

Number of police officers in UK schools increases by 300 in one year

Liz Smith

6 February 2023

“Over-policed and under-protected: The road to Safer Schools,” a report by the Runnymede Trust think tank, reveals that there are 979 police officers in Britain’s schools.

This is an increase of nearly three hundred, or 43 percent, since the last research available, from 2021. The Safer Schools Officers (SSOs) are overwhelmingly in schools with high numbers of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), a key poverty indicator, and which also have higher numbers of black and minority ethnic students.

SSOs have powers that ordinary police officers do not. They may have ongoing permission to be present on school property which ordinary police officers do not. They are assigned to a school or a cluster of schools under a generally vague Safer Schools Partnership (SSP).

Half of the SSOs (489) are based in London in areas where social conditions are appalling. There are plans to further increase the number of SSOs by seven percent (65 officers) across the UK.

The report presents only a partial picture, based on a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to police forces in the UK of which only 43 responded. The forces that did not respond are Kent, Leicestershire, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Sussex, Northern Ireland and Lancashire Police Constabularies. They cover some densely populated areas, with schools in impoverished areas, including: the city of Leicester, where 20 percent of neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 10 percent nationally; Derby and the former mining areas of Chesterfield and Bolsover; and Lancashire, where towns like Blackburn, Burnley and Darwen have over 35 percent of child poverty.

According to a July 7, 2022 written answer to a question from a Green Party London Assembly representative on the number of police in schools, the office of London Mayor Sadiq Khan answered, “As of June 2022, the MPS [Metropolitan Police Service] have over 370 SSOs delivering 622 SSPs and a further 329 schools who have named officer support. In total 1014 schools either have an SSP or named school officer.”

The impetus for the Runnymede Trust research was the case of Child Q, which “brought to attention the presence of police in schools”. Child Q was a then 15-year-old black girl wrongly accused of possessing cannabis, who in 2020 was strip searched by Metropolitan Police at her school in Hackney. She was menstruating at the time.

The arrest triggered protests against the Met, who are still under investigation. An FOI by the *Guardian* in March 2022 revealed, “Metropolitan Police conducted around 9,000 strip searches on children in the past five years.”

A Children’s Commissioner’s report into the “Strip Search of Children by the Metropolitan Police Service in 2022” found that “of the 650 children strip searched by the Metropolitan police between 2018-2020, 95% were boys, and over half of the boys searched were black.” This widespread criminalising of children is potentially causing long-term psychological damage.

The drive to embed police in schools took place under the Labour government of Tony Blair (1997-2007) which in 2002 brought in the “Safer Schools Partnership Programme”. This was part of a raft of policies seeking to penalise parents and young people for social problems previously dealt with by social services and school welfare programmes, including the introduction of fines and imprisonment of parents for their child’s non-attendance.

The Runnymede Trust report comments, “This marked a development in the role and activities of police officers in school, who in the decade after, were tasked with a range of multi-agency preventative and enforcement work based in the school setting.”

The report identified a further shift rightwards when, following the police killing in 2011 of Mark Duggan, riots erupted in Tottenham and quickly spread across the country. In November 2011, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced the Ending Gang and Youth Violence scheme. This insisted on the placement of police officers in schools as important to “identifying potentially at risk” young people and referring them for “further intervention to address their behaviour”.

Under the guise of fighting terrorism and preventing “radicalisation”, the Prevent Strategy was introduced by Labour in 2003, with the deliberate aim of demonising Muslims while reinforcing the apparatus for surveillance and intimidation to be used against the entire working class.

Prevent had its remit widened in 2011 by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. In 2014, Prevent led to the introduction of “British values” in the school curriculum. This includes the promotion of “British democracy” and the “rule of law,” under conditions in which civil liberties are under a sustained offensive. The Ofsted inspection criteria for judging schools also insists that these supposed values are for all British citizens to adhere to.

In 2015, legislation made it a statutory duty for school, local authority, prison and National Health Service staff to report any individual deemed “vulnerable” to radicalization to the Prevent programme. A 2019 report by Liberty revealed that UK police forces have full access to private information, including the political views, of the thousands of men, women and children referred to Prevent. The information is available to police forces through the National Police Prevent Case Management (PCM) database, centrally managed by the national counter-terrorism body.

The section of the report “Young People’s Experience of a Regular Police Presence in Schools” shows the extent to which the presence of police in schools is now a daily experience for many children. It reports that 37 percent of children attended a school with a regular police presence. It notes, “Thirty-nine young people who attended or had attended a school with a regular police presence provided qualitative comments about their experiences. The vast majority of views expressed here were negative.”

Overall, the Greater Manchester report shows that the presence of police in schools stigmatises both schools and their students. Their presence “creates a climate of fear, anxiety and hostility for young people, particularly for those that are already marginalised,” with young people’s well-being, mental health, and attainment all impacted. “Put simply, police in schools feed a school-to-prison pipeline.” This forms part of the Runnymede Trust’s summary.

In the last two decades, state schools have been transformed into holding pens where teachers are subject to intense scrutiny, working within a national curriculum imposed with all the many legal government directives flowing from Safeguarding and Prevent legislation. One of the points made in the Manchester report is that the presence of police in schools adds to “existing school punishments – including detentions, isolation and exclusions, for example – this poses a real barrier to the positive development of young people.”

Behaviour policies in schools have as their core principle a

punitive individual approach to the social problems that many young people find difficult to “leave at the door”. Over the last 15 years of austerity pastoral support in schools has been slashed, with under-resourced workers spending their entire time dealing with child protection and pressing social needs such as access to food, clothes, and welfare benefits—a situation that can only intensify under conditions of a severe economic crisis.

The Runnymede report pays lip service to wider social inequalities, but insists throughout on prioritising race as the defining problem of a police presence in schools separate from any identification of the common class basis of the targeting of pupils, whether they are black, Asian or white. It insists, “The government should require all police forces in England to discontinue any further participation in Safer Schools Partnerships and withdraw Safer Schools Officers from schools”, because their presence, “disproportionally discriminates against black and ethnic minority pupils.”

The increasing police presence in schools and the entire policy of criminalising the classroom must be ended. While there is plenty of money to pay for police in schools, there is no money to pay for desperately needed education workers and other required additional staff. More must be trained and recruited to create a nurturing not a hostile environment. Tens of billions of pounds must be poured in to support children and young people with their educational, social and mental health needs.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact