Center For
POLICING EQUITY

REDESIGNING PUBLIC SAFETY

K-12 Schools
RECOMMENDATIONS

All children deserve to feel safe at school and to have meaningful opportunities to learn. Currently, many K-12 schools employ police as what are frequently called "School Resource Officers" (SROs), but evidence does not show that the presence of school-based police reduces gun-related or other violence. In fact, stationing police in schools increases disciplinary actions and fuels the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately harms disabled students and students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ+.

Public health strategies such as school diversion measures and restorative justice initiatives in response to misbehavior can instead foster young people's development and contribute to a welcoming school climate. Safety for K-12 students means that they do not experience violence or bullying, they are not discriminated against, they do not fear criminalization or deportation, and they feel a sense of belonging. The following evidence-informed strategies promote this vision of school safety.



End School-Based Policing Programs

Evidence does not show that SROs and other school-based police improve school safety. A study of school shootings, for example, concluded that there were no differences in the severity of shootings based on whether or not an SRO was present. Available evidence does clearly demonstrate, however, that SRO programs increase arrests for minor misbehavior, contribute to inequitable and harsh discipline, and make Black and other vulnerable students feel less safe.

1. **End school-based policing and SRO programs.** These programs have not clearly benefited school safety, but have been shown to drive disciplinary actions and arrests, negatively affect educational outcomes, and undermine overall school climate.

2. **Redirect state and federal funding for SRO programs and police-school partnerships toward public health approaches** like restorative justice and hiring counselors.



End Police Response To Routine Student Conduct Issues

Police frequently respond to routine student conduct issues, such as disobedience, defiance, and dress code violations, and disproportionately do so when such issues involve Black students and disabled students. School administrators and policymakers should take steps to limit the involvement of police in school discipline.

3. **School districts should implement policies specifying that staff may not call the police to address student behavior unless there is an emergency**, meaning that the student causes serious physical harm to students, staff, or others in the school; poses an imminent risk or serious threat of physical harm; or possesses a firearm or explosive.

4. **Repeal laws that require school administrators to call the police for minor student misbehavior.**

5. **Decriminalize truancy, curfew violations, and other status offenses.** Status offense laws criminalize certain nonviolent adolescent behaviors that would be legal for adults, and are disproportionately applied to Black children.

6. **Decriminalize consensual "sexting" between teenagers of similar ages.**



End Surveillance Strategies

Widespread surveillance tactics to monitor students can undermine students' feelings of safety, security, and belonging, and are associated with increased rates of disciplinary actions. Schools with a majority of non-White students are more likely to use strict surveillance measures than schools with mostly White students.

7. **End school-based drug testing and the use of drug-sniffing dogs.** According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, there is no evidence that school-based drug testing prevents substance use by students.

8. **Ban facial recognition software in school video surveillance systems.** Facial recognition software systems have very high error rates, particularly in identifying dark-skinned women.

9. **Ban remote access of cameras and microphones on school-owned tablets and laptops.** Surveillance software opens the door to unnecessary punishment, decreases student perceptions of safety, and is not necessary to facilitate remote learning.



End Inequitable And Harsh School Discipline Policies

Exclusionary discipline–suspensions and expulsions–leads to decreased academic achievement, increases the risk of dropping out, and is correlated with higher likelihood of future involvement in juvenile legal systems. Racial disparities in exclusionary discipline have been documented for decades and begin as soon as children enter the U.S. public school system.

10. **End zero tolerance policies.** These policies drive exclusionary discipline and disproportionately harm Black students and disabled students.

11. **Remove vague language in school discipline policies and codes of conduct to reduce risk of inequitable application.** Language such as “willful defiance” and “disruptive behavior” leaves room for interpretation and may be disproportionately applied against Black students.

12. **Ban corporal punishment in K-12 schools.** Corporal (or physical) punishment is banned in Europe; in the United States, it is legal in public schools in 19 states and in private schools in 48 states.

13. **Ban seclusion and restraint in K-12 schools**, except when a student poses an imminent danger of serious physical injury to another person or themself.



Invest In Public Health Strategies To Create Safe Schools

School-based police focus on responding to problematic behavior after it happens, but a comprehensive public health approach to school safety aims instead to preventively address the many factors that contribute to a lack of safety in K-12 schools. These strategies can work to create a positive school climate–one where students are engaged in learning, feel they belong, and have trusting relationships.

14. **Explore restorative justice practices**, which aim to repair harm caused by misbehavior rather than exclude the student from school. Restorative justice in schools is associated with reduced disproportionate discipline outcomes and increased academic achievement.

15. **Explore social-emotional learning and trauma-informed school environments to prevent school violence.** Social-emotional learning is based on the understanding that all children need to be taught social and emotional skills, and that children impacted by trauma need the most support in this development.

16. **Invest in and train school nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists.** Ninety percent of public school students attend schools where the number of school support staff does not meet professional standards. Millions of students attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.

17. **Invest in adequate staff and training to support special education students.** Proper screening of disabilities increases the likelihood that students receive appropriate support and accommodations, rather than punishment.

18. **Invest in early literacy.** Falling behind on early reading milestones decreases a child’s academic engagement and increases the likelihood of not graduating on time. This is especially true for Black boys.

Improve Data Collection and Transparency

Efforts to redesign public safety should always include data collection. Data can deepen understanding of the problems that affect a community, help make sure that any new policy is achieving its goal of improved equity and safety, and build evidence for changes not yet made. Currently, there are no comprehensive data about school-based police in K-12 schools, which makes it difficult to understand and address disparities in school discipline and arrest in schools.

19. **Require school districts to collect and report data on staff-initiated student-police contacts.** Data should include information such as student demographics, reasons for the police contact, and who made the referral.

20. **Require police to record what happens after any contact with students (such as arrest) as well as any investigatory detentions and uses of force**, which are not commonly recorded in data.

This brief and the companion report are available at policingequity.org/school-safety.