



Legislative Testimony
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Written Testimony Opposing House Bill 6624, An Act Concerning Retired Police and Parole Officers Providing School Security and Peace Officers Carrying Firearms on School Property

Senator Gaston, Representative Boyd, Ranking Members Cicarella and Howard, and distinguished members of the Public Safety Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am writing to testify in opposition to House Bill 6624, An Act Concerning Retired Police and Parole Officers Providing School Security and Peace Officers Carrying Firearms on School Property.

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. School police employees' 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

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.*

Black girls in schools as white girls.³ The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil 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 are 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

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 *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/>.

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 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 evidentiarily linked to safer schools.¹⁶ In fact, police on K-12 campuses cause harm, rather than alleviate it.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 presence in schools.

We encourage this Committee to reorient its focus to solutions that get at the real root of the problem: the mental health of our children. Putting armed police in police will not reduce violence in our schools and will instead exacerbate it. House Bill 6624

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>.

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>.

goes even further to allow law enforcement officers to possess a gun on school grounds any time, regardless of whether they are engaged in the performance of their duties. This bill flies in the face of evidence-based research that has conclusively found no measurable benefit to the presence of guns in schools. If passed, House Bill 6624 is likely to cause harm to our school children, fail to protect them from danger, and increase the incidence in which students of color are subjected to arrest and violence. As such, the ACLU-CT strongly opposes House Bill 6624 and urges this Committee to do the same.