The Distribution of Police Officers and Social Workers in US Schools

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Mauro Ampie
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In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, scrutiny of police officers—including those in schools—has increased. At least 33 school districts have ended their contracts with police departments over the past year, but many school districts continue to employ police officers as an investment in student safety.[1] Hiring school police officers is not the only way to invest in safer schools, however. Social science research has shown that, in terms of improving student outcomes, school mental health staff members are a far better investment than school police officers. Nonetheless, high school students are more likely to attend a school with a police officer than with a social worker in about 77 percent of states.

Though some studies do find that school police presence decreases the rates of serious student misbehavior, it comes with considerable trade-offs.[2] Police presence in schools is associated with increased criminalization of students and decreased rates of high school graduation and college enrollment.[3] Students at schools with a higher police presence are also more likely to face disciplinary action for low-level misbehaviors and law enforcement referrals for nonserious crimes.[4]

[1] Maya Riser-Kositsky and Stephen Sawchuk, "Which Districts Have Cut School Policing Programs?" *Education Week,* June 4, 2021, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/which-districts-have-cut-school-policing-programs/2021/06; and Amir Whitaker, Sylvia Torres-Guillén, Michelle Morton, Harold Jordan, Stefanie Coyle, Angela Mann, and Wei-Ling Sun, *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.).

[2] Matt Barnum, "Do Police Keep Schools Safe? Fuel the School-to-Prison Pipeline? Here's What Research Says," Chalkbeat, June 23, 2020, https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/6/23/21299743/police-schools-research.

[3] Emily M. Homer and Benjamin W. Fisher, "Police in Schools and Student Arrest Rates across the United States: Examining Differences by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Journal of School Violence* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 192, https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2019.1604377; and Emily K. Weisburst, "Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-Term Education Outcomes," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2019), 338, https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22116.

[4] Weisburst, "Patrolling Public Schools"; and Chongmin Na and Denise C. Gottfredson, "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors," *Justice Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 619, https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2011.615754.

The impacts of school mental health staff members, on the other hand, include improved school climate, improved student academic and socioemotional skills, and fewer disciplinary incidents.[5] Social workers in particular are an especially effective support mechanism for students, associated with increases in students' interpersonal and academic skills and high school graduation rates.[6]

Police officers and social workers are not mutually exclusive, but understanding which students encounter which support staff every day can shed light on disparities in students' educational experiences.

Prevalence of School Police, Nationally and by State

Using 2017–18 data from the publicly available Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), I find that 55 percent of high school students, 38 percent of middle school students, and 18 percent of elementary school students attend a school with police presence. These high school and middle school rates are lower than the 67 percent and 45 percent reported in the 2013–14 CRDC, suggesting that police presence at secondary schools decreased by about 10 percentage points from 2013–14 to 2017–18.[7]

The four states with the highest shares of high school students in schools with police officers are Virginia (92 percent), South Carolina (87 percent), Tennessee (86 percent), and Georgia (85 percent)— all in the South. And given that in 2018, Florida passed legislation requiring a "safe school officer" at every school, this southern state likely also has a particularly high rate of school police (Florida did not accurately report its school police data in the 2017–18 CRDC, so exact figures cannot be constructed).[8] Parts of the Northeast also have a relatively large share of high school students in schools with police officers—specifically, New Hampshire (76 percent), Rhode Island (75 percent), and Massachusetts (73 percent).

[5] Ann M. DiGirolamo, Dimple Desai, Deana Farmer, Susan McLaren, Ani Whitmore, Danté McKay, Layla Fitzgerald, Stephanie Pearson, and Garry McGiboney, "Results from a Statewide School-Based Mental Health Program: Effects on School Climate," *School Psychology Review* 50, no. 1 (January 2021): 81, https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1837607; Edmund J. Nocera, Kathleen Whitbread, and Gene P. Nocera, "Impact of School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports on Student Behavior in the Middle Grades," *RMLE Online* 37, no. 8 (January 2014): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2014.11462111; and Tracy E. Waasdorp, Catherine P. Bradshaw, and Philip J. Leaf, "The Impact of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Bullying and Peer Rejection: A Randomized Controlled Effectiveness Trial," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 166, no. 2 (2012): 149, https://doi.org/10.1001/archpediatrics.2011.755.

[6] Michelle E. Alvarez, Lynn Bye, Randy Bryant, and Ann Marie Mumm, "School Social Workers and Educational Outcomes," *Children and Schools* 35, no. 4 (October 2013): 235, https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdt019; and Daniel Scott Diehl, "Social Work Services in Schools: Evaluation of a Community-School Social Work Model" (PhD diss., University of Louisville, 2003), https://www.proquest.com/openview/7bf5feed67436486f344ababafe4e73c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.

[7] Constance A. Lindsay, Victoria Lee, and Tracey Lloyd, "The Prevalence of Police Officers in US Schools," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, June 21, 2018, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/prevalence-police-officers-us-schools.

[8] "What Does the 'Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act' Mean for Students?" American Civil Liberties Union, Florida, accessed November 17, 2021, https://www.aclufl.org/en/what-does-marjory-stoneman-douglas-high-school-public-safety-act-mean-students.

FIGURE 1
Share of High School Racial and Ethnic Minority Students Exposed to a Police Officer
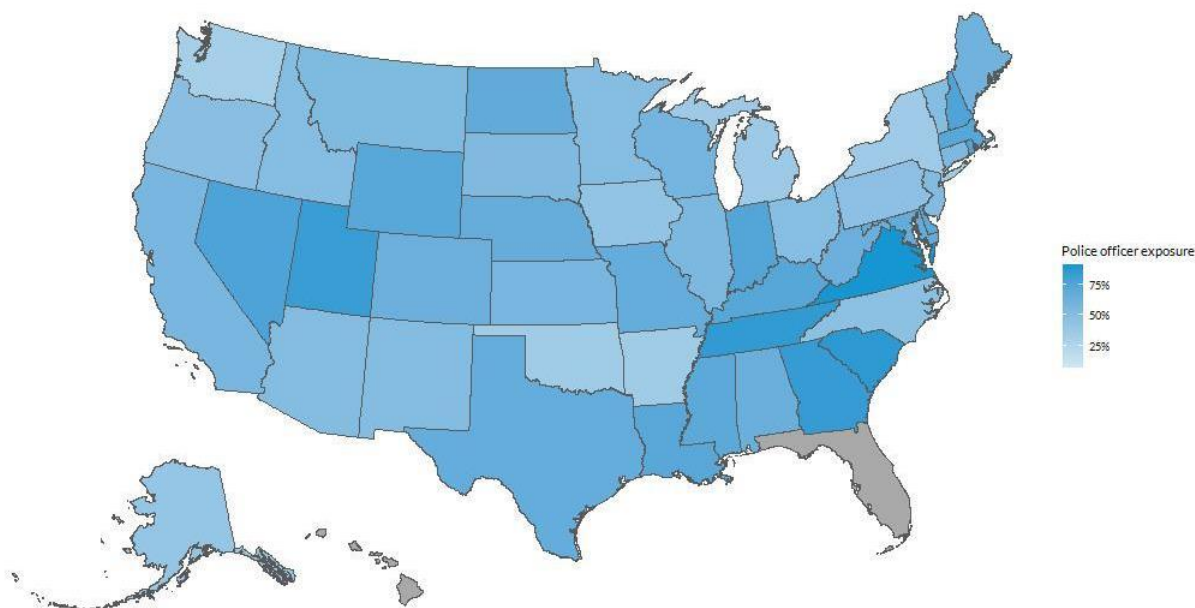
Source: 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data.
Notes: Racial and ethnic minorities include Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students. The figure shows, for each state, the share of high school students that attend a school with a law enforcement officer on staff. Although not shown, the shares for middle school students are remarkably similar. Florida and Hawaii are shown in gray because they inaccurately reported their school policing data to the Civil Rights Data Collection.

## Prevalence of School Social Workers, Nationally and by State

Because mental health supports are often considered a direct alternative to policing, a reasonable prediction would be that states with lower rates of school police officers have higher rates of school mental health staff members.[9] And 2017–18 CRDC data show this to be mostly true.

Southern states, which generally have high rates of school police presence, have particularly low rates of social workers in high school—most notably, Oklahoma (5 percent), Florida (9 percent), Mississippi (13 percent), and Alabama (15 percent). In contrast, some parts of the Northeast, Midwest, and West have high shares of their high school students in schools with social workers—specifically, Rhode Island (92 percent), New Jersey (89 percent), Connecticut (89 percent), Maine (79 percent), New York (79 percent), Illinois (78 percent), and New Mexico (77 percent). That Rhode Island also has a high share of high school students in schools with police officers demonstrates that school police officers and social workers are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

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[9] Education Resource Strategies (ERS), "Three Key Questions for Rethinking Student Safety Investments" (Watertown, MA: ERS, 2020)

FIGURE 2
**Share of High School Racial and Ethnic Minority Students Exposed to a Social Worker**
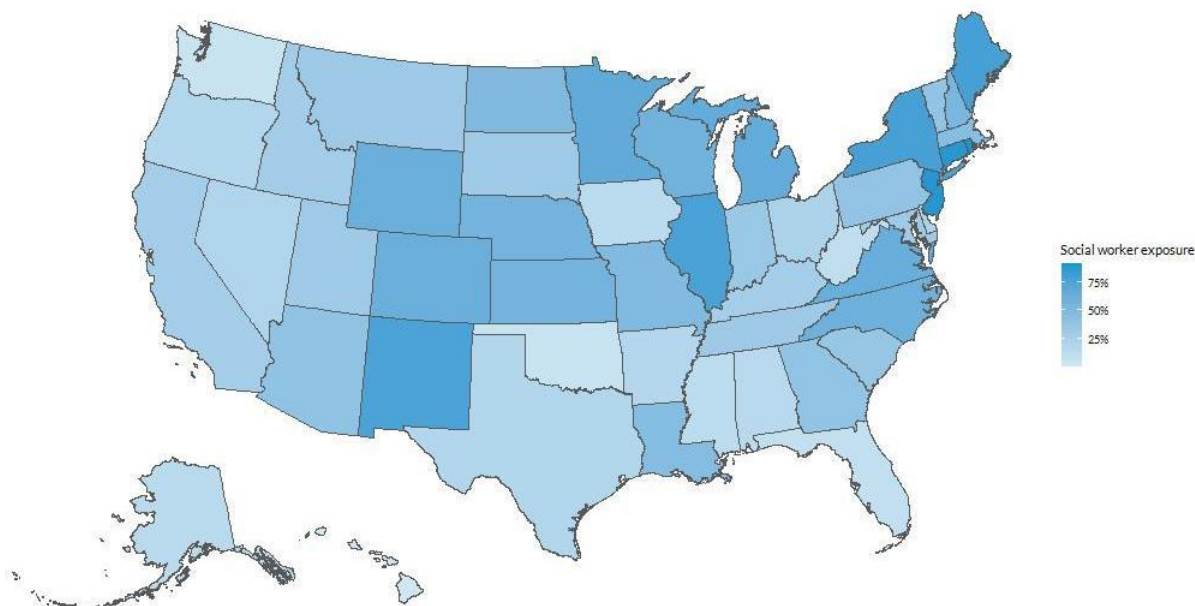
Source: 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data.
Notes: Racial and ethnic minorities include Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students. The figure shows, for each state, the share of high school students that attend a school with a social worker on staff. Although not shown, the shares for middle school students are remarkably similar.

Nationally, 40 percent of high school students, 33 percent of middle school students, and 31 percent of elementary school students attend a school with a social worker. Though elementary school students are more likely to attend a school with a social worker than a police officer, middle and high school students are more likely to attend a school with a police officer than a social worker. Furthermore, in about 77 percent of states (37 of the 48 with available data), a high school student is more likely to attend a school with a police officer than with a social worker. The situation is similar for middle school students, who are more likely to attend a school with a police officer than with a social worker in about 71 percent of states.

FIGURE 3
Difference between Social Worker Likelihood and Police Office Likelihood in High Schools
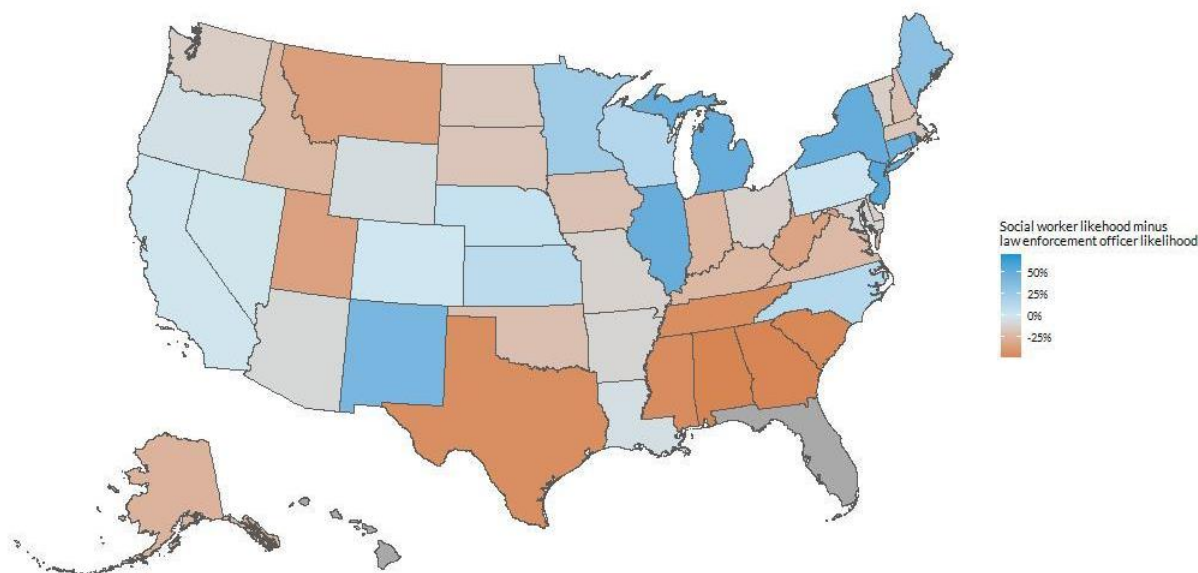
Source: 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

Notes: The figure shows, for each state, whether a high school student is more likely to attend a school with a police officer or with a social worker. In states shaded blue, high school students are more likely to attend a school with a social worker; in states shaded orange, students are more likely to attend a school with a police officer. The darker the state, the more pronounced the disparity. For example, Oklahoma is dark orange because a high school student in this state is six times more likely to attend a school with a police officer than with a social worker. In California, a lighter shade of orange, a high school student is two times more likely. Florida and Hawaii shown in gray because they inaccurately reported their school police data to the Civil Rights Data Collection.

Prevalence of School Police, by the School's Racial and Ethnic Composition

The negative effects of school police are often felt most acutely by students of color, despite showing similar rates of misbehavior as their white peers, so it is especially problematic to place police officers at schools predominantly composed of students of color.[10] These schools also stand to gain the most from increasing student access to social workers and other socioemotional staff. Black and Hispanic students face a plethora of disparities—language barriers, undocumented status, limited access to college—and socioemotional support staff members can provide crucial support to these students throughout their educational trajectories.[11]

A previous Urban Institute analysis examining 2013–14 CRDC data found that high school students in schools with a high share of Black and Hispanic students were more likely to have police officers in

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[10] Russell J. Skiba and Natasha T. Williams, "Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts about Racial Differences in Behavior: A Summary of the Literature" (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2014); and "Youth of Color," American Civil Liberties Union, Florida, accessed November 17, 2021, https://www.aclufl.org/en/youth-color.

[11] Desiree Vega, Erik M. Hines, Renae D. Mayes, and Paul C. Harris, "Preparing Latino Students for Life after High School: The Important Role of School Counselors and School Psychologists," *National Youth-at-Risk Journal* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2016), 70.

their schools.[12] This result was primarily driven by the lower prevalence of school police officers in schools where Black and Hispanic students make up 0 to 20 percent of students. In contrast, in the 2017–18 CRDC data, I find that a high school student's likelihood of attending a school with a police officer is virtually the same (56 percent versus 55 percent) for students in schools where Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students make up 0 to 20 percent of students and for students in schools where Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students make up 80 to 100 percent of students. For high school students in schools where Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students make up 20 to 80 percent of students, the likelihood of attending a school with a police officer is slightly higher (around 62 percent).

These results are surprising in several ways. Previous literature has suggested that initiatives to increase school policing often concentrate on schools with high concentrations of Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students, but my analyses suggest that in 2017–18, police officers were not more prevalent in high schools composed entirely or almost entirely of these students.[13] The key factor driving this result is the large change in school police presence in high schools where Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students make up 80 to 100 percent of students. In 2013–14, 68 percent of students attending schools where Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students made up 80 to 100 percent of students had school police officers; by 2017–18, this rate had dropped 13 percentage points to 55 percent.

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[12] Lindsay, Lee, and Lloyd, "The Prevalence of Police Officers."

[13] American Civil Liberties Union, *Bullies in Blue: The Origins and Consequences of School Policing* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

FIGURE 4

Share of High School Students Attending a School with Police Officers or Social Workers, by Racial and Ethnic Minority Share
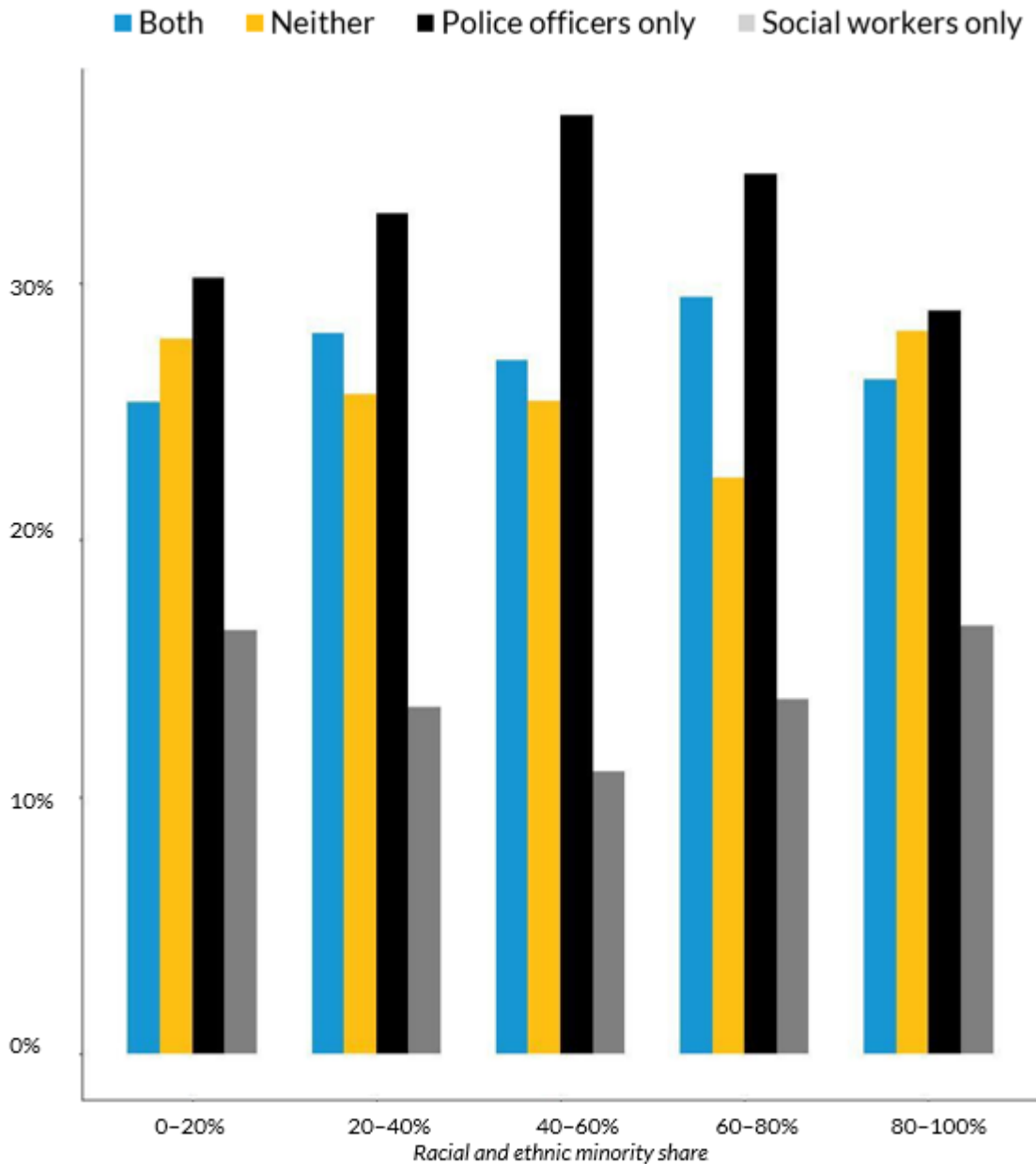
Source: 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data.

Notes: The figure shows, nationally, the share of high school students that attend a school with a police officer, social worker, both, or neither. The x-axis is the share of a school's student body that is Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial. Florida and Hawaii schools are excluded because they inaccurately reported their school policing data to the Civil Rights Data Collection. Although not shown, the shares for middle school students are remarkably similar. Of note, Asian and Pacific Islander students have not been explicitly separated out because previous literature on school policing suggests that they are not disproportionately targeted by school officials in the ways that Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students are.

Prevalence of School Social Workers, by the School's Racial and Ethnic Composition

The likelihood of a middle or high school student attending a school with a social worker does not vary much across different student body demographic make-ups. At the high school level, the likelihood of attending a school with a social worker hovers between 38 percent and 43 percent for all concentrations of Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students. At the middle school level, the rates all hover between 33 percent and 36 percent. Thus, the rate of social worker presence in secondary schools is not strongly linked to a school's demographic composition. Though it is reassuring that Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students are not disproportionately deprived of social workers, hopefully the schools with high shares of these students will be able to achieve higher rates of social worker presence. These students often face additional challenges throughout their schooling, and social workers can provide crucial support.

Implications for Policymakers and District Officials

School mental health support staff members are expensive investments, but so are school police officers. Social workers are ideally positioned to help students deal with various educational disparities, such as poverty, language barriers, and limited access to college. Handcuffs do not address these underlying inequities and serve only to put students directly in contact with the judicial system. State legislators and district officials should therefore consider diverting funds away from school police officers and into increased school mental health support staff, especially at schools that have a high concentration of students with high needs. Switching from policing and punitive discipline to mental health supports and restorative justice is a critical step toward a public schooling system that is equipped to serve all students appropriately.

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Acknowledgments

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