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Written Statement
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There is a clear need to respond to horrific events such as the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in an effort to prevent future tragedies and best protect children, generally. But all too often, responses to intractable problems like youth violence respond to fears rather than evidence, sometimes doing more harm than good.

In the following statement I address evidence on effective youth violence prevention efforts in schools, in an effort to help Congress take positive steps toward enhancing our children's safety. School policies are an important part of violence prevention efforts despite the fact that school violence represents only a small portion of the violence affecting children in the U.S. Because schools are a primary site of socialization for youth, where they forge relationships with other youth and with adults, and where they learn about the types of adults they will grow to become, the school offers a window of opportunity to intervene and prevent harm.

I have been studying this topic for years. I have published four books and dozens of peer-reviewed research articles on the subject of responses to youth violence, particularly school security. My work has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Justice, I have received several awards from the American Society of Criminology, and I hold leadership positions within the American Society of Criminology and the American Sociological Association.

What Works to Keep Children Safe in Schools?

Fortunately, there is a large body of research evaluating school safety practices that presents a fairly consistent set of findings concerning effective policies and practices. Much of this research emphasizes the importance of school social climate, which refers to the school's social atmosphere or learning environment. Specific definitions of school social climate vary, though they commonly refer to the interactions between students and school staff, and to the rules that govern the school.

This research tells us that schools that can maintain positive and supportive social climates are best able to prevent student misbehavior and crime. When students feel supported and cared for by adults, and when they see themselves as important parts of the school, they are less likely to misbehave or commit crimes against the school, staff, or other students. Students who feel respected, valued, and listened to are in turn more likely to respect those around them and abide by school rules.¹ Research has found this approach to be effective at schools across social strata, including in disadvantaged urban areas with high community crime rates.²

As a result, we know that an important aspect of school safety is the ability to form caring relationships within the school community. When school staff build strong relationships with students and with students' parents, students and families are more likely to receive the support they need to thrive. Moreover, when schools focus on relationships and supports for students,

¹ See Gary D. Gottfredson et al. (2005) "School Climate Predictors of School Disorder: Results from a National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 42: 412-444; Sandra M. Way (2011) "School Discipline and Disruptive Classroom Behavior: The Moderating Effects of Student Perceptions." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52: 346-375; Kirk R. Williams and Nancy G. Guerra (2011) "Perceptions of Collective Efficacy and Bullying Perpetration in Schools." *Social Problems* 58: 126-143.

² See Udi Ofer et al. (2009) *Safety With Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools*. NY: New York Civil Liberties Union and Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

they are more sensitive and responsive to children's mental health needs. Because the Youth PROMISE Act seeks to provide opportunities for youth and build relationships between youth and adults, and to do so using specific evidence-backed strategies, it is entirely consistent with what we know about effective school crime prevention.

Schools also need rules that are firm, fair, clearly communicated, and evenly enforced. Positive social climate does not mean that students who misbehave avoid punishment, or that students run amok with no rules guiding their behavior. On the contrary, it means that behavioral expectations are clearly defined and consistently enforced across the student body. As parents know, it is important to discipline children when they misbehave, so that they can learn from their mistakes; school discipline is no different. Yet school discipline should be transparent, in that all students know the rules and consequences for breaking them.

School punishment should also be inclusive and productive, where consequences for misbehavior seek to teach students proper behaviors and maintain their inclusion in the school community rather than exclude them by suspending or expelling them. Usually, students who misbehave are suspended, with some students missing so many school days due to suspensions that they must repeat grades. These frequently suspended youth often receive no counseling or other intervention to solve the problems causing their misbehavior. Consider, for example, the problem of a student acting up in class. I've spoken about this to many teachers, and they almost all tell me the same thing: students act up in class because they don't understand the course material. So what do these teachers usually do? They remove the student from class, sending him/her to a disciplinarian or in-school suspension, ensuring that the problem will grow as the student falls further behind the class. Though I understand the teacher's need to remove a disruption so that s/he can better teach to the remaining students, it is important for the school to provide some sort of tutoring or remedial help that deals with the underlying problem. Most schools do not – they rely on punishment alone, which makes the problem worse.

While classroom disruption may seem to be a minor issue, it is very relevant to the larger problem of youth violence prevention. Students who receive school punishment are at risk of a downward spiral where they become disengaged from school and are at greater risk of committing more serious infractions. Prevention efforts that seek to stem minor level misbehavior can effectively keep students on track and avoid larger problems, including violence.

One specific style of intervention that leverages these understandings is called *restorative justice*. The focus of restorative justice programs is to restore what has been lost rather than just to punish. This means that a student who hurts another must engage in a dialog about the harm s/he has done and how it has affected the victim. The offending youth must take responsibility for the harm committed and make amends. All parties, including the victim and the offender, engage in the restorative justice process, which ends in an agreement about how to move forward in a way that best makes up for the harm done. Thus youth receive punishment, but they do so in a way that acknowledges their mistakes and their capacity to improve behavior, and also that helps

victims move forward. Research convincingly shows that restorative justice works in preventing school misbehavior and crime, and is far more effective than punishment alone.³

Another strategy supported by evidence is the School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) program. PBIS require schools to: define and teach proper behaviors to youth, reward students for consistently demonstrating these behaviors, and establish a fair and consistent system of increasingly severe punishments for youth who misbehave. The idea behind PBIS is to focus on good behaviors, not just misbehavior, and to punish students in ways that make sense, through a series of escalating punishments. PBIS has also received a good deal of support for its effect in reducing student misbehavior.⁴

Other specific programs as well have been found to promote student behavioral compliance. They all have several elements in common: they involve relationship-building, they address students' emotional needs and competencies, and they promote positive school social climates. Each of these strategies seeks to include students as valued members of the school community through relationships of trust, listening, teaching, and mentoring. They also include punishment for when students violate laws or school rules, invoking punishments that are fair, evenly enforced, and clearly communicated.

Unfortunately, over the past twenty years schools across the U.S. have implemented policies and practices that ignore this evidence. These practices erode school social climates and impair relationships between students and schools. They include zero tolerance policies, increasingly strict codes of conduct, use of drug-sniffing police dogs, and the buildup of police and other security forces within schools. These practices are damaging to youth because they erode relationships, they prioritize rule enforcement over problem solving, and they subject children to unnecessarily severe consequences. They are very expensive, not only because of the cost of technology such as surveillance systems and of security personnel, but because they increase dropout rates and grade retention, and burden courts and correctional systems with a flow of students who are arrested at school for minor behaviors.

These practices also contribute significantly to racial inequality. Research using different methodologies and conducted in different places has consistently found that racial and ethnic minority youth are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested at school than others. Carefully conducted studies have repeatedly found that this disproportionate punishment rate is not a result of different behavior – it exists even when accounting for rates of student misbehavior. Rather, it is due to implicit bias, as teachers and other school staff often perceive racial and ethnic minority youth to be more threatening, aggressive and disorderly than white youth. This serious problem has now been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, and was an important part of recent Senate Hearings held by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights.

³ Mara Schiff (2013) "Dignity, Disparity, & Desistance: Effective Restorative Justice Strategies to Plug the School-to-Prison Pipeline." Paper presented at the Civil Rights Project Closing the School Discipline Gap Conference, January 10, Washington DC.

⁴ For a summary of research on PBIS, see <http://www.pbis.org/research/default.aspx>.

Police in Schools

There is little direct evidence about the specific effect of police in schools (usually called School Resource Officers, or SROs) on school crime rates that is methodologically sound. Several studies have addressed the topic, but most lack sufficient methodological rigor to establish confidence in their validity. For example, some research studies find that schools with SROs tend to have higher crime rates than those without SROs, but without accounting for whether SROs were stationed in these schools because of pre-existing high crime rates.⁵ Other studies argue that SROs enhance perceptions of school safety, but these findings are based on subjective reports of whether students or staff feel safer with an officer around, rather than on measured offending rates.⁶ Yet others find that school crime has gone down in some schools with SROs,⁷ which is meaningless on its own because school crime has been decreasing across the country over the past twenty years, regardless of policing strategies. In another recent study, researchers found that schools with more SROs have less violent crime than others, but that schools with more security personnel (including SROs) armed with firearms and those with more security guards have higher rates of violence and serious violence;⁸ given that most SROs in schools carry firearms, these results are difficult to interpret.

Two recent studies addressing this question using sound research methods offer a consistent message: having police in schools does not result in less crime, but it does result in more arrests for minor offenses such as disorderly conduct.⁹ These statistical analyses are entirely consistent with qualitative research based on observations of police activity in schools. A growing number of studies find clear evidence that police presence in schools results in the criminalization of youth behavior, particularly for racial/ethnic minority youth.¹⁰ Children who misbehave in unfortunate but common ways, such as mouthing off or engaging in minor fistfights, are now subject to immediate arrest. As a result, greater numbers of youth develop arrest records for the same behaviors that generations of youth have lived through relatively unscathed, and the racial gap in arrest, school completion, and long-term academic outcomes grows.

There is also a good deal of indirect evidence that large numbers of SROs in schools can be harmful to students. Several studies consider how police work in schools and how they interact with students. A growing body of research finds that they can impair the school social climate, helping to transform it from a place of academic and emotional support to one where law enforcement is prioritized instead.

In my 2010 book, *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear*, I look at efforts to maintain safety at high schools in two different states. Each school I studied had a full-time SRO. In many ways I was impressed by the SROs I met; each was a caring adult who took the

⁵ See Philip J. Cook et al. (2010) "School Crime Control and Prevention." *Crime and Justice* 39: 313-440.

⁶ E.g., David C. May et al. (2004) "Predictors of Principals' Perceptions of School Resource Officer Effectiveness in Kentucky." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 29: 75-93.

⁷ Ida M. Johnson (1999) "School Violence: The Effectiveness of a School Resource Officer Program in a Southern City." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 27: 173-192.

⁸ Wesley G. Jennings et al. (2011) "Evaluating the Relationship Between Law Enforcement and School Security Measures and Violent Crime in Schools." *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations* 11: 109-124.

⁹ Chongmin Na and Denise C. Gottfredson (2011) "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors." *Justice Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2011.615754; Matthew T. Theriot (2009) "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37: 280-287.

¹⁰ See Kathleen Nolan (2011) *Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban High School*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

assignment in hopes of helping children. Most of them invested time and effort in mentoring youth. Unfortunately, though, they had no training in adolescent development, and were poorly equipped for this role. They were trained in how to deal with conflict and crime, not how to defuse a situation by listening to a confused adolescent. Students cannot speak to them in confidence if their problems involve any sort of criminal act such as underage drinking, drug use, or other problems adolescents typically face.

The result is that student problems are redefined as criminal issues rather than social or counseling issues. A student who is abused at home receives no counseling, though her parents will likely be arrested; a student who displays irrational behavior is treated as potentially violent (and in need of police surveillance) rather than as a candidate for mental health screening; and so on. An important problem with this shift in how schools respond to student problems is that the underlying causes of student misbehavior go unaddressed, since the school's focus is instead on policing and rule enforcement. This allows students' problems to grow without intervention, especially when these students face consequences such as suspension, expulsion, or arrest, which move them farther away from caring adults and opportunities for success.

Unfortunately, some schools – usually those in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods – might need SROs in order to cope with pressing violence problems. But such problems are uncommon, given that school violence has been decreasing steadily nationwide for the past twenty years. Despite the overall safety of schools, 68% of 12-18 year old public school students in a 2009 nationally representative sample report having a security guard and/or police officer assigned to their schools,¹¹ and there are current calls for increases in funding for SRO programs. To respond to current concerns by increasing the numbers of SROs in our nation's schools could lead to more unnecessary arrests for minor misbehaviors and deterioration of the school social climate, making students feel like suspects instead of students, passive subjects of rules rather than citizens with agency. The available evidence suggests that increases in school police forces and other criminal justice oriented security strategies might actually *undermine*, not reinforce, school security.

Police-school liaisons are a promising alternative to traditional SRO programs. Police officers serving as liaisons can develop police-school relationships, consult frequently with school administrators, and visit schools often enough that students recognize and feel comfortable around them. But they are not full-time fixtures of the school and thus would be less likely to arrest students for minor violations or to erode supportive elements of the school social climate.¹² This approach represents a balance, where schools can develop relationships with police officers, but without allowing schools to sacrifice academic and social supports in favor of law enforcement priorities.

Concluding Recommendations

Proponents of adding more police to schools offer emotional arguments rather than evidence, claiming that we owe it to our children to do everything possible to keep them safe. This

¹¹ Simone Robers et al. (2012) *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011* (NCES 2012-002/NCJ 236021). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

¹² See Robin L. Dahlberg (2012) *Arrested Futures: The Criminalization of School Discipline in Massachusetts Three Largest School Districts*. NY: American Civil Liberties Union.

argument presumes that the only drawback is the financial payroll cost; it ignores the harm we can do by adding more police. Proposals to station National Guard troops in schools throughout the country, or to increase funding for SROs, ignore the evidence of what works and can create harmful environments for our children.

Thankfully, there is no need to work in the dark in creating sound school security policy. The available evidence offers several conclusions in which we should have confidence. These conclusions are the result of sound research that has been vetted by experts in the field, and that have been replicated using data from very different parts of the country. Schools can best prevent violence and other forms of misbehavior by:

- Undoing much of the buildup in rigid security and discipline that we have seen across the U.S. since the 1990s. Zero tolerance policies, high suspension rates, drug-sniffing dogs and other criminal justice oriented measures alienate students from school and erode school social climates.
- Removing full-time police officers from most schools across the country. Though SROs may be an unfortunate necessity for schools in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods, which experience serious safety concerns, these schools are few and far between. The vast majority of schools (and their students) would be better served by having police liaisons who can consult with schools and respond quickly to any issue, but who are not full-time members of the school community.
- Investing in student/staff relationships. Teachers' and other adults' efforts to help their students' social and emotional development should be supported and encouraged, counselors and mentors should be more available to youth, and students should be included as partners in school governance.
- Improving teachers' training in inclusive classroom management. Teachers who know how to manage by consent rather than force, by earning the trust and respect of their students, prevent a great deal of student misbehavior. Better classroom management can reduce rates of suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrests, and can prevent small behavior problems from becoming larger ones, including youth violence.
- Implementing evidence-based programs such as restorative justice and PBIS, as spelled out in the Youth PROMISE Act.