of the 19 counties in North Carolina that refuse to publish any data on the hiring, retention and expansion of school policing units. This lack of data collection is left to the discretion or desire of county sheriffs, which has led to the increasing lack of visibility of policing's impact on student health, education experiences, and youth justice. Criminalization information is also scarce. In the 'Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools' (CHCCS) District, school policing exists but no youth criminalization data is publicly available, and data on student law enforcement interaction is only recorded as 'interactions.' That being said, a school board meeting in 2022 recorded, "Black students are...10 to 11 percent of our district [in the 2021-22 school year], but were [representing] 39 percent of [school law enforcement] interactions and Latinx students were [representing] 17 percent."⁶⁷ The separation of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro School District from the larger county public school district complicates unchecked data, not allowing us to understand whether the same practices of only criminalizing black youth exist in both school districts, how many police officers are stationed in schools throughout NC's Orange County, or student health impacts correlated with policing.

⁶⁵ Cecelia Scheuer et al., "Impacts of Youth Criminalization." *Reimagining School Safety: A Look at the Dangers Posed to Students by Law Enforcement and How to Invest in Real Safety for Our Children*. Institute for Policy Studies, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27072.6>.

⁶⁶ ACLU NC, *Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools*

⁶⁷ Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools District Board Meeting, June 2022

Health Impacts of School Policing & School Pushout

The first and most comprehensive study identifying depression related symptoms amongst black students, worked to compare the experiences of students who were (1) not exposed to school policing, (2) exposed to non police school discipline, (3) exposed to school policing & non police school discipline, and (4) criminalized by police in school. Findings showed that compared to the non exposed group of students, each other group identified as having lower school attachment. Additionally, each group of students had incremental increase in average depressive symptom rates with the criminalized group of students reporting highest levels of depression.⁶⁸

In another study aimed at understanding both individual youth and community health impacts of policing, findings identified youth who were exposed to police stops reported more sleep problems than youth who have not been stopped by police. Further research into the familial health effects of childhood interactions with police revealed that 13.17% of mothers who's children who were not exposed to police stops report depressive-related sleeping difficulties, whereas more than double (28.69%) of mothers who's children were stopped by the police reported depressive-related sleep difficulties.⁶⁹ This study is getting closer to a humanistic and community centered approach to identifying health effects of current policing systems on kids and their families. The inclusion of 2nd hand health effects of school based and youth policing helps to illuminate why community organized engagement is not only important, but a direct response to outcomes affecting both individuals first hand, 2nd hand, and entire community health.

Links between education and health are well-established, but the explicit impacts of the association and ways to which poor health manifests for folks who lack education are not well understood. Research identifying two associations of education and health—a sense of personal control, and social support—found the completion of high school education was associated with an increased sense of personal control and that those who receive more education are more likely to have social networks that encourage preventative behavior as opposed to those with less history of education; such as getting annual physical exams, immunizations and screening for possible health concerns.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Perryman, 2022

⁶⁹ Jackson, 2021

⁷⁰ Catherine Ross & John Mirowsky. "The sense of personal control: Social structural causes and emotional consequences." In C. S. Aneshensel, J. C. Phelan, & A. Bierman (Eds.), *Handbook of the sociology of mental health* (2nd ed., pp. 379–402). Springer Science + Business Media, 1995

In 2018, the American Public Health Association (APHA) released a report and call to action concerning the pressing need to address police violence against communities of color as a public health issue. The public health report details ethnographic research indicating youth policing interactions alter key developmental processes among black boys. “While interventions for improving policing quality to reduce violence (e.g., community-oriented policing, training, body/dashboard-mounted cameras, and conducted electrical weapons) have been implemented, empirical evidence suggests notable limitations. Importantly, these approaches also lack an upstream, primary prevention public health frame.”⁷¹ The APHA’s findings suggest that reformation to policing practices, presence and powers are not enough to offset the historical and current impacts on the health of communities. Abolition may be the only solution.

The cumulative impact of school policing on students and community is not well defined, but we may use the prior studies to identify the myriad of ways in which policing exacts negative influence on student wellbeing. These systemic health issues resulting from school policing have largely been driven by a fear-based response, both in the origins of school policing against minority youth and the rise in school policing against gun violence.

Folks will benefit from discussing alternative solutions to policing in schools that work to both mitigate current health effects youth and entire communities experience as a result of school policing, and identify practices that will not increase the prevalence or rise of systemic health issues amongst students.

DISCUSSION

Student & Community Perspectives on School Policing

According to a recent EdWeek Research Center Survey for K-12 Educators, less than 25% of teachers agreed that the presence of police at their schools make them feel safer in their work. Alternatively, over 50% of teachers recommended the need for more mental health counselors to work with students on needs and behaviors.⁷²

In an interview from 1999, John Bujaci, a 16 year old student at Columbine School in Littleton, CO said, “I think it would be better if, instead of sending 500 media people when something bad happens,

⁷¹ APHA, “Addressing law enforcement violence as a public health issue,” 2019

⁷² Wendy Gomez, “Abolishing School Resource Officers Amidst the Black Lives Matter Movement: A History and Case Study in Oakland and Los Angeles,” *Princeton University Journal of Public & Internal Affairs*, 2021

they sent in 500 psychologists and people who are there to help you... I feel that if we all get the message to look after the people who don't get that much attention, then maybe this won't happen again."⁷³

In June of 2020, Students Deserve and BLM-LA (Black Lives Matter - LA) launched a survey to get student opinions on defunding school police. Within a week, over 5,000 current & former LAUSD students responded. Over 86% of survey respondents wanted LA School Police defunded, including 88% of current LAUSD Black student respondents. The survey revealed that Black students were three times as likely to report being followed by school police, four times as likely to report being racially profiled, three times as likely to report experiencing use of force and twice as likely to report being removed from class by school police as white students. In addition, 85% of current and former students who had interactions with school police reported them as negative, including experiences like being followed, questioned, belittled, racially profiled, randomly searched, sexually harassed, and more.⁷⁴ The results of the report also show a huge desire for the Los Angeles School Police Department funds, once the department is eventually abolished, to be redistributed back into educational funding. Specifically, when students were given the choice of up to three funding changes; the majority of LAUSD student responses were for psychiatric social workers, smaller class sizes, curriculum changes and counseling.⁷⁵

In a recent article written by a former Washington D.C. school police officer, Douglas explains how working as an SRO, he found it difficult to understand how his role was going to promote preventative safety or reduce violence in schools. He explains how many of his fellow school police officers were not properly trained to interact with youth, and how the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) which represents 1.7 million educators, are actively calling for the removal of police from K-12 schools. He ends his plea by stating, "Let's [begin to] do what is best for the youth. Let's save our children from the pepper spray, the body slams, and the tasers. Let's keep police out of schools."⁷⁶

⁷³ William Pollack & Todd Shuster, *Real Boys' Voices* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 189

⁷⁴ Barrows et. al., Haywood Burns Institute, Youth Justice Reimagined Report, 2020

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Evan Douglas, "As a Former Cop, I Know We Need Police-Free Schools." Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-as-a-former-cop-i-know-we-need-police-free-schools/2022/02>. February, 2022

Informed perspectives of all three mentioned school partners involved in current K-12 education and school policing—students, teachers, and a former school police officer—agree that there is a need for increased health services over the current presence or continued expansion of school police officers.

Alternatives to School Policing

School community programs led by formerly incarcerated individuals in education are typically the most effective in preventing violence, creating peace, and supporting youth. The ‘Youth Justice Reimagined Report’ developed a comprehensive plan to shift LAUSD away from LASPD school policing practices to move towards a healing centered specific role for school ‘Credible Messengers’. The report details a Credible Messenger as a community member, youth-health worker, or school counselor who has been incarcerated at some point and has experienced the justice system directly.⁷⁷ The development and institution of credible messenger roles within schools supports public health community engagement principles of including those affected by a system into the intentional community engaged re-designing efforts of the future system.

The ‘Youth Justice Reimagined Report’ also created a figure detailing how current school based policing funding could be placed back to youth services on school grounds as free after-school programs.

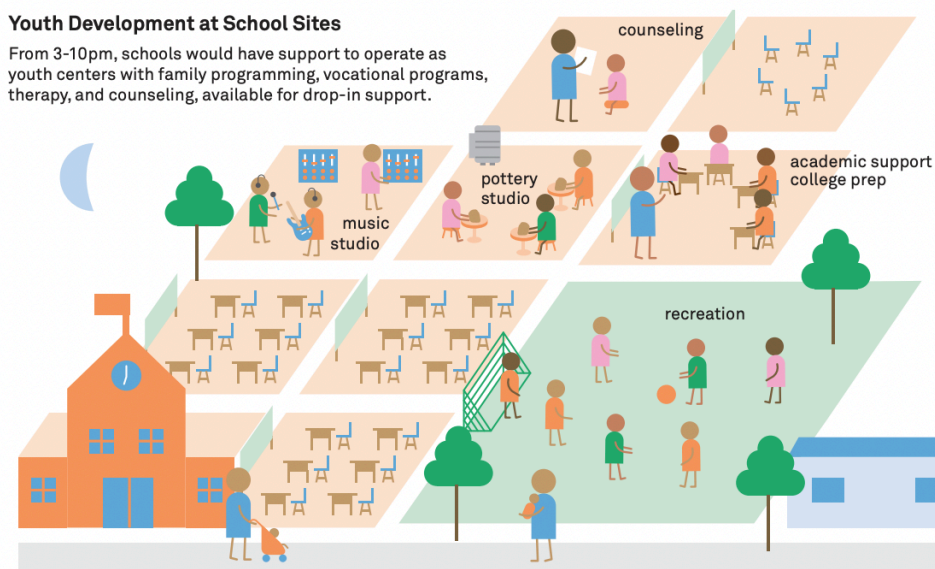


Figure 3. Source: Youth Justice Reimagined Report, W. Haywood Burns Institute, October 2020

⁷⁷ Barrows et. al., Youth Justice Reimagined

Another powerful community-led alternative practice to school policing comes from an elder-volunteer program in a Los Angeles high school. Community volunteers altogether replaced LASPD presence in the school by hiring grandparents to monitor school hallways and provide resources for students. “Not only did elders help to tutor students, but I witnessed these grandmothers also serve as enforcers of school rules when young people got out of line. Elders were respected as authority figures by the school, and when they intervened, they did so with love.”⁷⁸

Restorative justice is the process to which individuals involved in an incident are brought together to repair their relationship. With roots from indigenous paradigms of justice in the United States, New Zealand, and other native cultures; restorative justice provides a socio-emotional healing structure by which schools can change negative student behaviors to build senses of accountability & community. By bringing the affected community together, the aim is to develop a common understanding of what happened, who was affected and how, and what needs to happen to collectively address the harm caused. Researchers in 2001 were the first to publish a study on restorative justice conferences as a mechanism by which the negative emotions associated with conflict could be transformed into the positive emotions associated with cooperation.⁷⁹ Giving kids a chance to apologize to those who they have wronged, and in turn the opportunity for other kids to forgive, is vital to give both parties closure; healing for the victim and perpetrator with an opportunity to move on, unhurt, with lessons & a community of support. These practices would best be facilitated by a trusted school staff member, but does not necessarily require any additional funding or personnel. First steps include change detention rooms to ‘peer mediation rooms’ and/or rooms dedicated for restorative justice ‘circles’. Circles (or circling) is a specific form of restorative justice, where individuals can develop an open, honest, and respectful dialogue to acknowledge how an incident has affected them, allowing each participant to speak their feelings and take initiative for how best to repair harm done.⁸⁰ In circles, a talking stick is a communication tool designed to help the group (circle) acknowledge the person who is currently speaking. The object controls the environment so that only one person is speaking at a time. Meanwhile, all others in the circle will listen.

⁷⁸ Morris, “Pushout,” 210

⁷⁹ Jesse McDonald & Diane Moore, “Community Conferencing as a Special Case of Conflict Transformation,” in H. Strang and J. Braithwaite *Restorative justice and Civil Society*, Cambridge University Press, 2001

⁸⁰ Morrison, “Restoring Safe School Communities,” 122

These circles are called a range of things, from community group counseling, restorative circles, councils, circular mediation, roundtables, or life-skills circles.

Questions to be asked while implementing, facilitating or practicing Restorative Justice Circles include:

1. Who has been hurt?
2. What are their needs?
3. Whose obligations are these?

Research on the use of school restorative justice practices shows a reduction in suspension, to avert expulsions, to resolve conflict between students, and to increase student socio-emotional skillsets.⁸¹ Restorative justice is completely qualitative, meaning we must ensure it is facilitated by folks who are trained, comfortable and genuinely invested in working to facilitate circles for youth and entire school communities. Facilitation is not a means for control, and the qualitative nature of restorative justice practices will be compromised if whoever is ‘in charge’ feels the need to control. Students would likely benefit from these circles being facilitated by school psychologists, community health workers, social workers, school counselors, creative leaders, meditation teachers, and other trusted local community members with expertise in working with youth and developing socio-emotional responses.

A positive school model utilizing restorative justice practices linked to youth community health needs was described by Professor Greene, a Professor of Government at UNC Chapel Hill who specializes both in youth justice and legal rights. During her work fighting for the enactment of ‘Raise the Age’ laws in both North Carolina and New York—the last two states to establish legislation raising the age of adult criminal prosecution to 18 rather than 14 and 15—she had the privilege of witnessing restorative justice work in action. After having eliminated school policing practices from their district, a public K-12 school, in Schenectady NY, recently changed their ISS (In-School-Suspension) room, otherwise known as ‘detention’, to a ‘peace’ room with rotating staff dedicated to implementing restorative justice and facilitating youth-led circles. They also hired a full-time youth-family engagement specialist who supported youth by focusing on the needs of students with long-term suspensions, meeting with kids at school or with families at their homes, held meetings for youth called ‘what do you need’ sessions, brought students directly to necessary social services, and helped to build a food pantry in her office. “There was so much success in [the restorative justice] work, but it will be hard to convince some communities of the need for these roles given the current lack of school support staff available within

⁸¹ Morris, “Pushout,” 229

schools. It should be someone’s job within a school environment to speak with students, identify needs, and connect them to local services available.”⁸²

Greene also described how peer-reviewed research explains the need to use objective tools to identify students who are struggling in school—whether due to health, personal, family, other concerns—. “If you don’t use objective tools to identify which kids are struggling, some may fall through the cracks due to racial bias or the exhibiting of different behaviors [that don’t traditionally suggest a child is struggling].” To combat both the lack of readily available mental health screening and educator biases that may lead to missing students in need, Greene recommends the ‘check-in, check-mark’ system. Having identified the successful implementation and results of the program at another school, Greene explained how the ‘check-in, check-mark’ system works.

“The process begins with school staff writing down the names of all school students on a white board in a non-publicly visible area within the teachers lounge. If a member of the school staff had a ‘real’ conversation within the week with a certain student, they will place a check-mark next to that child’s name. The [‘check-in, check-mark’] process helps create a bridge in expanding efforts to talk with kids and will illuminate what children have been missed. Within a span of weeks, the simple work of making an effort to talk to kids [who were previously ‘missed’] can do so much to improve the health of an individual students experience, and in turn the health of the school community. But, first, school staff [even in current understaffed and low-paying conditions] must be willing to admit they are not perfect and have been ‘missing’ kids”.⁸³

The ‘check-in, check-mark’ system has the potential to seriously increase overall school community health, along with increase individual student-staff connections for the betterment of student health. This being said, research across the fields of education and public health must be dedicated to understanding the direct health implications and plausible student benefits of the ‘check-in, check-mark’ system so that educational leaders may advocate for the inclusion of a robust system supported by increased school staff or community health workers.

The final, and possibly most comprehensive, school-based alternative practice identified exists in Commerce City, Colorado and has been implemented in all 13 schools throughout the county’s Adam’s 14th District. Not far from where PJU’s North High community organizers began their work is the Adams 14th School District, serving a majority hispanic and low-income community, run by superintendent

⁸² Greene, February 2024

⁸³ Ibid

Karla Loría⁸⁴. In 2020, Ms. Loría decided to end the school district’s contract with the Commerce City Police Department citing, “abusive reactions to students” and “authoritarian disrespect to school staff.”⁸⁵ Desiring both to protect her students from violence and the threat of educational exclusion or criminalization, Loría also saved over \$500,000 of yearly education funds to be diverted into alternative programs aimed at finding different ways to support student needs, opportunities to learn from mistakes, and reducing increased rates of youth criminalization in the community.⁸⁶ In response to the school police divestment, the former (white) Commerce City Police Chief disturbed the next Adams 14th school board meeting explaining, “after 30 minutes being in a kindergarten class, he could tell which students were going to be in jail.”⁸⁷ While school-based criminalization data is inaccessible throughout the state of Colorado, an analysis of school-based law enforcement referrals for the 2022/23 school year found that since terminating the school police contract, only 9 students had been referred to law enforcement. In comparison, the neighboring school district—Brighton 27J, which continues to be policed by Commerce City PD—referred 330 students to police during the 22/23 school year. Though the Brighton 27J school district serves three times the amount of students, the rate at which students were referred to police in school throughout the district was 36 times more than in Adams 14th School District. Confident she had made the right decision to end the school police program, Loría immediately diverted some of the former school policing funding into un-armed security at the gates of all schools. But, the school district also implemented a restorative justice program called the ‘Youth Empowerment Program’ or YEP. Led by Alexander Landau, a former student victim of police brutality & wrongful criminalization, the program serves students referred by school staff due to behavioral concerns and students who desire to take a ‘brain-break’ for up to 30 minutes during the school day. Leading students in group and 1-on-1 conversations, self-defense classes, community gardening workshops and other engaging activities⁸⁸, the Youth Empowerment Program has been essential in providing health services to students of Adams 14th and restoring justice to the school environment, replacing former school policing harms. Though we

⁸⁴ Colorado Department of Education, 2021

⁸⁵ Commerce City Colorado School Board Meeting Notes, 2022

⁸⁶ Kati Weis, "Adams 14th SROs or Alternatives," 2023

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Denver Justice Project, 2021

would benefit from further research into the effectiveness and health outcomes associated with the YEP program for Adams 14 students, dropout rates are going down & graduation rates have already improved from 63.3% to 67% in the three years since the YEP program replaced policing in Adams 14th schools.⁸⁹

Aside from the benefits of the aforementioned alternative solutions, removing the institution of school policing could lead to improved youth health outcomes, reduce disparities—in youth pushout, exclusionary discipline and criminalization—, increase available funding to be redirected towards community engagement efforts, and work towards establishing a more equitable learning environment.

Utilizing Public Health Informed Models & Frameworks for Community-Engagement

One of the most popular frameworks for community engagement in public health is known as Community Based Participatory Research (or CBPR). CBPR works to establish an equitable approach to research, ensuring community members and researchers across a variety of fields can advance the need for improved intervention research approaches and strengthen the network of community engagement to address community health needs.⁹⁰ All of the formerly mentioned alternative practice recommendations utilize some form of CBPR, working to advance health in school environments and the lives of students.

The CDC recommends a multitude of strategies for implementing health equity through community engagement in a variety of fields and institutions.⁹¹ Strategies that would best be utilized within education based settings, to encourage the restoration of justice include:

1. Understanding Historical Context Before Developing Engagement Strategy
 2. Building Community Relationships from the Onset
 3. Assessing and Addressing Barriers to Community Participation
 4. Valuing Both Technical and Community Expertise
- & 5. Building and Supporting Community Capacity to Act.

Specific action points aimed at assisting community members on visualizing how these strategies could be practically applied include; assembling a Community Advisory Board consisting of school community leaders to develop a document describing the historical context of their community,

⁸⁹ Colorado Department of Education, 2023

⁹⁰ NIH, 2024; CDC, 2018

⁹¹ CDC, 2021

promoting the accessibility of community engagement through physical or virtual forms, and directing funds to community members using their hearts & time to share personal information and make change.

While these strategies may look different for each school community, there are many similar historical contexts, barriers towards community participation and ways to support community-led action.

Engaging the public health ‘social-ecological model’, we are able to understand that traditional education reform is not the sole goal. Rather, pursuing institutional school change represents a means of empowering communities to establish youth leadership to engage alternative forms of violence prevention. It is by working at all three levels—the individual (you, me or them), the community (local or national), and the institutional (systems, establishments & governing powers)—that organizing can develop relational power to create transformational progress, ultimately impacting education systems.

THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

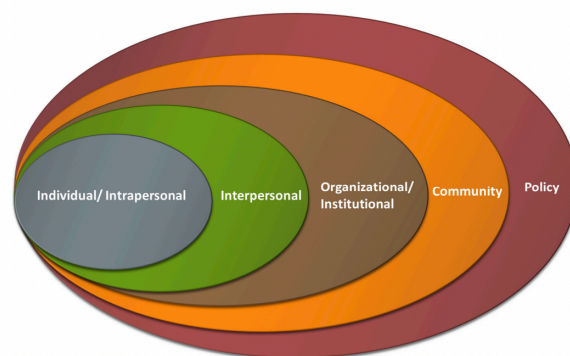


Figure 4. Source: HHS Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2015. Adapted from McLeroy et. al., (1988).

Continuous engagement for the implementation of school change at each level of the social ecological model—beginning with the individual—can work to establish overall impact on policies relating to policing and positively impact student health outcomes.

The majority of progress in instituting alternative practices to school policing, no-matter the findings or outcome, will increase practices allowing students to be involved in establishing policies and determining discipline; otherwise known as ‘humanistic’ youth policy creation. Research indicates humanistic policies appear to be more effective than coercive ones.⁹²

In order for Community-engaged alternative practices to be instituted within schools, a shift in power must be acknowledged and intentionally woven in to changes. Unfortunately, the conceptual tools

⁹² Lawrence, “School Crime and Juvenile Justice,” 279-281

we can use to explain and identify the different kinds of power that groups can build are scarce, even in the field of public health. Hierarchical responses understand power as the ability to exert influence on others, like the powers enacted by police upon students through policing presence in schools. Policing in schools resemble a power that can be understood as unilateral power or power ‘over’ students. So while it is helpful to understand the types of power, community-engaged school reformation organizing groups can also try to build a different kind of power, one that can be understood as relational or network based.⁹³ Given the importance of relationships to school reform, this kind of power is particularly critical to improving equity and promoting leadership practices in organizing for in education reform practices. If unilateral power involves power ‘over,’ relational power emphasizes power ‘with’ others, or building power to accomplish common aims. Unilateral power is a zero-sum, but relational power represents a win-win situation. Relational power requires mutuality, a degree of reciprocal influence, and an exchange of views and interests. Research of network based relational power in institutions is scarce, but one study from a network based health care study for cancer patients found benefits are associated both with individual patient health outcomes and to systems change of traditional institutional practices.⁹⁴

Shifting from a unilateral to a relational power model in schools could lead to more positive daily interactions, change the prevalence and use of punitive exclusionary disciplinary practices, and improve overall school culture. Public health informed practices recommend folks learning and teaching in schools to use relational power to promote equitable, informed changes on how our schools can operate for the well-being of youth and community health.⁹⁵

Recommendations for School-Community Health & Education Restoration

Schools and educational environments often reflect broader societal practices and inequalities. By transforming school policing practices into alternative—non-violent, non-exclusionary, non-criminalizing and non-carceral—solutions, schools could act as a lever for instituting broader societal change. This is especially important seeing as how these are the current conditions to which our youth, and future leaders are learning and growing within.

⁹³ Karl, 2023

⁹⁴ Scott, 2007

⁹⁵ Russell et. Al., 2008

Recommended Next Steps for...

- Federal & State Education Policy Makers
 - Redirect funding previously distributed for school policing to the implementation of health resources and personnel in schools. Health funding should also be explicitly tied to supporting student-led and cross-collaborative educational community engagement initiatives with the education community partners mentioned below.
- Researchers & Public Health Professionals
 - Begin to research, evaluate and disseminate information relating to community impacts and youth health outcomes of alternative solutions to school policing in school districts or individual schools. Prioritize longitudinal studies, alternatives that include the cross-collaboration of school community partners, and research identifying the intersectionality of impacts & outcomes for marginalized youth.
- Local School Board Members
 - Abolish school policing programs and reinvest funds into school-based or co-located youth health services—nurses, psychologists, social workers, community health workers—, support staff, youth engagement programs, self-defense classes and if desired by community, security monitoring outside school grounds. Develop and support the efforts of a Community Advisory Board (CAB) comprised of a 3:1 ratio of students and teachers to support the implementation and updating of school policies.
- Teachers & School Staff
 - Teach and attend trainings on alternative, non-violent, punitive or exclusionary disciplinary practices. Facilitate restorative justice circles in your classrooms utilizing advice from the discussion section & begin instituting the previously mentioned ‘check-in/check-mark’ system for students in your school. The Topa Institute⁹⁶ and InsightLA⁹⁷ provide specific in-person or virtual guidance and training for educators desiring to incorporate ‘circles’ or ‘councils’ into your classroom for your students.

⁹⁶ Topa Institute, 2024, <https://topa.institute/>

⁹⁷ InsightLA, 2023, <https://insightla.org/insight-in-schools/>

- Parents
 - Host community listening sessions in schools or homes, allow for folks to individually go around to identify the shared experiences, needs and desires your children express for their school communities.
- Community Organizers
 - Immediately work with communities to establish short-term MOU's between school districts and police departments providing explicit safeguards for students, while pushing for long-term abolition of school policing. Short-term MOU's should explicitly state limits on youth-police interactions including but not limited to ending in-school youth criminalization, requirements for police training on peaceful youth interaction, data transparency regarding school police presence, youth interactions, allocation of funds, in-school criminalization rates & criminalized student demographics. Community organizers would also benefit from identifying a spectrum of community leaders within your local school community to build organizational infrastructure and establish educational reformation action.
- Local Artists
 - Establish a mural project with your local schools and youth communities. Include both current K-12 students and former K-12 students excluded from education due to school policing in the project. Develop a community vision, supply students with lessons and tools, and begin creating in tandem. Integrate educational elements into mural projects, including but not limited to themes of restorative justice, community rebuilding, collective action, youth resilience, and community or self-love.
- Current K-12 Students
 - You are recommended to protect your physical, mental, social, emotional and long-term health by building and maintaining sustainable relationships with fellow peers, mentors in your school or community, and seeking available help when needed. Push to start a youth justice club or program within your school to gather, support and use your voices for change. Identify youth organizing movements throughout history with reclamation goals similar to what is desired amongst your peers and school community; and adapt them to your abilities and needs. Finally, below is a list of means for how individual youth or youth organizing groups can work to initiate positive collective action.

How Students can Raise Awareness and Bring About Change

- Formal Statements
 - A. Public Speeches
 - B. Letters of opposition or support
 - C. Declarations by organizations or institutions
 - D. Signed public statements or mass petitions
- Communications with Wider Audience
 - E. Slogans & Symbols
 - F. Banners, posters and digital communications
 - G. Leaflets, pamphlets, zines and books
 - H. Newspapers and journals
 - I. Records, radio, television
 - J. Earth-writing (chalk, rocks, etc)
- Group Representations
 - K. Protests
 - L. Picketing
 - M. Camouflaged Meetings of Protest (in school board meeting)
 - N. Teach-ins
- Symbolic Public Acts
 - O. Wearing of symbols (S.O.S. ‘Save our Students’ or ‘Save our Schools’ pins)
 - P. Displays of flags, symbolic colors, or portraits of former leaders
 - Q. Paint as protest
 - R. Symbolic chants
 - S. Singing Songs (of liberation)
 - T. Pilgrimages (journey from school to cemetery or juvenile jail)
 - U. Non-violent Occupation/Stay-in (sleeping in schools until change is made)
- Symbolic Public Acts
 - V. Pressures on Individuals (school board members)
 - W. Public Vigils
- Withdrawal & Renunciation
 - X. School Walk-outs or Student Strike
 - Y. Day of Silence
 - Z. Renouncing School-Based Honors⁹⁸

⁹⁸ John-Paul Flintoff, *How to Change the World* (New York: Picador, 2013), 120

In order to promote cross-collaboration and remove folks from ineffective independent group silos, school community partners are also recommended to work in tandem. Public health researchers can work with school boards to evaluate the effectiveness and health outcomes associated with alternative solutions. Students and community organizers can work together to establish a set of school specific action plans responding to youth needs. Local artists and students can collaborate on projects that educate and liberate.



Figure 5. Source: Durham Civil Rights & Education History Mural, Holmes, 2015. *Featuring Artists*

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Although I have mentioned a few community-based alternative roles to school policing—credible messengers, youth family engagement specialists, and restorative justice facilitators to name a few—it would be ideal for school districts to develop roles to hire a school public health worker who would be able to establish restorative justice practices including student check-ins, circles, and facilitating relationships with youth-based community organizations serving as co-located mental health services and other after-school programming for youth. With 13,187 public school districts in the nation; there is the possibility to hire a role I have titled ‘school community health worker’ (or SCHW) or whatever title would best fit the needs of your community. Similar to the ‘youth family engagement specialist’ mentioned earlier by Professor Greene, SCHW’s would be placed in every school district, tasked with working in tandem with students, hearing their needs and facilitating student access to social services, after-school programs, food pantries, healthcare & affinity groups within local community based on need.

If we hired ‘school community health workers’ at the average salary of public teachers throughout the nation, costs would be under 1 billion (\$857,155,000 to be exact) which is just under 1% of the current 23/24 school year’s 85.8 billion federal budget.⁹⁹ Based on salary data, it is estimated that we spent between 2.12-2.34 billion, of education dollars, in the 22/23 school year on school police or SROs.¹⁰⁰ We have already invested billions of dollars over the past century into school policing programs, which has not been effective in promoting school safety and has had a variety of negative health impacts including education exclusion and criminalizing outcomes for youth. By spending less than half of what we have designated for school police funding, we could ensure needs are being prioritized for student health. The implementation of a SCHW role in schools would not just impact individual student wellbeing or school health, but would contribute to broader public health goals including but not limited to reducing community healthcare disparities, promoting individual youth access to preventative care, and increasing overall community health and wellbeing.

While most cities have resource infrastructure and programs for youth; they are not being readily utilized and families, or kids themselves, struggle to find access. In rural settings, which are over 1/3rd of

⁹⁹ National Education Association, “Educator Pay Data,” NEA, 2023

¹⁰⁰ Lucy Sorenson, “Contextualizing the Push for More School Resource Officer Funding,” Urban Institute, September 8, 2023

the nation's public schools and serving over 1/4 of K-12 youth in the US (13.5 million kids); 'school community health worker's' (SCHWs) could serve vital roles of not only working to connect students to relevant services readily available in the area but also work to provide spaces for youth needs that are not already filled. The first three steps recommended as initial implementation of the SCHW role would be; (1) establishing a school mural project in design with youth, (2) the initiation of student 'check-in check mark's' on a weekly basis, and (3) establishing restorative justice circles—incorporated into student curriculum rather than 'homeroom'.

For students classified as within two or more minority groups, research on school police interactions, exclusionary discipline rates, and the prevalence of in-school criminalization or youth incarceration is barely available. Youth who are both black and transgender or LGBTQIA+ are most likely experiencing worse schooling conditions than any other student group mentioned. A study from National Black Justice Coalition found that 44.7% of Black LGBTQIA+ youth had experienced some form of exclusionary discipline through either suspension, expulsion, or criminalization.¹⁰¹ Research is needed, but immediately, more qualitative conversations with youth who are intersectional in their marginalized identity are necessary to understand a full picture of the problem and its effects on intersectionality. There should also be an emphasis for public health researchers to identify better means for data collection and dissemination of findings regarding health outcomes for marginalized intersectional populations.

By promoting public health equity and listening to the desires of children echoed throughout this paper, I have arrived at the conclusion that school communities should work to **abolish school policing**. School community members may benefit from developing a strategic school community engagement plan utilizing examples of alternative solutions to school policing described in this paper, along with consulting previous community engaged efforts, to support students in education reclamation & collective youth liberation.

¹⁰¹ National Black Justice Coalition, 2023

CONCLUSION

The negative impacts of school policing are felt both individually amongst students, and communally amongst families and entire communities. School policing has increased the prevalence of educational pushout, established the regular practice of in-school criminalization, and led to increased stress and trauma amongst students forced to interact with police everyday while they attempt to learn.

The gaps in research may continue to hinder effective policy making or the development and sustainability of community engaged alternatives to school policing. More work needs to be dedicated to supporting community development of preventative, health informed alternative solutions through school programs centering youth wellbeing over exclusionary discipline and school policing structures. A great importance should be imparted upon equity and inclusivity in designing and sustaining alternative solutions specifically aimed at mitigating the harms school policing exact upon minority youth. Additionally, research is necessary regarding the adaptability of alternative solutions in diverse school settings—urban, suburban or rural—to ensure scalability and applicability are taken into account.

The potential benefits of alternative solutions—while largely not understood through evidence based research—prove to increase student social-emotional health and interrupt the unilateral power structure within schools attempting to establish a relational, comfortable, and growth-oriented learning environment. There is a great need for increased research to identify health outcomes associated with alternative solutions by working with students, including qualitative research methods, and increasing capacities for intersectional marginalized identity data collection on student experiences and health outcomes. But, in the meantime, it is incumbent upon school leaders—for the well-being of minority youth and promotion of educational equity—to immediately replace school policing practices to alternative solutions, developed with and approved by students, so that we may begin to develop more research and understanding into other responses and the plausible health benefits associated for students.

In order to support our youth and the leaders of our future, we must rethink the environments in which they are learning. Continuing to police K-12 educational spaces will only detract from the support and comfort children desire to grow up within. Rather than supporting the continuation of establishing military-like conditions within our nation's hallways, community members should look upstream, to the origins of our current racist, fear-based, gun-violence validated, illegitimate school policing response.

It is vital for youth-wellbeing and the future of our children's health that we focus on developing an educational environment in which all students are able to gain a positive sense of self and community and grow with collective values, morals and love; so that we may begin to live and grow in a more supported, happier, & healthier society, together.

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