



MARCH 3, 2021

# For Safe Schools, Invest in Support Instead of Punishment

## Position Statement in Support of House Bill 1089

*Given before the House Ways and Means Committee*

Nearly 400 police officers (school resource officers or SROs) are stationed in schools across Maryland. Using the criminal legal system to address students' social, behavioral, and mental health needs is counterproductive and can put children on a path toward incarceration. This policy choice deepens racial injustice in Maryland, as police arrest and use force against Black students at rates far above the statewide average. We can better meet children's needs and make schools more suitable places for learning by shifting away from stationing police in schools and instead investing in supports and trauma-informed care. For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 1089.

Based on budget documents and public records, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy estimates that state and local governments statewide spend up to \$50 million annually to place police in schools. Relying on police to address behavioral issues does nothing to address the underlying barriers that prevent students from thriving in school and can steer students into our oversized, counterproductive criminal legal system—with potentially lifelong repercussions.

Putting police in Maryland schools expands our racially unjust criminal legal system:

- More than half of the 3,100 Maryland students arrested in a school-related setting during the 2018–2019 school year were Black, even though Black students accounted for only one-third of the total student body. School resource officers were responsible for the majority of these arrests.[1]
- Police used force against Maryland students in a school-related setting 69 times during the 2019–2020 school year.[3] Among those incidents, 49 were against a Black student (71 percent) and only 12 were against a white student (17 percent). The remaining eight incidents (12 percent) involved students belonging to other racial and ethnic groups but were not reported in detail because of privacy standards.

Spending this money on policing takes up resources that we could otherwise invest in mental health and other supportive professionals who could help students succeed. Research shows that physiologically taxing childhood trauma, also known as toxic stress, can contribute to health, academic, and behavioral problems. A report by the Economic Policy Institute describes toxic stress as follows:

“A normal response to a frightening or threatening situation is the production of adrenaline, cortisol, and related hormones by the amygdala, hypothalamus, and adrenal and pituitary glands. When released, these hormones can affect almost every tissue and organ in the body (Dhabhar 2009, 216; HHP 2018). ... Until the danger passes, cortisol keeps a person on high alert, limiting access to the parts of the brain responsible

for memory and deliberative decision-making. ... when frightening or threatening situations occur too frequently, stress becomes chronic and disrupts the brain's and body's responses. The body can over- or underproduce necessary hormones, and the body's physiology can fail to return to normal."

"Toxic stress and its associated hormone disruption can stunt brain growth and diminish brain activity in the prefrontal cortex, a region that controls executive function, learning, memory, attention, anxiety, and emotional regulation (Shonkoff et al. 2012, 236; Kim et al. 2013). It can elevate blood pressure for a sustained and unhealthy period and disrupt the metabolic system, and it can compromise the immune system, increasing vulnerability to infection and inflammation (Evans and Kim 2013, 44)."

Students in low-income families are more likely than their peers in higher-income families to experience toxic stress (34 percent versus 25 percent), and Black children are more likely to experience toxic stress than their white peers (32 percent versus 26 percent).

Comparing children who have experienced toxic stress to otherwise-similar children who have not, those with experiences of toxic stress are:

- 70 percent more likely to have below-average reading skills and 80 percent more likely to have below-average math skills
- 73 percent more likely to have a viral infection and 30 percent more likely to have acute upper respiratory infections
- Three times as likely to have difficulty concentrating in the classroom
- More than twice as likely to break rules or show aggressive behavior

Research shows that deliberate steps to foster a positive, supportive school environment can mitigate the impacts of toxic stress. House Bill 1089 mirrors several of the policy recommendations in the Economic Policy Institute report:

- Educate school staff on the impacts of toxic stress
- Identify and eliminate racially discriminatory in-school practices, especially traumatic disciplinary practices that can create toxic stress
- Involve health care professionals in identifying and treating symptoms of toxic stress

House Bill 1089 would move Maryland schools away from punitive, counterproductive, and racist approaches to school discipline and toward a more just and effective model.

**For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Ways and Means Committee make a favorable report on House Bill 1089.**

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## Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 1089

### *Bill summary*

House Bill 1089 would prohibit school systems from establishing police departments or contracting with law enforcement agencies to station police officers in schools; change the composition of the School Safety Subcabinet Advisory Board; prohibit school security employees from carrying firearms or making arrests; revise reporting requirements on school discipline; and increase funding for school psychological and supportive staff.

## *Background*

Three-hundred ninety-five police officers (school resource officers) are currently stationed in Maryland schools. The state pays \$10 million in grants to school systems to for associated expenses. The Maryland Center on Economic Policy estimates that other governmental units spend up to \$40 million on school police on top of this state funding.

## *Equity Implications*

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## *Impact*

House Bill 1089 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.