Within the past year and a half, CT Voices has examined the factors that contribute to students facing punishment, exclusionary discipline, and arrest in school and the efficacy and prevalence of School Resource Officers (SROs) in Connecticut. Through our research we’ve discovered:

- Discrimination, health inequities, and socioeconomics are factors that push students of color through the school to prison pipeline at rates higher than that of their white peers. These factors can, in part, be mitigated by ensuring students have access to adequate counselors and social workers.
- Many schools maintain an inadequate ratio of counselors/students and social workers/students, and about 15 percent of Connecticut school districts do not employ a single social worker—meaning that many children are unable to access valuable mental and behavioral health services in their schools.
- Students in schools that employ SROs are more likely to face punishment, expulsion, and arrest than students in schools that do not employ SROs—thereby exacerbating the school to prison pipeline.

**HOW DO WE ADDRESS THIS?**

The State should eliminate SROs from schools, and boards of education should utilize the cost-savings to fund additional counselors and social workers with the sole purpose of helping to build a positive school climate. This is necessary to ensure Connecticut students have access to mental health and counseling supports that improve student engagement and to reduce the number of children being pushed through the school to prison pipeline each year.

**THE NEED FOR COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS:**

The American School Counselor Association advocates that schools need a counselor to student ratio of at least 250:1 for counselors to adequately meet the needs of students. In a ten-year overview of school counselor presence, Connecticut consistently had a ratio greater than 400:1. In the most recent reported figure from the 2014-2015 school year, Connecticut had a ratio of 466 students to one guidance counselor.

The number of social workers able to support students is also inadequate. The National Association of Social Work recommends the same ratio of 250 students for every school social worker. According to a report by the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, the statewide ratio is approximately 530 students to one social worker, over twice as much as recommended.

In addition to helping meet the behavioral health and guidance needs of individual students, counselors and social workers—if trained appropriately and provided the right ongoing and culturally responsive supports—provide students with comprehensive college and career pathway guidance, deepen students’ attachment to school through personal relationships, and contribute to a more positive school climate.
SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS DO NOT MEASURABLY INCREASE SAFETY:

Schools with SROs are Not Measurably Safer: We do not find evidence that SROs are associated with better academic outcomes for students, nor are they associated with worse academic outcomes for students. They also do not appear to statistically contribute to a measurably safer school climate in most cases.

Schools with SROs have Increased Rates of Arrest: Black and Latino students in schools with SROs are over three and four times, respectively, at greater risk of being arrested or referred to law enforcement than Black and Latino children in schools without SROs. White students were at 2.8 times greater risk.

SROs in Schools lead to Larger Disparities for Latino Students: When adjusting for other factors that may influence referral to law enforcement and arrest rates, the percentage of Latino students arrested in schools with SROs was six times higher than the percentage of Latino students arrested in schools without SROs.

SROs in Schools Escalate Conflict: Research suggests that SROs may escalate conflicts when there is significant room for discretion in how to respond to student behavior. A survey of Delaware SROs showed that 77 percent of SROs surveyed reported that they had at some point arrested a student simply to calm them down.

Schools with SROs Increase Trauma for Some Students: When SROs are present in a school, administrators may defer disciplinary duties to SROs. Unlike security guards and school administrators, SROs have the power to arrest students. Experiencing arrest can be traumatizing for children who are arrested, their families, and other observers who may be present. Even one arrest can result in children experiencing reduced access to future educational and employment opportunities.

POLICYMAKERS MUST ACT TO FUND COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS:

The United States is experiencing a nationwide trauma due to COVID-19, and this is even greater for Black and Latino children whose communities and families have been hit harder. This trauma is compounded by the public murder and widespread viewing of George Floyd at the hands of police officers. When these children return to school, they need schools to be prepared to help students heal from these traumas.

In the wake of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, schools have engaged in two conversations. How do we keep our students safe? And how do we meet the mental health needs of our students? In response to the first question, the number of schools utilizing SROs increased by 29 percent between the 2012-2013 school year and the 2015-2016 school year. In response to the second question, state funding and local efforts have led to the establishment of mental and behavioral health programs for children. While these efforts have offered support to thousands of students across the state, the programs have never received full and equitable funding. Therefore, many children are still unable to access the needed care and counseling in their schools.

If we shift toward considering our students’ mental health and safety as intertwined, we begin to understand that in meeting their mental health needs, we are increasing the safety of our students.

To meet the mental, emotional, and general well-being of students across the state, Connecticut should eliminate School Resources Officers and utilize the cost-savings to fund additional school counselors and social workers that look like the students they serve, and fund their appropriate training and ongoing supports.

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The information outlined here is based on the findings of our two reports: “Policing Connecticut’s Hallways: The Prevalence and Impact of School Resource Officers in Connecticut,” and “Beyond Exclusionary Discipline: Re-Conceptualizing Connecticut’s School to Prison Pipeline to Address Root Causes.” Both of these reports are available online at ctvoices.org