

Commissioner Julian Jefferson offers the following testimony regarding the presence of police officers in our schools:

We have been discussing a recommendation to eliminate, or drastically reduce, the presence of police officers stationed in our middle and public high schools throughout this State. Two main arguments have been advanced in support of keeping police officers in our schools. First, to protect the students (and faculty) from potential dangers. Second, the police can enhance their connection to the youth in the community.

To the first argument, testimony and comments before this commission regarding the needs to have police officers in our schools to respond to the potential of an “active shooter” in a school, on its face, is a reasonable argument. The argument however does not withstand scrutiny. In this country we have experienced arson, bombings, vandalism, and mass shootings in our places of worships and workplaces. These events, just like school shootings, are rare events, but they do happen. We do not respond to these events by putting a permanent police sub-station in our places of worship or workplaces.

In this Country, and this State, we tend to respond to the ills of our society with more police, armed with more weapons, stationed in more places. We respond by hiring more corrections officers to incarcerate more of our people. As a country, we incarcerate more of our citizens than anyone other country on this planet. For all of this, we rank poorly, when compared other advanced societies, in levels of violence, education outcomes, and life expectancy.

We must do better, and this requires us to have a fundamental reimagination of how we respond to problems in our society. One place to start is taking police out of our schools. In the late 1970’s there were fewer than 100 police officers, nationwide, in our public schools. In 2007, that number was 19,088. This is something we created, and it is something we can fix.

The data clearly shows the negative effects of putting police in schools. Lieutenant Camacho spoke to the racial disparities he sees in our Youth Detention Center. Lieutenant Camacho spoke to the disparity he sees in data of arrests of minority youth, particularly black boys, in this State. The data shows a court appearance for a child (even without a conviction), increases the odds of high school dropout by a factor of at least 3.

We cannot be satisfied with the current situation simply because members of law enforcement want to remain in schools. To end the argument there would be similar to ending the discussion of creating an electronic mail system because the Postmaster General is not in favor of it.

Instead of paying a full-time police officer to be in our middle and high schools, why not have a dedicated social worker, counselor, or psychologist? The role of that individual would be to respond to children who are exhibiting behavior that clearly puts them at-risk of not being a productive member of society. This would be a far better use of resources than creating police sub-stations in schools.

What is preventing us from moving away from decades of trying to police our way out of the ills, inequalities, and problems in our society? Police have an important and indispensable role in our society; namely on enforcing the law to protect us from dangerous elements in our society. Our children, and the schools they attend, are not the places where the dangerous elements in our society are.

To the second argument, it suffices to say the police can meaningfully engage with youth to build positive relationships with them without having to station a full-time armed police officer in our schools.