Juvenile Justice

Study: Police Referrals Disproportionately Affect Students With Disabilities

by Lisa Backus
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In more than two dozen high schools throughout the state, students with disabilities made up nearly half of the referrals to police for in-school behavior during the 2017-18 school year according to federal data analyzed by the Center for Public Integrity.

The organization analyzed U.S. Department of Education data from all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico and found that school policing disproportionately affects students with disabilities, Black children and, in some states, Latino children.
In Connecticut, at least one school – Bristol Eastern High School – showed all 28 referrals to a police officer that year were for students with a federally recognized disability, data showed.

It’s a problem that has remained in the shadows as advocates call for fewer police and more social workers, psychologists, and educational programming for children with disabilities, Connecticut Child Advocate Sarah Eagan said.

“I think people are aware of it in broad strokes but I don’t think it’s discussed nearly enough,” Eagan said. “We tried to create a task force to look at school resource officers that didn’t pass and this wasn’t even a part of the legislative language. When you are talking about school suspensions and arrests, you are always talking about children of color with disabilities.”

Schools are not required to submit demographic data on students who are identified as having a disability under Sec. 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The demographic information for those students was not included in the tallies of the race of students with referrals analyzed by the Center for Public Integrity. However, schools do have to disclose information on student race and under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As such, information on the race of students with disabilities involved in referrals is incomplete.

New Britain High School had the highest number of students referred to police in the 2017-18 school year – 81 – with 39 of the referrals going to students with a disability. Of the 81 referrals, six were white students, 62 were Hispanic, and five were Black, according to the data. New Britain High School has more than 2,200 students. About 23% of students have a disability that requires an individual education plan according to information the district provided to the state Board of Education for the annual “Connecticut Report Card.”
New Britain school officials recognized that the number of referrals to police was high, so in subsequent years, high school administrators took steps to delineate which actions need to occur before a school resource officer becomes involved and created a student assistance center, according to Assistant Superintendent Michael Foran.

“We looked at why students were being referred and determined the vast majority were related to student conflict,” Foran said. “We had to teach our students how to handle conflict.”

Foran was careful to point out that at any given time in the 2020-21 school year only about half the high school’s regular population was in attendance because of pandemic restrictions such as hybrid and full-time online learning.

But the school proceeded with the plan to reduce conflict and opened a student assistance center that provides students with interventions that don’t require removal from school or the involvement of police, he said. As a result, in the 2020-21 school year, there were few, if any, incidents that involved a referral to a school resource officer, Foran said.

“We were very close to zero, but I can’t say for sure we were at zero,” he said. “We are providing better interventions prior to an SRO’s involvement.”
South Windsor High School had the second-highest number of student referrals to police at 68, which included 36 students with a disability. Of the 68 referrals, 33 were white students, six were Hispanic and 13 were Black. The school has a population of 1,283 with 15% of students being designated as having a disability, the district’s report card said.

Officials from South Windsor High School did not grant a request for an interview and Bristol school district officials did not return repeated phone calls.

Danbury High School had the third-highest number of student referrals to police, 64, including 20 students with a disability. Of the 64 referrals, 17 were white students, 33 were Hispanic and seven were Black. The school has 3,340 students with 13.6% having a disability, according to the district report card.
In several schools, including Bristol Central High School, Pomperaug Regional High School in Southbury, Greenwich High School, and Watertown High School, more than 60% of the referrals concerned students with disabilities. Some of these high schools had 5 referrals with 4 going to students with disabilities. In 13 other high schools, students with disabilities made up more than 40% of referrals to police.

Students with disabilities who had been placed in alternative therapeutic school settings also saw a high rate of referrals to police, according to the data.

The impact of a referral can lead to suspension, expulsion, arrest, and the student being pushed out of school, said Deborah Dorfman, executive director of Disability Rights Connecticut, an agency that advocates for people with disabilities.

“It’s easy to look at this as a disability problem, but it’s an intersectional problem with Black males with disabilities,” Dorfman said. “These are the kids who are getting pushed out of school at higher rates.”

Students with disabilities who are placed in alternative therapeutic settings often don’t get the same opportunities or curriculum as their peers, Dorfman said. “Children have to have opportunities in integrated settings,” she said. “If they need extra support they should be given that support in a neighborhood school.”

Children with disabilities also should be offered the same opportunities for extra-curricular activities, Dorfman said.

The issue is so pressing that the agency is shifting its priorities to advocating for requiring schools to use trained professionals – rather than police – to support children with disabilities who are having behavioral issues related to their disability at school.
“We’re focusing on kids with mental health disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and traumatic brain injuries who tend to be the ones who are pushed out of neighborhood schools,” Dorfman said.

Eagan pointed to a 2020 investigation she conducted that revealed Waterbury schools with students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade had called police 200 times during a six-month period in the 2018-19 school year to deal with children as young as age 4. Eagan noted in her report that police were called far more often than mobile crisis teams to deal with behavioral issues or aggression by young students. The 200 calls resulted in 38 misdemeanor arrests including nine for students who were 11 years old and under, Eagan said. The school system is now under a corrective action plan, she said.

“The implications are very significant,” Eagan said. “The reliance on police is a serious sign that there could be an indication of bias and likely there are programmatic deficiencies for children with disabilities.”
## 2017-18 CT Student Referrals to Law Enforcement

Below are all the schools in Connecticut that reported a minimum of 10 total student referrals to law enforcement in the 2017-18 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>TOTAL REFERRALS</th>
<th>DISABLED ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td>Students With Disabilities</td>
<td>Total Police Referrals</td>
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<td>Ansonia High School</td>
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Source: [Center for Public Integrity's analysis of U.S. Department of Education data](https://ctnewsjunkie.com/2021/09/13/study-police-referrals-disproportionately-affect-students-with-disabilities/), Click HERE to read the Data Dictionary • This chart only shows a portion of the data columns available in the original analysis. We reduced the amount of data for privacy reasons.

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