RACIAL EQUITY IN SCHOOL POLICING
A review of Indianapolis Public Schools Police Department

BACKGROUND

Disparities in educational outcomes and opportunities persist for students of color throughout the United States. On every measure of educational achievement and attainment, race continues to be a prominent factor in widening the opportunity gap within the student population.

Black and Hispanic/Latinx students consistently represent a disproportionately high number of discipline incidents. These incidents can significantly impact a student's future. Moreover, more than half of U.S. schools with high numbers of Black and Hispanic/Latinx students have school resource officers (SROs).[A] This trend is concerning as school discipline has trended toward criminalizing negative behaviors by shifting from in-school discipline to discipline handled by SROs and the court system.[1] Therefore, addressing racial disparities in schools requires a systematic assessment of all institutional policies, including school-based policing.

Given the national and local focus on police reform, Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) partnered with the Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy to identify best practices for achieving racial equity policing in their school district. CRISP examined reforms that should be considered by IPS Police Department (IPS PD) to address racial inequity and ensure effective, sustained, and improved student outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess the extent to which existing IPS PD's practices, policies, and procedures align with racially equitable evidence-based practices.

METHODOLOGY

The research team employed a mixed methods approach to assess the extent to which existing IPS PD operations align with evidence-based practices.

KEY FINDINGS

- IPS students, staff, and caregivers primarily saw IPS PD as only law enforcers while officers saw themselves as educators, informal counselors, and law enforcers.
- Black students have the highest arrest rates and are seven times more likely to be arrested than white students.
- Overall, 88% of IPS PD felt they collaborate effectively with school staff while only 61% of staff feel the same.
- Overall, 86% of IPS PD felt they had a positive relationship with students and families. Yet, only 40% of caregivers and 42% of students said IPS officers tried to engage with them outside of addressing behavioral concerns.
- Ambiguity surrounding IPS PD and school staff roles in addressing student misbehavior often stifles collaboration and can lead to confusion and miscommunication.
- IPS governance documents do not clearly outline use-of-force protocols, or differentiate between behaviors as criminal offenses or student misconduct.
- The racial equity and implicit bias trainings for IPS PD are insufficient because they do not require reflection or ongoing learning.
- IPS PD and school staff recommended more training to fulfill their responsibilities such as trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, child and adolescent development, and working with students with disabilities.

A   An SRO is a sworn law enforcement officer who is assigned to a school on a long-term basis and is trained to perform three main roles: law enforcement officer, law-related counselor, and law-related educator.

This approach included:
- A systematic review of existing literature on evidence- and school-based policing practices.
- Interviewing 11 members of IPS PD and surveying 21 members.
- Surveying 211 school staff and administrators, 79 middle and high school students, and 51 parents/caregivers with IPS middle and high school students. Parents/caregivers are referred to as caregivers in this brief.
- A review of IPS PD operating procedures and jurisdiction documents.

Researchers used descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to assess program implementation and whether it followed best practices.

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

The concept of SROs first emerged in the 1950s in Flint, Michigan, as part of a community policing effort.[2] Since then, legislation—such as the Safe School Act of 1994 and the amended Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968—helped encourage partnerships between law enforcement and schools.[3] Federal funding through Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and other state-level funding helped embed SROs in schools. In fact, 79% of schools with 1,000 or more students had at least one SRO in the school building by 2018.[4] While the prevalence of mass shootings is one reason for the use of police officers in schools,[5] the increase of SROs in schools occurred as part of a broad transformation of school discipline. Increasingly, SROs are asked to help enforce zero-tolerance policies in schools, requiring that students be punished for low-level offenses and minor social disorder, even when the child is not a danger to themselves or others. School districts with higher enrollment of nonwhite students are more likely to have these zero-tolerance policies.[6,7]

IPS POLICE DEPARTMENT

The IPS Board of Commissioners established the IPS Police Department in 2007 as a separate, fully trained law enforcement entity. A Memorandum of Understanding was entered with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and issues of jurisdiction and investigations. There are 38

IPS PD members including executive leadership, SROs, patrol officers, and the investigations unit.

A significant responsibility of IPS PD is to provide and maintain a safe educational environment for students and staff. SROs are primarily located in school buildings and help secure the safety of students, staff, and school property, while responding to the needs of school administrators. Patrol officers—who work in shifts—monitor an assigned IPS district area and respond to school emergency calls for assistance. Conversely, the investigations unit deals with incidents that arise between IPS PD and students or staff.
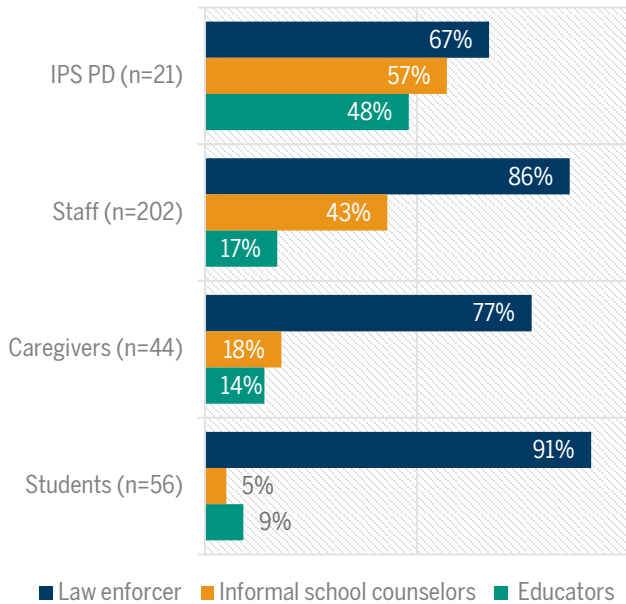
FINDINGS

The key findings from this study focus on four main areas: governance and oversight, transparency and accountability, collaboration, and training and professional development. Additional findings include information on uniforms and other safety equipment used in schools.

GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT

It is important to establish written governing protocols that outline school-based policing programs' operating procedures and policies for law enforcement and school districts. These protocols typically include an agreement between local law enforcement and the school district, and often include a Memorandum of Understanding and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Among other foundational tenets, these documents (1) articulate the mission and vision of the SRO program, (2) clearly describe the roles and responsibilities of SROs, (3) address the role of SROs and school administration in handling student misbehavior, and (4) establish a chain of command for SROs. These protocols support the goals of a school safety team, prevent role conflicts, and foster interagency collaboration among key stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school staff, and parents/families).

While IPS PD has longstanding governance documents that outline its operating procedures, the documents are missing key elements such as defined roles and responsibilities in handling student misbehavior as well as established practices for promoting communication and collaboration between IPS PD, school administration, and staff. Survey results also suggest that students, staff, and caregivers

FIGURE 1. Perceptions about the roles of IPS PD

IPS PD (n=21)
- Law enforcer: 67%
- Informal school counselors: 57%
- Educators: 48%

Staff (n=202)
- Law enforcer: 86%
- Informal school counselors: 43%
- Educators: 17%

Caregivers (n=44)
- Law enforcer: 77%
- Informal school counselors: 18%
- Educators: 14%

Students (n=56)
- Law enforcer: 91%
- Informal school counselors: 5%
- Educators: 9%

■ Law enforcer ■ Informal school counselors ■ Educators

were unsure about the role of IPS PD in school (Figure 1). These stakeholders primarily saw IPS PD as law enforcers. Only a few students and caregivers considered their IPS PD to be educators or informal counselors. Conversely, IPS PD were more likely to see themselves as educators, informal school counselors, and law enforcers.

There are further inconsistencies in how student misbehavior—such as classroom disruption or defiance—is addressed among IPS PD and staff. Both parties are uncertain about their specific roles. This ambiguity often stifles collaboration and can lead to confusion and miscommunication. Furthermore, IPS PD's governance documents do not differentiate between student behaviors that constitute a criminal offense versus those that are simply student misconduct. The guidelines also do not clearly outline the department's use-of-force protocols. This vagueness results in a lack of consistency in how IPS PD uses or enforces these practices and can lead to more punitive consequences for minor offenses.

Finally, while IPS PD hires individuals who are interested in working with youth, this is not a basic requirement. School administration, staff, and caregivers are not involved in the hiring and selection process. Staff expressed concerns that school administration is not involved in decisions related to the selection and placement of IPS PD officers. They advocated for more collaborative efforts to recruit officers who best fit the needs of the school and have an exemplary record working with youth.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Governance documents often contain written protocols to help facilitate transparency and accountability. These documents provide guidelines for sharing data with the public about SRO programming—such as the number of SROs and law enforcement interventions—and any efforts to disseminate information about student arrests, the use of force, and school-wide disciplinary actions.[8] Many of IPS PD's documents—including budgetary information, personnel information, case files, arrest data, and investigation records—are readily available. For example, arrest data is disaggregated by age, gender, race/ethnicity, the charge, and incident location. Best practices dictate that this data is also broken down by disability status, English as a Second Language (ESL), and how incidents were resolved. This additional information provides a complete picture of which students are receiving infractions and can help leaders address any disproportionalities. Figure 2 shows the number of students arrested by IPS PD decreased since 2016 despite a slight increase in the 2018–19 school year. This decrease may be explained by several factors, such as restorative justice practices[B] that are implemented in lieu of arrests and efforts to address student misbehavior by using nonpunitive measures.
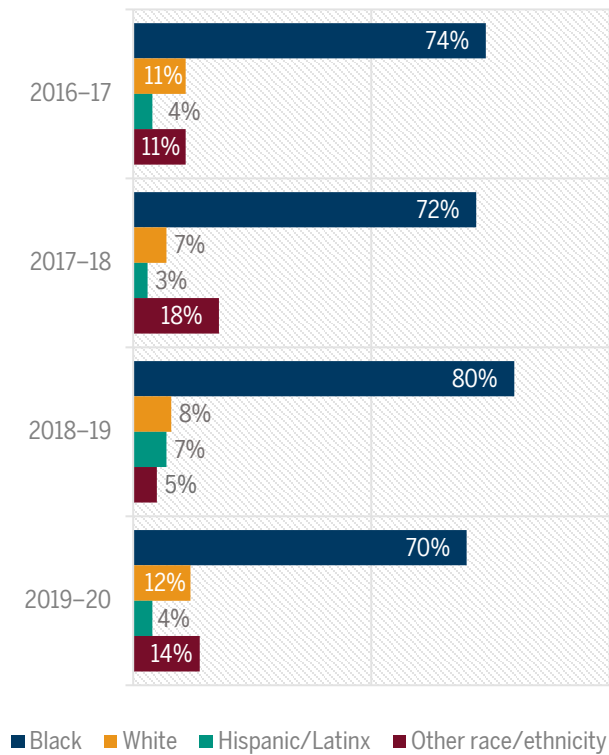
FIGURE 2. Number of high school students arrested by IPS PD (2016–2020)

- 2016–17: 107
- 2017–18: 71
- 2018–19: 76
- 2019–20: 50
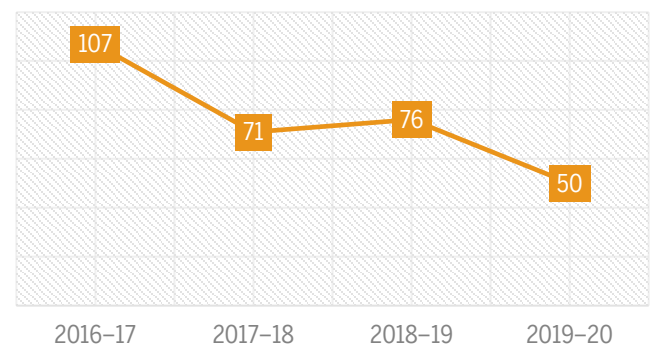
Note: Rates shown in 2019–2020 school year took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and represent arrests reported during in-person school.

B   Restorative justice is a diversion strategy and an example of racial equity training. It is typically a community-based approach to addressing criminal offenses and emphasizes intentional and strategic efforts to steer an offender away from the criminal justice system.

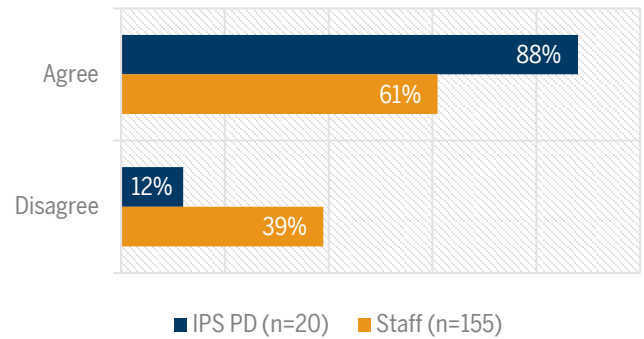## FIGURE 3. High school student arrests by race/ethnicity (2017–2020)

Legend: Black, White, Hispanic/Latinx, Other race/ethnicity

2016–17: Black 74%, White 11%, Hispanic/Latinx 4%, Other race/ethnicity 11%
2017–18: Black 72%, White 7%, Hispanic/Latinx 3%, Other race/ethnicity 18%
2018–19: Black 80%, White 8%, Hispanic/Latinx 7%, Other race/ethnicity 5%
2019–20: Black 70%, White 12%, Hispanic/Latinx 4%, Other race/ethnicity 14%

FIGURE 4. Perceptions of effective collaboration, percentage who agree/disagree

Agree: IPS PD 88%, Staff 61%
Disagree: IPS PD 12%, Staff 39%

IPS PD (n=20), Staff (n=155)

Despite decreases in arrests, racial disparities persist. As seen in Figure 3, Black students are arrested at a higher rate than their peers. Overall, IPS's Black students were seven times more likely to be arrested than white students across all four years that data was analyzed.

COLLABORATION

Effective school-based law enforcement relies on positive relationships and consistent communication between officers, school staff and administration, students, and their caregivers. This collaborative approach helps to increase awareness, access to resources, and promotes school-based emergency planning.[8] However, survey findings revealed there were varying levels of collaboration among IPS PD and staff. Overall, 88% of IPS officers felt they collaborated effectively with school staff while only 61% of school staff felt the same (Figure 4).

A significant deterrent to collaboration is the ambiguity surrounding roles and responsibilities when addressing student misbehavior. As a result, IPS PD and staff cannot effectively address these issues. Other challenges include lack of opportunities for intentional engagement between school staff and IPS PD, such as scheduled meeting times. However, IPS PD noted the importance of building rapport with both students and their caregivers. Overall, 86% of IPS PD felt their relationship with students and caregivers was positive. Yet only 40% of caregivers and 42% of students said IPS officers tried to engage with them outside of addressing behavioral concerns which hinders collaboration and relationship building.

TRAININGS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School-based police officers often navigate multiple roles which presents some unique policing challenges within an educational context. Schools typically focus on fostering academic achievement and educational attainment, while police officers traditionally protect public safety and maintain law and order. These differences in mission and goals can affect how SROs connect with students and respond to student behavior.[8] Therefore, effective SRO programs should incorporate training and professional development opportunities to help school-based officers navigate multiple roles and responsibilities.

Currently, IPS PD participates in both law enforcement instruction and specific school-based policing trainings. However, both IPS PD and school staff expressed a need for additional training to help officers effectively fulfill their roles and responsibilities and meet the needs of students. These training topics include trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, child and adolescent development, working with students with disabilities, and more.

IPS PD also participates in the district-mandated racial equity training and an implicit bias training led by an external entity. While these trainings can provide foundational

knowledge on the long-lasting impact of institutional racism, they are inadequate. Combatting systemic racism requires ongoing learning, reflection, and intentional implementation of core concepts in their work. Similarly, IPS PD currently implements and facilitates restorative justice conferences to address some disciplinary issues. However, officers noted that these conferences often lack consistency in terms of frequency and application. Several reasons cited were lack of capacity to implement these on an ongoing basis and insufficient buy-in from staff, students, and caregivers.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

The research team collected additional information about how SRO programs are implemented, including practices for wearing uniforms, carrying firearms, and using other safety equipment in schools. Overall, the district's approach to these matters may benefit from the input of additional stakeholders, such as caregivers, school administration and staff, students, and community residents.

SRO uniforms

While evidence about the relationship between student outcomes and SROs wearing uniforms at school is limited, some school districts have adopted new dress codes that help SROs appear more approachable. Overall, research does not conclusively suggest that changing the uniforms of police officers will result in improved student outcomes without also implementing related policy changes.

Safety equipment and carrying firearms

There is mixed evidence on the use of safety equipment in schools. Metal detectors, for example are associated with negative perceptions among students, while there is inconclusive evidence on the impact of SROs carrying guns and student outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

Achieving racial equity in education requires removing institutional and structural barriers that negatively affect outcomes and opportunities for students of color. However, racial disparities are pervasive nationwide. Locally, Black and Hispanic/Latinx students within IPS experience higher rates of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Between 2016 and 2020, more than 60% of IPS high school students who were suspended were Black or Hispanic/Latinx. These trends have prompted school districts to intentionally mitigate disparities in disciplinary actions that affect educational outcomes for students of color.

School policing practices can either help or hurt districts' progress toward achieving racial equity. Literature suggests that SROs can help create a safe environment and positive climate for students by discouraging bullying, developing relationships with students, and helping school staff manage student misbehavior—all important contributors to student outcomes. On the other hand, SROs in schools could worsen outcomes for students from racially minoritized backgrounds. Several studies have documented a relationship between the presence of SROs and increased rates of school discipline. This result—in conjunction with the overrepresentation of Black youth with disciplinary actions—highlights that SROs may contribute to existing racial inequities in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings helped highlight key opportunities for improving IPS PD program practices. The following recommendations are for both IPS PD and IPS administration to consider. To be effectively and successfully implemented, these recommendations will require intentional interagency collaboration between IPS PD, school administration, and staff. All IPS stakeholders must work together to implement these recommendations to ensure the collective interests of the school system are being met.

GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT

- Use governance documents to clearly define IPS PD, staff, and administration roles in addressing student behavior to promote increased collaboration and reduce ambiguities surrounding these responsibilities.
- Differentiate between student misconduct and criminal offenses to mitigate IPS PD's role in school disciplinary issues traditionally handled by school administration and staff.
- Provide specific use-of-force guidelines, including outlining scenarios in which less-than-lethal and deadly force should be used.
- Involve school administration, staff, and student caregivers in the officer selection and hiring process. This will help facilitate buy-in across these groups, increase collaboration, and ensure officers are an appropriate fit within the school culture.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Develop a systematic approach to managing records and data accessibility to enhance IPS PD's ability to evaluate the success of planned programs, initiatives, and activities. This will help determine practices that are effective and areas for improvement over time.
- Develop a governance document that outlines protocols to track key metrics and maintain publicly available data, including IPS PD case/investigations, arrest records, student data related to exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., suspensions and expulsions), attendance, truancy, and other school disciplinary actions. This can help track and monitor student outcomes, assess whether specific types of students encounter more disciplinary actions, and help increase reporting and public awareness of this information.

COLLABORATION

- Provide opportunities for intentional engagement and collaboration between school administration, staff, and IPS PD. For example, at the beginning of the school year, ensure that staff and IPS PD understand each other's roles in the school and coordinate joint training and learning sessions to enhance their collaboration efforts. This will increase their ability to meet students' needs and address complex issues that might arise.
- Create opportunities for students, their caregivers, and IPS PD to interact outside of safety protocols. An effective school-based policing program requires sustained engagement with students and caregivers to ensure the program is meeting students' needs.

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Implement more extensive school-based policing-specific training opportunities that focus on navigating complexities encountered by students within a school setting. Topics could include child and adolescent development, trauma-informed care, and working with students with disabilities.
- Racial equity and systemic justice issues—specifically within the education and criminal justice system—should be incorporated in training curricula to encourage ongoing learning, discussions, and reflection on the topics.

- Develop a method to document SRO training and professional development activities to ensure all SROs have attended required sessions as outlined in IPS PD's governance documents.
- Strengthen the use and implementation of current restorative justice practices to help improve their efficacy. This includes building the capacity of all school staff to practice restorative justice rather than incident-driven approaches as well as documenting the outcomes of these efforts to assess their effectiveness.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider rebranding the IPS PD program to create a shift in department culture and mindset. Members of IPS PD mainly perceive their role as law enforcers even though an SRO's roles and responsibilities extend far beyond maintaining and protecting the safety of students and staff. Referring to IPS PD as SROs, while teaching the importance of fulfilling other key roles, could help foster a more positive and nonpunitive educational environment for students.
- Develop a school safety advisory committee to help recommend whether IPS PD should wear uniforms and carry guns and tasers in the school. Using the evidence already provided in this brief, the safety committee should also elicit feedback from caregivers, students, school administration, staff, and community residents on these practices.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Embed evidence-based practices into IPS PD's operating procedures to help mitigate disproportionalities in educational outcomes for students of color and to foster the district's vision of racial equity.
- Conduct ongoing assessments of the IPS PD program to ensure consistency with evidence-based approaches and positive outcomes for all students.
- Assess the cost effectiveness of the IPS PD program and reviewing use-of-force practices.

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