



To: Chairs Pinsky and Smith and members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs and Judicial Proceedings Committees
From: Shamoyia Gardiner, Education Policy Director
Re: Senate Bill 459: Public Schools - School Resource Officers - Firearms Required
Date: March 10, 2020
Position: Oppose

Advocates for Children and Youth opposes Senate Bill 459 for five key reasons:

This is a Local Issue Which Requires Local Solutions and Understanding of the Historical Context

Baltimore City is unique—while Maryland's other local school systems rely on memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with their jurisdiction's law enforcement agency, Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) has its own sworn police force. BCPS officers who are not stationed at one single school may keep their weapons with them at all times, and those who are stationed at a single school may retrieve their weapons in the event of an emergency. BCPS officers are accountable to certain provisions set forth in the federal consent decree under which the Baltimore Police Department operates.¹ **SB 459 will pose new, complex issues for the terms of the consent decree, as well as for BCPS administration.** This, and many other factors which require a localized historical context to be completely understood, is why **this weighty decision must sit completely in the hands of Baltimore City residents and the officials they elected** to represent their interests.

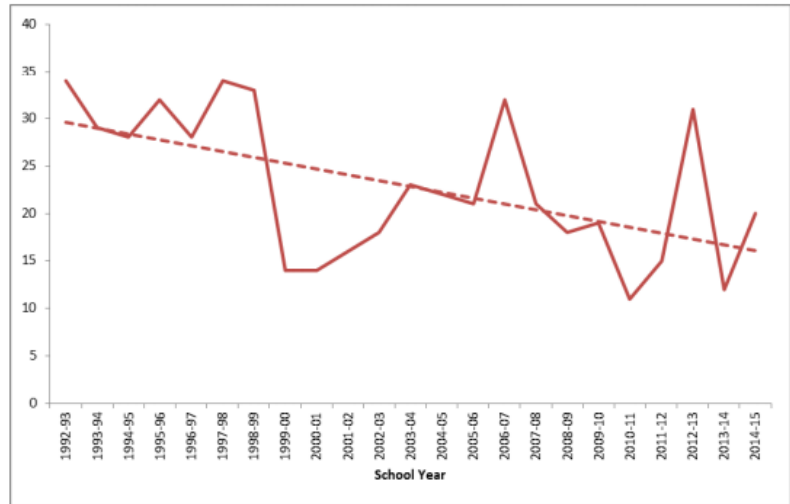
The Presence of a Gun Does Not Preclude Tragedy

Most children who are victims of homicide are not killed at school.² Though school-based mass shootings justifiably increase concerns about student safety at school, knee-jerk policy decisions will not provide effective solutions. **There is no empirical evidence indicating that armed SROs prevent school shootings.** The argument that arming SROs will act as a deterrent to people who would otherwise perpetrate a school shooting has been debunked in instances like the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman-Douglas High, where an SRO was present and 17 people were murdered.

¹ Document: DOJ/Baltimore City Consent Decree Agreement. "United States of America, Plaintiff; v. Police Department of Baltimore City, et. al., Defendants" January 12, 2017.

² Congressional Research Service. "School Resource Officers: Issues for Congress" July 5, 2018.

Figure 1. Number of At-School Homicides of Children Ages 5-18, SY1992-1993 to SY2014-2015



Source: Figure prepared by CRS using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017*.

Note: The dashed line in the figure is a trend line calculated by CRS.

At best, research regarding the effectiveness of SROs in preventing these tragedies is inconclusive; at worst, a positive correlation exists between the presence of SROs in high schools and instances of gun possession and threats of attack with a weapon.³

Requiring BCPS SROs to Carry Firearms in Schools Will Exacerbate Student Trauma

For Baltimore City's young people, many of whom have been affected by gun violence, it is imperative that school remain a safe, welcoming, comfortable space. A student who has been touched by gun violence cannot truly be comfortable in a gun's presence. For all students, not just those with multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), psychological safety is a prerequisite to engaging with any instructional material. Arming SROs threatens student achievement, damages school climate, and flies in the face of efforts to implement restorative approaches to conflict. BCPS still has work to do regarding the implementation of its *Blueprint for Student Success*, and needs financial support, not increased gun presence, to meet its goals. [Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data](#)⁴ shows that in the 2015-2016 school year, 90 BCPS students were arrested on school property. Of those, 98% were African American, a disproportionate percentage considering that only 81%⁵ of BCPS students are African American. Moreover, when Baltimore students are arrested, most cases are thrown out, suggesting that the behaviors which led to arrest could have been handled by an alternative means, at school, without the intervention of the SRO. **The introduction of firearms in schools has potentially lethal consequences for students of color**, and the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of initiatives like SB 459 should be enough to make us pause.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Maryland State Department. (n.d.). Maryland Public Schools Arrest Data. Retrieved from <http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/StudentArrest/MarylandPublicSchoolsArrestData011218.pdf>

⁵ Civil Rights Data Collection. (2018). Baltimore City Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=26918&syk=8&pid=2278>

Chronic Underfunding and Other Issues Pose an Actual, Recurring Threat to Student Safety

Teachers from Frederick Douglass High School, the site of the February 8th shooting in Baltimore City, have publicly condemned policy decisions which seek to arm SROs in the course of the normal school day. They have instead pointed to disinvestment in their school's facilities and operations, citing broken door locks, camera equipment, and other poorly-maintained security measures which they believe would have averted the events of that day if they had been functioning properly. Teachers have also noted that changes to their class loads and subject areas have placed less of a focus on relationship-building with students, a critical component of school culture and safety.

BCPS School Police Are At Their Most Effective Right Now

In less than 10 years, BCPS SROs cut student arrests by 91%. While not perfect, this progress is a result of decisions made by local leaders. BCPS Police Chief Hamm credited the reduction to new policies that are in line with national efforts which seek to build positive relationships between students and the officers.⁶ **If police officers are to exist in school buildings at all, building relationships with students must be a primary goal.** SB 459 would create a power imbalance in these critical, effective relationships by introducing a lethal weapon.

This holds in dangerous situations as well--the presence of Douglass High's unarmed SRO and his two armed superiors did not stop the shooting from happening. However, BCPS SROs are so effective *without* guns that they were able to subdue the shooter--**without either armed officer having to draw their weapons**. That is both a testament to the high-quality training BCPS officers receive and proof that SB 459 is not necessary.

The Voices of Students Must Be Prioritized on this Issue

Students from various organizations across Baltimore City, including the Baltimore Algebra Project and Youth As Resources, have made clear their opposition to allowing SROs to carry their firearms in schools throughout the day. These students are so compelled by this issue that they have made demonstrations at multiple public events, even subverting public discourse norms to ensure that their message is heard and heeded. It is our responsibility to listen to them.

Do not ignore the concerns of individuals with lived experiences related to this policy issue. We strongly encourage members of this committee and the entire General Assembly to hold the views of Baltimore City students and teachers in the absolute highest regard when decisions are made that will impact their daily lives. **ACY strongly urges an unfavorable report on SB 459.**

⁶ Campus Safety Magazine. "Baltimore City Schools' Police Officer Arrest Rate Drops 91%" July 19, 2017.

