



Legislative Testimony
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Written Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 1095, An Act Concerning School Resource Officers

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am writing to testify in support of Senate Bill 1095, An Act Concerning School Resource Officers.

The ACLU-CT believes that in order to reduce the harm that policing is causing communities of color across the state, Connecticut must reduce the role, responsibilities, and presence of police. This means, at minimum, diverting funds from policing to building safe and healthy communities. School resource officers are police, just as much as any other law enforcement staff across the state, and their in-school policing has much of the same effects on school communities as municipal and state policing have on the broader community. Police presence in schools is a key link in the school-to-prison pipeline.

When police are in schools, kids—especially Black and Latinx kids—are more likely to be arrested.¹ School police are also disproportionately arresting students with disabilities.² These disparities are stark: police are five times more likely to arrest Black girls in schools as white girls.³ The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil

¹ West Resendes, *Police in Schools Continue to Target Black, Brown, and Indigenous Students with Disabilities. The Trump Administration Has Data That's Likely to Prove It*, ACLU NEWS & COMM. (July 9, 2020), available at <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/police-in-schools-continue-to-target-black-brown-and-indigenoustudents-with-disabilities-the-trump-administration-has-data-thats-likely-to-prove-it/>.

² *Id.*

³ Amir Whitaker et al., *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students*, at 30, ACLU (Mar. 2019), available at <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>.

Rights found that while Black students comprised 15 percent of students enrolled in public schools, they accounted for 31 percent of students referred to or arrested by the police.⁴ When the intersections of those identities combine, it is disastrous for BIPOC students who are also disabled.⁵ The acts which underlie these arrests are shocking: spraying perfume, criticizing a police officer, kicking a trashcan, throwing a baby carrot, taking a milk carton, wearing saggy pants, and having a tantrum at age five.⁶ Increasing armed presence in schools correlates with increased discipline rates, decreased high school graduation rates, and decreased college enrollment.⁷ Although the presence of armed officers and staff in schools results in increased disciplinary actions against all races of students, the effects are felt the worst by Black students.⁸ For example, one study found that a program that increased student exposure to police in high-crime areas of New York City decreased the educational performance of Black men during the years the program ran.⁹

These racist outcomes do not even come with the benefit of safer schools. At best, the data is conflicting and lacking in methodological rigor.¹⁰ At worst, considering the higher incidents of arrests in schools with police, police make schools less safe.¹¹ Overall, school crime levels have decreased regardless of, not due to, the presence of police in schools.¹² At the same time, today's students are experiencing record levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma of all forms. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 72 percent of children in the U.S. will have experienced at

⁴ *Data Highlights on School Climate and Safety in Our Nation's Public Schools, 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety*, U.S. DEPT. ED., OFF. CIV. RTS. (2018), available at <https://bit.ly/3aVDJgx>.

⁵ *Id.* at Chart 2.

⁶ *Id.* at Appendix D.

⁷ Emily K. Weisburst, *Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-Term Education Outcomes*, *J. POL'Y ANALYSIS & MGMT.* (Feb. 7, 2019), available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22116>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Joscha Legewie & Jeffrey Fagan, *Aggressive Policing and the Educational Performance of Minority Youth*, 84 *AM. SOC. REV.* 220 (2019), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122419826020>.

¹⁰ Nathan James & Gail McCallion, *School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools*, CRS REP. CONG. (June 26, 2013), available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>.

¹¹ Edwin Rios, *More Cops Won't Make Schools Safer, But Here's What They Will Do*, *MOTHER JONES* (Mar. 19, 2018), available at <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2018/03/more-cops-wont-make-schools-safer-but-hereswhat-they-will-do/>.

¹² Dana Goldstein, *20 Years After Columbine, Schools Have Gotten Safer. But Fears Have Only Grown*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Apr. 20, 2019), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/us/columbine-anniversary-school-violencestatistics.html>.

least one major stressful event, like witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or losing a loved one, before the age of eighteen.¹³

School counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists are the right people to address the multitude of issues facing our young people. Schools with such services see improved attendance rates, better academic achievement, and higher graduation rates, as well as lower levels of suspension, expulsion, and other discipline.¹⁴ School-based mental healthcare improves outcomes for individual students and makes the entire school community safer.¹⁵ In contrast, police presence in schools is not evidentially linked to safer schools.¹⁶ In fact, police on K-12 campuses cause harm, rather than alleviate safety.¹⁷ A recent study found no association between having an armed officer and the deterrence of violence in school shootings, and in fact found that an armed officer on the scene was the top factor that contributed to increased casualty, excluding the perpetrator's use of assault rifles or machine guns.¹⁸ Students in Connecticut schools are better served by access to mental health professionals than by an increase of armed police in schools.

All students deserve to feel safe, secure, and supported in their places of learning. Yet too often our schools rely on policing, which undermines children's wellbeing, rather than funding professionals trained to deliver students the developmental and behavioral health resources they need. The ACLU-CT supports legislation that works to build an educational system that centers the social-emotional well-being of students through care, resources, learning, and restoration.

¹³ Whitaker, *supra* note 3, at 6.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Jillian Peterson, James Densley & Gina Erikson, *Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass Shootings, United States, 1980-2019*, 4 JAMA NETWORK OPEN (Feb. 16, 2021), available at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2776515>.

Senate Bill 1095 would expand the definition of school resource officers to include school counselors, social workers, psychologists, aides or other staff members with the appropriate training. Real public safety means access to mental healthcare, affordable housing, income, proper childcare, opportunities for young people, and safe recreational spaces. This legislature must take steps to address these root necessities for school community wellbeing through methods that do not increase policing, like passing Senate Bill 1095. As such, the ACLU-CT supports Senate Bill 1095, and urges this Committee to do the same.