School Policing in Pennsylvania: Prevalence and Disparities

Part 2 of a 3 part series | MORE AT: *researchforaction.org/police*

Introduction

In the first brief of RFA's **Police in Pennsylvania Schools** series, we reported the limited evidence of the impact of police on overall school safety and discussed the larger body of evidence that shows that school policing disproportionately harms students of color. In this second brief, we examine the *prevalence* of school policing in Pennsylvania schools. While data on police presence is limited, we are able to examine: 1) race/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in school police staffing and spending, 2) race/ethnic disparities in referrals to law enforcement and school-based arrests by gender, grade, and special education status, and 3) changes over time in Pennsylvania's school police staffing and school-based referrals and arrests.

Overall, we find that:

- *Pennsylvania school districts with high proportions of students of color and more economically disadvantaged students spend more heavily on school police.*

- *Black and Hispanic students in Pennsylvania are disproportionately arrested and referred to law enforcement and those trends hold across student grade, gender, and disability.*

- *The number of school police officers (SPOs) and school resource officers (SROs) has increased in Pennsylvania over the last decade and, though not increasing, school-based police referrals and arrests are among the highest in the nation.*

Safety and Security Personnel: Defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education

School Police Officer (SPO) – A law enforcement officer at a school, employed or contracted directly by the school. The officer's responsibilities are established by the school or district.

School Resource Officer (SRO) – A law enforcement officer employed by a law enforcement agency and stationed at a school through an agreement between the agency and school or district.

School Security Guard – An individual stationed at a school for safety duties but does not have the powers and responsibilities of school police officers.

Note: The analysis in this brief is limited to SPOs and SROs.

Data Limitations on School Police

The federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) "Safe Schools Online" website both contain data on school staffing, referrals to law enforcement, and arrests. However, there are inconsistencies between the two data sources and underreporting has been documented. PDE data, which is current up to 2018-19, does not include arrest and referral data by student demographics.

Thus, for this report, we rely on the PDE data for police staffing and for changes in referrals and arrests over time. We rely on the CRDC data for arrest and referral rates by student grade level, race, gender, and disability status subgroups. The CRDC does not report referral and arrest data by student socioeconomic status subgroups.

Finally, neither data source indicates whether a school-based referral or arrest was conducted by school police (SPO or SRO) or whether it was conducted by a member of local law enforcement. Likewise, while school safety incidents overall are reported by type of legal violations (i.e. simple assault, disorderly conduct, possession/use of a controlled substance, etc.) public data do not indicate which offenses led to a police referral or arrest.

Disparities in School Police Staffing and Security Expenditures

As can be seen in Figure 1 below, school police, as well as school-based referrals and arrests, are not equally distributed across Pennsylvania schools. School police are more heavily concentrated in schools with more students of color and economically disadvantaged students than the state overall. The same is true with regard to the amount of resources expended on school security.

Figure 1. Police are Concentrated in Schools with More Students of Color and Economically Disadvantaged Students
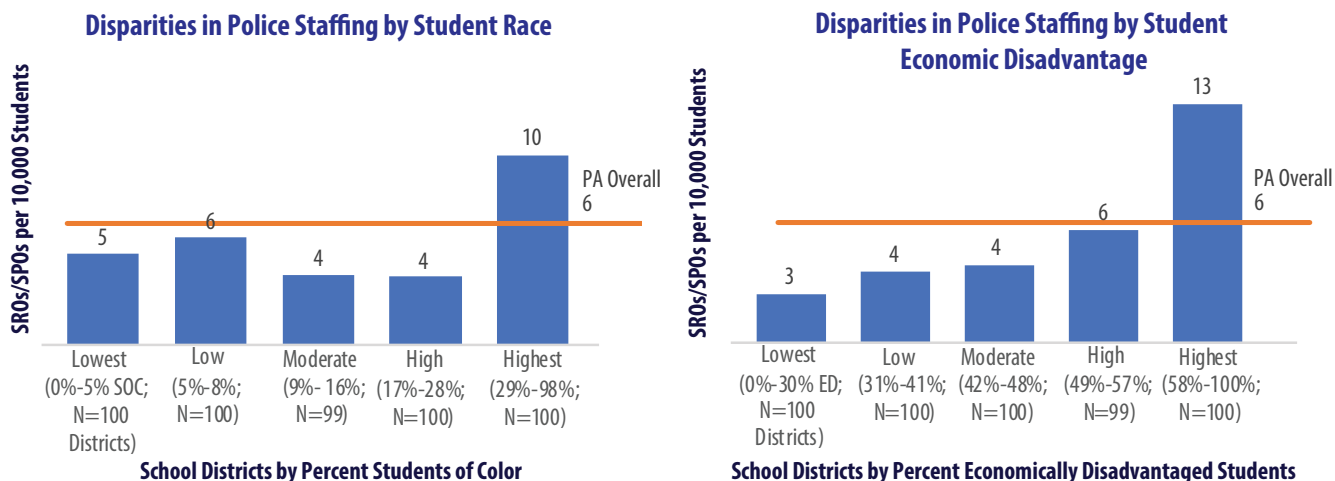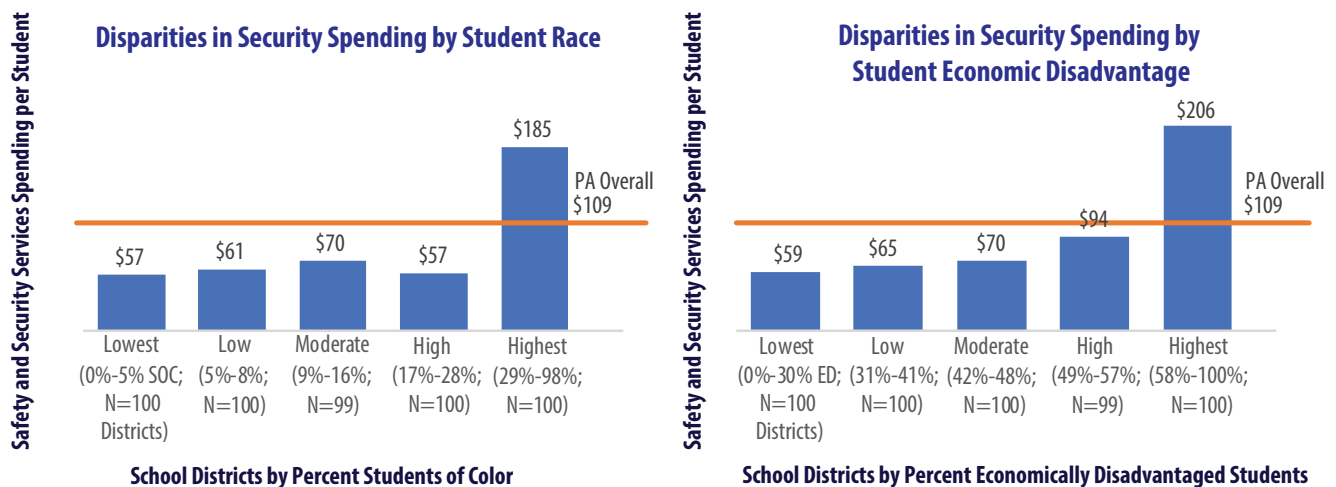

Source: Elementary and Secondary Information System, 2018-19; Safe Schools Reports, 2018-19.

- School districts with the highest percentages of students of color had 10 school police or resource officer per 10,000 students – roughly twice the number of SPOs/SROs in districts with lower percentages of students of color (5).

- School districts with the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged students had over four times the number of school police or resource officers per 10,000 students than districts with the lowest percentages of low-income students (13 to 3).

To further understand disparities, we also examined school district budget expenditures in the area of "safety and security services." Safety and Security Services includes expenditures related to maintaining order and safety in school buildings, grounds, and in the vicinity. This includes costs for School Resource Officers and School Police Officers, police activities for school functions, traffic control on grounds, hall monitoring, and safety kits.[1]

1 Pennsylvania Department of Education, Chart of Accounts for PA Local Educational Agencies, FY 2020-21. https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/School%20Finances/Comptrollers%20Office/Chart%20of%20Accounts.pdf

Figure 2: Disparities in Safety and Security Spending

Disparities in Security Spending by Student Race

Safety and Security Services Spending per Student

				$185
$57	$61	$70	$57	

PA Overall $109

Lowest (0%-5% SOC; N=100 Districts) | Low (5%-8%; N=100) | Moderate (9%-16%; N=99) | High (17%-28%; N=100) | Highest (29%-98%; N=100)

School Districts by Percent Students of Color

Disparities in Security Spending by Student Economic Disadvantage

Safety and Security Services Spending per Student

				$206
$59	$65	$70	$94	

PA Overall $109

Lowest (0%-30% ED; N=100 Districts) | Low (31%-41%; N=100) | Moderate (42%-48%; N=100) | High (49%-57%; N=99) | Highest (58%-100%; N=100)

School Districts by Percent Economically Disadvantaged Students

Source: Annual Financial Reports, 2018-19; Elementary and Secondary Information System, 2018-19.

As shown in Figure 2, we found that:

- School districts with the highest shares of students of color spent $185 per pupil on safety and security services – roughly three times the spending of districts with lower shares of students of color ($57-70).

- School districts with the highest shares of economically disadvantaged students spent $206 per pupil on security services, while districts with the lowest shares of economically disadvantaged students spent just $59 per pupil.

Although not shown, disparities by race in security spending also persist within economic disadvantage quintiles, except for the lowest quintile (i.e. within each of the top four quintiles, districts with the highest percentages of students of color are spending more on security compared to districts with lower percentages of students of color). This pattern did not hold true for police staffing.

School-Based Police Referrals and Arrests

The above disparities in police staffing and spending are mirrored by disparities in school-based police referral and arrest rates for Black and Hispanic students. Race/ethnic disparities are even more pronounced among elementary students, girls, and students with special education needs.

Law enforcement referral rate is the percentage of students referred to a law enforcement agency or official by the school.

Arrest rate is the percentage of students arrested in a school-related incident.

Police Referrals and Arrests by Race/Ethnicity and Grade

As shown in Figure 3, Pennsylvania students experience high Black/White and Hispanic/White disparities in school-based police referrals and arrests. Referrals and arrests are highest in middle and high school grades, but more most disparate in elementary school grades.

Figure 3: Referral and Arrests Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Grade Level

Law Enforcement Referral Rate

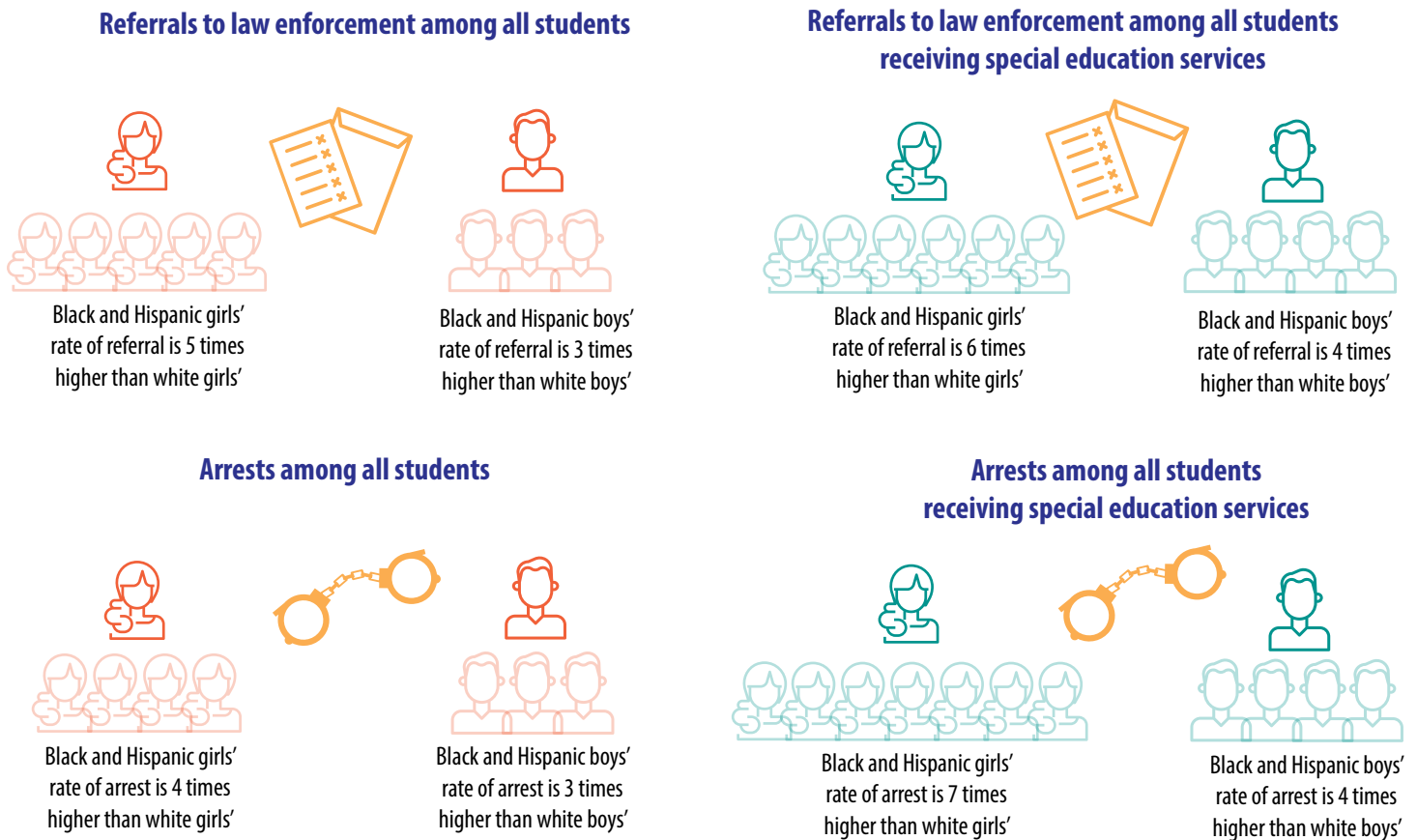|	Black Students	Hispanic Students	White Students
All Schools	3.4% (5x higher than white)	1.9% (3x higher)	0.7%
High Schools	5.4% (4x higher)	3.3% (2x higher)	1.4%
Middle Schools	5.4% (5x higher)	3.9% (4x higher)	1.0%
Elementary Schools	2.2% (11x higher)	0.9% (4x higher)	0.2%

Arrest Rate

	Black Students	Hispanic Students	White Students
All Schools	0.8% (4x higher than white)	0.5% (3x higher)	0.2%
High Schools	1.5% (3x higher)	1.0% (2x higher)	0.5%
Middle Schools	1.8% (7x higher)	1.3% (5x higher)	0.3%
Elementary Schools	0.3% (11x higher)	0.1% (4x higher)	0.02%

- Black students overall had the highest law enforcement referall rate compared to Hispanic and White students (3.4%–5x higher than the rate for White students overall).

- Hispanic students overall saw a law enforcement referral rate of 1.9%–3x higher than the rate for all White students.

- Law enforcement rates were highest in middle and high school grades, while elementary students saw the greatest disparities by race.

- Black students overall had the highest arrest rate compared to Hispanic and White students (0.8%%–4x higher than the rate for White students overall).

- Hispanic students overall saw an arrest rate of 0.5%–3x higher than the rate for all White students.

- Black and Hispanic students had the highest arrest rates in middle school, which were 7x and 5x higher than White middle school students respectively.

Police Referrals by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Special Education Status

As shown below, race/ethnic disparities in referrals to law enforcement and school-based arrests among all students were even more stark for girls and for students in special education. Black and Hispanic girls saw much higher disparities compared to White girls. Black and Hispanic girls who receive special education faced the greatest disparities, as they were six times more likely to be referred to law enforcement and seven times more likely to be arrested than White girls who receive special education.

Figure 4: School-Based Police Referrals and Arrests by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Special Education Status

Referrals to law enforcement among all students

Black and Hispanic girls' rate of referral is 5 times higher than white girls'

Black and Hispanic boys' rate of referral is 3 times higher than white boys'

Referrals to law enforcement among all students receiving special education services

Black and Hispanic girls' rate of referral is 6 times higher than white girls'

Black and Hispanic boys' rate of referral is 4 times higher than white boys'

Arrests among all students

Black and Hispanic girls' rate of arrest is 4 times higher than white girls'

Black and Hispanic boys' rate of arrest is 3 times higher than white boys'

Arrests among all students receiving special education services

Black and Hispanic girls' rate of arrest is 7 times higher than white girls'

Black and Hispanic boys' rate of arrest is 4 times higher than white boys'

Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-16.

# Change Over Time in Police Staffing and School-Based Referrals and Arrests

Over the past decade, the numbers of SPOs and SROs in Pennsylvania schools have both increased, with SPOs increasing at a faster rate. As shown in Figure 5, the sharpest overall increase, from 827 to 1,043, occurred between 2017-18 and 2018-19. Figure 6 shows that over the same 10 years, the number of school safety incidents that ended in a referral to law enforcement has fluctuated up and down, while the number resulting in arrest has decreased.

Figure 5: Number of School Police and Resource Officers in Pennsylvania, 2009-10 to 2018-19

Figure 6: School Safety Incidents Involving Police in Pennsylvania, 2009-10 to 2018-19
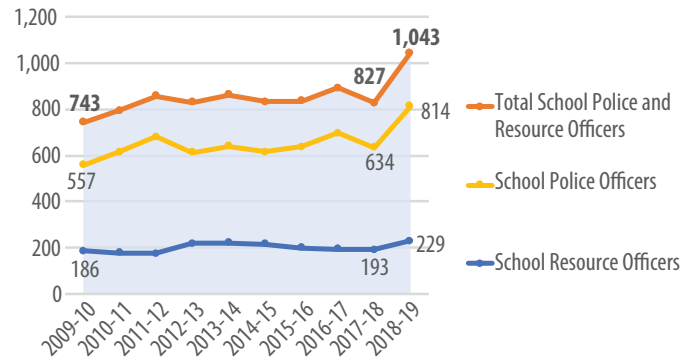

Source: Safe Schools Reports, 2009-10 to 2018-19.
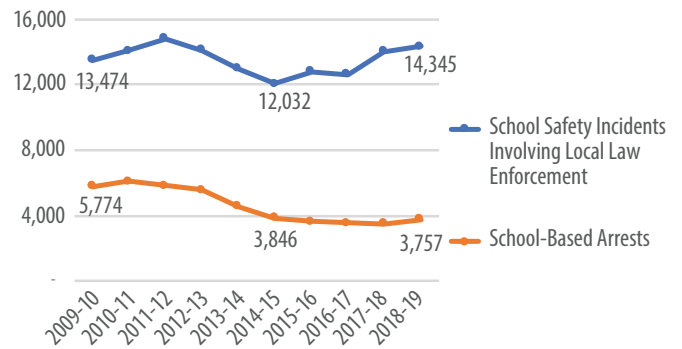
Pennsylvania's decrease in reported school-based arrests is modest compared to a more significant national decline in youth arrests overall. Meanwhile, federal data show that Pennsylvania continues to be a national outlier for its high police referral and arrests rate (see Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7: Students Referred to Law Enforcement per 1,000 Students
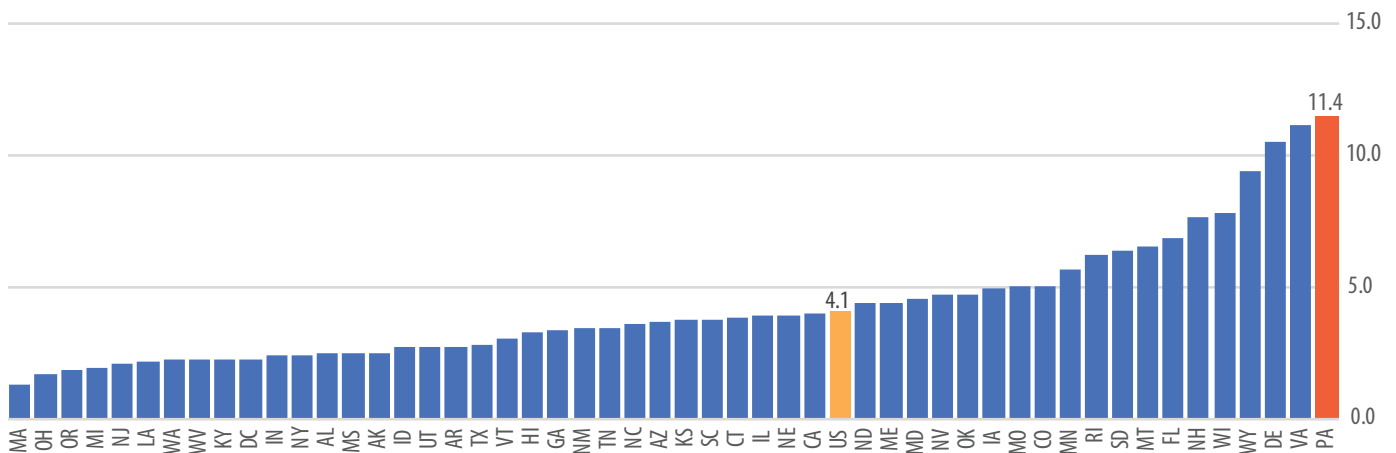
Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-16 State and National Estimations.

Figure 8: Students Arrested per 1,000 Students
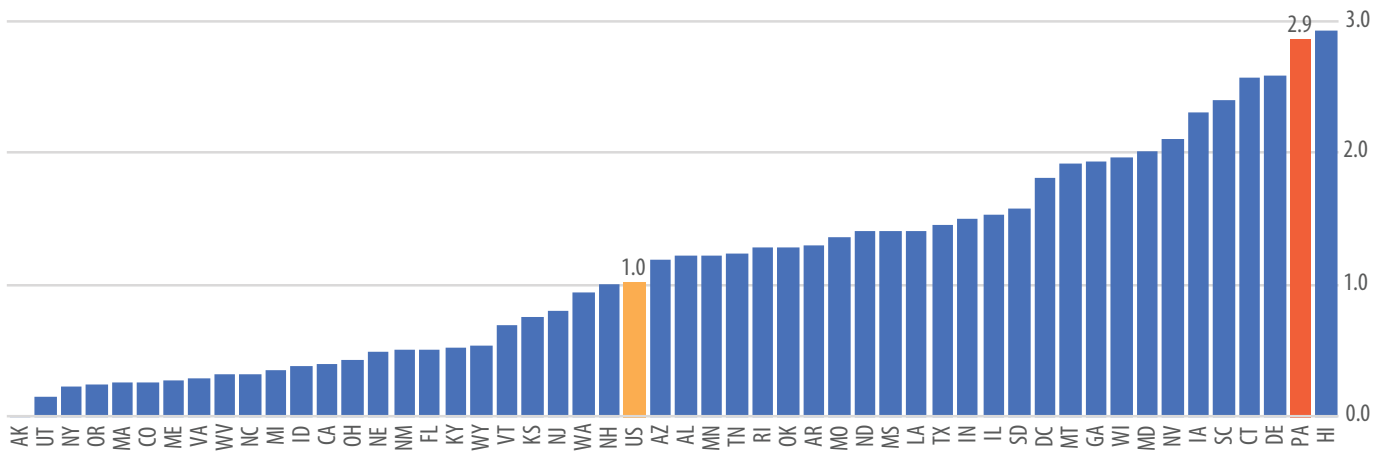
Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-16 State and National Estimations.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania school districts that enroll more students of color or economically disadvantaged students have *more* police present and spend more financial resources on policing. The racial/ethnic disparities in staffing and expenditures are mirrored in disparities in school-based police referrals and arrests, which persist across student grade, gender, and special education status.

Over the past decade, Pennsylvania schools are increasingly reliant on policing despite a lack of evidence that police improve safety. Moreover, school-based referrals and arrests are respectively the highest and second highest in the nation. The final brief in this series will support districts and schools that seek to reduce reliance on policing, by outlining alternative approaches to protect school safety without police.