

COPS...IN SCHOOLS??!!

It all started with the Gun-Free Schools Act, passed in 1995, which imposed the most dramatic criminal penalties for possession of a firearm on school property in history. By 1997, 94% of public schools had implemented “zero tolerance” policies with respect to firearm possession in schools. Unfortunately, these policies did not prevent the 1999 shooting rampage at the suburban, predominantly white Columbine high school in Littleton, Colorado. The Columbine tragedy, along with a rash of similar incidents in the months immediately following, fueled even harsher “school safety” policies across the country.¹

“...in a school system with hundreds of police officers and thousands of safety agents, there are times when that security presence is seen as an occupying force.”

- Principal of Thomas Jefferson High School in Queens, New York²

Ironically, but not surprisingly, the most punitive measures were adopted in urban schools attended by primarily low-income youth of color, which were outfitted with metal detectors and surveillance cameras, and subjected to an influx of armed police officers who were empowered to enforce school discipline codes through criminal arrests and sanctions, turning schools into “mini precincts and mini jails,” and creating a school-to-prison pipeline.³ According to Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM):

Although school safety initiatives in the U.S. initially focused on possession of firearms on school campuses, under the “broken windows” theory, “zero tolerance” policies quickly extended beyond firearms possession on school premises to minor infractions of school disciplinary policies such as tardiness and truancy, schoolyard scuffles and even verbal disagreements and cursing in school, contributing to dramatic increases in the frequency and level of school discipline imposed for what is essentially routine youth (mis)behavior.⁴

A youth-led participatory action research project in Detroit, MI found that criminalization was a leading factor in the city's over 60% drop-out rate. They found that experience of being treated like a criminal in school extends beyond the “zero tolerance” suspension policies and includes the overall environment of school, where metal detectors, verbal and physical abuse from teachers and staff, and a dehumanizing physical environment are a part of daily life.

“Even the simple fact of having security guards every day and the almost like, police state or high security state of the high school, doesn't necessarily make me want to be in school and my mind is definitely not on learning..”

- Jamilia Harnois, former student at Western High School, Detroit, MI⁵



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⇒ WHO IS IMPACTED?

A March 2005 report by the Advancement Project concluded “[a]cross the board, the data shows that Black and Latino students are more likely than their White peers to be arrested in school...[despite the lack of] evidence that Black and Latino students misbehave more than their White peers.”⁶ Black students are “punished more severely for less seriously and more subjectively defined infractions.”⁷

Jaisha Akins, a five-year old African American girl, was handcuffed and forcibly removed from her St. Petersburg, FL school by police called by school officials because she was acting out, as all five year olds do on occasion.⁸

A sixteen-year old Black girl was pulled out of class and arrested at her Bronx High School for cursing in the hallway. When her principal tried to stop the arrest, he was arrested too.⁹

One advocate working with youth at three Los Angeles high schools predominantly attended by youth of color reported that LGBT students had told her of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation by school police officers.

In Detroit, 60% of students report they have experienced harassment at the hands of school staff or faculty. Of those students, 1 in 3 believed they were harassed because of their racial, sexual gender or other identities. One queer high school student reported, “I know a few people who dropped out of school, I think the reason they dropped out was because of the way they were treated, as far as other students, they got beat up and bullied and the teachers really didn't take any interest into what they were saying and they didn't do anything about it.”¹⁰

DRUM found that over half of South Asian students surveyed in Queens, New York had experienced and/or seen harassment by school police and authorities. 85% of those believed the harassment was based on actual or perceived race, ethnicity, religion, or immigration status.¹¹

“Last year during Ramadan, I wore a scarf. When I would come through the metal detectors, I would be asked by school security why I was wearing a scarf. They asked me if I was religious. I told them it was none of their business. I see how the school safety agents pick on those they perceive to be religious, particularly those who wear scarves and hijab.”

- Maksudha, 17 year-old high school student¹²



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⇒ PHYSICAL BRUTALITY

Police bring the same tactics they employ on the streets to the schools where they are stationed, and often receive no specialized training. Thirty two percent of police departments interviewed by TASER International (the manufacturer of a weapon which delivers 50,000 V of electricity) used TASERS in schools.¹³

In September 2007, school security guards at Knight High School in Palmdale, California were caught on camera assaulting a 16 year-old African American girl, pushing her over a table and breaking her wrist after she spilled some cake on the floor of the cafeteria. The security guard yelled “hold still nappy-head” during the assault.¹⁴ (Photo on right.)



In 2004, Miami-Dade police used a TASER to shock a 12 year old girl for skipping school.¹⁵

⇒ SEARCHES AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

It is very uncomfortable being searched because I really don't like being touched by other people, especially people I don't know very well. It is more uncomfortable for girls because sometimes they check you around your most private areas, and it's just uncomfortable.

- Testimony of Jacquia Bolds, a Syracuse, NY high school student, before the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Young girls report frequent sexual harassment and inappropriate and overly invasive searches by police and school security guards stationed in schools. **For instance:**

A 14 year-old Chinese girl reported:
“The security guard accused me of having a knife... They took me to a room and made me take off my shirt and pants to check my bra. They didn't call my parents or let me talk to a teacher I know. I didn't have a knife just like I told them.”¹⁶

A young Latina lesbian reported that throughout the 2001 and 2002 school year, LAPD officers stationed at her high school would frequently ask her to kiss her girlfriend, and ask them “what do you guys do?”



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⇒ ENDNOTES

- ¹ Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), *Education, Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety-Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth* 65-66, June 2006.
- ² Fertig, Beth. "School Safety Agents Cause Tensions," WNYC News, May 3, 2005.
- ³ Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), *Education, Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety-Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth* 65-66, 70, June 2006; Chino Hardin of Prison Moratorium Project, quoted in Elizabeth Hays, *Students United to Rip Patrol, Want Cops out of Schools*, New York Daily News, February 18, 2004.
- ⁴ Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), *Education, Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety-Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth* 65-66, June 2006.
- ⁵ Detroit Summer Live Arts Media Project (LAMP) Hip Hip Audio Documentary, *Rising Up From the Ashes: Chronicles of a Dropout* (2006) Track 10
- ⁶ The Advancement Project, *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*, March 2005.
- ⁷ T. Johnson, J. Boyden, and W. Pittz, *Racial Profiling and Punishment in U.S. Public Schools*, Applied Research Center 2001.
- ⁸ *Video Captures Police Handcuffing 5-year-old Girl*, Associated Press, April 22, 2005; *A Current Affair to Show 5-year-old's Arrest Today*, <http://www.acurrentaffair.com/daily/todayshow/index.html> (last visited April 24, 2005).
- ⁹ Carrión, Jr, Adolfo. Who's in charge? A report on issues related to disputes over authority between the police and school administrators in Bronx schools, Office of the Bronx Borough, July 2005.
- ¹⁰ Detroit Summer Live Arts Media Project (LAMP) 2007 Survey
- ¹¹ Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), *Education, Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety-Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth* 65-66, June 2006.
- ¹² Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), *Education, Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety-Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth* 40, June 2006.
- ¹³ Anne-Marie Cusac, *The Trouble with Tasers*, The Progressive, April 11, 2005. Between late 2003 and early 2005, at least 24 Central Florida elementary school students were shocked with TASERS by police officers placed in public schools. Some of the students were as young as 12 years old. A typical scenario involved officers wading in through a crowd to break up a fight and using TASERS to "get them to move." David Weber, *Records: Cops Used Tasers Against 24 Students Since 2003*, Sun Sentinel, March 25, 2005.
- ¹⁴ Fox News LA, September 27, 2007; Ann Simmons, *Mothers seek action from Palmdale school; They protest when their children are suspended after allegedly tussling with a security guard*. *Los Angeles Times* September 29, 2007.
- ¹⁵ *Police Taser 6 year-old Boy*, CNN.com, November 13, 2004.
- ¹⁶ *Deprived of Dignity: Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools*, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, 2007.

