

THE MISREPRESENTATION OF SCHOOL SAFETY



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A Review Of Policing In Gwinnett County Public Schools

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REPORT

Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) have continued to fund the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program to “educate students and parents about safety issues, while also protecting them and preventing inappropriate behavior on school campuses”. In addition, Gwinnett County Public School Resource Officers are tasked to de-escalate situations too intense for teachers and administration to handle, provide counseling and mentoring services to students, and provide law-related education to community members. The funding for this program increases year to year, while students struggle to navigate emotions, conflict, identities, and more whilst in school.

Nationally, SRO programs began in the 1950s and gained traction in the '90s in response to various school shootings. In 1982¹, Georgia legislation gave local school boards the agency to establish school-based law enforcement officers.

In the 1990s, Georgia local school boards began assigning SROs in response to the fear around high-profile school shootings and purported juvenile crime. Though research is widely inconclusive of SROs effectiveness in combating school shootings, we do know that 46% of national suspensions/expulsions are accounted for on differential treatment and not on the basis of behavior². This data exhibits the racial prejudices that cannot be quantified but continue to exist within schools and means of punishment.

According to data from the Georgia Peace Officer Standard and Training Council, about 12% of SROs working in the state's school police departments have been forced out of a previous job, been terminated or investigated for reasons including: chronically poor performance, sexual misconduct, lying to superiors, and inappropriate use of force. This history of 12% of Georgia's SROs being potential perpetrators of harm strongly contradicts the purpose of Georgia's Association of School Resource Officers which states: "To demonstrate how a safe learning environment, in our schools, can be more easily obtained through positive role modeling, networking, and intervention with our youth³." There is also a history of counties in Georgia establishing their police force in a rushed manner⁴, which resulted directly in the hiring of formerly terminated police officers.

When the need for protecting students is met with rushing through a hiring process that relies heavily on ensuring hires are equipped for the job, historically Georgia's school boards have prioritized establishing a police force quickly over establishing student safety and well-being.

Entry of School Resource Officers in Gwinnett County, GA

Gwinnett County Public Schools approached the School Resource Officer program much differently from most counties across Georgia and the country. There have not been any officers forced out of a job and hired into GCPS because Gwinnett Schools function independently from Gwinnett County Police. This does not absolve Gwinnett County of perpetuating harm through the program. According to ProPublica's Miseducation Database (2018), Gwinnett County Public Schools had 906 total arrests, accounting for 22.76% of the state total of 3,980⁵. This number may seem proportionate since GCPS has the largest student population in Georgia, but if we were to compare 906 total arrests in the largest county with the 24 arrests in Dekalb county (3rd largest student population), we can detect that it is not a matter of size but rather of policing.

"After I filed a complaint, seeing him [SRO] around school was uncomfortable. I didn't want to go to school anymore. I was scared I would be singled out again..." GCPS Student Reflection

Gwinnett County School Resource Officers are required to have at least five years of law enforcement experience and hold at minimum an associate degree in pursuit of being hired⁶. The prospective officer must also receive the Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Basic Law Enforcement certification, pass a criminal history, psychological, and polygraph test, and have a valid Georgia driver's license.

Though this may seem like a thorough hiring process, approximately 97%⁷ of the manual is about policing and there is little to nothing that covers child development and the transitioning from street policing to policing in schools, which an important discernment when dealing with children, especially children of color, girls, children of different abilities, and LGBTQ+ identities.

Safety and Security Program in Gwinnett County Public Schools



Funding

Throughout the review of the Gwinnett County Public Schools 2020-2021 Proposed Budget, which details the budget costs for the length of one academic year, there is no specification about funding de-escalation programs or trainings for school resource officers. The GCPS SRO Procedural Manual⁸ outlines that the P.O.S.T 40-hour Field Training Officer Course is required to be considered, which upon further review isn't specified publicly what field training does to prepare SROs to police in schools. There is a portion in the budget that outlines the costs of onboarding, which includes the costs of uniforms, vehicle purchases, phone services, and "other purchased services"⁹. SRO's are the only people whom work for Gwinnett County and receive vehicles for transportation, which is a yearly cost of \$87,000. The GCPS proposed budget was adopted August 2020, for the 2020-2021 academic year.

In 2019 there was an increase in the number of school resource officers in Gwinnett County Public Schools, specifically to decrease the number of rotations in elementary schools¹⁰. This increase is not the first Gwinnett County has seen, four of its prior seven budgets included additional funding for School Resource Officers. This is quite significant as we move into reviewing what counseling services for students.

Policing

Student safety is not about physical safety needs, but also about psychological and emotional needs. It is not guaranteed that SRO's are protecting students from physical violence. Within the School Resource Officer Procedural Manual, it is stated under section 507:

"AUTHORIZED USES

a. **An officer may use a TASER CEW to lawfully subdue and/or control a violent or combative person when the use of less lethal force is justified.** Each cycle of a TASER is a separate use of force and must be justified independently. The decision to use a TASER CEW should be based on the **officer's reasonable perceptions, training and experience at the time of the incident.** Prior to use, officers should give a verbal warning if safe to do so.

The preferred target area shall be the person's back. **If a back shot is not available, the officer should make reasonable efforts to target below the chest.** The head, neck, chest and groin should not be intentionally targeted (Section 507.04). "

This kind of language built around the appropriateness of a “less-lethal” weapon leaves room for interpretation. It is also later stated that a TASER CEW cannot be used on a person who is “obviously under the age of fourteen (14).” This freedom of discernment unknowingly promotes race and gender-based profiling and potentially puts students who are more prone to be subjected to adultification, which are usually black/brown boys¹¹ and girls¹², at risk of serious physical harm.

SROs Weaponry & Gear 	2 Guns
	Taser
	Baton
	Bullet Proof Vest
	Handcuffs

“The officer’s presence alone is seen as an element of force or at least actively discourages lawbreaking and promotes safety. The second tier of force is a verbal address, followed by the first levels of physical contact. Empty-hand contact and closed-hand contact is left up to the officer’s discretion, [Chief]Rikard said.” – Gwinnett Daily Post. August 2019

Advisement and Counseling Funding in Gwinnett County Public Schools

According to the GCPS budget, the Advisement and Counseling Student Services program exists to “facilitate student academic success, career planning, and development of life skills by providing administrative support to local schools and at the system level. Programs include Kindergarten through 12th grade, advisement and counseling, 6-12th grade teacher/student advisement...” The Advisement and Counseling budget is divided into two sections, the first being Student Services, which has a budget of \$1,168,733, and an Instructional portion which has a budget of \$36,678,614. While this amount is nearly three times greater than the budget for School Resource Officers, it does cover more ground in terms of the purpose it serves in a student’s day to day life. Students usually interact with SROs for discipline while counselors are someone a student may visit and interact with on a more regular basis. It is also important to note that the Advisement and Counseling Student Services Program is not detailed about the types of counseling provided (social, academic, behavioral, etc...) but from what could be gathered is the services serve and prioritize academic pursuits.

“The worst part is knowing my situation was bad, but I heard so much worse once I was sent to GIVE. My identity and their ignorance made every day hard and I am still trying to heal from the trauma from high school.” Gwinnett Student Reflection

While this is obviously important for students, the investment into a student’s mental and emotional well-being is worth the cost and time.



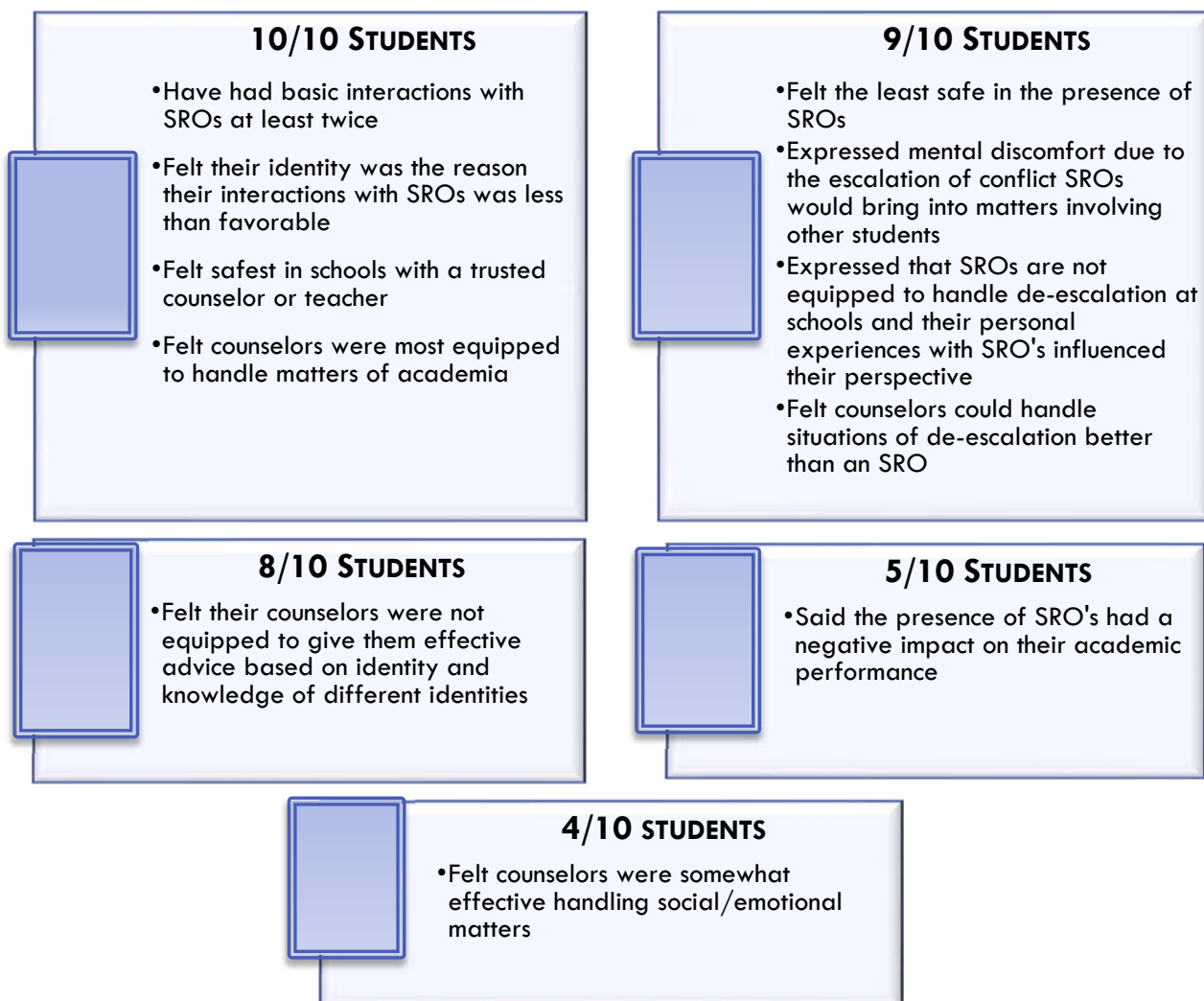
Safety as Told by Students

A survey of ten former and current GCPS students was performed to assess their levels of safety in relation to school resource officers, and the effectiveness of counseling in their personal experiences as GCPS students. Nine of those students felt generally unsafe with the presence of community police, and even less safe with the presence of police in schools. Upon being asked to elaborate, a majority of those students alluded to the heavy policing that goes on within their neighborhoods and how it has had a detrimental impact on how people in their community interact.

Some of the questions in this survey included:

- Did the presence of an SRO make you feel safer in school (emotionally, physically, socially)?
- Do you feel the presence of police in schools impacted your academic performance?
- Do you feel school counselors are equipped to handle everyday conflict between students and/or faculty at your school?

Towards the end of each survey, each student was asked about the best and worst parts of having counselors and officers, respectively, in schools and here are a few of their reflections:



Conclusion

According to the ProPublica Miseducation Database, there are about 1.9 social workers/psychologists/counselors per 1000 students in Gwinnett County Schools compared to the statewide average of 2.4 per 1000 students. From the feedback gathered from students, it is apparent there is an area of a student's growth that is missing from schools. There is a general feeling of unsafety or violence that students feel with police in schools. All of our surveyed students fall under at least one category of marginalized identities, non-white, female, disabled, or LGBTQ+, and all of those students felt the escalation of their situations were in large part due to their identity. While the small sample size of students surveyed was limited in this initial round of data collection, ten students feeling unsafe having interactions with those who are in schools to promote safety and security within students is significant enough to warrant a real examination for remedy. Gwinnett County Public Schools have made a commitment to students, their safety, and their academic success, yet there are several instances where that commitment has been broken.

Counseling services are important to students; however, they prioritize academia first and not a student's well-being. There is room for both to be prioritized, because without students feeling secure and safe, they will not be able to reach their true academic potential. It is also extremely important to have diversity in counselors, so students can see themselves in their counselors and feel seen by those whom they trust most. Better emotional management for students would result in less violence overall, considering violence is usually resorted to when all other options have been exhausted or, in the case of children especially, no other option has been taught or presented.

GCPS could use the current budgeted police funding, to provide Restorative Justice training, cultural competency training, and counselors focused specifically on the emotional and mental well-being of students. Organizations like the Health Initiative, WellCare of Georgia, Georgia Network for Nonviolent Communication, and so many others develop trainings specifically to ensure educators and people in general who interact with others often have a place to unlearn biases and learn how to use communication to solve problems. This kind of implementation over time will see vast changes in student behavior because they will be fortified in emotional competency and expression, that violence won't be first nature in reaction to an interpersonal conflict. Without SROs in schools, students wouldn't have an example of physical violence because it wouldn't exist in the environment that is meant to nurture and protect them. Coupled with improvements in the counseling department around cultural understandings, identity representation, emotional and mental centering, Gwinnett County Public Schools could create the environment that they imagine in their mission statement, and one that caters to students of all backgrounds.

ABOUT GWINNETT STOPP

The Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP) is a parent-driven community centered advocacy group focused on abolishing the School to Prison Pipeline (STPP). Gwinnett SToPP was formed by a small group of parents who grew to understand the magnitude of the school-to-prison pipeline in their own community. Gwinnett SToPP works to:

- Reduce both the number of children removed from the classroom and the duration of the absence;
- Educate parents and the community on the characteristics, contributors and consequences of the pipeline;
- Monitor district trends, policies and practices that contribute to the pipeline to ensure transparency and accountability; and
- Recommend national best practices to dismantle the pipeline.

Gwinnett SToPP empowers students and parents most impacted by the STPP to demand safe, supportive public schools. Gwinnett SToPP works under the theory that schools must be accountable to the communities they serve, and parents and students should be active participants in decision making about their schools.

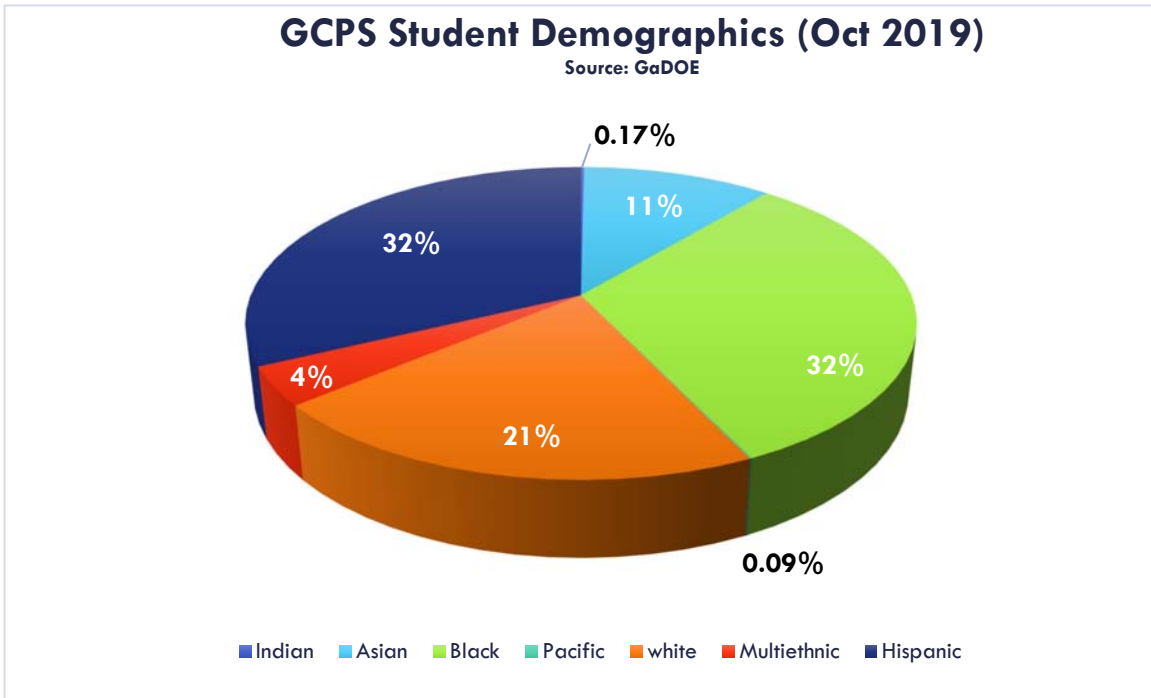
Through our workshops and two successful advocacy training institutes-- Parent Leadership Institute and Youth Leadership Institute, Gwinnett SToPP provides parents, students, and community members with information and data needed to understand the systemic problem of pushout. These trainings include how to use that information and data to hold elected officials and policymakers accountable when schools are not serving all children equitably and fairly. Collectively, the institutes have put trained advocates on the ground in Gwinnett to push for and against policies that impact the STPP. We also work with parents, students, and community members to bring a pro-active vision of discipline in schools that minimizes out of school time and promotes healthy school climate, recognizing that we must lead with a strong vision of what we want to see.

STPP

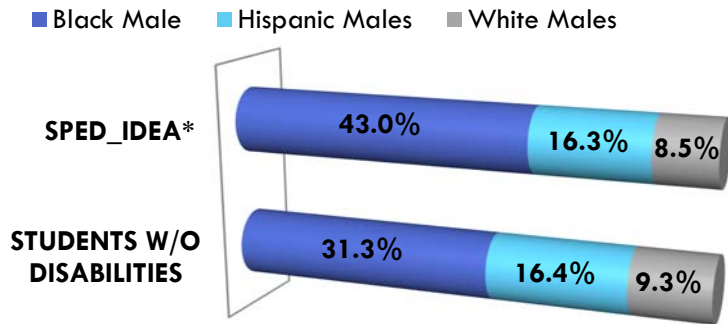
The School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) is a national trend wherein students are funneled out of their regular education setting and into alternative education and the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The STPP disproportionately affects students of color, students with disabilities, males, and students from low-wealth backgrounds. Several policy trends in the public education and juvenile justice systems have contributed to this nationwide epidemic:

- over-criminalization of youth through zero-tolerance policies/practices,
- criminalization of school rule violations,
- incentives created by high stakes testing for schools to push out low performing students,
- and schools bypassing due-process protections for children.

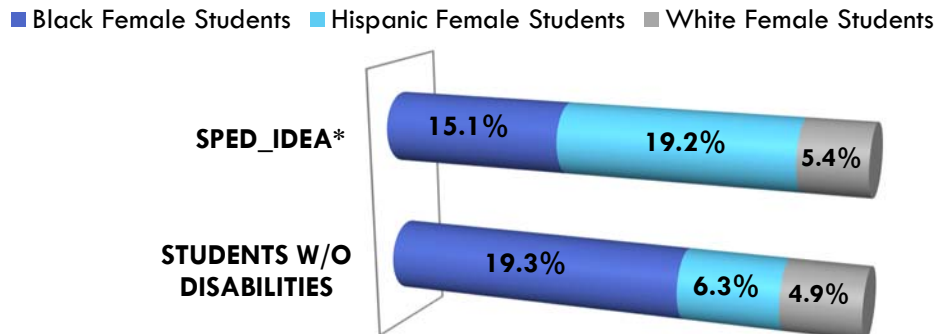




MALE STUDENTS REFERRED TO SRO'S SY2015-16



FEMALE STUDENTS REFERRED TO SRO'S SY2015-16



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education Civil Rights Data Collection

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- ¹ O.C.G.A. § 20-8-5.
- ² Social Forces, Volume 98, Issue 4: Unpacking the Drivers of Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Expulsion (2020)
- ³ GASRO. "About." GASRO, 2019, www.gasro.net/about.
- ⁴ Cox Media Group. "Clayton Co. Schools to Hire Security Guards as Sheriff Removes Deputies." *WSBTV*, 26 Mar. 2013, www.wsbtv.com/news/local/clayton-co-schools-hire-security-guards-sheriff-re/242402901.
- ⁵ Groeger, Lena Annie Waldman. "Miseducation." *ProPublica*, 16 Oct. 2018, projects.propublica.org/miseducation/district/1302550.
- ⁶ "Grayson GA Free Classified." *GEEBO*, grayson-ga.geebo.com/jobs-online/view/id/778133491-school-resource-officer-safety-/?utm_campaign=google_jobs_apply&utm_source=google_jobs_apply&utm_medium=organic.
- ⁷ GCPS Safety & Security Policy and Procedure Manual (Section 601) (on file with author).
- ⁸ *Id* at Section 603.
- ⁹ Gwinnett County Public Schools 2020-2021 Proposed Budget (pg. 54) (on file with author).
- ¹⁰ Denman, Taylor. "Increased SRO Staff Begins Watch over Students Monday." *Gwinnett Daily Post*, 2 Aug. 2019, www.gwinnettdaily.com/local/increased-sro-staff-begins-watch-over-students-monday/article_8b03572a-b48c-11e9-81d9-531d195e2b79.html.
- ¹¹ American Psychological Association. (2014, February 24). Members Topics Publications & Databases Psychology Help Center News & Events Science Education Careers About APA Home // News & Events // Press Room // Press Releases // Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less... Date created: 2014 Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent Than Whites, Research Finds [Press release]. Retrieved September 7, 2020, from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/03/black-boys-older>
- ¹² Morris, M. W. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. London, UK: The New Press.

Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP)

www.GwinnettSToPP.org

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