



R E S E A R C H   A N D   A D V O C A C Y   F O R   R E F O R M



**Written Statement of  
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**Prepared for the Senate Judiciary  
Subcommittee on the Constitution,  
Civil Rights, and Human Rights**

**Hearing on “Proposals for Reducing  
Gun Violence: Protecting Our  
Communities While Respecting the  
Second Amendment”**

**February 11, 2013**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Sentencing Project, a national nonprofit organization engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice policy, appreciates this opportunity to offer our views to the Subcommittee on the important issue of how to protect our communities, and particularly our youth, from gun violence, and how to promote safety in schools.

Research to date demonstrates that it is counterproductive for public safety goals to add more police to schools. In order to reduce violence and promote educational objectives, it is far more effective to provide the nation's children with the necessary resources to support their emotional, mental, and scholastic development through strong school environments. We strongly support comprehensive, evidence-based solutions in the jurisdictions where they are needed to build strong communities and keep our children and families safe.

### **An Opportunity to Reflect**

Recent mass shootings in the United States invite us to reflect and take meaningful action to improve our national policies around gun control, access to mental health services for at-risk youth, and support for violence prevention and intervention programs in our nation's vulnerable schools and communities. As various proposals from a diverse array of stakeholders are considered, we urge caution against adopting policies that could worsen outcomes for youth, support an unhealthy presence of police in schools, and lead to unnecessary involvement in the justice system for youth.

### **A Counterproductive Violence Reduction Strategy**

Research shows that placing armed police in schools actually increases physical dangers to youth. A 2011 longitudinal study of 470 schools nationwide examined school safety over a period of years (2003- 2004, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008) during which police officers were added to some schools but not others over time. The researchers found “...no evidence suggesting that [School Resource Officers] or other sworn law-enforcement officers contribute to school safety. That is, for no crime type was an increase in the presence of police significantly related to decreased crime rates. The preponderance of evidence suggests that, to the contrary, more crimes involving weapons possession and drugs are recorded in schools that add police officers than in similar schools that do not.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Na, C. and Gottfredson, D. (2011). Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors. *Justice Quarterly*, pp 1-32; Similar results found in this study: Jennings, W. G.; Khey, D. N.; Maskaly, J.; & Donner, C. (2011). *Evaluating the Relationship between Law Enforcement and School Security Measures and Violent Crime in Schools*. *Journal of Police Negotiations* 11(2): 109-124.

Most schools continue to be extraordinarily safe places for children. Violence in schools has been dropping steadily for the past 20 years since its peak in 1993, along with violent crime generally. More than 98% of youth homicides do not occur in schools. In the 2009-2010 school year there was approximately one homicide or suicide of school-age youth at school per 2.7 million.<sup>2</sup>

### **Expanding Juvenile Justice Referrals & Reducing Students' Opportunities to Succeed**

Students who attend schools with on-site law enforcement are in greater danger of unnecessary involvement in the juvenile justice system through the criminalization of behaviors traditionally resolved through standard school discipline policies. In a study using data from 2,270 U.S. schools from the National Center for Education Statistics' national School Survey on Crime and Safety, researchers used various demographic factors to compare the rate at which schools report offenses to the police. They found that schools using law enforcement officers report offenses to the police at a significantly higher rate than those not using such officers.<sup>3</sup>

Law enforcement officers are ill-equipped to respond to students in need of mental health attention. Because police are not trained in fields such as education and developmental psychology, decisions such as whether to arrest a student rely on criteria that do not include the full range of options that would be provided if school officials responded.<sup>4</sup> In many of today's schools, police officers are now making decisions that were previously made by educational administrators.

### **Disproportionate Effects on Youth of Color**

Studies routinely find that the minority composition of the school and the percentage of students identified as low-income are significant drivers in elevated percentages of offenses reported to the police.<sup>5</sup>

Proposals that include increased police presence in schools disproportionately affect youth of color and are now known to drive the school-to-prison pipeline, a concern recently considered by this Subcommittee in a hearing that drew experts together to discuss the increasingly troubling relationship between school misbehavior and juvenile justice involvement. Among the research discussed was the recent finding by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil

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<sup>2</sup> Robers, S., Zhang, J., Truman, J., Snyder, T.D. (2011). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2011*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Torres, M. & Stefkovich, J. A. (2009). *Demographics and Police Involvement: Implications for Student Civil Liberties and Just Leadership*. *Education Administration Quarterly* 45(3): 450-473.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, B. (2006). Understanding and Assessing School Police Officers: A Conceptual and Methodological Comment. *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Vol. 34: 591- 604.

<sup>5</sup> Torres, M. & Stefkovich, J. A. (2009). *Demographics and Police Involvement: Implications for Student Civil Liberties and Just Leadership*. *Education Administration Quarterly* 45(3): 450-473.

Rights that more than 70% of students arrested or handed over to law enforcement officials from school are youth of color.<sup>6</sup>

### **Poor Use of Resources**

To the extent that security measures are ineffective, they create a false sense of security and a threatening environment directly as well as indirectly by diverting resources and money from more effective preventative measures.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time that more police have been added to schools, mental health services and funding for guidance counselors and school psychologists has been reduced to historic lows. Yet, a common thread in recent mass shootings is the undetected or untreated signs of mental health disorders despite signs of trouble displayed by the shooters. In the 2008-2009 school year, 5,246 law enforcement officers were placed in New York City's public schools, while only 3,152 guidance counselors were employed.<sup>8</sup> As noted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), placing law enforcement officers in all of our nation's schools would consume one-seventh of the nation's police force.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Among our most solemn responsibilities as a nation is to protect and nurture our children. Unfortunately, when crises strike, there is often a temptation to tighten sanctions and add new punishments, but we know that these actions have a disparate effect on at-risk youth—especially youth of color—long after the crisis has passed.

Real, sustainable public safety is most effectively achieved by involving an array of stakeholders, including law enforcement, courts, schools, health and social service providers, and other community organizations to work collaboratively on evidence-based youth safety interventions. It is counterproductive to merely ramp up law enforcement. In order to reduce violence, it is far more effective to provide the nation's children with the necessary resources to support their emotional, mental, and scholastic development.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2012). The Transformed Civil Rights Data Collection: Revealing New Truths about our Nation's Schools. Washington, DC: OCR. Available online: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2012-data-summary.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Addington, L. (2009). Cops and Cameras: Public School Security as a Policy Response to Columbine. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol. 52 (10): 1426-1446.

<sup>8</sup> New York City ACLU (n.d.) School to Prison Pipeline Fact Sheet. Available online: [http://www.nyclu.org/files/stpp\\_numbers.pdf](http://www.nyclu.org/files/stpp_numbers.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> International Association of Chiefs of Police (December 21, 2012). Statement of IACP President Craig Steckler on Proposal to Place Armed Police Officers in All Schools. (available upon request.)