Following nationwide uprisings against police violence in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, many school districts have reexamined the use of police in their schools. Several jurisdictions in the DC metro area are moving to reduce the number and responsibilities of police in schools and implement alternative school safety strategies.¹ In this brief, after reviewing the history and unequal effects of police in US schools, we examine efforts in three of these jurisdictions—Washington, DC; Alexandria, Virginia; and Montgomery County, Maryland—to illustrate the varied approaches localities have taken, the barriers they have faced, and key considerations for policymakers and community members about how to implement and sustain these changes. Lessons from these three jurisdictions can inform national conversations about divesting from law enforcement agencies and investing in alternative safety infrastructure in schools.
BOX 1

About This Brief

This brief is part of a project with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute to increase transparency in the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) budget and to inform strategies to increase nonpolice safety infrastructure in DC. This overview is intended to provide high-level context about efforts to reconsider the role of police in schools in the DC metro area. We conducted a document review of a variety of sources, including academic literature, reports from local agencies, news articles, and publicly available budget information. This brief accompanies an online tool produced by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute that includes detailed breakdowns of the MPD budget. That tool is available at https://www.dcfpi.org/all/visualizing-the-dc-police-budget/.

The Rise of Police in Schools

The concept of the school resource officer (SRO) dates to at least the 1950s, with the first reported program having been in Flint, Michigan (Weiler and Cray 2011). But the use of police in public schools can be traced to the 1940s in places like Indianapolis and Los Angeles. The use of police in schools rose sharply in the 1990s because of responses to several issues; these responses included legislative initiatives that were intended to address school shootings and a racialized narrative around juvenile crime and so-called “super-predators,” a narrative that grew despite the fact that youth violence was declining by the mid-1990s (French-Marcelin and Hinger 2017). Furthermore, in the early 1990s, schools increasingly embraced zero-tolerance policies, which mandated specific responses to student misbehavior irrespective of the severity of that behavior or the context surrounding it (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008). Such policies contributed to the growing narrative of the rise of “delinquent” and “pre-delinquent” youth, terms that were disproportionately applied to Black and Latinx youth in schools (French-Marcelin and Hinger 2017). Along with punitive zero-tolerance policies came the notion that officers must be placed in schools to enforce them, contributing to the expansion and funding of school police officers (Petteruti 2011).

Today, there are several types of school-based officers, including SROs, which are sworn law enforcement officials assigned long term to schools by a municipal or other law enforcement agency; school police officers, which are sworn officers that work for a specific school police department; and school safety officers, which are often nonarmed civilian employees (National Police Foundation 2016). According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, police in schools have a range of responsibilities, including law enforcement, informal mentoring, and teaching. But this varies by school district, and a survey by that association found that the majority of SROs identified their role primarily as law enforcement. Moreover, Wang and coauthors (2020) found that as of the 2017–2018 school year, 61 percent of all schools reported the presence of at least one security staff member at least once a week, and that security staff are more highly concentrated in schools with older students, with 84 percent of high schools and 80 percent of middle schools reporting having security staff. Furthermore, among middle and high schools where Black students made up more than 75 percent of the student
population, 54 percent had at least one law enforcement or security officer on campus, compared with 32.5 percent of schools with majority white populations.\textsuperscript{4}

**Funding Police in Schools**

The organizational and funding structures for school-based police vary widely; school-based officers can be employed by local police departments, sheriffs’ departments, or school systems and can be funded through federal or state grants, local law enforcement budgets, school district budgets, or a combination of these sources.\textsuperscript{5} When these funding sources overlap, it can be difficult to parse the full costs of school police programs and understand how they are funded.

In the mid-1990s, a dramatic increase in the funding of school police programs led to their rapid expansion. The passing of legislation such as the Gun-Free Schools Act and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 paved the way for federally funded support of law enforcement in schools. In 1998, funding was expressly allocated for federal COPS in Schools grants administered by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (French-Marcelin and Hinger 2017), which between 1999 and 2005 granted nearly $823 million in funding to hire over 7,200 SROs.\textsuperscript{6} The federal government’s total investment in school-based police since 1998 has been estimated at over $1 billion.\textsuperscript{7}

**The Harm, Inequity, and Inefficacy of Police in Schools**

The increasing criminalization of typical adolescent behavior through zero-tolerance policies disproportionally affects students of color and students with disabilities.\textsuperscript{8} In addition, the presence of law enforcement in schools is associated with negative outcomes such as disruption to education, increased school suspensions, and increased arrests (Fisher and Hennessy 2016; Owens 2017).

**Arrests and Referrals to Law Enforcement**

The use of school-based officers to enforce school policies can lead to early exposure to the criminal legal system for common student misbehavior, thereby contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, the process through which punitive policies increase student contact with and involvement in the legal system (JPI 2020; LDF 2018; Ryan et al. 2018). Moreover, school-related arrests and referrals to law enforcement disproportionately impact students of color (Homer and Fisher 2018; USCCR 2019). In the 2017–2018 school year, nationally, Black students made up 28.7 percent of referrals to law enforcement from public schools and 31.6 percent of school-based arrests, despite making up just 15.1 percent of enrolled students (OCR 2021). Black students are arrested at 3 times the rate of their white peers, Native American and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are arrested at more than 2 times the rate of their white peers, and Latinx students are arrested at 1.3 times the rate of their white peers (Whitaker et al. 2019). A driver of these disparate impacts may be that SROs are more likely to be posted in schools where students of color are more highly concentrated, producing more opportunities for interaction.\textsuperscript{9} Furthermore, scholars have theorized that disproportionate arrests of Black students are due to “adultification bias,” the false perception that Black children, and in particular Black girls, are
more mature than is reasonable for their age and therefore more criminally culpable, which leads to increased policing of their behavior (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017; Goff et al. 2014).

Students with disabilities also disproportionately experience school-based arrests, accounting for only 12 percent of the student population yet representing a quarter of students arrested and referred to law enforcement (DOE 2014). These inequalities compound for Black students with disabilities, according to a 2019 report by the US Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR 2019). Moreover, the students most impacted by the criminalization of adolescent behavior often live in communities that have been overpoliced and divested from, further deepening the disparate impacts of police in schools.

Exclusionary Discipline

In addition to increased interactions between students and law enforcement, the presence of police in schools has been associated with increased use of exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion. Studies have found that when police are involved in the enforcement of school policies, punishment becomes more severe and zero-tolerance policies are applied more (Fisher and Hennessy 2016). Studies have also found that exclusionary discipline results in lower attendance rates, increased course failures, and a higher likelihood of dropping out, thus limiting future employment and income opportunities (Balfanz, byrnes, and Fox 2014).

There are distinct racial disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline, as Black students are more likely to be suspended and for longer periods (Hoffman 2014; Shollenberger 2015). In the 2017–2018 school year, nationally, despite making up just 15.1 percent of the public school student population, Black students experienced 38.8 percent of expulsions with educational services (whereby a student is removed from their regular school but continues to receive educational services) and 33.3 percent of expulsions without educational services (whereby educational instruction is suspended for the remainder of the school year or longer) (DOE 2014; OCR 2021). Furthermore, Black students experienced 38.2 percent of out-of-school suspensions (OCR 2021). One study of exclusionary discipline in Texas found that Black students had a 31 percent higher chance of experiencing school disciplinary action than otherwise identical white and Latinx students (Fabelo et al. 2011). The use of discipline contributes to student disconnection and can have long-lasting economic and social impacts on students (Ryan and Goodram 2013). Compounded by racial disparities in the application of exclusionary discipline, these adverse outcomes institutionalize racial inequality.

Impacts on Student Safety and Well-Being

Despite the increased interest in placing police in schools in recent decades, there is little evidence that they decrease criminal activity or prevent school shootings (Kupchik 2020). School shootings are relatively rare, making it difficult to study whether police in schools may prevent them. A 2018 Washington Post study, however, found that out of about 200 incidents of gun violence in schools, a school police officer had successfully intervened in just 2 (CFJJ 2020). Similarly, there is a lack of conclusive research on the impact of police in schools on school crime and violence (Kupchik 2020). Placing police in schools has been linked, however, to increased use of exclusionary discipline and
increased numbers of identified offenses related to drugs and weapons, indicating that the addition of police in schools increases monitoring and overenforcement of rules rather than increasing student safety (Gottfredson et al. 2020). In other words, placing police in schools does not necessarily deter students from engaging in criminal behavior and is only a different way of enforcing discipline. As a result, research on the impact of police on crime or violence often lacks conclusive results (RFA n.d.).

Some have argued that the presence of police in schools may actually make schools more dangerous for students, referencing reports of police violence against students in hallways and classrooms, and others have argued that it can create a harmful school climate for students (Whitaker et al. 2019). Research has found that interactions with police officers increase trauma and emotional distress—particularly for students of color—which can negatively impact students’ academic performance (CFJJ 2020). In response to the growing body of evidence indicating the harm police interactions do to students, advocates of police-free schools have argued for increasing school-based mental health services to address students’ needs that may lead to misbehavior rather than relying on law enforcement (King and Schindler 2020).

Rethinking the Role of Police in Schools

The evidence of negative consequences associated with police presence in schools, combined with a lack of conclusive evidence on their potential for improving public safety, is leading many jurisdictions to rethink the role of police in schools. In response to growing evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline and the disparate impacts of police on students of color and students with disabilities, some communities have pushed to remove police from schools altogether. The uprising against police violence after the murder of George Floyd amplified these calls for police-free schools from students, families, community members, and advocates. Many have argued for more restorative approaches to discipline, less harmful strategies to make students safer, and increased funds for critical, and often underresourced, student supports such as counselors and social workers in place of SROs. Below, we spotlight efforts in three jurisdictions across the DC metro area that illustrate the varied approaches districts have taken to meet the demands of community members that police be removed from or reduced in schools. These conversations are ongoing, and this brief represents a snapshot of what had happened through the end of 2021 in these three jurisdictions. Table 1 provides key aspects of these jurisdictions’ efforts.
**TABLE 1**

**Key Changes to Policing in Schools in Three DC Area Jurisdictions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Washington, DC</th>
<th>Alexandria, VA</th>
<th>Montgomery County, MD</th>
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<td>▪ In the summer of 2020, the city council voted to transfer the district’s school security contract from the police department to DC Public Schools.</td>
<td>▪ The city council initially voted in July 2021 to remove police from schools and to reallocate funding for mental health services.</td>
<td>▪ In May 2021, the county council voted to remove police from schools and instead station them outside schools as “community resource officers.”</td>
</tr>
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<td>▪ In 2021, city leaders voted to phase out and eliminate the SRO program from July 1, 2022, to July 1, 2025. During this period, DC will also scale up school-based mental health services.</td>
<td>▪ In response to several incidents at city schools, SROs were reinstated in October 2021 until at least June 2022.</td>
<td>▪ County officials also announced plans to train staff in restorative justice approaches and to hire additional school-based mental health service providers.</td>
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**Notes:** SRO = school resource officer.

**Washington, DC**

The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) School Safety Division has a contract with DC Public Schools (DCPS) to employ school-based security personnel as well as funding to deploy SROs to schools across the district. Consistent with national trends, Black DCPS students are disproportionately affected by the presence of police in schools. In 2019, 92 percent of arrests in DCPS schools were of Black students, and Black girls were 30 times more likely to be arrested than white students of any gender. Despite these disparities, funding for police and security guards in DC schools increased between FY2016 and FY2020 (figure 1).

In light of these disparities, community members and advocates in DC have for years lobbied for police-free schools. These efforts gained widespread public attention following the murder of George Floyd, with over 500 people signing up to testify at the FY2021 MPD budget hearing and over 15,000 people submitting comments, many of which called for the reduction or elimination of the MPD budget and the removal of police from schools.
FIGURE 1
Spending on Police in DC Schools in FY2016 and FY2020

- DCPS security contract
- School resource officer budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total: $27.5 million</th>
<th>Total: $35.4 million</th>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$9.6 million</td>
<td>$17.9 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>$11.8 million</td>
<td>$23.6 million</td>
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**Source:** DC Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of the Metropolitan Police Department budget.

**Notes:** DCPS = District of Columbia Public Schools. In 2020, the DC city council voted to transfer the school security contract from the Metropolitan Police Department to DCPS.

**PROCESS AND KEY EVENTS**

In the summer of 2020, largely in response to resident testimony and advocacy from local organizations for police-free schools, the DC Council voted on several changes to limit the MPD’s role in placing officers and security guards throughout DC public schools. It voted to transfer the management of over 300 unarmed private security guards who had been hired through a private company from the MPD’s School Safety Division to DCPS, a reallocation of $23 million in funds. This transferred responsibility for the management of these security guards to the schools and did not affect the 90 MPD officers in the SRO program. In April 2021, the DC Police Reform Commission, a body created by the DC Council to review police practices and recommend ways to improve public safety for residents, released a final report highlighting 90 such recommendations (DC Police Reform Commission 2021), one of which was to remove police from DCPS schools and eliminate the MPD School Safety Division. This was in line with the recommendations of the Police Free Schools effort led by the Black Swan Academy, a local nonprofit focused on supporting Black youth empowerment.

In the most recent budget cycle, the DC Council took this a step further by voting to phase out the SRO program between July 1, 2022, and July 1, 2025. It also banned school-based arrests, effective immediately. During the phase-out period, the council plans to scale up school-based mental health services for students, which is in line with the goals of advocates for police-free schools in the district.
Though phasing out SROs is a step toward police-free schools in DC, it will not begin to impact the numbers of police in schools until 2022 and the SRO program will not be completely eliminated until 2025. This means many of the high school students fighting for police-free schools in DC now will not see this change take effect until after they have graduated. Furthermore, there is still the question of whether unarmed security guards, which are now managed by DCPS, will remain in the schools.

Alexandria, Virginia

In Alexandria, advocates of police-free schools have met hurdles in removing police and replacing them with other safety infrastructure. The city’s SRO program includes five officers who are deployed to Alexandria’s public high school and middle schools and one officer who serves as a supervisor to the program.

In October 2020, the school board approved a new memorandum of understanding with the Alexandria Police Department that included a requirement that more data be collected to understand the impact of SROs on students. In May 2021, the Alexandria City Council narrowly voted to reallocate nearly $800,000 in funding for its school police program toward initiatives geared at improving school-based mental health services, including the hiring of health therapists, a human services specialist, a mentoring partnership coordinator, and an additional public health nurse. This change retained the 21 unarmed security guards in the schools but removed SROs from schools in the 2021–2022 school year.

In mid-October 2021, however, the Alexandria City Council reversed this order and voted to temporarily return armed officers to schools through June 2022. This contentious reversal was made in reaction to several incidents involving guns in schools that increased calls to return police to schools. The funding allocated for the additional positions referenced above will remain in place. Discussions on the role of police in Alexandria schools and transitioning to nonpolice safety infrastructure that emphasizes student well-being and mentoring are ongoing.

Montgomery County, Maryland

In Montgomery County, proponents of police-free schools have had more success swiftly removing police from schools. The county’s SRO program began in 2002 and staffing levels have since fluctuated.
Most recently, the program consisted of 25 officers and had a total cost of about $3 million as of early 2020.²⁷ Citing persistent racial disparities in school arrests, councilmembers sponsored legislation that would ban SROs from being stationed in schools by the county police department.²⁸ The county employed a racial equity and social justice impact statement, a type of analysis used to predict the impact pending bills would have on racial and ethnic disparities if enacted, to quantify the possible effect of removing SROs from schools. That statement indicated that removing SROs would reduce school arrests and consequently reduce disparate impacts on Black and Latinx students, who were disproportionately represented in school-based arrests.²⁹

**PROCESS AND KEY EVENTS**

In May 2021, the Montgomery County Council voted to approve a police budget that included continued funding for 23 positions for officers who previously worked as SROs.³⁰ But instead of being stationed in the schools, the SROs have been redesigned as “community resource officers,” who are present in the areas around schools, do not maintain relationships with school personnel, and do not regularly patrol inside schools. Instead, the community resource officers will respond to 911 calls or nonemergency calls for services.³¹ The county also allocated $750,000 to train school staff in restorative justice approaches, and the county plans to use American Rescue Plan funds to hire 50 new social workers for county schools. To formalize the new relationship between the county police and the public school system, County Executive Marc Elrich convened the Reimagining School Safety and Student Well-Being Steering Committee, which produced a preliminary report in August 2021.³² On October 13, 2021, Elrich provided a media briefing on the contents of the report, focusing on the committee’s recommendations around mental health and restorative justice services.³³

**EARLY PROGRESS**

Stakeholders succeeded in removing SROs stationed inside schools (a reform many have praised) and providing new resources to support student mental health services. But the proposal to remove SROs from schools was not entirely in line with the demands of local activists and students (including those from the Montgomery County Defund Policing and Invest in Communities Coalition, a coalition of over 25 organizations in the area that supports the complete removal of SROs from schools)³⁴ who have argued that the new plan is insufficient because it moves officers outside school buildings rather than removing them from school environments altogether.³⁵ In addition, this budget change was not brought about via legislation, which may leave the door open for SROs to be used in the future.³⁶

**Key Considerations for Police-Free Schools**

Communities still in the early stages of reconsidering the role of police in schools can learn from jurisdictions that have already employed alternatives and reallocated funding to programs that can promote student safety without relying on maintaining a police presence in schools. In the DC metro area, school districts can learn from one another and from others in the United States that are further along in building new school safety infrastructure, such as the Phoenix Union High School District, which is using participatory budgeting to reallocate SRO dollars.³⁷ We conclude with important
considerations the experiences in DC, Alexandria, and Montgomery County raise for schools looking to reduce or eliminate the role of police.

Reducing or removing police from schools and ending zero-tolerance policies that criminalize adolescent behavior may reduce racial disparities in school arrests and disciplinary actions. Literature on the subject repeatedly associates the presence of police in schools and punitive policies with higher rates of school discipline and disparate impacts on Black students. In Montgomery County, via a racial equity and social justice impact statement, legislators found that the removal of SROs would likely reduce racial disparities in school arrests.

To promote the safety and well-being of students, schools can invest in school-based mental health services and restorative justice programs instead of employing police. School districts have had success investing in mental health programs such as Eugene, Oregon’s, Helping Out Our Teens in Schools program, which provides integrated health support, crisis response, and short-term counseling to high school students. Recognizing the connection between student mental health and behavior, Alexandria and Montgomery County allocated resources to support school-based mental health programming and to increase the number of counselors available to students.

When considering reallocating funding, schools and policymakers should pay attention to the perspectives and preferences of students and community members—particularly those disproportionately impacted by overpolicing. To ensure the voices of students, parents, and school faculty are heard in reallocation conversations, the Phoenix Union High School District has employed participatory budgeting, a method of allocating public money directly through community-driven democratic processes. In addition, several organizations, including the Black Swan Academy in Washington, DC, engage with and empower students in their advocacy to ensure the voices of people most affected by school policies are heard.

Notes


4 Kristen Harper and Deborah Temkin, “Compared to majority white schools, majority Black schools are more likely to have security staff,” Child Trends, April 26, 2018, https://www.childtrends.org/compared-to-majority-white-schools-majority-black-schools-are-more-likely-to-have-security-staff.


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