



Legislative Testimony
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Written Testimony on House Bill 5001, An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Ranking Members Hwang, Somers, and Petit, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am here to testify on House Bill 5001, An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health.

The ACLU-CT believes that in order to reduce the harm caused by police in 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 has on the broader community. School police employees' presence in schools is the key link in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Because of systemic racism, the students hurt worst and first by police surveillance in schools are Black and Latinx children.¹ Because of interlocking systems of oppression, students with disabilities are also disproportionately hurt by police presence in schools.² These disparities are stark: Black girls are five times as likely

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 and Commentary (July 9, 2020), available at <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/police-in-schools-continue-to-target-black-brown-and-indigenous-students-with-disabilities-the-trump-administration-has-data-thats-likely-to-prove-it/>.

² *Id.*

to be arrested in schools with police as white girls.³ While the intersections of these identities combine, it is disastrous for students of color who are also disabled.⁴ 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.⁵

These outrageous outcomes do not even come with the benefit of safer schools. At best, the data are conflicting and lacking in methodological rigor.⁶ At worst, considering the higher incidents of arrests in schools with police, police make schools less safe.⁷ Overall, school crime levels have decreased regardless of, not due to, the presence of police in schools.⁸ 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 least one major stressful event, like witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or losing a loved one, before the age of eighteen.⁹

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.¹⁰ School-based mental healthcare improves outcomes for individual students and makes the entire school community safer.¹¹ In contrast, police

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>.

⁴ *Id.* at Chart 2.

⁵ *Id.* at Appendix D.

⁶ Nathan James & Gail McCallion, *School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement in Schools*, CRS Report for Congress (June 26, 2013), available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>.

⁷ 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-heres-what-they-will-do/>.

⁸ 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-violence-statistics.html>.

⁹ Whitaker, *supra* note 3, at 6.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

¹¹ *Id.*

presence in schools is not evidentiarily linked to safer schools.¹² In fact, police on K-12 campuses cause harm, rather than alleviate it.¹³ Students in Connecticut schools are better served by access to mental health professionals than by an increased police presence in schools with an expanded role in mental health. As such, the ACLU-CT recommends that this Committee amend section 23 of HB 5001 to reduce the role of school resource officers in schools.

We also encourage this Committee to consider amending the language of this bill to ensure representation of directly impacted persons and families on the Children's Behavioral Health Plan Implementation Advisory Board. People with lived experience have expertise that is incredibly valuable in determining the current needs of Connecticut's children. Rather than including systems that perpetuate harm towards youth, like the Department of Corrections, this bill should bolster the advisory board representation of the very people our mental health system is intended to serve.

We want to commend the Committee for including many excellent provisions in this bill. For example, it is vital to address the state's shortage of child psychiatrists and other mental health providers, while also supporting increased representation of racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ folks, and multilingual people. Increasing the number of mental health services offered in school and addressing the financial barrier to receiving mental health care that so many families in Connecticut face.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*