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School Policing Research Summary
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I. Introduction.

Over the last 25 years, horrific mass murders of schoolchildren have rightly intensified the desire to improve school safety. The attention demanded by these terrible events has generated discussions among parents, media, researchers, issue organizations, advocacy groups, the general public, and all levels of government. These conversations have produced a wide range of perspectives about what to do and, predictably, the search for solutions has often been informed by personal opinion and politics more than research and evidence (Jonson 2017). In addition to being an elected representative whose responsibilities include promoting the safety of everyone associated with JCPS, I am a public-school parent.

Consequently, I am highly motivated to sift through the mass of information regarding school safety to determine what measures will increase the likelihood that every person in JCPS is safe. As school policing has dominated school safety discussions perhaps more than any other topic, the practice warrants rigorous examination. An analysis of evidence from a diverse range of sources reveals highly consistent findings. The strong correlation in results from a large number of studies indicates that the conclusions in this summary are extremely well supported and therefore provide a reliable set of principles to guide decision-making on school policing.

II. Schools today are very safe.

Given the proliferation of media in recent years, it is understandable that someone might believe schools are more dangerous than in the past. However, today's schools are not only safer than ever but are one of the safest spaces for a child to be. During the last 25 years, overall juvenile crime and youth victimization have decreased significantly, as have crimes, acts of violence, and thefts committed at schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017; Darby, 2018; Petteruti, 2011; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Nicodemo & Petronio, 2018; Schladebeck, 2018). Serious crimes at schools are, "exceedingly rare" (Na & Gottfredson 2011, p. 17). "Very few schools record crimes involving rape, robbery, sexual battery, attacks, and firearms" (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 17). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that "only a fraction of youth homicides occur in schools" (Schladebeck, 2018). Most tellingly, "reported rates of school violence and theft are at the lowest levels since data were first collected by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1992" (Petteruti, 2011, p. 1). According to juvenile justice specialist Aaron Kupchik, this is largely because, "kids behave better than they did a

generation ago” (as cited in Darby, 2018). In short, all the evidence indicates that schools are safer than ever and that children are already safer at school than just about any other location.

III. Law enforcement at schools does not improve safety.

Despite school safety having steadily improved over the last 25 years, one could argue that schools can never be too safe and that we should promote school policing as an extra layer of protection. While this view is understandable, a tremendous amount of research has failed to produce any evidence that school police improve safety (Darby, 2018; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Petteruti, 2011). Thus, “recent efforts to scale back law enforcement involvement in schools have not caused increases in school crime” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 9). Moreover, police are not needed to identify and address serious crime in schools, “probably because the rates of reporting of these crimes to law enforcement are already very high” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 24). Tellingly, an exhaustive report published by the U.S. Secret Service on the prevention of school shootings does not even mention putting police in schools (Vossekuil et al., 2002). In addition, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission (2013; 2015) did not emphasize school policing but things like having locks on all classroom doors and regularly updating emergency plans.

IV. School police make schools less safe.

Another possible argument for school police is that—even though they do not improve safety—there may be a benefit if they make students, staff, and parents feel safer, thereby allowing schools to better focus on teaching and learning. Unfortunately, evidence shows that school police makes schools more dangerous (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 15; Mayer & Leone, 1999; Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 26; Petteruti, 2011, pp. 9–11; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003; Vossekuil et al., 2002, pp. 32–33). Na and Gottfredson (2011, p. 26) effectively summarize several reasons for this, so I quote them at length.

Scholars have suggested a number of mechanisms through which increased police presence might have the unintended effect of increasing school crime. For example, the school’s capacity to exercise effective informal social control might be reduced when responsibility for maintaining order is shifted from the teachers to police. Increased reliance on surveillance and an emphasis on formal controls may create an environment of fear and distrust, weakening the school’s sense of community and diminishing students’ willingness to confide in school staff when they are experiencing problems (e.g. Brotherton, 1996; Devine, 1996; Noguera, 1995). Kupchik (2010, p. 115) also claims that SROs affect the overall school climate ... which may provide a basis for reduced perceptions of school as

a cohesive, caring community. A third possible mechanism ... is that the counseling services provided by the police may be, on average, less effective than those provided by trained counselors. ... The findings from qualitative research concur (Kupchik, 2010, pp. 105–114). By shifting responsibility for counseling troubled youth to police, problems may be exacerbated rather than resolved. Finally, police presence may result in role confusion regarding school disciplinary procedures, which may undermine the school's ability to administer discipline in a fair, consistent way.

For these reasons, “where [the effort to scale back law enforcement] has been tried, incidents of student misbehavior have *decreased*” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 9). Likewise, Na and Gottfredson found, “no evidence that increased use of SROs decreases school crime. The only statistically significant association with school crime was in the opposite direction” (2011, p. 26).

As witnessed at J-town High School in November 2017, “the involvement of a police officer in school discipline can escalate alarmingly” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 15). In the J-town case, a routine altercation being addressed by a school administrator quickly escalated when a police officer unilaterally decided to intervene with force. This led to a student being tased—which has led to several deaths in recent years (Reuters, 2017)—and to a near riot that could have completely spiraled out of control. In short, JCPS is incredibly lucky that the actions of the J-town officer did not lead to far worse consequences.

Most frighteningly, there is good reason to believe that police in schools may hinder efforts to prevent school shootings. As described above, the presence of police weakens relationships in schools and erodes trust between children and adults. Thus, the U.S. Secret Service warns:

Prior to most [school shootings], other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack. In most cases, those who knew were other kids—friends, schoolmates, siblings, and others. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult. ... If students have concerns about how adults will react to information that they bring forward, they may be even less inclined to volunteer such information. [Vossekuil et al., 2002, pp. 32–33]

On top of this, Addigton (2009) finds that a misplaced faith in the ability of school police leads, “to a reduced likelihood that schools will adopt policies and practices whose effectiveness for promoting school safety is better established” (quoted in Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 27). Thus, the Secret Service does not recommend or even mention the use of law enforcement in schools as a method of preventing school shootings (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

V. Putting police in schools needlessly harms children.

In addition to not providing any safety benefit and making schools more dangerous, an overwhelming body of research confirms that the most pronounced effect of school policing is to unnecessarily arrest or refer children to law enforcement for relatively minor incidents (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 38; American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 20; Brown, Novak, & Frank, 2009, p. 207; Darby, 2018; Kupchik 2010, p. 5; Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 4; Petteruti, 2011, p. 1; Teske, 2011, p. 88; Theriot, 2009, p. 280). For example:

- “Schools with more police see more arrests than schools with fewer, and those arrests are often for things like simple battery—no weapons, no injuries—or disorderly conduct” (Darby, 2018).
- A judge in Clayton County, Georgia found that “schools ... that had SROs had nearly five times the number of arrests for disorderly conduct as schools without an SRO, even when controlling for the level of economic disadvantage” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 15).
- “Simple assault without a weapon is the most common crime recorded by schools, followed by theft, vandalism, and possession of a knife” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 17).
- “The presence of an officer in the school is associated with more than a doubling of the rate of referrals to law enforcement for ... simple assault without a weapon” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 17).
- “Increased use of SROs facilitates the formal processing of minor offenses” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 22).
- “The presence of police officers helps to redefine disciplinary situations as criminal justice problems rather than social, psychological, or academic problems, and ... increases the likelihood that students are arrested” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 24).
- “Districts from around the country have found that youth are being referred to the justice system at increased rates and for minor offenses” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 1).
- “Police officers are more likely to arrest juveniles than adults engaging in similar behaviors, and more likely to exercise authority over perceived disrespect by juveniles. This ... can mean that a perceived school rule violation ends up treated as a crime” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 20; see Brown, Novak, & Frank, 2009, p. 208).

The formal processing of routine misbehavior is made worse by official guidance from the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) which, “cautions against ‘convert[ing] some violations of law and school rules into teachable moments and educational opportunities” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 13; NASRO, 2012, p. 34). This policy effectively eliminates the counseling role which is often touted as one of the benefits of school police. Thus, as opposed to reducing misbehavior so arrest is not necessary, many school police

likely share the sentiment of those in Ferguson, Missouri who see, “increased arrests in the schools as a positive result of their work” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 47).

VI. Placing police in schools is driven by the illusion of safety.

Given that school police have a negative impact on safety and unnecessarily push children into the criminal justice system, why do many school districts spend so much money on law enforcement? For Darby (2018), “what’s at the heart of all the calls to put more police in schools [is that it] makes people, parents in particular, feel better.” As Na and Gottfredson put it, “SROs tend to be welcomed by key stakeholders for many reasons other than their actual impact on school safety” (2011, p. 6). While police should be involved in preparing schools for emergencies, “this role does not require regular presence patrolling a school, nor does research support reliance on school-based police to deter school shootings” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 14).

Some of the strongest evidence of faulty reasoning behind putting police in schools is from a report prepared for the U.S. Congress (James & McCallion 2013). The authors found that “neither law enforcement nor school officials cited levels of violence within their schools as a reason for starting a school resource officer program” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 29). Instead, school officials placed police in schools primarily due to fear of violence generated by national media (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 40; American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 29). Likewise, the results of an earlier survey by the Department of Justice under George W. Bush found that only 3.5 percent of principals sought school police due to violence while 24.5 percent cited, “national media attention” (Coon & Travis, 2005, p. 35).

VII. School police have the worst effect on the most vulnerable children.

While school police only became widespread after the school shootings at Columbine in 1999, law enforcement in schools originated in the 1960s as a reaction to integration (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 17; American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 3; Black, 2016, p. 34). “White communities argued ... that a lack of discipline among Black children would bring disorder to white schools” (Black, 2016, p. 34). Thus, the first school police were part of a larger, “program of social and economic control” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 3). Even today, “campuses with larger populations of students of color are more likely to use harsh surveillance techniques, disciplinary actions and involve police in minor infractions” (Spencer, 2013).

Similarly, Na and Gottfredson find that the growth of police in schools, “was in part a delayed response to the student rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s that resulted in several

judicial rulings limiting the discretion of school personnel to exclude students from school for disciplinary reasons” (2011, p. 3). That is, raising disciplinary issues among black and brown children to the level of criminal acts became a tactic some schools employed to subvert desegregation. This dynamic has extended into the era of high-stakes testing as a means for some schools to, “remove poorly performing and infrequently attending students from their rolls” (Hirschfield, 2008; quoted in Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 4).

Given these origins, it is unsurprising that school police most negatively affect students who already face social marginalization such as African American, Latinx, immigrant, LGBTQ, and special education children (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 39; American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 11; Development Services Group, Inc., 2014; Hall, 2017; Petteruti, 2011, p. 21; Spencer, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Some of the most significant findings are below.

- Data consistently show that African American students are more than twice as likely to be arrested or referred to law enforcement (Advancement Project, 2018, pp. 22, 38; American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 11; Hall, 2017; Smith-Evans & George, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016, 2018).
- African American girls are, “17% of public school enrollment [but] ... 43% of girls arrested at school” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 38; Patrick & Evans, 2018; Smith-Evans & George, 2014).
- Special needs students comprise, “only 12% of student enrollment, but 28% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested at school” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 38; U.S. Department of Education, 2018).
- In one recent school year, more than one in every four students referred to law enforcement had special needs (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 22).
- Several studies repeatedly demonstrate that LGBTQ students suffer negative consequences similar to those experienced by African Americans (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 39; Development Services Group, Inc., 2014; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011; Irvine, 2010; Morgan, Salomon, Poltkin, & Cohen, 2014).
- School police are a main contributor to the, “widening gap between black and white youth confinement” (Olivares, 2017). “In 2001, black children were four times more likely to be incarcerated than white children. But in 2015, black children were five times more likely” (Olivares, 2017).

School police unnecessarily harm the very students many schools already struggle to educate. This needless contact with the criminal justice system does life-long damage, greatly increasing the likelihood that children will drop out, be unemployed, and be incarcerated, each of which entail a high cost burden for families, taxpayers, and society at large (Petteruti, 2011, pp. 1, 18).

VIII. Are there differences in the behavior of white and black children?

One possible explanation for different rates of referral to law enforcement for white and black children is that some students behave worse than others. However, a massive amount of research has confirmed that children of different races misbehave the same amount. As this is difficult for some to believe, it is best to let research from a variety of sources speak for itself.

- “It’s not about the differences in behaviors by youth. It’s about the differences in how adults respond to those behaviors” (Olivares, 2017).
- “The results from [the CDC’s] 2015 study show black youths are not committing more crimes in proportion to white youths. ... White youths are more likely to carry weapons, drink alcohol and do harder drugs” (Olivares, 2017).
- “Research suggests that the substantial racial disparities ... are not explained by more frequent or more serious misbehavior by students of color” (U. S. Department of Justice & U. S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 4; see Fabelo, et al., 2011; Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Rocque, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, Peterson, 2002).
- “There appears to be no evidence that African-American students are punished more in school because they act out more” (Skiba, 2001, p. 182).
- “Studies using both measures of student self-report and extant school disciplinary records ... have generally failed to find evidence of racial differences in student behavior” (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010, p. 62).
- “There is no evidence that students of color exhibit higher rates of misbehavior” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 38).
- “Consistently, there is no evidence that racial disparities in discipline are the consequence of differences in rates or types of misbehavior by Black/Latino and white students” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p. 22).
- Rather than differences in behavior, “a heightened police presence in communities of color ... is to blame” (Olivares, 2017).

The conclusive finding that white and black students behave the same is a main reason that the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education advise that “[schools are obligated] to avoid and redress racial discrimination in the administration of student discipline” (2014, p. 5).

IX. Relationships are the key to safety.

Within education in particular, policy must be driven by, “evidence-based interventions intended to address legitimate needs identified through research and analysis” (Advancement

Project, 2018, p. 40). School safety must be a top priority. However, “law enforcement in schools is not the best nor most cost-effective way to achieve [it]” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 1). Thankfully, several strategies for promoting school safety have proven to be effective in high-quality research (Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 27; see Gottfredson, 2001; Gottfredson, Wilson, & Najaka, 2002; Hahn et al., 2007; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Moreover, “many of these effective practices are also known to be cost-effective” (Drake, Aos, & Miller, 2009, quoted in Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 27). Unfortunately, putting police in schools, “siphons money away from real solutions that improve school climate and build positive relationships between students and school staff” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 40).

Shifting away from policing and toward building positive relationships is important for many reasons, including the prevention of school shootings. As Petterui notes, “disadvantaged schools with high-quality relationships feel safer than advantaged schools with low-quality relationships” (2011, p. 12). Given that school shootings are not typically stopped by police but because other children know about the planned attack, it is worth repeating a key conclusion from the Secret Service: “If students have concerns about how adults will react to information that they bring forward, they may be even less inclined to volunteer such information” (Vossekuil et al., 2002, pp. 32–33; see Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002, p. 12). However, for the reasons detailed above, the presence of police in schools damages the relationships between children and adults that are key to stopping school shootings. Thus, the Secret Service report does not recommend school police (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 37).

Moreover, Gottfredson et al. (2005, p. 412) find that “schools in which students perceived greater fairness and clarity of rules had less delinquent behavior and less student victimization [and] ... schools with more positive psychosocial climates had less teacher victimization.” Based on the findings outlined above, it is reasonable to conclude that school police diminish student perceptions of fairness and clarity of rules and harm the psychosocial climate. For instance:

That SROs play multiple roles has the potential to cause confusion as SROs are expected to both serve as trusted mentors and also police officers who conduct investigations and make arrests. Youth may be particularly confused about their rights in relation to an SRO, who may also be viewed as a trusted adult. For example, a student may think that she is talking with a mentor in the form of the SRO about an incident, but in reality she is talking to a police officer and what she is saying can later be used against her. [Petteruti 2011, p. 3]

That is, “a child may believe they are confiding in a trusted adult, only to find the conversation turn into an interrogation and end with their arrest” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, p.

14). This becomes even more problematic considering that “an SRO can overrule a school administrator who wants to prevent the arrest of a student” (Petteruti, 2011, p. 2).

Thus, the presence of school police works against the goal of creating a safe and calm environment conducive to learning. In terms of proven solutions, “additional teachers and smaller class sizes both prevent disciplinary issues and improve student achievement” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 40; see Wilson, 2002; Schanzenbach, 2014). Moreover, “every dollar spent on police ... could instead be invested in teachers, guidance counselors, and health professionals that support, not criminalize children” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 40).

X. Conclusion.

The promotion of school policing over the last five decades reflects larger social dynamics in which black and brown children in the United States have increasingly lost their right to childhood (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 2). Thus, despite schools being safer than ever, “young people in school today are interacting with a larger police presence than ever before” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 22). Unfortunately, putting police in schools based on significantly exaggerated fears has negative consequences on both safety and learning. As Darby (2018) states, putting police in schools, “gives us the illusion that our schools are more secure, often at the very real expense of students’ futures and, in some cases, their physical safety.” In other words, “this fear-based response is illogical, harmful and ignores students’ demands for safe and supporting learning environments” (Advancement Project, 2018, p. 40).

Considering that: (1) children suffer life-long damage from being referred to law enforcement, (2) school police do not help prevent school shootings or school crime, (3) police in schools increase danger and disorder, (4) school police unnecessarily harm the very students many schools already struggle to educate, and (5) school police take revenue away from real solutions; the unavoidable conclusion is that there are no good reasons to have police in schools and there are several clear reasons to remove police from schools.

Thus, Commissioner of Education Wayne Lewis commits an egregious error in stating, “The research is clear. There is a consensus around what we can do to keep our kids safe, and SROs are needed” (Kentucky Teacher, 2018). It is unfortunate that the Commissioner is spreading misinformation instead of promoting real solutions to school safety. Sadly, the most at-risk children in Kentucky will pay the price for the Commissioner’s poor judgment. Unless school districts want to share the Commissioner’s culpability for further damaging already vulnerable students, we must have the courage to rely on facts in making decisions about school safety.

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