

Millions of American youth attend schools with police but no support staff

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On March 4, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a devastating report which exposed the increasingly militarized state of public schools in the United States and chronic underfunding of school support staff.

The report, “Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students” provides a state-level student-to-staff ratio of employed student counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers and contrasts these numbers to the increasing presence of police officers in public schools, especially in lower-income neighborhoods. The statistics revealed in this report are harrowing.

The ACLU found that over 90 percent of individual schools in the US do not meet the one to 250 counselor-to-student ratio recommended by professional standards and the US Public Health Service. On average, all of the schools in the country employ close to half of this number of counselors: one for every 444 students, with Arizona having the worst ratio in the country at one counselor for every 758 students. Only three states out of 50 meet the recommended ratio.

The report went on to note that there are 1.7 million students in the US who attend schools where there are police on campus but no counselors at all; 6 million students attend schools where police are present but not a single school psychologist is employed; and finally, 10 million students have police in their schools where not a single social worker is employed.

Many schools in the US do not have any nurses on campus. The nurse-to-student ratio recommended by professional standards is one nurse for every 750 students. Twenty-nine states do not meet this standard. Michigan and Oregon employ the fewest school nurses in the country. The ratios of students per nurse provided in the report for these two states are downright criminal: both are above 4,100 students per nurse. Three million children

in the country attend schools where there are police officers on staff but not a single nurse.

These statistics are staggering. Even as they are being starved of much needed funds, working-class schools are being turned into armed camps replete with metal detectors, online video surveillance and even military equipment.

Examples can be found throughout the country.

- The impoverished Detroit Public Schools spent \$41.7 million on a district-wide security upgrade in 2011, creating a 23,000 square-foot Police Command Center and Headquarters for the school system.

- Just last week in Chicago at a mayoral forum, Democratic candidate and former president of the Chicago Police Board Lori Lightfoot suggested turning the city’s 38 recently shuttered schools into police-training sites.

- Capitalizing on last year’s horrific massacre at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, the Florida state legislature recently passed a bill allocating \$58 million toward arming teachers throughout the state.

While millions of dollars are easily found to militarize public schools, teachers and students are told by Republican and Democratic politicians alike that there is no money for much needed resources like nurses, counselors and other support staff. These conditions have compelled hundreds of thousands of teachers to go on strike, in a wave of teachers struggles across the US and internationally. In every case, teachers have made the demand for more support staff a central issue, and in every case the unions have facilitated the ramming through of concessionary contracts that do nothing to address the fundamental issues.

Most recently in Oakland, in a state dominated by the Democratic Party, the union rejected demands by rank-and-file teachers to include opposition to budget cuts in the strike demands, even though the district planned to

pay for any pay increases by slashing millions of dollars from educational services and closing schools. The contract the union hailed as “historic” left untouched the staffing ratios for nurses in the district, which currently stand at one for every 1,350 students.

The effect of these dual processes, the chronic underfunding of education and the further militarization of schools, has devastating effects on students. The ACLU report notes that there is no research to substantiate the claim that having police present in schools has any positive effect on delinquent behavior and school safety. On the contrary, the report notes that “in many cases, [the presence of law enforcement staff in schools] causes harm. When in schools, police officers do what they are trained to do, which is detain, handcuff, and arrest. This leads to greater student alienation and a more threatening school climate.”

The ACLU found that schools where police are always present have reported 3.5 times as many arrests per 10,000 students as schools without police.

To the extent that the American government invests in public schools, hiring additional police is promoted by the political establishment as a necessary response to increasingly frequent school shootings. However, filling school campuses with cops does nothing to address the underlying societal ills that are the root causes of violent and antisocial crimes committed in the first place.

Outbursts of mass violence, along with other causes of early death among teens such as drug overdoses and suicides, are bound up with the growth of social inequality and the miserable conditions under which the bulk of the working class is living. Since the economic recession of 2008 and the decline of full-time employment that followed as a result of the restructuring of many major industries under the Obama administration, economic uncertainties in working-class families have no doubt plagued millions of children in the last decade.

Children in the US today are growing up in a country that has been at war during the entirety of their lives; wars that have destroyed entire societies and whose victims are treated with callous indifference in the bourgeois media. These experiences sweep into social consciousness in innumerable ways.

In fact, the ACLU report cites a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which found that the suicide rate among children ages 10 to 17 increased by 70 percent between 2006 and 2016. Approximately 72 percent of children in the US will have experienced at

least one major stressful event—such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one—before the age of 18.

Under such conditions, the need for school nurses, psychologists, and counselors can quickly become life and death questions for students.

The authors of the report note the substantial amount of research done on the benefits of having health care professionals trained to work with children in schools: “School counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists are frequently the first to see children who are sick, stressed, or traumatized.” The report goes on to state that “schools with such services see improved attendance rates, better academic achievement, and higher graduation rates as well as lower rates of suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary incidents.”

The data cited in the report shows that school-based mental health and special learning needs services, when made available, improve the overall safety of schools and promote student participation in interactive educational initiatives.

The resources to provide all of these services and much more exist in society. However, to secure a healthy and productive learning environment for teachers and students requires a frontal assault on the wealth of the ruling class and the social and economic system it defends, capitalism.

The defense of public education requires a fight for socialism, which above all means the establishment of a society based on social need, not private profit, in which the wealth produced by the working class is owned and controlled democratically, and in which every individual has the right to an education, a decent job, a livable income, health care, a healthy environment, and access to culture.



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