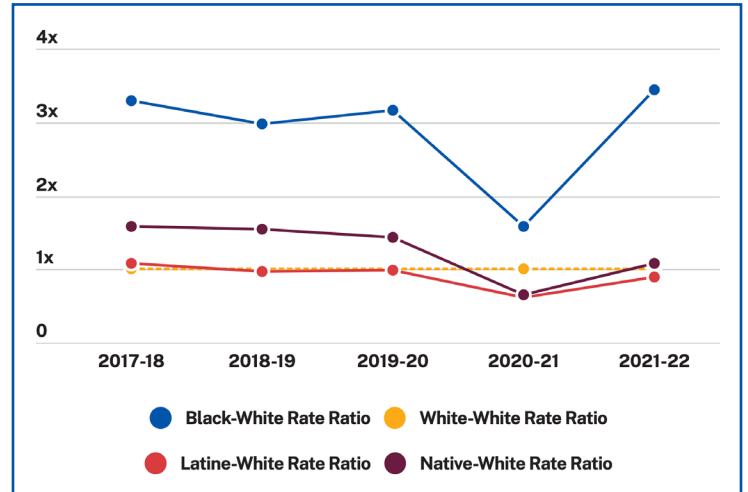


Ongoing Consequences of North Carolina's Reliance on Police in Schools

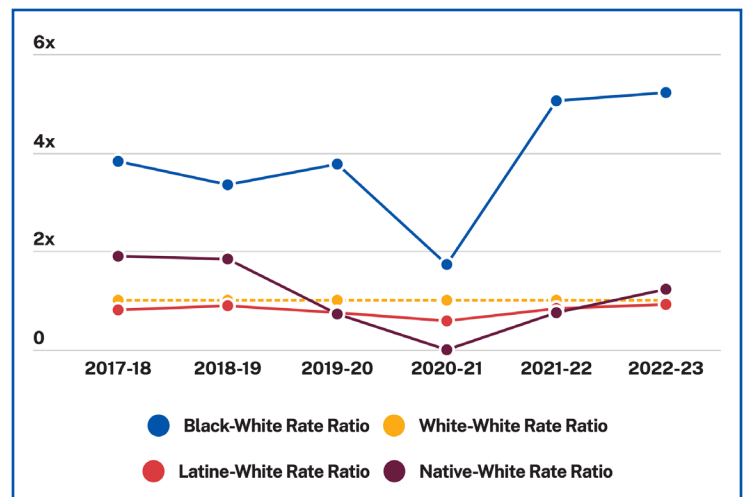
Despite clear evidence regarding the negative impact of police on students and school environments, North Carolina continues to devote millions of dollars to placing armed law enforcement officers in schools. But prioritizing funding for police officers over funding for other school staff and community-based supports is a policy choice that has had grave consequences for North Carolina's children, especially Black youth and students with disabilities.

The data included in this factsheet is from our 2023 report, *The Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools*, and they illustrate the results of these policy choices, including the presence of police officers in North Carolina's schools instead of counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and community health workers. The racial disparities in school-based complaints and disorderly conduct charges are also apparent, which illustrates the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of law enforcement referrals. Specifically:

- Between 2017 and 2022, law enforcement and school staff filed school-based complaints against Black students at 3 times the rate of their white counterparts. These racial disparities are the highest in Madison, Vance, Washington, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, Forsyth, Nash, Durham, Chatham, and Tyrell counties.
- From 2017 to 2023, schools in 25 counties have referred only Black students for disorderly conduct in schools. In 21 of these 25 counties, Black students account for less than 50% of the student population. Of the 33 counties that conducted 50 or more total referrals, 6 did not refer any white students. Black students accounted for less than 50% of the student population in each of those 6 counties.
- Between 2017 and 2023, statewide law enforcement and school staff filed school-based complaints of disorderly conduct against Black students at 4 times the rate of their white counterparts. For many counties, the disparities in the rate of referrals for disorderly conduct in schools is even worse, especially in Gaston, Forsyth, Moore, Wake, and Pitt where adults refer Black students at a rate of 23 to 42 times their white classmates. Moreover, the statewide disparities are widening: From 2021-23, schools referred Black students for disorderly conduct at over 5 times the rate of their white classmates.



Ratio of school-based complaints comparing the rate for each demographic group to the rate for white students



Ratio of disorderly conduct referrals comparing the rate for each demographic group to the rate for white students

In short, reliance on policing of students in North Carolina's schools does not work. This choice has made students less safe, not more, and created a climate of distrust and fear, especially for Black students and students with disabilities. It is time for North Carolina to prioritize policies and strategies that actually make schools safe and welcoming learning environments for all children. Achieving that laudable goal means investing in kids, schools, and communities, not armed law enforcement officers.

Mental Health Providers are Scarce

School counselors, social workers, nurses, psychologists, and community health workers are critical for ensuring that students are able to fully participate in school, and in supporting the health and well-being of youth. However, North Carolina has a significant dearth of school-based mental health (SBMH) providers in schools. The consequences for North Carolina youth are stark. Indeed, North Carolina was recently ranked 42nd out of 50 states for overall youth mental health.

- Data shows that there is only 1 counselor per 361 students, much higher than the recommended ratio of 1 counselor per 250 students.
- 1 social worker is assigned for every 1,653 students, serving over six times as many students than what is recommended (one social worker to 250 students). Moreover, nearly half of North Carolina schools did not report having any social worker on staff.
- There is 1 nurse per 1,578 students, twice the ratio recommended of one nurse to 750 students. Moreover, nearly half of North Carolina schools have no nurse at all.
- Data shows that one school psychologist serves 2,970 students, nearly 6 times the number of students than what is recommended.

Police and the Harms They Cause are Ubiquitous

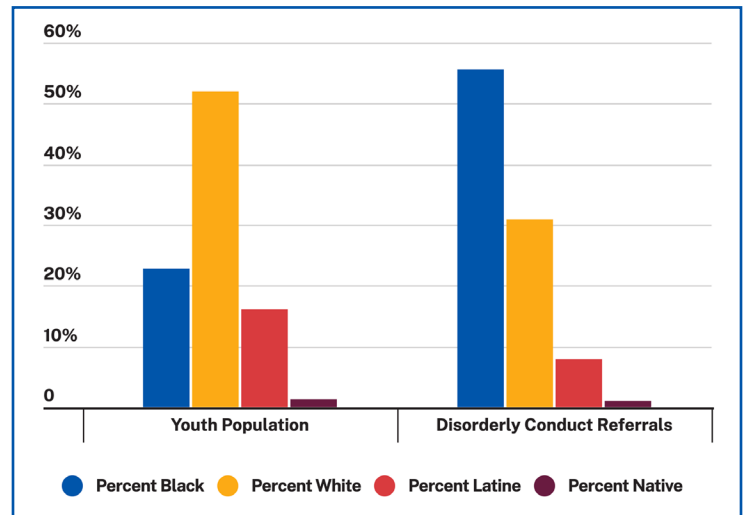
Since 2018, North Carolina has increased funding for school-based police officers, however, these significant investments have not paid off. A study from 2023, assessing the results of a 170% increase in funding for school police officers over the past five years in North Carolina, found that police “have no effect on criminal acts or short-term suspensions but may increase the number of school-related arrests,” especially for students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students. Increasing policing and training did not reduce serious incidents like assaults, homicide, bomb threats, possession and use of alcohol and drugs, or the possession of weapons. In fact, numerous incidents have come to light within the last three years of police officers directing abusive, unlawful, and violent behavior towards students in North Carolina’s schools. Students have been tased, tackled, handcuffed, and pepper sprayed. Multiple school police officers have been arrested for sex crimes involving students at the schools they patrol.

School-Based Complaints and Disorderly Conduct Charges

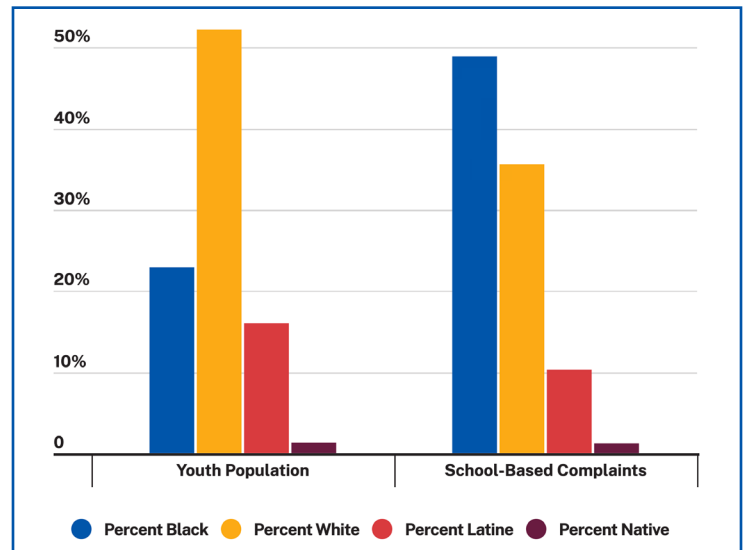
In North Carolina, one of the most expansive and concerning criminal laws applicable to school-based conduct is the “disorderly conduct in schools” law, which makes it a crime to “disrupt, disturb, or interfere with teaching.” Vague laws like the disorderly conduct in schools law give police officers

unbridled discretion to define when, and under what circumstances, typical childhood conduct crosses the line into criminal behavior. Laws that don’t provide clear standards are particularly susceptible to biases, implicit or otherwise, which can shape a police officer or administrator’s perceptions of a child’s intent and culpability when disruptive behaviors occur, influencing the nature and severity of the responses to the conduct.

It is well-established that Black students are not generally more likely to misbehave than other students, even after accounting for different socioeconomic backgrounds, yet adults are far more likely to punish Black students (and to punish them severely) than their white peers for similar conduct.



Demographic composition of North Carolina's youth population compared to the demographic composition of students who were subject to referrals for Disorderly Conduct from 2017-2023



Demographic composition of North Carolina's youth population compared to the demographic composition of students who were subject to school-based complaints from 2017-2022.

The Way Forward

Children in North Carolina are over-policed and under-supported in school, and Black students and students with disabilities are disproportionately harmed by criminalization in school. To change course, the state, school districts, and schools should:

- **Prioritize funding school-based mental health providers rather than police in schools.** North Carolina schools need to increase funding for school-based mental health providers and other initiatives to increase access to mental health for North Carolina’s children, instead of pumping more money into schools to hire more police officers.
- **Invest in and expand state and local partnerships to increase the availability and number of culturally affirming school-based mental health providers.** State and local efforts should prioritize increasing the number of available school-based mental health providers in schools, including by partnering with colleges and universities to expand the workforce pipeline.
- **Strengthen and further develop partnerships with community health workers (CHWs) to support mental health for youth.** CHWs often provide critical support to children, including with respect to issues that they face at school. They can serve to facilitate access to and improve the quality and cultural competence of health and social services for the community.
- **Decriminalize typical childhood behavior, including by repealing the disorderly conduct in schools law.** These types of laws provide unbridled discretion for law enforcement to criminalize typical adolescent behavior and fuel long-lasting harms for youth, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities, that funnel them into the criminal legal system.
- **End the regular presence of law enforcement in schools.** Police in schools harm students’ education in numerous ways and particularly burden students of color and students with disabilities. Investing in restorative practices and community partnerships can better serve the needs of students and the school community.
- **Require equity assessments of police impact and ensure accurate reporting of data.** Schools and school districts must be required to document and assess the impact of police in schools, including on students of color and students with disabilities. Reporting of data at the state and local level about the number of police in schools, law enforcement referrals, and school-based arrests must be accurate and transparent.
- **Reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline and punitive approaches to student behavior management.** Schools and districts need to invest in evidence-based supportive practices and restorative justice to support kids, and teachers and school staff must have training and resources to strengthen student-teacher relationships, build empathy mindsets, and enhance racial equity.



Sources

Links to source materials and related resources are available in Sam Davis, et al. The Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools (ACLU of North Carolina 2023)
www.acluofnorthcarolina-bts.org/cops-in-schools