SYMPOSIUM ESSAY

Race, School Policing, and Public Health

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Abstract. The ever-growing list of names of Black victims who have died at the hands of police has emboldened a new public narrative that frames police violence—and other more commonplace, though less lethal, disparate policing practices—as a public health crisis rooted in this country’s history of racism and anti-Blackness. This public narrative in turn has spawned a diverse set of responsive actions in both the public and private sectors directed at addressing the effects of individual and structural racism on health. Yet missing from this linkage between police violence and racialized health disparities is any focus on the educational system, despite the increasing prevalence of police and standard policing practices in K-12 schools and the clear racial disparities of school policing. The central claim of this Essay is that school policing is an obvious public health issue. It sits at the nexus of two critical social determinants of health—education and racism—and requires targeted attention as such. The racialized nature of school-policing practices and the disparate outcomes for Black students are well documented. And, by applying a public health lens to this school police literature, specific individual- and aggregate-level health and mental outcomes become apparent. School policing negatively affects Black students’ mental health and physical safety, diminishes protective health factors, and places students at heightened risk for justice-system entry. Finally, understanding school policing as a public health issue has significant potential benefits and practical implications, especially for the antiracist health-equity movement.

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Introduction

The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery, and the long list of Black victims who preceded them have emboldened a new public narrative naming police violence as a public health crisis rooted in racism and anti-Blackness.1 A growing body of research underscores such discourse, showing associations between a range of negative health and mental health outcomes for Black people and Black communities and both instances of excessive physical violence and death at the hands of police officers2 and more commonplace usage of policing tactics including intimidation, verbal assaults, and stops.3

Following last year’s national uprisings, government leaders, the public and private sectors, and academics all responded swiftly, taking actions including declaring racism a public health issue,4 funding new health and racial-justice initiatives,5 and calling for health-centered interventions to

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mitigate racism’s impact. 6 Though distinct, all of these actions were
grounded in addressing the effects of individual and structural racism on
health. 7 Yet the specific national and subnational attention on police
violence 8 and racialized health disparities has not permeated into discussion
of the educational system despite the increasing prevalence of police in K-12
schools, 9 documented racial disparities in school policing, 10 and the use
of standard policing tactics in educational settings. 11

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6. See, e.g., Jordan DeVylder, Lisa Fedina & Bruce Link, Impact of Police Violence on Mental
Health: A Theoretical Framework, 110 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1704, 1708-10 (2020); Catherine
dP Duarte et al., Applications of the American Public Health Association’s Statement on
Addressing Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Issue, 110 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH S30,S30-S32 (2020); J. Nwando Olayiwola et al., Making Anti-Racism a Core Value in Academic
Medicine, HEALTH AFF. BLOG (Aug. 25, 2020), https://perma.cc/L7JG-YDGZ.

7. See, e.g., Press Release, Robert Wood Johnson Found., Statement from Richard Besser,
MD, on Racial Injustice, Violence, and Health in America (June 2, 2020),
https://perma.cc/8F3A-XMHY (“[H]ealth disparities, and often the diseases themselves,
stem in part from the stress of being silenced, ignored, oppressed, and targeted for
violence—too often by those institutions and individuals entrusted to protect all people”).

8. For purposes of this Essay, I adopt Osagie Obasogie and Zachary Newman’s broad
definition of the term “police violence” indicating both a systemic nature and far-

9. See F. CHRIS CURRAN, EDUC. POL’Y RSCH. CTR., UNIV. OF FLA., THE EXPANDING PRESENCE
OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN FLORIDA SCHOOLS: RESEARCH REPORT 2020, at 3 (2020) (ten-
year analysis of law enforcement in public schools showing a 35% increase nationally);
SAMUEL CORREA & MELISSA DILIBERTI, INST. OF EDUC. SCI., U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., POLICIES
OUTLINING THE ROLE OF SWORN LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS 1
(2020) (finding that in the 2017-2018 school year a sworn law enforcement officer was
present at least once a week in 51% of public schools); Ben Brown, Evaluations of School
Policing Programs in the USA, in HANDBOOK OF SCHOOL SECURITY, SURVEILLANCE AND
PUNISHMENT 327-28 (Jo Deakin, Emmeline Taylor & Aaron Kupchik eds., 2018).

10. See GEORGETOWN L. CTR. ON POVERTY & INEQUAL., DATA SNAPSHOT: 2017-2018—
NATIONAL DATA ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE BY RACE AND GENDER 1-4 (2020); AMIR WHITAKER,
SYLVIA TORRES-GUILLEN, MICHELLE MORTON, HAROLD JORDAN, STEFANIE COYLE, ANGELA
MANN & WEI-LING SUN, ACLU S. CAL., COPS AND NO COUNSELORS: HOW THE LACK OF
SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH STAFF IS HARMING STUDENTS 7 (2019); ADVANCEMENT PROJECT,
WE CAME TO LEARN: A CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS 52-54 (2018).

11. See, e.g., BrieAnna J. Frank, Officer Used Pepper Spray to Break up Phoenix Middle School
Fight, Police Confirm, ARIZ. REP. (last updated Oct. 25, 2019, 8:33 PM MT),
https://perma.cc/W7L3-WPAA; Emma Ockerman, A School Police Officer in Florida
Was Arrested for Body-Slamming a 15-Year-Old Student, VICE (Nov. 6, 2019, 7:56 AM),
https://perma.cc/X7RW-TYGB.
The failure to approach school policing as an obvious public health issue is a flaw within the current movement that requires targeted attention. While there exist multiple empirical pathways to constructing a racial-health-equity agenda inclusive of school policing, that agenda cannot be constructed until it is first conceptually located within the domain of public health. That is the aim of this Essay.

The Essay proceeds in three parts. First, it presents some brief background on school policing, with specific attention to the racialized nature of police practices and disparate outcomes for Black students. Second, it exposes the ways in which school policing is not just a criminal justice or civil rights issue. Specifically, it argues that when one applies a public health lens to school police literature it reveals specific individual- and aggregate-level health and mental outcomes. These associations, while not conclusive, strongly suggest that school policing should be, at a minimum, investigated from a public health perspective. Lastly, the Essay describes potential benefits and practical implications of a public health approach to school policing.

I. Police and Schools

Historical evidence from the era of state-sanctioned slavery to the present illustrates how schools regularly have employed often-violent policing and disciplinary practices rooted in racism and anti-Blackness to control students. While many policies and practices have changed over time.
time, the use of school-based law enforcement, most commonly represented as school resource officers (SROs),\textsuperscript{15} as a mechanism of social control has not diminished. In fact, the opposite is true. Over the last fifty years, Black students have faced a growing epidemic of policing and criminalization in their schools.\textsuperscript{16} The increasing number of police officers in schools during the 1960s and 1970s was linked to social and political attitudes and legislation that viewed youth through the lens of criminal justice.\textsuperscript{17} In the 1980s and 1990s, Black students were subject to law-and-order approaches, including broken-window policing strategies, that characterized them as “superpredators.”\textsuperscript{18} Criminal justice priorities shaped zero-tolerance educational environments and enlarged the scope of law enforcement practices in schools.\textsuperscript{19}

In the aftermath of high-profile school shootings and under the banner of safety and prevention, federal and state policies have further broadened the scope and power of school policing and expanded funding for school-based law-enforcement officers.\textsuperscript{20} Research has shown this has not only failed to create safer schools, but resulted in significant racialized consequences. For example, in 2018, the Government Accountability Office found that Black students were “disproportionately disciplined” relative to their peers, whether

\textsuperscript{15} See Anthony Petrosino, Trevor Fronius & Darius Taylor, Reg’l Educ. Lab’y at WestEd, Research in Brief: School-Based Law Enforcement 1-2 (2020) (defining the main types and primary role of school-based law enforcement).
\textsuperscript{16} See Megan French-Marcelin & Sarah Hinger, ACLU, Bullies in Blue: The Origins and Consequences of School Policing 10-12 (2017); see also supra notes 9-11 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{17} See Elizabeth Hinton, Creating Crime: The Rise and Impact of National Juvenile Delinquency Programs in Black Urban Neighborhoods, 41 J. Urb. Hist. 808, 815 (2015) (describing legislation that “firmly embedded the carceral state in black urban neighborhoods” and “brought surveillance equipment, patrol forces, and probation officers into the everyday lives of young Americans who survived on public assistance, lived in housing projects, or attended urban public schools”).
\textsuperscript{18} French-Marcelin & Hinger, supra note 16, at 7.
\textsuperscript{19} See id. at 7-9.
\textsuperscript{20} See id. at 8, 10-11; F. Chris Curran, Univ. of Fla., The Expanding Presence of Law Enforcement in Florida Schools 3 (2020); Denise C. Gottfredson et al., Effects of School Resource Officers on School Crime and Responses to School Crime, 19 Criminology & Pub. Pol’y 905, 907-08 (2020).
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through suspensions or referral to law enforcement.21 The following year, research drawing on the Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection indicated that Black students were arrested in schools at a rate three times that of white students22 yet did not have higher rates of school misbehavior than their white peers.23 Such racial disparities in school policing are not an anomaly and are documented by civil rights advocates, public-policy organizations, and researchers alike.24 Furthermore, the United States incarcerates youth at higher rates than other countries25 with the burden falling most heavily on youth of color.26 Together, these data underscore how school police and policing practices not only fuel the persistent school-to-prison pipeline but function to disrupt the overall educational experience of Black students, especially those with disabilities.

II. School Policing and Public Health

Public health can be defined as the “[t]he art (i.e., practice) and science (i.e., research) of protecting and improving the health of communities.”27 The central aim of the field is to solve fundamental challenges of population health by addressing a range of externalities or determinants (such as social, political, economic, and environmental conditions and contexts) that contribute to health inequities.28 As the World Health Organization explains,

22. See WHITAKER et al., supra note 10, at 5.
23. See ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, supra note 10, at 38.
24. See ACLU OF FLA., THE COST OF SCHOOL POLICING: WHAT FLORIDA’S STUDENTS HAVE PAID FOR A PRETENSE OF SECURITY 17 (2020); Kristen Harper & Deborah Temkin, COMPARED TO MAJORORITY WHITE SCHOOLS, MAJORORITY BLACK SCHOOLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE SECURITY STAFF, CHILD TRENDS (Apr. 26, 2018), https://perma.cc/DD9E-XL74; DANIEL J. LOSEN & PAUL MARTINEZ, LEARNING POL’Y INST. & CTR. FOR C.R. REMEDIES, LOST OPPORTUNITIES: HOW DISPARATE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE CONTINUES TO DRIVE DIFFERENCES IN THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN 6 (2020); WHICH STUDENTS ARE ARRESTED THE MOST?, EDUC. WEEK (2017), https://perma.cc/A8PD-2L3D (showing that Black students are just 15.5% of overall enrollment but represent 33.4% of students arrested and 25.8% of students referred to law enforcement); ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, supra note 10, at 38.
27. Ford & Airhihenbuwa, supra note 13, at S31.
28. Health inequities are systematic differences in the opportunities groups have to achieve optimal health, leading to disparate and avoidable differences in health outcomes. See Paula Braveman, HEALTH DISPARITIES AND HEALTH EQUITY: CONCEPTS AND MEASUREMENT., 27 ANN. REV. PUB. HEALTH 167, 180-81 (2006).
the “overall vision is to promote greater health and well-being in a sustainable way, while strengthening integrated public health services and reducing inequalities.”29 For the last ten years, the social determinants of health (SDOH) have functioned in the United States as an explanatory mechanism and organizing principle to recognize how social factors lead to health disparities.30 Defined, the SDOH represent the “conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality-of-life risks and outcomes.”31 The SDOH framework also “includes feedback loops that represent the nonlinear and iterative nature of social determinants.”32 And while institutional and interpersonal racism are accepted as aspects of the social environment that impact the risk for violence, the current SDOH framework does not formally define police violence as a social determinant.33

Under the SDOH framework, education functions as a key determinant and strong predictor of chronic disease, social and economic instability, incarceration, and even life expectancy.34 For example, by age twenty-five, individuals with a high school degree can expect to live over ten years longer than those without one.35 Given this, it is beyond dispute that policies and

33. See McLeod et al., supra note 2, at 10 (arguing that “police brutality is a social determinant of health and can lead to poor health outcomes among Black Americans.”); Yearby, supra note 30, at 523-24 (discussing the incomplete nature of the current SDOH framework and arguing that it must be revised to include structural racism as the root cause of racial health disparities).
35. See BRIAN L. ROSTRON, JOHN L. BOIES & ELIZABETH ARIAS, U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., EDUCATION REPORTING AND CLASSIFICATION ON DEATH CERTIFICATES IN
practices within schools are health policies and practices.\textsuperscript{36} However, this Essay argues that school policing is not a public health issue just because education is a social determinant of health. Rather, school policing is also a public health issue because it sits at the nexus of two critical social determinants of health: education and racism.\textsuperscript{37} And that, at a minimum, it negatively affects Black students’ mental health, disrupts their educational attainment, diminishes their social supports (school-based health protective factors), and places them at heightened risks for justice-system involvement.

Under the social-ecological model of public health,\textsuperscript{38} the presence of such social contexts and outcomes should alone justify consideration of school policing within that model’s domain. However, when viewed in totality—and given the ever-growing evidence base demonstrating relationships between policing and negative health outcomes for Black Americans—the coexistence and operation at multiple levels of influence within one system (education) substantiates an argument for including school policing in the public health discussion and racial health equity agenda.

\textsuperscript{36} While there is no literature or public discourse that contends school policies are not health policies, there remains a disconnect between the fields of education and public health. See supra note 12.

\textsuperscript{37} See Jennifer Jee-Lyn Garcia & Mienah Zulfacar Sharif, \textit{Black Lives Matter: A Commentary on Racism and Public Health}, AM. J. PUB. HEALTH, Aug. 2015, at e27, e28; Maria Trent, Danielle G. Dooley & Jacqueline Dougé, \textit{The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health}, PEDIATRICS, Aug. 2019, at 1; Yin Paradies et al., \textit{Racism as a Determinant of Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis}, PLOS ONE, Sept. 23, 2015, at 1, 2. An alternative view of structural discrimination, including racism, is presented by public health law scholar Ruqaiijah Yearby. Yearby argues that the SDOH framework should be revised to position structural discrimination as the “root cause of racial health disparities, which influences all of the key systems.” Yearby, supra note 30, at 524.

\textsuperscript{38} A social–ecological model considers the dynamic interplay between social contexts and environmental factors and influences, which interact to affect individual and population health outcomes.
**Figure**
Sample of School Policing Studies and Public Health Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health and Mental Health Categories</th>
<th>Finding / Outcome</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td>SROs use excessive force against students with disabilities.</td>
<td>Shaver &amp; Decker (2017)²⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-traumatic stress disorder</td>
<td>Students who experienced police stops in schools reported post-traumatic stress following stop.</td>
<td>Jackson et al. (2019)³⁰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress</td>
<td>Students who experienced police stops in schools reported emotional distress during stop.</td>
<td>Jackson et al. (2019)³¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td>Exposure to three-year federal grant for school police decreased high school graduation rates by 2.5 percent and decreased college enrollment rates by 4 percent. Associations between increased levels of exclusionary discipline and poorer student achievement on end-of-year reading and math tests.</td>
<td>Weisburst (2019)³² Perry &amp; Morris (2014)³³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health protective factor (peer connectedness)</td>
<td>Some students who experienced police stops in schools felt social stigma and shame.</td>
<td>Jackson et al. (2019)³⁴</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


⁴⁰. See Jackson et al., supra note 3, at 631.

⁴¹. See id. Youth who were stopped at school experienced higher levels of emotional distress, social stigma and post-traumatic stress than youth stopped outside of school. See id.


⁴⁴. Jackson et al., supra note 3, at 631.
As the mapping in the Figure indicates, it is likely that school policing has a net effect on individual or population health outcomes. Experiences of physical harm, stress, and trauma resulting from policing can lead to mental health disorders and conditions such as depression and anxiety.\(^49\) Consider, for example, school connectedness and positive school climate, which can function as protective health factors to buffer youth against emotional distress and suicidal ideation and attempts.\(^50\) When school connectedness—students’ belief
that adults in their school care about their learning and about them as individuals— is diminished or students perceive their school climate as negative, it places them at risk for engaging in high-health-risk behaviors and increases feelings of distrust, disconnection, and trauma. Research also shows that school connectedness and school climate can mitigate or exacerbate absenteeism, low academic engagement, and dropout. Lower levels of educational attainment are not only correlated with a range of negative health outcomes, but detrimental socioeconomic outcomes. Furthermore, considering the role of school police in the school-to-prison pipeline, the relationship to public health is straightforward: once involved in the justice system, Black youth experience deleterious health outcomes during and following confinement.

Lastly, studies on the impact of discrimination on health have found it to be associated with poorer physical health, and higher rates of stress, depression, and schizophrenia.

It is also significant that the potential proximate health and mental health effects of school policing do not occur in isolation from a larger social context. Policing in schools exists against a backdrop of high levels of stress, complex
trauma, and adverse childhood experiences in Black communities, all of which can negatively impact health and mental health. And for students who are exposed to high rates of community violence, such experiences can amplify the cumulative negative influences of early life adversity on their physical and mental health in adulthood. As a result, the public health consequences of school policing can compound and exacerbate preexisting health disparities for individuals and communities. This may be particularly acute for Black students whose community-based experiences with policing (including trauma, stress, racism, and the like) could act as a dose–response relationship or effect. Simply put, the higher levels of exposure to police that a Black student experiences (inside and outside school) may increase their probability of negative health and mental health outcomes.


A public health approach to school policing offers a number of benefits. It focuses on socio-ecological drivers of disparities, supports interventions at preventative and structural levels, expands invested stakeholders, unsettles disciplinary conventions, and offers diverse methodologies to advance a contemporary justice agenda in which research, policy, and practice intertwine to expose and address racism as the root cause of health inequities. It also reveals how racialized outcomes are a consequence of structural determinants, not merely a group of isolated incidents. From this inclusive context—where school policing is not siloed as an education problem or a civil rights issue—the potential to disrupt intersecting social, political, economic, and legal conditions that prevent Black students from experiencing "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" begins to shift from a conceptual idea to a reality.

Conclusion

Future research on school policing applying public health methodologies is essential. Following national civil uprisings and protests, a clear focus on exposing and addressing policing within the domain of public health has emerged. This is a critical step in the right direction, but falls short of a bold vision for an equitable society where Black lives matter. This Essay offers a necessary intervention into the legal literature by distinctly naming policing in schools as a public health issue. In doing so, it expands the possibility of legal reforms and policy interventions beyond that of education equity or civil rights. The presence and behaviors of police in schools is a matter of public health with real and serious consequences for either exacerbating or mitigating racialized health disparities. And as we continue to apply a public health lens to policing outside our schools, we must also turn our attention to what is happening inside our schools.

64. Harris & Pamukcu, supra note 13, at 813, 825-32.
65. See id. at 825-26.
66. See supra note 13 and accompanying text.
68. See Garcia & Sharif, supra note 37, at e28.
69. WORLD HEALTH ORG. CONST. pmbl., cl. 2.