



Center For
POLICING EQUITY

Do We Need Police in Schools?

A [Community Up](#) product from the [Center for Policing Equity](#)

Communities [know](#) that police contact with students can lead to unnecessary arrests and discipline. Schools with designated police officers arrest students [3.5 times as often](#) as those without. Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students face the highest risk of being arrested or having force used on them at school, especially if they are disabled. Being stopped, ticketed, or arrested at school makes it more difficult for children to succeed in school and **increases** their likelihood of future criminal involvement. Echoing what Black communities have long said, research [shows](#) that police in schools do not make Black students feel safer.

Every community wants law enforcement to keep school children safe from intruders and school shooters. But schools should not be places where police officers surveil children for lawbreaking, arrest children, or use force on them. Even police [agree](#) that they “should not be involved in student discipline.” The role of police at schools is to protect children against external threats, not to punish students’ misbehavior.

Schools and communities are taking steps to keep children safe at school. There are several ways that community members can help make sure that school staff and administrators, not armed police officers, respond to student misbehavior. For example, parents and parent groups can meet with school administrators and attend school board meetings to present policy ideas and up-to-date research, such as our [Redesigning Public Safety: K-12 Schools](#) white paper. Students can advocate for change by joining student government and starting a [student defense committee](#) with supportive staff. Communities can rally for change by taking [direct action](#), such as a peaceful protest. This resource provides readers with information about when police involvement is and isn’t appropriate in schools, students’ rights when interacting with police, and alternatives to police involvement.

Do Not Call the Police for Student Misbehavior

Police should not be called to manage student misbehavior, **unless**:

- There is an immediate threat of serious physical violence
- The student purposely inflicts injury that requires emergency medical attention

School policies should state that calling the police is a last resort, and require that any time police are called in to resolve a situation staff cannot handle, school staff must:

- Get approval from the principal before reporting a student to law enforcement
- Immediately document, in writing, why the police response was necessary

Do Not Call the Police on Disabled Students

To comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, police should not be called to manage behavior that stems from a student’s cognitive disability, mental health condition, or other condition that affects their judgment and behavior (for example, the student has a diagnosis of illness that could affect their judgment and behavior, such as PTSD, epilepsy, or diabetes, or the student appears to be experiencing a mental health emergency).

Do Not Call the Police for Student Conduct

Many students have been arrested for misbehaviors too minor to involve police. Schools should **never** call the police for these misbehaviors:

- Dress-code violations, cell phone use violations, and any other school disciplinary violations that are not criminal offenses
- Fighting or hitting that does not result in injury requiring medical attention
- Forgery
- Graffiti or vandalism
- Insubordination/defiance
- Loitering
- Losing or damaging school property
- Loud or disruptive behavior
- Mutually voluntary sexual behavior among peers close in age
- Name-calling, slurs, bullying, and other verbal harassment that do not present any risk of serious physical harm
- Taking property that belongs to other students, staff, or the school
- Threats of harm which, in context, are clearly metaphorical (such as “He told you what? I’m gonna kill him!”)
- Trespassing
- Truancy or tardiness
- Use or possession of controlled substances or alcohol

Do Not Allow Police to Interrogate Students at School

Students are required by law to attend school; they deserve to be safe from criminal surveillance there. But police officers sometimes come to schools to interrogate a student in order to obtain evidence concerning a crime that the student or someone else may have committed—whether the crime took place at school or elsewhere.

Most students do not [know their rights](#) when interacting with police, including the right to refuse to answer questions. States have different requirements about when and how police can interrogate a child. When a police officer questions a child, the child cannot be expected to know whether they’re free to walk away from the officer, whether they need a lawyer or to call their parents, or why it might not be in their interest to answer an officer’s questions.

Parents and communities should urge their schools to adopt a rule that prohibits police interrogation of students at school, except in the narrowest of emergency situations. If police officers want to interrogate a student, they should not interrupt the student’s learning to do so. If police officers have legal grounds to investigate a student concerning criminal behavior, any interrogation should take place off school property, outside school hours, and follow state law. If a child is to be interrogated at school, their parents and a defense lawyer **should be present**. These rules can help ensure that schools are a safe place for children to learn.

How Can Schools Keep Students Safe Without Police?

Across the country, students and communities have shown that they can resolve even serious misbehavior without suspension, expulsion, or police contact. Connecticut’s [Youth Mobile Crisis Response Service](#) has [significantly reduced](#) student arrests. Oakland, California, has removed police officers from schools and replaced them with “climate and culture ambassadors,” greatly decreasing arrest rates and [improving](#) students’ sense of safety. Baltimore County Public Schools implemented a program to help school staff respond to and prevent behavioral crises that reduced suspensions by over [50%](#) and cost, annually, only 5% of what they spend on police every year. If you want to learn more about these alternative response programs and the research behind them, take a look at our [school safety resources](#).

