

School Resource Officers—The Case Against

“It Is Time to Redefine Safety”: The Argument to Defund School Police

by Johanna Wald*

Seattle School Superintendent Denise Juneau was saying the quiet part out loud when she stated on June 9, 2020, that “the presence of an armed officer prohibits many students and staff from feeling fully safe and welcome in our buildings” (Ho, 2020). Whether accidental or deliberate, hers was a stunning admission. For 20 years the federal government and states have steadily increased allocations for school police, justifying the expense under the guise of “keeping schools safe.” Yet here was a superintendent of a major urban school district conceding that, in fact, armed police in the school building have the exact opposite effect: Their presence raises the level of fear and anxiety of students and staff alike.

Research on Effects of Police in Schools

This recognition is all the more damning in light of our growing knowledge that students’ ability to learn and thrive depends on the comfort and safety they feel in school. This mounting evidence base has led to a shift away from a predominant focus on testing and standards to the importance of creating a “civil and safe school climate.” The National School Climate Council reported that a “growing number of reports, studies, and legislation emphasize the importance of positive school climate in reducing achievement inequities, enhancing healthy development, and promoting the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for 21st century school—and life—success” (Piscatelli & Lee, 2011).

Indeed, a related body of research confirms Juneau’s observation about

the negative effects on young people’s academic and emotional well-being of frequent interactions with police. This is particularly true for Black students, who are so often the target of aggressive police action. One study of over 2.5 million students in Texas found that hiring more police in schools leads to greater numbers of suspensions and lower graduation and college enrollment rates (Weistburst, 2018). A study of students attending school in New York City concluded that increased exposure to police stops reduces the rates of high school graduation, college enrollment,

necessary to protect students and staff from crime, violence, and tragic school shootings. But this argument is not borne out by convincing evidence. One meta-analysis of 12 studies found that none “indicated a positive impact” of a police presence on school safety outcomes (Stern & Petrosino, 2018). Criminologists at Texas State University identified 25 incidents of active shooters targeting schools in 2013 and concluded that not a single one ended as a result of the actions of armed guards or police officers (Blair & Schweit, 2014). They noted that, while armed guards were present in four of the

Increased exposure to police stops reduces the rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college persistence.

and college persistence, with the effects “substantially” larger for Black students, who are the “overwhelming” target for stops (Bacher-Hicks, 2020). Another study reported that Black males as young as 11 years old living in neighborhoods subjected to aggressive, broken-windows policing experienced increased absences from school and lower test scores (Legewie & Fagan, 2019). Desmond Ang’s (2020) study found that “exposure to police violence leads to persistent decreases in GPA, increased incidence of emotional disturbance, and lower rates of high school completion and college enrollment for Black and Latino students.” Yet another paper identified being stopped at school by police officers as a “potent” predictor of heightened emotional distress and post-traumatic stress symptoms in youth. This paper noted that the presence of guards and metal detectors in schools significantly increased students’ perceptions of fear (Bachman et al., 2011).

What About Safety From Crime?

Despite all of this research, many continue to argue that police in schools are

schools that experienced mass shootings in 2018—in Kentucky, Florida, Maryland, and Texas—the guards were not able to stop the killing. A 2018 *Washington Post* analysis of nearly 200 incidents of gun violence on campus found only two incidents when a School Resource Officer successfully intervened in a shooting (Cox & Rich, 2018). Furthermore, a task force in New York chaired by former State Chief Judge Judith Kaye found that schools that did not rely upon police reported a greater sense of safety for students, lower arrest and suspension rates, and fewer crimes (New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force, 2013).

Can School Resource Officers Fill Other Roles?

Another argument for retaining school police is that these individuals often play a variety of roles in school, including mentors, coaches, and even friends to students. Mo Cannady, the Executive Director of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) argues that: “Well-trained school resource

**Johanna Wald is a writer and researcher who has written and presented extensively about issues related to criminal and juvenile justice reform, educational equity, and implicit bias. She currently works as a consultant and policy and communications specialist for Strategies for Youth, and has worked as a policy analyst at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, where she organized the first research conference on “The School to Prison Pipeline.”*

See *REDEFINE SAFETY*, next page

REDEFINE SAFETY, from page 7

officers operate more like counselors and educators" (Goldstein, 2020). Unquestionably, there are talented, dedicated, and compassionate School Resource Officers who operate exactly this way. But, if schools are looking for more counselors and educators, why not hire individuals trained in those fields? Why expect law enforcement officers, trained primarily to use the tools of force and arrest, to fulfill these functions? Sooner or later, they are likely to revert to their training.

Risks of Violent Responses

As the sociologist Alex Vitale stated:

When we turn a problem over to the

that therefore, in order to de-escalate the situation, the student would need to first be removed from the classroom, the outcome would have likely been very different. The situation could have been resolved without violence, without arrest, and without trauma.

Time for a New Approach

In June 2020, the Massachusetts Teachers' Association endorsed the elimination of school police. Its announcement read that:

It is time to redefine safety...Districts must change how they meet the emotional health and safety needs of students and identify and obtain the necessary resources to keep students, educators, and

We must end the presence of police in our public schools and instead invest in social support systems.

police to manage, there will be violence, because those are ultimately the tools that they are most equipped to utilize: handcuffs, threats, guns, arrests. That's what really is at the root of policing. So if we don't want violence, we should try to figure out how to not get the police involved (Donnella, 2020).

Vitale's point was vividly illustrated in the notorious 2016 incident in a South Carolina high school. Captured in a video that went viral, a School Resource Officer, who was white, was called into a classroom when a student, who was Black, would not yield her cell phone (Associated Press, 2016). When she continued to refuse to give up the cell phone, the officer flipped her desk over and dragged her, literally, out of the classroom. Then he handcuffed and arrested her. He also arrested another student, also Black, who argued with him about the arrest.

The officer's response was widely condemned. Eventually, he was fired. Yet, many pointed out that this incident represented a systemic, as well as an individual, failure. That police officer should never have been called to address what was clearly a school discipline situation in the first place. Had it been handled by the teacher, a school administrator, or a counselor trained to understand an adolescent's need to look good in front of peers, and who understood

communities safe. We must end the presence of police in our public schools and instead invest in social support systems (Bentley, 2020).

The Association has it exactly right. During this period of intense reexamination of our assumptions about public safety, let us remember that police presence in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon. Anyone over the age of 35 likely attended schools without police and lived to tell the tale. By reducing reliance on school police, educators will take the first necessary step to reclaiming the mission of schools to prepare students for life in a democratic, multi-ethnic, multi-racial society that values civility and respect for all members. If schools focus on creating climates where students feel safe enough to learn and thrive, they are likely to both reduce violence and crime and increase academic and social-emotional learning.

References

- Ang, D. (2020). *The effects of police violence on inner city youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. Available at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ang/files/PoliceViolence_Ang.pdf.
- Associated Press (2016). Deputy who tossed a S.C. high school student won't be charged. *New York Times*, September 2, 2016. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/03/afternoonupdate/deputy-who-tossed-a-sc-high-school-student-wont-be-charged.html>.
- Bacher-Hicks, A. (2020). *Social costs of proactive policing: The impact of NYC's Stop and Frisk*

Program on educational attainment (working paper). Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sSxhfmDY3N1VAN5XwyRObE65tmAZzhTj/view>.

- Bachman, R., Randolph, A., & Brown, B. (2011). Predicting perceptions of fear at school. *Youth and Society*, 43(2), 705–726. Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.877.1653&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
- Bentley, J. (2020). Ban police officers from MA schools: Teachers union. *Barnstable-Hyannis Patch*, June 22, 2020. Available at: <https://patch.com/massachusetts/barnstable-hyannis/ma-teachers-association-calls-end-police-presence-schools>.
- Blair, J.P., & Schweit, K.W. (2014). *A study of active shooter incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013*. Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Cox, J., & Rich, S. (2018). Scarred by school shootings. *Washington Post*, March 25, 2018. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/us-school-shootings-history/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-school-shootings%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-school-shootings%3Ahomepage%2Fstory.
- Donnella, L. (2020). How much do we need the police? *NPR*, June 3, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/06/03/457251670/how-much-do-we-need-the-police>.
- Goldstein, D. (2020). Do police officers make schools safer or more dangerous? *New York Times*, June 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/schools-police-resource-officers.html>.
- Ho, S. (2020). Seattle bans police officers from schools. *Washington Times*, June 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jun/10/seattle-bans-police-officers-schools/?fbclid=IwAR1MNjafw8ulKwHH1Rs7rBQiZjR8o2Urw7Zx333SXjx20rylw7SF0jYy9yo>.
- Legewie, J., & Fagan, J. (2019). Aggressive policing and the educational performance of minority youth. *American Sociological Review*, February 11, 2019. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0003122419826020?journalCode=asra&>.
- New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force (2013). *Keeping kids in school and out of court: Report and recommendations*. Albany, NY: New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. Available at: <https://www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/NYC-School-JusticeTaskForceReportAndRecommendations.pdf>.
- Piscatelli, J., & Lee, C. (2011). *State policies on school climate and bully prevention efforts*. New York: National School Climate Center. Available at: https://www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/policy/policy_brief.pdf.
- Stern, A., & Petrosino, A. (2018). *What do we know about the effects of school-based law enforcement on school safety?* San Francisco, CA: WestEd Justice and Research Prevention Center. Available at: <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/JPRC-Police-Schools-Brief.pdf>.
- Weistburst, E. (2018). *Patrolling public schools* (policy brief). Austin: Texas Education Research Center at the University of Texas. Available at: <https://texaserc.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/21-UTA034-Brief-BPCAB-11.1.18.pdf>.