

Unequal Exposure to School Resource Officers, by Student Race, Ethnicity, and Income

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Sagen Kidane and Emily Rauscher
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The presence of school resource officers (SROs) and law enforcement in schools is directly related to the number of student offenses reported for misbehaviors, and SROs are much more likely to be present in schools serving Black and Latinx students.¹ But we know less about how the presence of police in schools varies by race, ethnicity, and income. Our analysis of 2018 data shows that schools with high concentrations (80 percent or more) of Black or Latinx students are more likely to have an SRO present on school grounds compared with schools with high concentrations of white students, regardless of income level. Put another way, lower-income schools are about seven times more likely to have an SRO if they are predominantly Black or Latinx than if they are predominantly white.

Between 2006 and 2018, the percentage of schools with at least one SRO on site increased by 20 percent.² Prior research has focused on the disproportionate impact of school discipline on Black and Latinx students, with a recent study finding that an increased presence of SROs leads to more exclusionary responses to punish Black and Latinx students compared with white students.³ Research also shows that schools with high concentrations of minoritized students are more likely to discipline Black and Latinx students, even in cases where they behave similarly to white students.⁴

Although these studies report important findings for schools and policymakers, data on student race, ethnicity, and economic background can show which types of schools are more likely to have an SRO, with implications for which types of students are more likely to encounter an SRO.

¹ Mauro Ampie, “The Distribution of Police Officers and Social Workers in US Schools” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021); Matthew T. Theriot, “School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no. 3 (May–June 2009): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.008>; and Deanna N. Devlin and Denise C. Gottfredson, “The Roles of Police Officers in Schools: Effects on the Recording and Reporting of Crime,” *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 16, no. 2 (2018): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016680405>.

² Digest of Education Statistics, table 233.70.

³ Scott Crosse, Denise C. Gottfredson, Erin L. Bauer, Zhiquan Tang, Michele A. Harmon, Carol A. Hagen, and Angela D. Greene, “Are Effects of School Resource Officers Moderated by Student Race and Ethnicity?” *Crime & Delinquency* 68, no. 3 (2022): 381, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128721999346>.

⁴ Kelly Welch and Allison Ann Payne, “Racial Threat and Punitive School Discipline,” *Social Problems* 57, no. 1 (2010): 25; and Russell J. Skiba, Robert H. Horner, Choong-Geun Chung, M. Karega Rausch, Seth L. May, and Tary Tobin, “Race Is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline,” *School Psychology Review* 40, no. 1 (2011): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2011.12087730>.

We use 2017–18 school-level data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) on SROs, linked to 2017–18 data on student composition from the National Center for Education Statistics and to 2017–18 Urban Institute data on the school-level share of students in poverty (Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools).

We use these data to compare the share of schools with any SRO by student racial, ethnic, and income composition. We compare schools at various levels of student racial and ethnic composition (less than 20 percent, from 20 to 49 percent, from 50 to 79 percent, and at least 80 percent), separately for schools above and below the national median of the student poverty rate.⁵

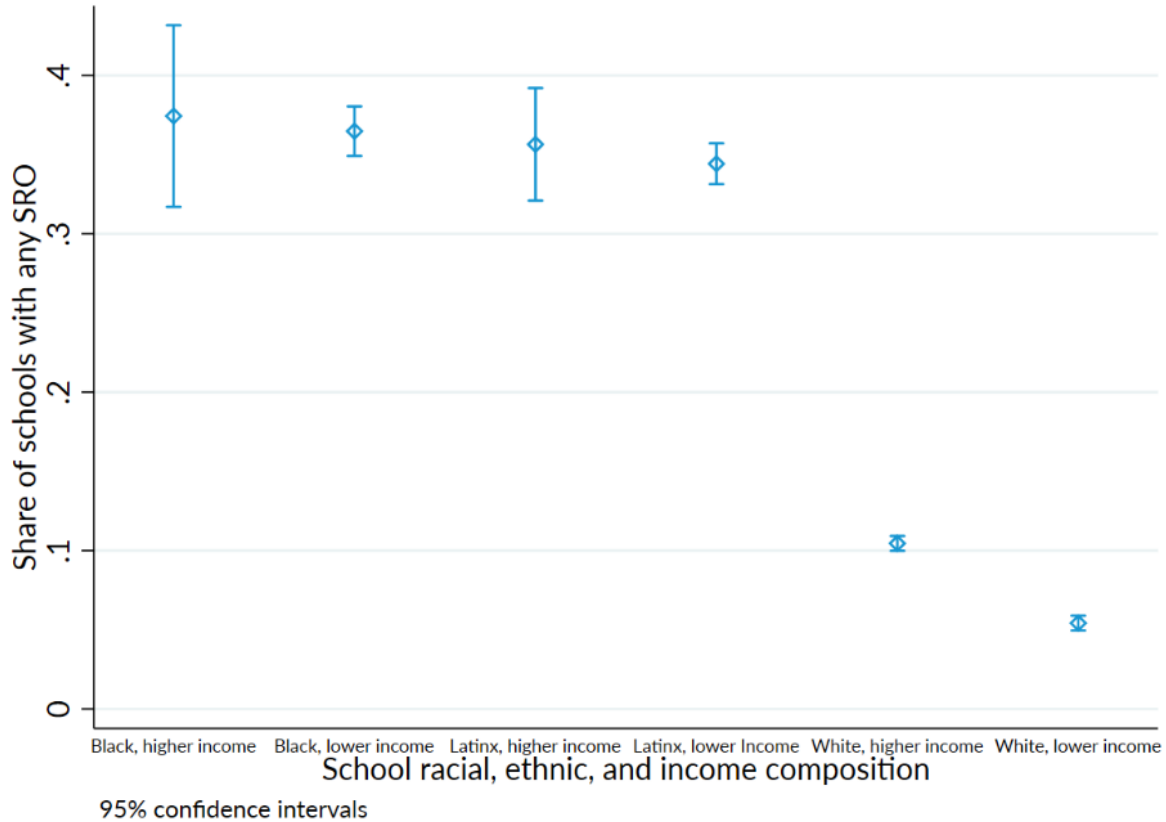
We find that schools with a relatively high Black or Latinx population are more likely to have an SRO, regardless of students' economic backgrounds, on average. Thirty-four to 37 percent of schools with high concentrations of Black or Latinx students have SROs present, compared with 5 to 11 percent of predominantly white schools (figure 1).

⁵ All estimates are weighted by student enrollment and use the modified estimates of student poverty rate, which adjust for variation by student race and ethnicity to align more closely with US Census Bureau estimates. See Emily Gutierrez, Kristin Blagg, and Matthew Chingos, *Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools: A New School-Level Measure of Economic Need* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2022).

FIGURE 1

Predominantly Black and Latinx Schools Are More Likely to Have an SRO, Regardless of Income

Share of schools with any SROs, by income composition among schools with high shares of Black, Latinx, or white students



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Source: Authors' analysis of 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data linked to 2017–18 National Center for Education Statistics school-level membership data and 2017–18 Urban Institute school-level poverty rate (modified Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools measure).

Notes: SRO = school resource officer. All estimates are weighted by student enrollment. High proportion represents schools with a population of 80 percent or more students in each race or ethnicity category indicated on the x-axis. “Higher” and “lower” income indicate schools above and below the median student poverty rate.

The difference in exposure to SROs between higher- and lower-income schools with high shares of Black and Latinx students is negligible, while the income difference for schools with high proportions of white students is larger: 5 percent of lower-income schools have an SRO, compared with 11 percent of higher-income schools.

When we look at schools across the continuum of racial and ethnic composition, we find that students in both lower- and higher-income schools are more likely to have exposure to SROs when the proportion of Black or Latinx students is higher (table 1). The opposite is true when the share of white students is larger, and majority-white schools are more likely to have an SRO if they are higher income.

TABLE 1

Share of Schools with a School Resource Officer, by Student Race or Ethnicity and Income Composition Categories

School composition	Black		Latinx		White	
	Higher income	Lower income	Higher income	Lower income	Higher income	Lower income
< 20%	20.1%	20.3%	17.0%	17.7%	32.1%	31.7%
20–50%	24.6%	24.5%	28.4%	22.3%	27.6%	22.0%
50–80%	25.0%	27.1%	29.2%	27.7%	21.5%	12.3%
≥ 80%	37.4%	36.4%	35.7%	34.4%	10.5%	5.4%
Total schools	44,813	44,426	44,813	44,426	44,813	44,426

Source: Authors’ analysis of 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data linked to 2017–18 National Center for Education Statistics school-level membership data and 2017–18 Urban Institute school-level poverty rate (modified Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools measure).

Notes: “Higher” and “lower” income indicate schools above and below the median student poverty rate. Share of students in each race or ethnicity category indicated in the school composition column. Numbers of schools in each category are reported in appendix table A.1.

Implications

Other factors could explain differences in the presence of SROs, including urbanicity, state policy, and income differences beyond the above-and-below-median measure we use. But these differences are unlikely to explain the starkly unequal exposure that Black and Latinx students have to SROs. Exposure is particularly troubling for those attending low-income schools, which often have fewer resources and higher discipline rates.

Unequal exposure to SROs may contribute to unequal discipline, with implications for student performance. During the 2017–18 school year, Black students represented 15 percent of enrolled students but made up more than 30 percent of students who experienced a suspension, expulsion, or school arrest.⁶ Removal from the classroom can affect outcomes in academic achievement and school motivation between Black and white children.

Compared with lower-income predominantly white schools, higher exposure to SROs in high-income schools with high concentrations of white students raises questions for future research. For example, this difference could reflect rural-urban differences or unequal perceptions of SROs. Recent research reports that teachers and SROs are less likely to perceive students in predominantly white schools negatively or as a threat to the school community than those in schools with a large proportion of minoritized students.⁷ SRO presence in higher-income predominantly white schools could reflect

⁶ Office for Civil Rights (OCR), “An Overview of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Public Schools for the 2017–18 School Year” (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, OCR).

⁷ Jayanti Owens, “Double Jeopardy: Teacher Biases, Racialized Organizations, and the Production of Racial/Ethnic Disparities in School Discipline,” *American Sociological Review* 87, no. 6 (2022): 1007, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224221135810>; and Benjamin W. Fisher, Ethan M. Higgins, Aaron Kupchik, Samantha Viano, F. Chris Curran, Suzanne Overstreet, Bryant Plumlee, and Brandon Coffey, “Protecting the Flock

more positive experiences of white children exposed to SROs compared with racially marginalized students. Future research should explore the impact that perceptions of SROs have on SRO presence in different school contexts.

District administrators, school boards, and finance officers should draw on the available evidence as they consider whether they need an SRO, whether they are assigning officers fairly across schools, and how they could use funds saved from SROs for other purposes. They can also look to bring in more support staff to identify and mitigate student problems. In 2020, Minneapolis Public Schools removed school police and is using partnerships with community organizations to improve school safety and student well-being.⁸ Some districts have considered hiring social workers and school psychologists for similar reasons. Learning which types of spending are most beneficial for which types of students will help districts direct funds in ways that reduce rather than exacerbate racial inequities.

Appendix

TABLE A.1

Number of Schools, by Student Race, Ethnicity, and Income Composition Categories

School composition	Black		Latinx		White	
	Higher income	Lower income	Higher income	Lower income	Higher income	Lower income
< 20%	39,511	28,974	32,597	24,156	3,747	18,581
20–50%	4,158	7,878	8,672	8,809	8,342	8,886
50–80%	867	3,931	2,843	6,263	16,303	7,981
≥ 80%	277	3,643	701	5,198	16,421	8,978
Total schools	44,813	44,426	44,813	44,426	44,813	44,426

Source: Authors' analysis of 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection data linked to 2017–18 National Center for Education Statistics school-level membership data and 2017–18 Urban Institute school-level poverty rate (modified Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools measure).

Notes: “Higher” and “lower” income indicate schools above and below the median student poverty rate. Proportion of students in each race or ethnicity category indicated in the school composition column.

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or Policing the Sheep? Differences in School Resource Officers' Perceptions of Threats by School Racial Composition,” *Social Problems* 69, no. 2 (2022): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa062>.

⁸ Solomon Gustavo, “Minneapolis Public Schools Adds Violence Interrupters to Provide After-School Safety,” *MinnPost*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.minnpost.com/metro/2022/05/minneapolis-public-schools-adds-violence-interrupters-to-provide-after-school-safety/>.

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