



School Police Presence in Allegheny County

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Introduction

School communities across the nation and region are engaging in conversations about the use of police in schools as police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Walter Wallace Jr., and too many others have renewed attention to structural racism. Locally in Allegheny County, research from the [Black Girls Equity Alliance](#) and the [Allegheny County Department of Human Services](#) recently documented “extreme levels of racial disproportionality” in arrest rates and juvenile justice court referrals. Among their findings are that:

- Black youth in Allegheny County are referred to court at higher rates than Black youth nationally, while white youth in the county are referred at lower rates than white youth nationally.
- Black youth received 80% of criminal allegations from Pittsburgh Public School (PPS), while comprising only 58% of the total student body. Nearly half of PPS students with allegations from SY 2010-11 through August 2018 later became involved in the criminal justice system as young adults.
- In Pittsburgh, school police comprise the largest source of court referrals and these referrals were much more likely to be for lower-level offenses than allegations outside of school.

In recent years, some school districts across Allegheny County have made noteworthy changes to school policing. For example, [Woodland Hills School District](#) and [Penn Hills School District](#) have sought to reduce or eliminate reliance on police, while the [Pittsburgh Public School District](#) is improving data collection and creating more transparency on the community impact of school police. In contrast, a growing number of other districts in the county have, with [community support](#), announced [expanded police presence](#) and in some cases have decided to [arm police](#).¹ Yet there has been little public reporting about the actual presence of police in Allegheny County schools.

Research for Action, as part of a [three-part series on school police in Pennsylvania](#), recently examined data on school police at the state level. This brief from RFA’s [Allegheny County Education Research Project \(ACER\)](#) seeks to better understand school police presence in Allegheny County.

While reliable data on police presence are limited, our review of available evidence shows that:

- School police presence has **increased** across Allegheny County over the past five years.
- School security guards are **disproportionately** located in county districts with the highest concentrations of students of color, while school police are more evenly distributed.
- Allegheny County school districts with higher concentrations of students of color **spend more per pupil** on “safety and security” measures.



Definitions from 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. School security personnel may be armed or unarmed.

**Schools may have additional police presence from local police officers who are not contracted with the school as SROs or SPOs.*

**All PA school security personnel must complete the 40 hour [Basic School Resource Officer Course](#) offered by the [National Association of School Resource Officers](#).*

¹ [Research](#) has found a relationship between the presence of police and increased rates of school-based referrals and arrests. Some recent initiatives have sought to engage police in efforts to reduce referrals and arrests, including a [police diversion program](#) that has shown [promising results](#) in Philadelphia.

Data Limitations for School Police

The federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) "Safe Schools Online" websites both contain data on school police staffing. By "school police" we are referencing School Police Officers (SPOs) and School Resource Officers (SROs).

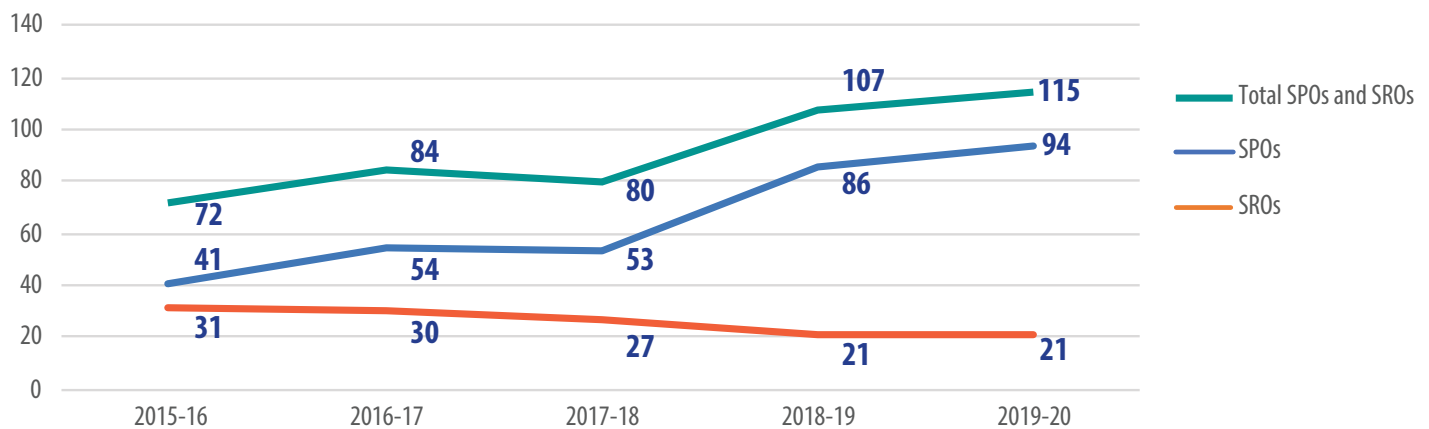
However, inconsistencies between the two data sources and underreporting have been documented. In addition, neither data source captures the presence of local law enforcement officers who are not officially assigned to a specific school but may patrol around and inside public schools as part of their regular duties.

For this brief we use the PDE data as this is the most current source for all 43 public school districts in Allegheny County. School police data for the Gateway, North Allegheny, and North Hills, and Upper St. Clair school districts were missing in the PDE data. We replaced the missing data with values that we obtained directly from the districts.

School Police Presence in Allegheny County Public School Districts

As shown below in Figure 1, the overall number of police in Allegheny County school districts has increased over the past five years. The growth is driven by an increase in school police officers (SPOs), even as the number of school resource officers (SROs) has steadily declined. This trend aligns with [news reports](#) that school districts in Western Pennsylvania are increasingly creating their own school police departments.

Figure 1. Law Enforcement Personnel in Allegheny County's 43 Public School Districts 2015-16 to 2019-20.



Note: Data compiled by Research for Action based on the Pennsylvania Department of Education's "Safe Schools Online" and from individual school districts.

School Security Guards Across Allegheny County Public School Districts

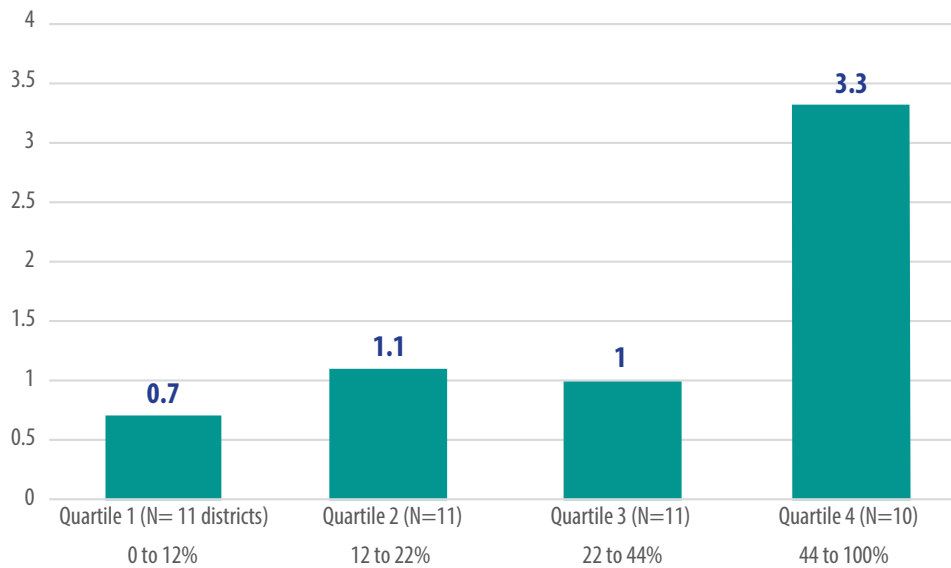
In addition to or in place of sworn law enforcement officers, many school districts employ school security guards. The total number of school security guards² reported by Allegheny County public school districts over the past five years has fluctuated, but years between 2015-16 and 2019-2020 report between 198-247 guards.

According to PDE's PA Safe Schools data, the presence of SPOs and SROs is similar in Allegheny County districts with both high and low rates of students of color. As displayed in Figure 2, Allegheny County school security guards are concentrated in districts with the highest percentage of students of color and economically disadvantaged students.³

² In the Safe Schools Online Data, school security guards are reported as "school security officers."

³ Of the 10 districts with the highest percent students of color (quartile 4), nine are also districts with the highest percent of students with economic disadvantage.

Figure 2. School security guards staffing per 1,000 students in Allegheny County districts by percent students of color in 2019-2020



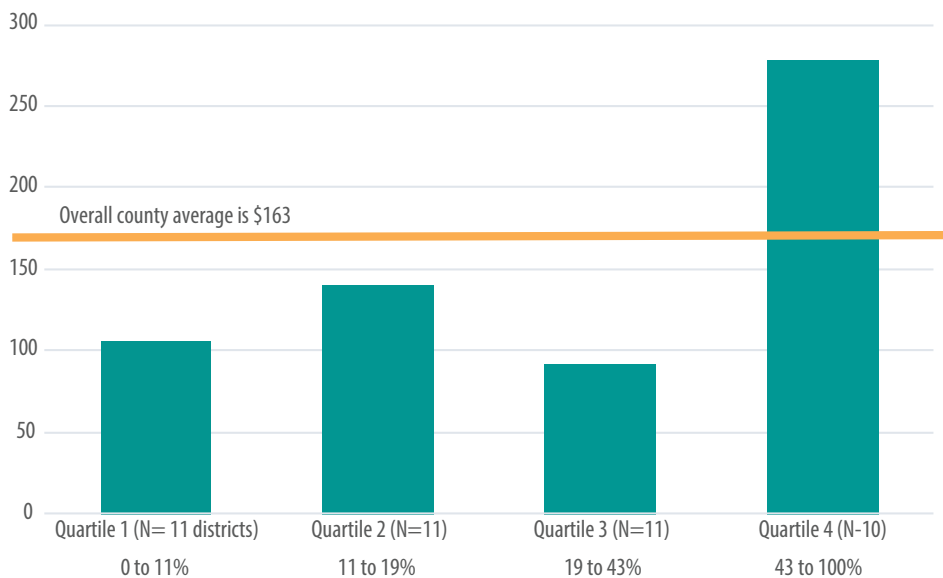
Source: PDE Safe Schools 2019-20, Future Ready District Fast Facts 2019-20.

School Safety and Security Expenditures for Allegheny County Public School Districts

Public school budget reports in Pennsylvania aggregate all expenditures related to police and security staff in a broad category for “Safety and Security Services.” This includes spending for School Resource Officers, School Police Officers, and security guards as well as for police activities for school functions, traffic control on grounds, hall monitoring, and safety kits. This [budget category](#) can also include a range of expenditures that are not related to police staffing, such as security cameras and metal detectors.

With this limitation in mind, Figure 3 displays clear disparities in safety and security spending by district student characteristics. School districts with the highest shares of students of color spent \$278 per pupil on safety and security services – over two times the spending of districts with the lowest share of students of color.

Figure 3. Average safety and security spending per pupil in Allegheny County School Districts by share of students of color in 2018-19



Source: PDE, Chart of Accounts for PA Local Education Agencies, FY 2018-19; Future Ready Fast Facts 2018-19

The following 28 Allegheny County School Districts reported at least one school police officer or school resource officer in the 2019-2020 school year:

- Baldwin-Whitehall
- Bethel Park SD
- Brentwood Borough SD
- Chartiers Valley SD
- East Allegheny SD
- Fox Chapel Area SD
- Gateway SD
- Hampton Township SD
- Highlands SD
- Keystone Oaks SD
- McKeesport Area SD
- Montour SD
- Moon Area SD
- Mt. Lebanon SD
- North Allegheny SD
- North Hills SD
- Northgate SD
- Pittsburgh SD
- Plum Borough SD
- Quaker Valley SD
- South Allegheny SD
- South Fayette Township SD
- South Park SD
- Steel Valley SD
- Upper Saint Clair SD
- West Jefferson Hills SD
- West Mifflin Area SD
- Woodland Hills SD

Conclusion

Data on the presence of school police in Pennsylvania are limited and, where reported, sources are often inconsistent. Yet available data indicate that, despite some districts expressing a desire to reduce police presence, Allegheny County districts as a whole have become more reliant on school policing. This is consistent with recent news reports highlighting the expansion, and in some cases the arming, of school police. Moreover, districts that serve high numbers of students of color spend more on safety and security in general.

More reliable data are needed to fully understand the extent of police staffing as well as other forms of policing in Allegheny County schools. In the meantime, district and school leaders should consider the limited evidence on the effectiveness of school police, extensive evidence of negative impact on students of color and alternative approaches to school safety.

About ACER and RFA

The Allegheny County Education Research Project (ACER) is a project of Research for Action (RFA), a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit education research organization that seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved children and students. RFA's work is designed to strengthen early education, public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public; and enrich civic and community dialogue. Learn more about ACER and RFA at <https://www.researchforaction.org/acer>.

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The Heinz Endowments is devoted to the mission of helping our region prosper as a vibrant center of creativity, learning, and social, economic and environmental sustainability. Core to our work is the vision of a just community where all are included and where everyone who calls southwestern Pennsylvania home has a real and meaningful opportunity to thrive.

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