

EDITORIAL

Criminalizing Children at School

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD (*Published: April 19, 2013*)

The National Rifle Association and President Obama responded to the Newtown, Conn., shootings by recommending that more police officers be placed in the nation's schools. But a growing body of research suggests that, contrary to popular wisdom, a larger police presence in schools generally does little to improve safety. It can also create a repressive environment in which children are arrested or issued summonses for minor misdeeds - like cutting class or talking back - that once would have been dealt with by the principal.

Stationing police in schools, while common today, was virtually unknown during the 1970s. Things began to change with the surge of juvenile crime during the '80s, followed by an overreaction among school officials. Then came the 1999 Columbine High School shooting outside Denver, which prompted a surge in financing for specially trained police. In the mid-1970s, police patrolled about 1 percent of schools. By 2008, the figure was 40 percent.

The belief that police officers automatically make schools safer was challenged in a 2011 study that compared federal crime data of schools that had police officers with schools that did not. It found that the presence of the officers did not drive down crime. The study - by Chongmin Na of The University of Houston, Clear Lake, and Denise Gottfredson of the University of Maryland - also found that with police in the buildings, routine disciplinary problems began to be treated as criminal justice problems, increasing the likelihood of arrests.

Children as young as 12 have been treated as criminals for shoving matches and even adolescent misconduct like cursing in school. This is worrisome because young people who spend time in adult jails are more likely to have problems with law enforcement later on. Moreover, federal data suggest a pattern of discrimination in the arrests, with black and Hispanic children more likely to be affected than their white peers.

In Texas, civil rights groups filed a federal complaint against the school district in the town of Bryan. The lawyers say African-American students are four times as likely as other students to be charged with misdemeanors, which can carry fines up to \$500 and lead to jail time for disrupting class or using foul language.

The criminalization of misbehavior so alarmed the New York City Council that, in 2010, it passed the Student Safety Act, which requires detailed police reports on which students are arrested and why. (Data from the 2011-12 school year show that black students are being disproportionately arrested and suspended.)

Some critics now want to require greater transparency in the reporting process to make the police even more forthcoming. Elsewhere in the country, judges, lawmakers and children's advocates have been working hard to dismantle what they have begun to call the school-to-prison pipeline.

Given the growing criticism, districts that have gotten along without police officers should think twice before deploying them in school buildings.