

Good afternoon, my name is Naomi Blank. I'm a senior at The Wheeler School in Providence, RI and a member of Young Voices. I am here today to testify against House Bill #8310 which would mandate the placement of a minimum of two SROs at every public school in RI. Although this aspect of the bill claims to "increase school security", it has been proven that SROs create a more dangerous and hostile environment for students.

In 2010, the US Department of Justice conducted a study on assigning police officers to schools. There was no evidence to indicate that increased presence of law enforcement makes schools safer. In fact, in two recent high profile incidents that occurred in Parkland, FL and Uvalde, TX, SROs failed to intervene to prevent or halt the attacks brought on by a mass shooter. Additionally, school police officers reinforce the criminalization of young people of color, serving as a key component of the school-to-prison pipeline. Black and Latinx students are more likely to be disciplined, suspended and arrested in school when SROs are present. Police assigned to school buildings often don't receive the necessary specialized training on adolescent development, racial equity, restorative justice or strategies for de-escalation, leaving many unequipped to do their jobs without causing harm to students. Criminalizing students from a young age takes a tremendous toll on their self esteem as well as their overall outcomes in adulthood. While some might argue that SROs can potentially prevent juvenile crime from occurring in schools, a better, more effective preventative measure would be to increase funding for mental health professionals in schools. Through increased support for in-school mental health professionals, students who are suffering can learn helpful coping strategies that are useful in the long run.

Increasing the presence of firearms and law enforcement in schools is not the solution for providing greater security for students. Investing in mental health support in schools and enacting gun safety legislation would be more widely beneficial for students and our communities as a whole.

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