

MORE THAN A PLAZA

DC JUSTICE LAB

Police Free Schools

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While school resource officers, placed with the aim of keeping campuses safe, have been a common fixture in American schools for [decades](#), activists are [calling attention](#) to the stark reality of positioning these officers in schools—the [criminalization](#) of students of color. Schools with police, report [3.5 times](#) as many arrests as schools without police, often resulting in students of color and students with disabilities being placed into the criminal system.

The presence of police in schools disrupts the learning environments of Black and brown students, as it forces them to confront a system of policing that more often views them as threats rather than students. When police are in schools, students of color are more likely to be arrested. Nationally, Black students are [disproportionately](#) disciplined, suspended, and arrested in public schools. During the [2015-2016](#) school year, Black students represented about 31% of nationwide referrals to law enforcement agencies or arrests, despite making up just 15% of the student body. Overall, 65% of arrests in schools were students of color or mixed race. This dynamic is exasperated for those students in other marginalized groups such as those with [disabilities](#) and [LGBTQ identities](#).

These disparities are also persistent in Washington, D.C., where students are policed in schools by security guards, special police, and the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). The same police [harassing Black residents](#) of the District are the same police in D.C. schools. Over the previous four school years, Black students and students with disabilities were disproportionately disciplined in D.C. public schools. Black students accounted for more than 90% of all disciplined students and nearly all of the district's expulsions and school-related arrests. This past academic year, all of the District's in-school arrests involved students of color. Of the 338 students arrested in D.C. public schools, 312 were Black and 26 were Latinx, of them, 104 had disabilities.

Considerable research has shown that the higher rates of discipline are not related to higher rates of misbehavior. Instead, students of color are more likely to be arrested because police often view their adolescent behavior as more criminal than white students; and they are punished more harshly than white students when engaging in [similar or identical behavior](#). In the District, Black girls are arrested at a rate [30 times more](#) than that of white girls and boys, although most of them do not pose a threat to public safety. In fact, a [vast majority](#) of them are charged with non-violent, non-weapons offenses, oftentimes, they are being booked for things like running away, breaking curfew or skipping school without regard for the reasons why they are behaving that way.

The presence of police furthers the [school-to-prison pipeline](#), and D.C. is investing in police at the expense of students. MPD's largest contract is with D.C. Public Schools. Over the last school year, the District has spent nearly \$25 million on security in public schools and another \$10 million on MPD officers to patrol public and charter schools, and Mayor Muriel Bowser proposed adding \$2.5 million to MPD's School Safety Division. This almost ensures that in D.C. school, adolescent behavior and [trauma responses](#) will be met with more harm, not resources, and nearly guarantees the criminalization of typical adolescent misbehavior, discriminatory enforcement of vague law, and the possible use of excessive force against students in school spaces. As it is currently set up, the system penalizes students of color, who may face poverty, experience trauma instead of helping them overcome it. This city's dedicated funding to policing students in schools not only criminalizes them but helps to widen one of the largest [achievement gaps](#) between black and white students and white and Hispanic students of any urban public school system in the country.

As the [national call](#) to redirect police funding towards social services and community programming triggered the reevaluation of police in schools across the country, several school districts have already decided to cut ties with police and others are considering it. The D.C. Council has [moved](#) to remove the DCPS school security contract from MPD and return it to DCPS. Soon after, D.C.'s State Board on Education passed a [resolution](#) in support of police-free schools. But, more can be done to create safer, more equitable schools in the city. First, D.C. should remove all forms of police from its schools. The city should also make continued investments in student well-being and improving the learning experience by committing \$6 million for expansion of school-based mental health programs and \$4.4 million to expand the use of community-based violence interrupters in schools and the broader community and rejecting the mayor's proposed \$18.5 million increase to the police budget in the fiscal year 2021 city budget.