

Race and poverty often unjustifiably tied to school security measures

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Elementary, middle, and high schools with large minority populations—but not necessarily higher crime rates—are far more likely than others to require students and visitors to pass through metal detectors, according to new research to be presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

In fact, the study finds that rates of student misbehavior and crime are only weakly and inconsistently related to [school security measures](#).

"We find it disturbing that the adoption of school security is more closely related to student race and ethnicity and to socio-economic status than to actual criminal behavior," said study co-author Aaron Kupchik, an associate professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware.

In their study, Kupchik and co-author Geoff Ward, an assistant professor of criminology at the University of California-Irvine, explore the use of five school security measures—[metal detectors](#), surveillance cameras, full-time law enforcement officers, locked/monitored gates on school grounds, and drug-sniffing dogs—across a nationally representative sample of 2,510 public schools.

They find that most security measures are common in all high schools, regardless of the size of low-income and [minority populations](#)—a finding which they say runs counter to the common expectation that poorer, predominantly nonwhite, urban schools are uniquely inclined to

implement criminal justice-related security.

But metal detectors, specifically, are significantly more likely in elementary, middle, and high schools with large populations of minority students.

"Because they are used most frequently in high-minority schools, metal detectors may stigmatize nonwhite students," said Ward. "Furthermore, metal detectors are considered to be minimally effective and disruptive to learning environments, so they may create barriers to academic success that disproportionately affect minority students."

In elementary and middle schools, poverty is a significant predictor of the usage of all five security measures the researchers considered. This is particularly noteworthy because security mechanisms overall are less common in elementary and middle schools than in high schools.

"Thus, criminalization of misbehavior begins earlier for students attending schools with concentrated poverty, potentially contributing to short- and long-term disparities in educational achievement," said Kupchik.

Kupchik and Ward also find that schools in the Midwest, West, and South are more likely than those in the Northeast to employ the security measures they examined, particularly drug-sniffing dogs. Overall, southern schools are the most likely to implement tight security. These regional disparities reflect broader cultural trends, with more punitive practices common in western, Midwestern, and southern states.

Importantly, all of the study's findings remain true after controlling for student misbehavior and crime, location in an urban setting, and perceived area crime rates, which the authors say helps rule out the possibility that high-minority and high-poverty schools respond

pragmatically to an elevated crime threat—in the school and/or the neighborhood—by implementing tighter security.

"Instead, it appears that school officials respond to a presumed correlation between minority and low-income students and violence and weapon use," said Ward.

In the past, researchers have argued that school security practices are a source of social reproduction; that is, they have suggested that security is disproportionately applied to "low-status" youth (i.e., minority and low-income youth), which reinforces and reproduces this low status, thus helping to maintain the inequality between those students and their more advantaged peers.

However, Kupchik and Ward are among the first researchers to use nationally representative data to empirically test this theory. Their results generally support arguments about social reproduction, particularly in the case of elementary and middle school security and in the case of metal detectors, they said.

The study uses data from the 2005-06 School Survey on Crime and Safety, a nationally representative survey of school administrators.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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