

# FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

*Police make schools safer—right?*

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*As I walked down the hall, one of the police officers employed in the school noticed I did not have my identification badge with me. Before I could explain why I did not have my badge, I was escorted to the office and suspended for an entire week. ... Walking to the bus stop, a different police officer pulled me over and demanded to know why I was not in school. As I tried to explain, I was thrown into the back of the police car.*

—MICHAEL REYNOLDS, 17, testifying before the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing

For not having an identification badge, Michael—a high school student in Detroit, Michigan—faced two instances of police involvement in one day and a lengthy suspension. His experience is alarming, but not unusual. It reflects the widespread use of zero-tolerance disciplinary practices—practices more likely to be found in schools with higher percentages of students of color—that can push students out of classrooms and into the juvenile justice system. This phenomenon, known as the school-to-prison pipeline, hinges on federal, state and local education and public safety policies that include school-based policing and the presence of school resource officers (SROs).

Everyone wants schools to be safe, and to many stakeholders and policymakers having police on site seems like a logical step toward reducing building-level crime or preventing a school shooting. But while the intention may be to provide a firm-but-kind role model to watch over the school, officers in schools frequently wind up enforcing zero-tolerance policies related to behaviors like cell phone use, being out of uniform or—as in Michael's case—not carrying an identification badge.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) reports 260,000 students were referred to law enforcement and 92,000 were subjected to school-based arrests during the 2011–12 school year. While

there is no national data on the nature of the offenses in these cases, community-level reports out of Colorado, Ohio and New York indicate that the presence of police directly resulted in larger numbers of arrests for disorderly conduct. One study out of the southeastern United States places the number of such arrests at five times higher than at schools without SROs.

Research also shows that in addition to increasing school-based referrals, ticketing and arrests, policing students for minor disciplinary infractions contributes to feelings of alienation and disengagement, distrust of authority and lower educational outcomes. And

these collateral consequences are not experienced equitably. The DOE notes that, across all school settings, students of color and students with disabilities are among the most likely to be policed and referred to the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The Advancement Project has found that the same is true for gender non-conforming students and LGBT youth.

The takeaway? Experts and advocates who study school climate and the school-to-prison pipeline are raising serious equity and safety questions about school-based policing programs that put officers in the role of disciplinarian rather than protector.

## Safety Enforcers or Disciplinarians?

SRO programming grew rapidly toward the end of the 1990s. Despite the fact that reported incidents of violence and crime in school were in decline at the time, the National Center for

## A Brief History of School-based Policing

SRO programs first appeared in the 1950s, but did not become widespread until the late 1990s. The federal impetus came in the form of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services program, which heavily subsidized the hiring of SROs.

Zero-tolerance school disciplinary policies also spurred SRO programs. Peter Price, author of *When Is a Police Officer an Officer of the Law: The Status of Police Officers in Schools*, writes that zero-tolerance policies proliferated years before the infamous 1999 school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, in response to the perceived threat that school-based crime was on the rise. These fears centered particularly on violence and drug use, which data show were not actually increasing. According to a report by the Advancement Project, this disconnect can be traced to the 1980s, when a "get tough" mentality fueled the War on Drugs and later expanded to public education in the form of crackdowns on "failing schools," high-stakes testing and punitive disciplinary consequences. Surveillance, metal detectors and other security measures increased in public schools, paving the way for SRO programs.



Education Statistics' *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2013* report states that the percentage of students age 12 to 18 reporting the presence of security guards and/or police officers in their school increased from 54 percent in 1999 to 70 percent in 2003.

Recent calls for more SRO programs came after the Sandy Hook tragedy, according to Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) Communications Coordinator Nancy Trevino. The DSC—a coalition of local grassroots and advocacy groups in 24 states—is at the forefront of efforts to find local and national alternatives to zero-tolerance policies and school-based policing.

“After the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, we saw a big increase ... of representatives in different states wanting to increase police in schools to make schools safer,” Trevino says. “Time and time again, members of our coalition have stated that it’s not the best response [for] creating safer school climates.”

Sarah Camiscoli, an educator at a 6–12 public school in the Bronx, serves on the organizing council of Teachers Unite, a DSC member organization made up of public school educators in New York City focused on reforming inequitable discipline practices. “What we’ve seen is that when ... school shootings happen, they happen predominantly in communities that are more affluent,” she says. “It’s not in schools that have a high demographic of young people of color. But when these conversations start, the first schools that they want to increase security in or put these officers in are low-income communities where the demographic [is] people of color.”

Camiscoli is right. According to the Justice Policy Institute’s *Education Under Arrest* report, children of color are more likely to attend schools with SRO programs. Other factors that increase student-SRO interaction include attending a large school (1,000+ students) or attending a school in an urban or high-poverty area. A policy



report by the Congressional Research Service states that schools with SRO programs are more likely to have patrolled grounds and security inspections. While not a universal experience, a distinct pattern emerges: Youth who attend schools with SROs are more likely to be black or Latino, to be poor, to experience highly restrictive and monitored learning environments *and* to be arrested for minor infractions.

When she asked students (organizers for the advocacy group IntegrateNYC4me) how it felt to attend a school that was patrolled by police, Camiscoli received answers like “They’re always looking at us,” “Just because we are in a school with lots of black and Latino students doesn’t mean we need police” and “Police can help us, but cops being around too much feels like something is wrong.” And on the subject of passing through a metal

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## What Is an SRO?

**There is no definitive job description for all school resource officers, but the Congressional Research Service offers this aggregate description: “Law enforcement officers who engage in community-oriented policing activities and who are assigned to work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations.” In some localities, SROs—also called school safety officers, school police officers or school liaison officers—are employees of the local police department; in others, they are employees of the school district’s independent police department.**

detector: “It’s very uncomfortable to go through that experience.”

Arrests and school climate aren’t the only concerns. The Southern Poverty Law Center found that SROs in the Birmingham City Schools district in Alabama used a pepper spray/tear gas combination to discipline hundreds of mostly African-American high school students from 2006 to 2011. When bystanders are included, the number of students affected exceeds 1,000.

## Recipe for Success?

Given all the potential pitfalls, what practices will put SROs in the best position to truly help students and schools? Deputy Chris Burke, a highly trained SRO in Durango, Colorado, says, “With me being in uniform, I try to make myself approachable, if a student’s going to have a problem, to feel safe and to come up and approach me about that.” Burke recognizes that his relationships with students may be influenced by negative experiences with law enforcement *outside* of school, so relationship building is crucial. He connects with students over lunch, helps coordinate Teaching Tolerance’s Mix It Up at Lunch Day, reads to students and counsels them on legal issues only if he receives permission from parents or guardians.

Maurice “Mo” Canady, executive director of The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), emphasizes that SROs should *not* handle routine disciplinary matters. “When it comes to formal discipline, especially suspensions and expulsions, there’s no place for law enforcement,” Canady says. “We’re very clear on that.” He adds that effective SRO programs should be an ongoing collaboration between the school, the law enforcement agency and properly selected officers who receive comprehensive training tailored for the school setting. “It’s almost like a three-legged stool,” Canady says. “If you remove one of these legs, the program is bound to fail.”

In many school districts and schools, however, one or more of the “legs” in

Canady’s analogy is unstable or absent, creating fractured, hostile relationships. Problems multiply in the absence of mandatory, codified standards to guide school-police partnerships and detail *how* SROs should respond to student misconduct. These issues—and calls for improvement—are in the national spotlight: In January 2014, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education issued a joint “Dear Colleague” letter and school discipline guidance package reminding stakeholders of the obligation to avoid discriminatory discipline practices and to work to improve school climate. These resources also mention that schools may be held liable for discrimination enacted by school police and security staff. In December 2014, President Barack Obama created the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which is working to find best practices for police-community relationships, including those in public schools. The Task Force gave students like Michael an opportunity to relay their experiences of winding up in the back of a police car for basically being a kid.

In 2012, DSC released *A Model Code on Education and Dignity*, which presents a human rights approach to school-based policing. Key recommendations include safety and discipline policies that ensure minimal involvement of police officers; clear guidelines on limiting school-police partnerships; mechanisms for accountability and transparency (including an articulated SRO-related complaints process available to students, parents and guardians); and SRO trainings in de-escalation, adolescent development and psychology, conflict resolution and restorative justice.

While the collateral consequences of school-based policing are clearly systemic, there are communities around the country taking steps toward building safer and more nurturing models of school safety:

In **CLAYTON COUNTY, GEORGIA**, the chief judge of the juvenile court, Steven C. Teske, initiated a county-wide process in 2003 to end zero-tolerance

disciplinary practices in schools. Teske facilitated a cooperative agreement—in the form of two memoranda of understandings (MOUs)—between schools, law enforcement and other stakeholders to limit school-based suspensions and arrests for “misdemeanor type delinquent acts,” including disorderly conduct. According to Teske, by the 2011–12 school year, the number of students referred to the juvenile court for school offenses dropped by 83 percent.

The **SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT** and that city’s police department redefined their relationship as of January 2014. An MOU, effective through the 2018–19 school year, stipulates that SROs should not be involved in school discipline issues (unless absolutely necessary) and will receive at least one free training annually in restorative justice practices. The MOU also mandates the use of a graduated-response system, starting with a warning for low-level offenses. These significant steps were driven by a community-based effort that included DSC member organizations Public Counsel and Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth.

**DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS** and the Denver Police Department signed an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) in February 2013 that redefines the role of SROs in public schools. This agreement grew out of negotiations between district leaders and Padres y Jóvenes Unidos, a community organization committed to ending the school-to-prison pipeline. Key mandates of the IGA include that SROs differentiate between disciplinary matters and criminal issues; that SROs be versed in the school district’s discipline policy, which emphasizes restorative approaches; that administrators and other educators handle disciplinary matters without involving SROs (unless necessary); and that SROs receive training in school-specific topics such as child and adolescent development and psychology, best practices for improving school climate and how to create safe spaces for LGBT youth.

## Best Practices for School-based Policing

If past is prologue, the unexamined presence of SROs in schools will continue to raise concerns about school climate and criminalization of youth. These recommendations—drawn in part from DSC’s *A Model Code on Education and Dignity* and *The School Discipline Consensus Report* issued by the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center—can help school personnel build safer and more just and equitable schools.

- Connect with advocacy organizations under the Dignity in Schools Campaign umbrella or other groups focused on school discipline.
- Establish a working group to amplify your concerns around school-based policing.
- Gauge perceptions of school safety held by students, staff and community members.
- Share research on why school-based police should not engage in routine discipline.
- Advocate for the creation (or revision) of a memorandum of understanding that clearly defines the school-police relationship.
- Advocate for the school administration to collect and publish data annually on school-based policing.
- Invite SROs to staff meetings, especially when discussing topics related to student behavior and school climate.
- Adopt positive, evidence-based approaches to school discipline, such as restorative justice and school-wide positive-behavioral interventions and supports.
- Actively improve school climate and work toward building (or sustaining) a trauma-sensitive school.
- Leverage the knowledge of counselors and support staff when determining how to address minor misconduct. ♦



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