

Ending the School-To-Prison Pipeline: A Case Study of Cincinnati Public Schools

The call for school discipline reform:

A successful plan to address racially disparate discipline in Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) must be multifaceted. CPS must (1) implement restorative justice practices for all staff, (2) terminate the Memorandum of Understanding with the Cincinnati Police Department (CPD) and remove School Resource Officers (SROs), and (3) undergo regular audits of discipline data.

Black students in CPS are

5 times more likely

to face exclusionary discipline than their white peers.

Over **400** students negatively interact with the justice system each year:

- **81** arrests
- **135** warrants
- **191** summons/referrals

Most of these could have been handled by school staff instead of police.

Black students make up **63%** of CPS

85% of in-school suspensions

78% of expulsions

93% of out-of-school suspensions

89% of police referrals

There are

16 SROs assigned to the district.

CPS employs

106 private security guards

and has authorized

\$2.5 million

to hire additional guards in 2022.

SROs are called to resolve at least **4850** conflicts annually. This, on average, results in:

- **400** formal legal interactions
- **1515** student/parent conferences

The vast majority are so minor that they don't result in any discipline.

School administrators can - and should - handle them instead.

SROs visit up to

7 schools per day, covering all grade levels.

The rotation looks more like a standard "beat," where policing young people is the unit's aim.

Only **.2%** of student interactions with the justice system involve a gun or teacher assault.

They are (1) minor (and for guns, almost exclusively non-violent), (2) resolvable by school administrators.

▶ The MOU between the police and the district grants CPD **unilateral power** over school policing. CPD decides placement, identity, and number of SROs with no required reporting to CPS.

What we know about school discipline:

- **Zero tolerance policies lead to more severe discipline for smaller infractions.** They now apply to 75-80% of discipline, which are often minor misbehaviors (i.e. fistfight, loitering).
- Black students are disciplined for more subjective and less serious offenses (i.e. disrespect, excessive noise, threat) than white students.
- SROs don't prevent crime. They increase arrests for minor misbehaviors that administrators can, should, and have historically handled.
- **SROs protect white students and police Black students.** In majority-white schools, SROs greatest noted concerns are external threats. In majority-Black schools, SROs treat students as the biggest threat.
- SRO implicit bias training doesn't work. It heightens and solidifies biases, resulting in amplified disparities.

How Cincinnati Public Schools' discipline scheme contributes to systemic racism:

- ▶ **The perception of some schools as “more dangerous” has no relation to the number of police interactions on campus.** Intervention frequency is determined by specific SROs, not specific schools. Officers who were reassigned within CPS maintained consistent discipline rates despite changes in perceived school danger. But schools saw massive fluctuations despite similar frequency of misbehavior.
- Unlike imminent danger situations that don't require a warrant (i.e. weapons frisk), SROs get warrants for non-urgent situations that could be handled by school staff (i.e. personal belongings search for drugs).
- ▶ **The duration, content, and personalization of SRO conferences is not standardized.** A “conference” is as broad as a lengthy 1-on-1 meeting with a child or a mass email to parents. Their frequent use suggests “positive” behavior intervention is a primary job task, despite no counseling or psychology qualifications.
- The preferred type of discipline is up to SRO discretion and varies widely. Officers consistently favor one form of discipline (i.e. arrest, warrant, conference) **for all types of behavior**. For example, one officer favored warrants and conferences (3 arrests, 60 warrants, 100 conferences). Another used only arrests (48 arrests, 0 warrants, 0 conferences). A third held conferences (2 arrests, 2 warrants, 200 conferences).
- ▶ **Many informal interactions with SROs are negative.** Some performance evaluations show a history of intimidating and rude behavior when talking with students, thus harming their trust in, and relationship with law enforcement in opposition to the program's goals of bettering police-community relations.

Definitions:

- **Exclusionary discipline:** a punishment that removes a student from the classroom (i.e. suspension, arrest)
- **Zero tolerance:** policies that mandate a specific punishment for misbehavior (usually exclusionary)
- **Restorative justice:** a guided, flexible practice that emphasizes harm reparation for misbehavior without punitive measures, addressing the root causes of misbehavior while keeping children in the classroom