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Research as Copaganda? An Abolitionist Framework for the Study of Police in Schools

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Abstract

Recent global discourses about policing have interrogated the role of police (e.g., the #DefundthePolice movement) and amplified decades-old calls from scholars, educators, students, and activists to remove police from schools (e.g., #PoliceFreeSchools, #WeCameToLearn and nopoliceinschools.co.uk). Yet, copaganda continues to situate police, and police in schools, as necessary and desirable. In this essay, we present themes from the literature about school police. We then leverage those themes to advance a framework for the study of police in schools so that this research base does not function as copaganda. We emphasize an abolitionist approach to the study of police in schools that accounts for the history of policing as a racialized project, mobilizes critical and abolitionist perspectives, and takes seriously perspectives about defunding and removal in lieu of reform. We conclude by amplifying recommendations by abolitionist scholars and organizers.



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Copaganda

The propaganda by which the public is socialized into viewing police as benevolent do-gooders and the institution of policing as necessary to survival is global. As Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie explain (2022), “it’s not simply that we can’t imagine a world without police, but that we are disciplined into not having that imagination through ‘copaganda’ – propaganda favorable to law enforcement that inundates mainstream media” (p. 183). Scholars in media and cultural studies offer analyses and definitions of copaganda by interrogating how police are portrayed in print media, pop culture, literature, movies, and even kids’ shows like *Paw Patrol* and *Noddy’s Toyland Adventures*, socializing us¹ to believe in policing as a public good (e.g., Bernabo, 2022; Cowan, 2024; Denman, 2023; Frazer-Carroll, 2020; Hatrick & González, 2022; Linnemann, 2022; Moore, 2022). In police procedurals, for example, the criminal justice system is portrayed as “race-neutral” (Color of Change, 2020), divorcing policing from its racially violent history and prompting viewers to take the portrayal of racialized identities, police, and criminals as fact. Even negative depictions of officers in popular media reinforce notions of ‘bad apple’ officers and distract from the “horror of policing” (Linnemann, 2022). From classics like *RoboCop*, *Bad Lieutenant*, and *Sherlock Holmes* to more recent shows like *Line of Duty* and *True Detective*, “police stories suggest that even in its most violent and corrupt forms – as inseparable from security, law and order – the police are never beyond redemption” (Linnemann, 2019, p. 357). Indeed, popular media serves to uphold the “myth of the good cop,” even as representations of police characters diversify onscreen (Neal, 2021).

Copaganda can also be “direct and unmediated” (Denman, 2023, p. 3), perpetuated by police departments, unions, and government agencies (Peterson, 2024). And, there is a long history of the construction of copaganda via police liaisons with both cultural and news media producers (Colbran, 2022). For example, the script for *Dragnet*, one of the first television shows about policing in the U.S., was vetted and edited by the “Publication Information Division” of the Los Angeles Police Department in the 1950s. LAPD advisors to the show made sure that police officers were “ethical, efficient, terse, and white,” and ensured portrayals of policing were positive, belying the violence of policework in that department, such as forceful and even lethal arrests, drunken behavior on the job, and the institution’s racial segregation policies (Davis & Wiener, 2020; Domanick, 1995). A 2001 report to the U.S. Department of Justice documenting extensive news media-police relationships suggests that media savvy police departments in regular contact with reporters often were “more adept at making damaging news story [sic] quickly disappear” (Lovell, 2001, p. v), echoing Black feminist journalist Ida B. Wells’ assertion that those who commit murder are those who write the reports (Wells, 1893; 2013). Amidst newer technologies like police body cameras and viral smartphone videos that document police violence (Smiley, 2024), ties between and among police and the media continue. For example, supposed “independent reports” of policing activities in 2020 after the racial justice movement in the U.S. published by the *New York Times* were actually written by LAPD officials, wherein acts of police violence against protestors were characterized as “missteps” and “mistakes.” These could be righted, officials argued, by

¹ We use first person throughout the paper to situate ourselves as part of communities socialized by copaganda and to also implicate ourselves in the project of racial capitalism. We take issue with the predominant assumption, shared by folks across racial, political, gender, etc. groups in the U.S. and elsewhere, that policing is a public good. Police, by and large, enjoy broad support in the U.S. and throughout the world, despite decades if not centuries of abolitionist theorizing and activism to support our imagining a world without them.

reforming and expanding policing intelligence budgets and infrastructure (Karakatsanis, 2023),² underscoring the ostensible reformability of policing as an institution. Moreover, police in some communities now also have their own robust social media campaigns to generate and sustain favorable public perception (Baggett & Selman, 2025; Wood & McGovern, 2021).

Copaganda and Schooling

Schools, as prime locations of socialization, are also sites of copaganda. Students are taught from a young age to believe that police are a necessary good and that “life without police is impossible” (Wall, 2020, p. 319), including in schools. This socialization takes place not only via the regular placement of police in schools, but through police-youth programming (Baggett, 2026). “Officer Friendly” campaigns normalized the place of police in U.S. schools as early as the 1960s in efforts to encourage positive perceptions of police (Nopper, 2021; Onion, 2020). D.A.R.E. programs in the 1980s and 90s encouraged students to trust in law enforcement and to report misbehavior and activities related to drug and alcohol use (Felker-Kantor, 2022). The rise of the ‘triad’ model of policing in the 2000s means that today police in U.S. schools consider themselves not only law enforcement officers but also educators and counselors/mentors (NASRO, n.d.). In the UK, efforts to liaise between schools and police have been documented as early as the 1940s, with more recent shifts toward police programming aimed at identifying ‘at-risk’ youth and placements in schools that are composed of students from “disadvantaged backgrounds” (Henshall, 2018).

Beyond their presence in school hallways and video surveillance rooms as “School Resource Officers,” school police visit classrooms to teach about laws, the consequences of disobedience, and the roles of police (Weiler & Cray, 2011). They may read books to elementary school students about policing and police dogs (Enos, 2022), engage in extensive mentoring programs with youth (Love, 2023), and teach lessons about how “criticism of policing is a media-created fiction or unrepresentative of policing in general” (Kupchik et al., 2020, p. 416). Meanwhile, police in schools arrest, pepper spray, and bodyslam students, and physical and sexual assault of students are regular occurrences (Advancement Project, 2024; Contrera et al., 2024; Interrupting Criminalization and In Our Names Network, 2024).

Copaganda about police and police-youth programming also circulates within and beyond school communities; photos, puff pieces, and feel-good stories about police events in schools are often pushed out via local news outlets and social media (Wood & McGovern, 2021). Public relations campaigns might bring attention to “Career Days” with law enforcement, “Bite Demonstrations” with police K-9s, “Touch-a-Truck” events at schools and community centers, as well as other police-youth programming like cop camps for kids, encouraging kids and families to “Back the Blue” (Baggett & Selman, 2025). Families can even find books for children about policing in schools at their local libraries, like one written by a Sheriff’s Deputy who “learned firsthand how children can misunderstand officer’s roles in schools” (Coyle, 2024). These efforts occur in communities across the U.S., resulting in an “extensive police legitimization academic infrastructure” (Herskind, 2023, p. 100).

² We note there are outlets that regularly push back on and interrogate the project of policing like Democracy Now, the Beyond Prisons podcast, and OneMillionExperiments.com, among many others.

Copaganda is rooted in ideas about criminalization and carcerality, positioning criminals as deserving of punishment and incarceration. Yet, “what constitutes ‘criminality’ is not some hard-and-fast category; rather it is constantly shifting to reflect society’s anxieties and priorities” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2021, p. 29). In the U.S., for example, racialized tropes about “thugs,” “welfare queens,” “gangbangers,” and “juvenile superpredators” have shaped ideas about criminals for decades. As Arun Kundnani (2016) argues, “By defining a community as ‘suspect’ you construct a racial lens through which that community is viewed” (p. 86).³ Criminalization is also a “highly racialized process of determining who is ‘deserving’ of social programs and investment,” including public education, “and who is not” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2021, p. 30).⁴ Even though policing produces criminality by surveillance of who and what police determine not to be in keeping with laws (McHarris, 2021), the common wisdom is that police keep us safe from ‘criminals,’ on school campuses and off.

The constant presence of police in schools, coupled with messages about the danger of ‘criminals’ and the protection afforded by police, make it difficult to interrogate or critique school police in many communities, including research communities. Researchers, like the broader public, are socialized into this system of carceral logics and its accompanying academic infrastructure, predicated on policing and prisons as purported solutions to social problems (Gilmore, 2007). Research about police in schools, therefore, has the potential to add to cultural messaging about policing as necessary and desirable, thereby functioning as copaganda in academic contexts.

Academia, Epistemic Ignorance, and the Myth of Objectivity

Copaganda operates as part of the complicity of the academy in the ever-expanding carceral state (Harney & Moten, 2013) and what some have called the “college-prison nexus” (Johnson & Dizon, 2021). This complicity is perhaps most visible in the material financial relationships between universities and prisons (Burke, 2020) and the presence of police and surveillance on educational campuses (Baldwin, 2021). For example, the university where we work has ties with for-profit prisons in Alabama (Office of the Governor, n.d.). Graduates from the university include current and former members of local police departments and members of state-wide school safety initiatives who have advised expansion of school police programs. A top university “safety and security” official is the former assistant chief of police for the city in which our university is located and is also a graduate of our college. Members of NASRO, the National Association of School Resource Officers in the U.S., serve as SROs in public school systems local to the university. Preservice teachers from our college regularly observe, conduct their field placements, and complete their student-teaching practicums in these heavily policed schools. Children of university faculty also attend these schools. Praise for policework in local schools is regularly featured in local publications and social media accounts (Baggett & Selman, 2025) and has also been featured nationally in the *New York Times*. These examples expose the ubiquity of school police and carceral

³ Here, Kundnani (2016) is referencing criminologist Paddy Hillyard’s work, who argued that that “the Irish ‘community’ in England did not pre-exist police surveillance but was itself constituted through the interrogation process, both in the minds of the police and of their targets” (p. 86).

⁴ In public schools, this means criminalizing student behaviors, labeling them as ‘defiant,’ ‘disorderly,’ or ‘disobedient.’ School personnel more frequently apply these labels to students of Color, punishing students by removing them from peers and classrooms; this removal communicates that they are not ‘deserving’ of educational resources and services (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021).

initiatives both on and off campus and are the context in which researchers at our institutions are working. Yet, these conditions are not unique to our area; they are instead illustrative of the “coconstitutiveness” of higher education with the Prison Industrial Complex⁵ (Maldonado & Meiners, 2021), socializing us all into a police definition of reality (Wall, 2020).

Less obvious, perhaps, are the ways that research endeavors – the scholarship produced within and from institutions of higher education – are part and parcel of this carceral complex (Saleh-Hanna et al., 2023). That is, researchers at institutions of higher education are embedded in, and benefit from, institutional norms and practices that caution against and even punish the acknowledgment and interrogation of the racial capitalist logics foundational to our institutions, including policing.⁶ Researchers then are both shaped by, and contributing members of, institutions and disciplines that perpetuate ignorance of carceral logics, racial capitalism, and the naturalization of policing. A failure to acknowledge and reckon with the entanglement of academia, higher education, and carcerality, including the integral roles of police and policing, operates from what Charles Mills (2007) points to as an “epistemology of ignorance,” an ignorance which, as Eve Sedgwick (1990; 2024) reminds us, is never innocent. Such ignorance is carefully taught, learned, and tended to by the academy.

Even within contexts of carefully cultivated and maintained ignorance, all research is ideologically-, theoretically-, and axiologically-driven. Whether tacitly or explicitly, scholars’ conceptualizations, data collection and generation, analysis, and interpretations are deeply rooted to paradigmatic and political commitments. Yet, research about school police is often driven by positivist assumptions that are not made explicit but instead are presented as objective. This guise of objectivity requires obscuring scholars’ commitments, values, and positionalities from readers (Nolan, 2015). Indeed, recent scholarship about “academic copaganda” has underscored social science researchers who “exploit the ideal of objectivity to produce the appearance of police effectiveness or contest abolitionist critique” (Vargas et al., 2025, p. 6). While still the most accepted and expected forms of research in the social sciences, objectivist quantitative approaches tend to “encode particular assumptions” (Gillborn, 2010, p. 245). And, per Nolan (2015):

As the process of evidence-based policy-making defines what constitutes legitimate knowledge and who gets to produce it, a hegemonic ‘evidence-loop’ is formed in which studies that support school policing gain legitimacy as ‘objective’ and critical research on the topic gets excluded. (p. 895)

This evidence-loop perpetuates dominant narratives while obscuring the functions of policing as part of carceral logics in schools, including colleges and universities. Research about school police in particular often tests, for example, how police ‘help’ or ‘harm,’ purporting to

⁵ The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), according to Critical Resistance (n.d.), contains “the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems.” As Meiners (2011) argued over a decade ago, “While the term ‘PIC’ typically refers to connections between jails, the economy and the political sphere, research demonstrates that education must be included in this definition. With the increased use of surveillance and incarceration tools – for example metal detectors, surveillance cameras, school uniforms, armed security guards, and on-site school police detachments – urban schools look and feel a lot like detention centers.” The U.S. incarcerates the most people in the world, with prison, policing, and surveillance budgets far outpacing those devoted to public education (Meiners, 2011).

⁶ See, for example, the case of Garrett Felber at the University of Mississippi:
<https://www.mississippifreepress.org/um-fires-history-professor-who-criticizes-powerful-racist-donors-and-carceral-state/>

measure the ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’ of their functions in public schools. These tests are conducted without accounting for broader functions of policing in a carceral, racial capitalist⁷ state, treating police presence in schools and beyond as axiomatic and decontextualizing police from the political and economic realities that dictate their deployment. Further, the guise of objectivity requires researchers to both ignore and erase – the logical mechanisms and consequences of learned/taught epistemic ignorance – the experiences and testimonies of Black students, students of Color, queer and trans students, and students with disabilities who argue that police do not keep us safe (Advancement Project, 2024; Interrupting Criminalization and In Our Names Network, 2024). In other words, research about police premised on (undisclosed) objectivist assumptions, axioms, and algorithms demonstrates attachment to “the status quo and delusive comforts of cops and cages” (Purnell, 2021, p. 148).

Researchers are further socialized into an objectivist worldview by the media of research and the expectation that they (we) will review the literature related to their (our) topics of interest. Expectations that said reviews are comprehensive and that researchers construct objective claims from empirical work are themselves tied to epistemologies of ignorance rather than abolitionist epistemologies (Vitale, 2024), directing attention toward purportedly objective scholarship and away from theoretically explicit publications (e.g., abolitionist writings). The naturalization of policing is, therefore, supported by peer-reviewed, published, and ‘real’ research. In this way, a growing body of extant literature props up researchers’ socialization, frames our inquiry, and positions us as potential contributors to a self-reinforcing evidence loop that appears to support the placement of police in schools, and our reliance on police more broadly. Despite paywalls limiting public access to much academic research, open access publications are increasing, and researchers’ use of social media and other public-facing platforms amplifies the reach of academic copaganda both within and beyond academic contexts. And, as Karakatsanis (2025) argues, “there is an entire wing of the copaganda ecosystem that churns out...simplistic scholarship” that the media then takes up and circulates. This growing body of publicly accessible scholarship thus serves to fortify the copagandist socialization of the public.

Our Approach

As a research team, we have been trained in critical theoretical approaches that encourage making commitments and values explicit. We do so here by noting that our research team is composed of faculty researchers, historians, and public school teachers in the state of Alabama. We are collectively committed to interrogating the roles and responsibilities of police and to imagining our communities without them, even as we accrue the benefits of the academy that come with publications and grants that support our interrogation and imagining.

In what follows, we advance a framework for the study of police in schools to both resist the evidence-loop that Nolan (2015) warns of and to mitigate how research about school police potentially operates as copaganda. That is, we offer a different conceptual map from which researchers who are doing work on schooling and police should begin. To construct our framework, we read the literature base about school police, using Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, JSTOR, PsycInfo, and Criminal Justice Abstracts with restriction to peer-reviewed publications, and searched the following terms: School Resource Officer (SRO),

⁷ Racial capitalism, according to Cedric Robinson (1983), explains how capitalism can only be understood as racial capitalism; it is “an economic system premised on exploitation of a racialized other” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 28). For a further discussion of terms and concepts, see, for example, Kaba and Ritchie (2022, pp. 26-32).

School Safety Officer (SSO), sworn law enforcement officers (SLEO), school-based police, police in schools, youth, students, and adolescents. We focused on literature published between January 2017 and March 2023 to include years both before and after the racial justice movements and uprisings of 2020. Given the heightened attention to police post-2020 and the introduction of ideas about ‘defunding’ and ‘abolishing’ police and prisons to mainstream political, cultural, and intellectual narratives, this period allowed for the possibility that there would be a shift in the framing of studies of police in schools. We also assumed papers published in this timeframe would lean on previous publications, offering a holistic view of the socialization and argumentation of academics investigating police in schools.

We read articles that reported findings from a study about school police as the sole focus of the study, as part of broader surveillance and punitive policies and implemented practices in schools, or as perceived by students or other community members. We also mined reference lists to complement our construction of a comprehensive corpus of articles for the identified period. Articles represented 46 different publication outlets and were authored by researchers who represented 14 different fields, as indicated by authors’ online bios and websites, including criminology, sociology, psychology, counseling, public health, social work, and education. We began our exploration by reading and categorizing articles by foundational and/or conceptual framework(s), methodology/methods, sample, dependent and independent variable(s) used in quantitative studies, guiding concept(s) used in qualitative studies, and analytic framework(s). This supported our efforts to understand the landscape of studies about school-based policing. Working from that broad understanding, we next reread the articles with the following questions in mind: *in what ways does this landscape of studies (fail to) include the interrogation of policing in school contexts; how does this literature base demonstrate a reification/rejection of copagandist evidence loops?* We generated clusters of articles along three themes: a(n) (a)historical and race-evasive framing of (school) police; an absence of critical theorizing about policing; and an emphasis on reform as a solution to poor outcomes associated with school policing. In the following sections, we first underscore these three themes in the literature. We cite noteworthy counterexamples in lieu of including a list of studies and their authors, which may draw our attention away from these structural issues and towards individual researchers. We take this pedagogical approach to uplift and amplify those scholars and theorists who serve to instruct researchers about what integrating critical and abolitionist perspectives might look like. We next leverage these findings to generate anti-copagandist strategies employed by researchers, which we present as a three-plank framework for the study of police in schools: accounting for the racialized nature of policing, mobilizing critical and abolitionist theorizing about policing, and taking seriously the project of abolition instead of focusing on the reformability of policing.

Themes in the Literature

Ahistorical and Whitewashed Framings

We reviewed forty-three articles (~56%) that did not include any history of police or their introduction to public schools. Researchers who did situate policing in a historical context (~44%) generally chronicled the rise and expansion of school-based policing with the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, an increase in ‘zero tolerance policies,’ the COPS program that federally funded the expansion of school-based police, and ballooning funding after high profile school shootings such as those in Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland. In two articles (~3%), researchers traced the introduction of police to schools to the 1930s in Indianapolis, and in another article (~1%), a

researcher documented the “Coordinating Councils” in California in the 1920s that led to police-school partnerships. None of these framings, however, situated policing as an explicitly racialized project.

In ten articles (~13%), researchers documented Flint, Michigan as a locus of school-based policing, though most did not contextualize how the city became a major automotive center during the early 20th century and experienced a rapid increase in policing alongside an increasing Black population. In one article, Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) located the introduction of school police in Flint to the beginning of desegregation. Another researcher, Gleit (2022) explicitly framed school police as a racial project in Flint and in subsequent expansion to other cities, and Turner and Beneke (2020) explicitly accounted for the history of policing as a racialized, capitalist project, contextualizing the introduction of police in schools as it coincided with Black Migration. In sum, researchers rarely acknowledged the origins of school-based police, or policing writ-large, as part of the projects of racial capitalism and criminalization in and out of schools (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Selman et al., 2019). Nor did they trace the robust histories of decades of abolitionist activism and organizing that have served to push back on police presence in schools.

Uncritical Framings

Many of the articles we reviewed (~43%) lacked explicit mention of analytical frameworks, leading us to question the context in which researchers interpreted results. In lieu of clear theoretical and conceptual frameworks, articles included reviews of literature about prior research on police roles and responsibilities in public schools. These included overviews of ‘community-oriented’ policing approaches and the ‘triad’ model of policing, put forth by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), wherein school police function as full officers of the law and disciplinarians, in addition to roles as mentors and educators. These research designs were premised on the assumption that outcomes around ‘safety’ in schools, in addition to the effects of school police on the ‘school to prison pipeline,’ were determined by the roles that police assumed in schools. Specifically, researchers posited that adverse outcomes were a consequence of rectifiable misalignments between the context-specific approaches of school-based police and other school-based practitioners.

Of those articles that did include clear theoretical or conceptual frameworks (~57%), five (~6%) relied on field-specific framings about police legitimacy, procedural justice, and legal socialization. For example, the authors of two articles (~3%) evaluated whether specific programming targeted at youth of Color in schools around ‘positive’ interactions with police could prompt more trust in the police, thus legitimizing them. The authors of another group of articles (~12%) integrated ecological systems theories and racial threat theories about the interplay of policy adoptions, contexts, and individuals. For example, researchers used proximity theory to explain and test the ‘distance’ of actors and systems like police and social control in schools and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory to explore perspectives of school police in a ‘trauma-informed’ professional development program. Researchers who relied on theories about ‘racial threat’ did not acknowledge how these frameworks may contribute to deficit perspectives about Black and Brown youth as deviant⁸ and criminal, therefore contributing to the inevitability of policing as necessary to control and mitigate ‘threats.’

⁸We highlight Hwang’s (2019) critique of the study of deviance, wherein “positivistic empirical studies of deviance fail to acknowledge the genocidal colonial processes by which regulatory technologies of law, legal

Authors of another small group of articles (~10%), by contrast, framed the study of police in broader critiques about school and student criminalization. These critical theoretical framings help explain the increasingly punitive contexts in which student behavior is interpreted and consequenced and underscore connections between and among schools, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems. For example, Hines and Wilmot (2018) relied on Critical Race Feminism, drawing connections between and among anti-Blackness and micro-aggressions to analyze Black students' experiences with anti-Black aggressions in interactions with school police. Similarly, Turner and Beneke (2020) drew explicitly from perspectives theorizing the connections among policing, criminality, anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, carcerality, and the school/prison nexus, which are integral framings to contextualize and interpret the presence and machinations of school-based police.

Emphasis on Reform

Most of the articles we reviewed (~70%) concluded with recommendations and implications for policy and practice, with some researchers (~13%) calling for a rethinking or re-evaluation of police roles and responsibilities. When formulating recommendations from their studies, researchers often troubled the *work*, rather than the *presence*, of police in schools. Instead of questioning the legitimacy of police placement in schools, reforms were usually positioned as the mechanisms by which problems with police could be mitigated or ameliorated. These reforms most frequently focused on training for police (~27%), about, for example, how to build relationships with youth, implicit bias, culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches, and developmentally appropriate strategies for working with youth. In another cluster of articles (~12%), researchers recommended reform of policies, including calls for policies that scaled back the use of police in school disciplinary processes, more clarity in Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that delineated the roles and responsibilities of police in schools, and more clarity in student codes of conduct. Additionally, two articles (~3%) included recommendations for reforms toward community policing models, wherein police work to build relationships with youth, especially youth of Color. Lastly, another small group of articles (~6%) included recommendations for reform that emphasized the importance of centering student and community perspectives in evaluating the 'appropriateness' of SRO programs. These findings are aligned with other recent research about the tendency towards reform; Zabala-Eisshofer and colleagues (2024) found, in their analysis of policy recommendations in 100 peer-reviewed articles about School Resource Officers, that researchers "recommend reform or retention of SROs regardless of study findings – recommendations rooted in majoritarian narratives about the necessity and benevolence of SROs" (p. 358).

Only two of the reviewed articles (~3%), those authored by Gleit (2022) and Turner and Beneke (2020), invoked abolitionist perspectives about police presence, explicitly calling for their removal. Another article included arguments for the use of police exclusively in high schools, and another for the use of police only in areas with high rates of violent crime. An additional article acknowledged abolitionist calls for removal of police, advocating for more training around 'trauma

enforcement, and juridical discourses are normalized and naturalized. Thus, the reproduction of the figure of the deviant as criminal, and vice versa, only further normalizes a pernicious cycle of expansion, reform, and research on carceral technologies and carceral spaces ranging from the ethics of solitary confinement, mental health jails, and youth in detention centers to debates on gender-responsive imprisonment" (p. 563).

informed care' and restorative practices until police were scaled back or removed from schools altogether.

Having explicated the findings from our analysis of the extant literature, in the following sections, we draw on those findings to insist that scholars: 1) account for policing in schools as a historically and contemporaneously racialized project; 2) mobilize critical perspectives to organize the study of police in schools; and 3) take up the project of imagining schools without policing instead of focusing on reform. We underscore these three planks of an abolitionist framework for the study of school police and offer descriptions of how failure to deploy these strategies serves the project of copaganda.

An Abolitionist Framework for Studying Police in Schools

Plank 1: Considering the Sociohistorical Position of Policing

Though recent popular media attention has focused on law enforcement as members of white supremacist groups (Richer & Kunzelman, 2022), police have always captured, brutalized, and murdered Black folks, Indigenous people, and people of Color (Brucato, 2020; Hernandez, 2017; Hinton, 2021; Malka, 2018; Quijada Cerecer, 2013; Razack, 2020; Williams, 2015). Policing has never been a neutral force, from its origins in watch systems in the Northeast (Potter, 2013); as constables conscripted to 'protect' white settlers as they captured Indigenous lands (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016); as "paddy rollers" and slave patrols (Durr, 2015; Hadden, 2001), supervisors of convict-leasing (Blackmon, 2009; LeFlouria, 2015) and part and parcel of lynch mobs in the South (McHarris, 2021; Reichel, 1988); as "Texas Rangers" known for their brutal practices in the South and West (McHarris, 2021); as strike breakers in the Midwest (Hunegs, 2020; Potter, 2013); as anti-integration forces siccing dogs on Civil Rights activists across the country (Hinton, 2021); or as modern militarized departments with tanks and tactical equipment designed for urban warfare (Neocleous, 2021). As Vitale (2017) points out, the nature of policing may have changed over time, but "the basic function of managing the poor, foreign, and non-white on behalf of a system of economic and political inequality remains" (p. 50). Today, instances of racialized police violence are more widely publicized than ever before, yet these instances often serve to perpetuate narratives about 'bad apple' officers rather than prompting an examination of policing as an inherently racialized and violent institution (Kaba & Ritchie, 2021; Williams, 2015).

Likewise, school-based policing is a racialized project which has been intertwined with U.S. public schools for over a century, especially in urban areas. In short, police have arguably always been in U.S. public schools, and their presence has always been tied to race and racism. For example, in the 1930s, Indianapolis Public Schools hired a special investigator to purportedly support the general safety of the district; this special investigator was connected to early concerns amongst white residents over desegregating schools (Henning, 2021), loosely organizing a group of officers purportedly to patrol school property, support traffic duties, and conduct security checks after school hours. This group would later be formally organized as the Indianapolis School Police in 1970, a group with close ties to the state legislature and Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners, both controlled by known members of the Ku Klux Klan from the 1920s until the 1960s. In the 1950s, Flint, Michigan became another locus of school policing. Flint was a major automotive center; during the early 20th century the city had experienced a rapid increase in Black population. As school desegregation efforts began there, police became regular features of schooling (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Gleit (2022) notes that police were introduced to schools

in Flint “in response to concerns over school integration, juvenile delinquency, and a desire to control Black liberation movements” (p. 1). Indeed, during the early 1950s in Flint, white community perceptions about the ‘juvenile delinquency’ of Black youth during de-segregation drove an increase in school-police partnerships (Gomez, 2021), as it did across the country both pre- and post-*Brown v. Board*.

Elsewhere in the U.S., police were deployed into public schools to quell and criminalize Black student activism (Hale & Livingston, 2023; Hinton, 2021; Kautz, 2023; Remnick, 2023). The reputation of racialized violence at the hand of police during the 1950s and 60s, both in schools and out, led to the development of Officer Friendly programming in Chicago schools in the 1960s. First developed as a partnership between business leaders and police to offset negative perceptions of police as strikebreakers and as violently opposed to civil rights, Officer Friendly programming was soon implemented in schools across the country (Baggett & Selman, 2025; Myers, 2019). Officers made presentations about the necessary good that was policing, encouraging students to take home pro-policing messaging and workbooks to their families. Meanwhile, “disturbing a school” became a crime in many states in the U.S. during the late 1960s, creating the pretense under which school police and school practitioners could target and arrest Black and Chicano students for their activism (Taylor, 2024; Thompson, 2011). The 1970s and 80s in the U.S. were also marked by punitive policies and criminalization of students of Color in schools (Thompson, 2011). In the early 1980s, for example, D.A.R.E. (Drug Awareness and Resistance Education) programming in Los Angeles continued explicit efforts to legitimize police as educators and mentors, attempting to counter negative perceptions of police, particularly among racially and economically marginalized communities (Felker-Kantor, 2022). Those programs, while purportedly teaching students about “personal responsibility, self-esteem, and support for law-and-order” also encouraged students to “snitch” on their classmates and families (Felker-Kantor, 2023).

Just as police have been intertwined with U.S. public schools for decades, communities across the country have engaged in activism to push back on police work in schools (Hale, 2022; Hale & Livingston, 2023; Hinton, 2021; Kautz, 2023; Remnick, 2023). From political education and the Conference on Prison Problems during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement (Felber, 2020) to the abolitionist demands made by the Movement 4 Black Lives (2024) after Ferguson in 2016, to the ongoing movement for #policefreeschools, organizers and collectives across the U.S. and throughout history have always resisted the idea that we need police in order to survive. Omitting both the racialized history of school police and this history of activism serves to decontextualize policing as part of racial capitalism and criminalization in and out of schools (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Selman et al., 2019). An ahistorical approach also supports the mythology of law enforcement as a helping profession, much as police are positioned as “helpers” in many state standards and curricular documents in the U.S. (Kolluri & Young, 2021) and in police-youth programming (Myers, 2019). This mythology is at the core of the legal socialization of young people, and copaganda more broadly, perpetuating false narratives that normalize the violence of policework, equate safety and police, and erase the work of those who have fought and continue to urge us to disentangle policing and schooling infrastructures. Without acknowledging this history, researchers risk advancing work that is race-evasive and divorced from its violent reality, positioning police as a taken-for-granted and positive presence (Nolan, 2015).

Indeed, a majority of research about school police has not centered race (Javdani, 2019), yet accounting for the history of policing as a part of racial capitalism explains and contextualizes the introduction of police in schools as it coincided with, for example, Black Migration and “moral

panics about juvenile delinquency” (Turner & Beneke, 2020, p. 223). Understanding how school policing was “developed in an attempt to suppress assertions of Black culture, Black autonomy, and Black liberation movements within schools” (Sojoyner, 2013, p. 245) helps us to interrogate and push back on the violent mechanisms of policing today. Contemporaneous police work includes, for example, a vast network of profiling, enclosure, ‘stop and frisk’ policies, ticketing, and arresting those who cannot pay even minor fines and fees, generating revenue for municipalities and bodies for the Prison Industrial Complex (Davis, 2003). In schools, policing and surveillance manifest in higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and arrests of Black youth, youth of Color, and queer and trans students, for example, in addition to ticketing and petitions to local courts, generating revenue and labor for the juvenile and criminal justice systems and the carceral state.⁹ Policing in schools also manifests as physical and sexual harm for students, as journalists (Contrera et al., 2024) and organizations like the *Advancement Project*, *Alliance for Educational Justice*, *In Our Names Network*, and *Interrupting Criminalization* have extensively documented. Perversely, the placement of police in schools is often justified as providing protection and care for all children (Beneke, 2022; Meiners, 2014; 2017; Selman, Baggett, & Richardson, 2024).

Plank 2: Adopting Critical and Abolitionist Assumptions

Field-specific and grounded theories about policing, such as framings about police roles and responsibilities in public schools; the ‘community-oriented’ policing model emphasized by the U.S. Department of Justice, through which public schools receive funding for police placement (i.e., COPS grants and the School Violence Prevention Program, 2024); or the ‘triad’ model of policing, put forth by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO, n.d.) might attempt to explain the work of police in schools. Yet, underpinning these framings is the assumption that poor outcomes regarding school police may be related to (mis)alignment of specific types of organizational approaches across schools and officers, and that negative effects for students are simply due to problematic policies, inadequate training and support for SROs, or ‘bad apple’ officers (Baggett, 2026). These framings do not interrogate the presence of police in schools, nor what they “actually do to support the education of youth and to create equitable schools” (Da Costa, 2024, p. 21).

Reliance on field-specific and grounded theories of policing in lieu of critical and abolitionist perspectives also means that research is founded on the assumption that police *can* solve problems rather than assuming, or even considering, that the institution of policing is inherently problematic and responsible for producing problems. When research designs premised on false objectivity result in ‘favorable’ outcomes or in ‘improvements’ in school issues, readers extrapolate favorable views of school policing writ large (Nolan, 2015). Critical and abolitionist perspectives, by contrast, position policing, including school policing, as inherently problematic, pushing back on conventional wisdom that policing, punishment, and incarceration are solutions

⁹ A recent investigation in Illinois, for example, revealed that school-based police issued thousands of tickets to students and families over a three-year period, including tickets for vaping, truancy, and fighting at school (Cohen & Richards, 2022). In Alabama, the state where we live and work, ‘vape courts’ now handle referrals from school police and other personnel who accuse students of vaping on school grounds in some school districts. <https://www.al.com/news/2023/10/alabama-launches-vape-courts-for-students-busted-at-school.html>

to social ills (Gilmore, 2007). Critical histories and theories of policing describe how police power is not just positioned as a mechanism for a ‘safe’ and ‘orderly’ society, but how policing is related to racial and class formation (e.g., Brucato, 2023); how it produces nation-states (e.g., Neocleous, 2021; Walia, 2021); policing as “violence work” (Seigel, 2018); and how it operates as one facet of surveillance and security in broader systems of school control (e.g., Monahan & Torres, 2010). Theorizing about racial capitalism, carcerality, and anti-Blackness helps explain, for example, the tendency to criminalize youth behavior in schools, even in ostensibly “progressive” school communities (e.g., Shange, 2019; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Framings like Critical Race Theory center issues of race and racism in exploring the perspectives of school-based personnel like, for example, teachers in England as they made sense of negative impacts of school police for youth (Joseph-Salisbury, 2021). Similarly, Critical Race Feminism helps explain the effects of school police on Black girls, like an incident in South Carolina where a white School Resource Officer dragged a Black girl, Shakara, from her desk in an incident that went ‘viral’ (Hines & Wilmot, 2018).

Further, those concerned with youth outcomes and policing often frame that concern via the “school to prison pipeline,” a framing which attempts to explain the punitive context in which student behavior is interpreted and consequenced. This framework attempts to establish connections between and among schools, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems, functioning as a metaphor wherein schools are sites from which youth are ‘piped’ into the criminal justice system. Yet, schools might be better understood as operating by and under the same carceral logics as prisons (Wun, 2017): a school/prison nexus (i.e., Meiners, 2007; Stovall, 2018) for youth. As Sojoyner (2013) argues, for example, the ‘pipeline’ as a framework “never accounts for the possibility that the structure of public education is responding to the actions taken by Black students that are perceived to threaten the status quo” (p. 245). As articulated in previous sections, a historical accounting of policework in schools in the U.S. explains how schools have long been, and continue to be carceral sites for Black students, where, for example, police are strategically deployed to quell student activism under the guise of deterring student misbehavior. The pipeline metaphor is also, as Shange (2019) argues, “limited by its presumption that prisons are an immutable fact of the landscape, rather than obsolete” (p. 54), working to foreclose our imaginations towards worlds without prisons and police. Abolitionist framings, by contrast, encourage us to imagine an otherwise.

Just as absent or incomplete historical tracings of police and policing in schools serve a copagandist project, an absence of critical and abolitionist theorizing about policing, carcerality, and racism makes it possible for researchers to study police in schools and outcomes associated with them as discrete variables. These approaches further decontextualize police work from its origins and fail to account for schools as carceral and violent spaces for youth. Moreover, treating youth outcomes at the hands of school police as hypotheses to be tested and variables to be manipulated is dehumanizing, while also serving assumptions about the reformability of police and instead of (re)imagining schools without them.

Plank Three: Mobilizing Abolitionist Perspectives

A focus on police reform implies that policing consists of useful and positive elements that need only be reconfigured. However, reform efforts often simply *re*-form problematic policies and practices within preexisting systems, forces, and ideologies, instead of interrogating and dismantling those systems. ‘Reformist reforms’ (Gilmore, 2007), even if well-intentioned,

contribute to the expansion of the carceral state. Examples of reformist reforms include financial incentives for police to move to predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods, recruiting people of Color to policing to ‘diversify’ the force, and the introduction of ‘plain-clothed’ officers into schools (Selman et al., 2024).

Adoption of reformist tendencies perpetuates copagandist logics of policing as inherently good, natural, and necessary, even if in need of occasional tweaking. This stance is in stark contrast to that of abolitionists who argue police *do not* and *cannot* keep us safe from violence, racism, misogyny, and other oppressive forces in our communities, including our schools, despite the billions of dollars spent on their presence. Policing, no matter how much tweaking or reform it undergoes, or how much it is positioned as protection for youth, can never be a solution because reform efforts cannot address the carceral logics that underpin the place of police in school buildings (Meiners, 2017). Further, “it is only to the extent that such [reform] measures push people to imagine an end to the presence of police in schools and to adopt alternatives – such as those that youth activists imagined – to policing in schools, that they represent a step forward for just schools and justice in the lives of all children” (Turner & Beneke, 2020, p. 237).

In lieu of reform, we must emphasize efforts to remove police from schools, which “offer the promise of greater educational equity” (Gleit, 2022, p. 15). As Correia and Wall (2018) write, “Where police reform seeks only to transform the ways policing happens, police abolition seeks to transform what the police are” (p. 277). We must also emphasize transformative frameworks in school communities where classrooms are predicated on and responsive to shared community values instead of control and punishment. We must also resist and counter propagandist and carceral curricula that serve to reinforce ideas about students as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021). In healthy school communities, when misconduct does occur, it should not mean rule-breaking as a violation of the institution to be met with punishment but instead should be framed as a rupture to relationships or the community that can be repaired (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021). In short, abolition and its principles make schools safer (ross, 2021).

Conclusion

In constructing this framework, we acknowledge the labor put forth by abolitionists, youth organizers, and teacher- and scholar-activists who have been demanding #policefreeschools for decades, if not almost a century, and certainly well before the advent of hashtags and social media. It is their work that allows us to imagine a research perspective and literature base that might be different. This material and intellectual labor, these movements, and these demands have pushed and catalyzed analysis and political education around police in schools, like the extensive campaigns by, for example, *Critical Resistance*, *Project NIA*, *The Education for Liberation Network*, *BreakOUT!*, *INCITE!*, *In Our Names Network*, *Policing-Free Schools (Canada)*, and *The Black Organizing Project*. Advocacy networks that labor for proto-abolitionist demands have crafted reports and documentation, such as the *Black Girls Matter* report (AAPF, 2010), analyzing the harm perpetrated by school police and carceral school cultures. Curricular efforts like *Reparations Won* in Chicago that integrate a history of police violence in K-12 instruction, in addition to instructional activities in *Lessons in Liberation*, push back on whitewashing and decontextualization of policing from its origins. We also note the many pockets of folks in small and rural communities who often go unnamed and unrecognized as they agitate for abolition, transformative justice, healing, and repair in their school communities.

To honor their work, scholars must take seriously an abolitionist approach to the analysis of police in schools, the reasons for which we reaffirm here. Researchers focused on school policing must reject race-evasive conceptualizations and historicizations of police, attending instead to the ways schools are constructed with carceral logics to be sites of surveillance, punishment, and enclosure, especially for Black students (Sojoyner, 2013; 2016). Researchers must reject myths of objectivity and acknowledge the contributions of police to violent realities lest they (we) become complicit in carceral violence against youth. Scholars must lean on theorizing that helps us understand the place of schools and police as part of racial capitalism and the Prison Industrial Complex, many examples of which we have cited throughout this essay. Divorcing policing from its “violent order” (Correia & Wall, 2021) and from racial capitalism not only serves to perpetuate the “fantasy of police” (Herzing, 2021, p. vii), but also erases the perspectives and experiences of BIPOC, immigrant, queer, trans, and disabled students, scholars, and community members who continue to advocate for police abolition and who imagine school futures free not only of police officers, but of “family policing” in education¹⁰ (Meiners et al., 2023).

Next, scholars must “push beyond the RCT [Randomized Control Trial] industrial complex” (Torres, 2020, para. 15) that is often held up as the ‘gold standard’ in research, but which serves to decontextualize lived experience from analyses of power and control and from the social and political processes that engender and sustain power imbalances. As Karakatsanis (2025) argues, “almost none of the punishment bureaucracy’s interventions have significant effects on interpersonal harm even when the most rigorous experimental techniques are used”; scholars focus “enormous effort...[on] figuring out how to manage the chaos and suffering caused by poor material living conditions, rather than directing intellectual energy toward *ameliorating those conditions*” (p. 113). Indeed, he argues, there are “incentives” to scholars to participate in copagandist projects of research. We must reject these temptations to participate in academic epistemic ignorance, as it is a key site of the normalization and perpetuation of police violence, just as we must reject the temptation to adopt reformist stances about policing. We must instead interrogate how universities have produced ideological investments in police in schools, while helping carve new paths forward. In so doing, we should center the “voices and actions of those directly impacted by such histories to lead the ways we all work for abolition, the ways we are abolition/ist” (Coles et al., 2021, p. 105). Specifically, rather than operating from the assumption that safety in school can only be achieved through policing, scholars should instead imagine school communities without policing and surveillance, framing research from these lenses. As Kaba and Ritchie (2022) remind us, “In reality, we haven’t always had police. What makes us believe that we always will or that we will always have to?” (p. 182).

In this article, we have focused on copaganda in academic contexts and highlighted anti-copagandist strategies as a contribution and specific application of a broader abolitionist approach. We also join scholars from across fields, including legal studies (e.g., Payne-Tsoupros & Johnson, 2022; Spade, 2023), education (e.g., Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance,

¹⁰ Abolitionists and organizers name systems like the ‘child welfare’ or ‘child protective’ systems as “family policing,” where, for example, mandatory reporting “is touted as a positive intervention,” but “the reality is that school based reports often result in family surveillance and forced family separation and rarely in prevention of abuse and neglect” (Meiners et al., 2023, p. 4). See resources at <https://www.movementforfamilypower.org/getmandatedreportersoutofschools>, and <https://www.mandatoryreportingisnotneutral.com/resources>

2021; Love, 2019; Meiners, 2011; Sabati et al., 2022; Stovall, 2018), social work (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2021; Layton & Addo, 2021), public policy (e.g., Gomez, 2021), criminology (e.g., Selman & Turner, 2022), sociology (e.g., Vitale, 2017; Smiley, 2024), political science (e.g. Maher, 2021), Black and ethnic studies (e.g., Rodriguez, 2021), and library science (e.g. Abolitionist Library Association) to advocate for the defunding and removal of police from schools. We emphasize calls from “communities who have the greatest stakes in eliminating all forms of violence, who are both targeted for state violence and abandoned to conditions that produce greater violence” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 11) to imagine what safety means and looks like without the presence of police. Devoting huge portions of school budgets to policing means fewer resources for higher salaries for teachers, for high quality curricular resources, for nurses, for school psychologists, for social workers¹¹, for community wraparound services, and for alternative models of accountability. For example, highly compensated and well-prepared teachers are less likely to leave the profession; low teacher turnover is a hallmark of stable and healthy schools. Culturally relevant curricula and emphasis on building relationships between and among students, teachers, communities, and content supports student learning in robust and impactful ways. Transformative justice initiatives support the development of different modes of accountability and repair that do not rely on punishment and removal of students. All these things are in place in many schools across the U.S., the results of student and community organizing for better schooling. In other words, we already know what works to keep communities safe, and how we might imagine systems of accountability that do not rely on punishment when harm occurs.

While much of this essay has focused on our local U.S. context, police abolition, like copaganda, is indeed a global project. In Canada, for example, recent scholarship has interrogated the discourse around police as “building relationships” with youth, normalizing their presence in schools (e.g., Da Costa, 2024). In the U.K., scholars have examined how the presence of police in schools criminalizes Black youth and youth of Colour (e.g., Connelly et al., 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, 2021; Nijjar, 2020). Likewise, similar movements exist outside the U.S. to remove police from schools, like #PolicingFreeSchoolsCA, nopoliceinschools.co.uk, and the #NoMoreExclusions campaign (2024), as well as broader police and prison abolition collectives like *Abolitionist Futures* (2024).

Abolition is both a struggle *against*, and a struggle *for* (Maher, 2021). In schools, we must struggle *against* the presence and actions of police and policing as they operate to harm school communities. We must simultaneously struggle *for* building school communities that value the worth and humanity of all members, including youth, teachers, and other school-based practitioners, so that no member is deemed as deserving of punishment, removal, and enclosure (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021; Coles et al., 2021; Sojoyner, 2013). We end with an invitation: what might it look like if researchers, scholars, and community members in public education start with the assumption that abolitionists are *right* (Torres, 2020)?

¹¹ We also center here the necessity of abolitionist approaches to social work, counseling, and other services that shape youth and family experiences and outcomes. In other words, our recommendations about teachers, counselors, and other school personnel come with the caveat that they are not conscripted into the project of policing.

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