

Study finds tight school security can have unintended, negative consequences

November 20 2015, by Charles Anzalone

Security measures in American high schools can have unintended consequences that hinder, rather than help students learn, according to research conducted by University at Buffalo education professor Jeremy Finn and Canisius College psychology professor Tim Servoss.

The effects are especially consequential for [minority students](#).

The study, "Student Suspensions and Arrests: The Role of School Security," will be presented at the American Educational Research Association's conference in April in Washington, D.C.

Using data from about 700 American high schools and three national surveys, Finn and Servoss found the safety and security measures in high schools can lead to results that hinder teaching and learning.

The study stems from schools' implementing security measures such as hall cameras, police officers, metal detectors or drug surveillance because of fear generated by remote but high-profile events. Further incentive for high security comes from government agencies and local communities, often more than from real needs within the school itself.

Security measures are costly, imposing additional burdens on schools and districts already hard-pressed financially. But there is no reliable research base to guide administrators and policymakers about the effects of security on their schools.

Among the findings of the new study:

- Security measures were disproportionately adopted in large schools with high populations of African-American [students](#). The security features adopted in these schools often were above and beyond the level of misbehavior and crime in those schools.
- School security often brings unintended negative consequences: Students often feel less safe when the level of security is high.
- The presence of [school security](#) often leads to more students being suspended or arrested, and the effect these absences have on students' education is often harmful. Interruptions to learning present more obstacles for students, especially those students with academic or behavioral problems. Once students separate from classroom instruction, they may receive minimal support when they return to school.
- Security also can lead directly to suspensions or arrests. Police guards in schools increased the likelihood of a student being arrested 2.2 to 3.0 times more than in schools without the police presence. Finn and Servoss also found that minorities are affected disproportionately, with more African-American students than whites being arrested.

Race was a constant issue, according to the researchers, who note that other research has shown that African-American students are six times more likely to walk through a metal detector when entering school than white students.

"The proportion of African-American students in a school was a significant predictor of schools' security levels," even when taking into account issues such as background characteristics and crime and misbehavior in the school, Finn and Servoss write. "And it is well-documented that the suspension rates of black students are substantially higher than those of whites.

"These results suggest that the implementation of security measures are at least partially based on school size and the proportion of African-American students, above and beyond any objective dangers within school (crime or misconduct) or in the neighborhood surrounding the [school](#)."

Further, the study found that high levels of security make it more likely that a student would be suspended and particular [security measures](#), such as police guards, are associated with higher numbers of arrests—both of which impact minorities disproportionately.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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