

# High School Students' Perceptions of Police Vary by Student Race and Ethnicity

## FINDINGS FROM AN ANALYSIS OF THE CALIFORNIA HEALTHY KIDS SURVEY, 2017/18

By Jonathan Nakamoto, Rebeca Cerna, and Alexis Stern

In response to ongoing public concern about violence on K-12 school campuses, many schools around the United States are partnering with local law enforcement to increase the presence of officers in schools. However, a police presence, whether at school or in the community, may not make all young people feel safe.

This brief presents data from a large sample of high school students, in eight diverse, low-income communities, who completed the California Healthy Kids Survey in the 2017/18 school year (see page 6 for more about the sample).<sup>1</sup> Some previous studies have found racial and ethnic disparities in young people's perceptions of police and of their own safety (Lacoe, 2015; Peck, 2015). However, because students' perceptions may be influenced by multiple contextual factors (Wu, Lake, & Cao, 2015; Wu, Sun, & Triplett, 2009), they may differ substantially by school and community (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011). Building on this research, the analyses highlighted in this report explore how students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are experiencing the presence of police in their community and in their school. Overall, compared to their White peers, students of color, especially Black students, had less positive perceptions of police in both instances, although this disparity was smaller in relation to students' perceptions about police in their school.

This report details how students in the sample feel, first, about police in their community and, then, about police in their school.

## How do students from different racial and ethnic groups feel about police in their community?

All students in the sample were asked to respond to seven positively oriented statements about police in their community (listed in exhibit 1). Students' response options fell on a

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of reporting data on four main student groups, the authors use the terms Asian, Black, Latino, and White. For more specifics on how students were asked to identify themselves in the Healthy Kids survey, see "About the sample."

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4-point scale, ranging from “not at all true” (1) to “very much true” (4). Exhibit 2 presents the numerical averages of students’ responses to these seven survey statements, to illustrate students’ overall perceptions of police in their community. It shows that perceptions vary by students’ racial or ethnic group. Overall, responses from Black students in the sample reflect less positive perceptions of police in their community, compared to their White, Latino, or Asian peers. Across the seven statements about police, the average response by Black students is slightly higher than “a little true” (2.1), while the average response for White students is slightly lower than “pretty much true” (2.9). Based on standards for social science research (Hill, Bloom, Black, & Lipsey, 2008), this gap between the average response of Black students and the average response of White students represents a large difference. Latino and Asian students’ average reported perceptions of police in their community fall between those of the sample’s Black students and White students. The differences shown in exhibit 2 between Black students and students in the other racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant.<sup>2</sup> The differences between Whites and Latinos, Whites and Asians, and Asians and Latinos are also statistically significant.

Data displayed in exhibit 3 reflect students’ reported feelings of relative safety with police in their community, based on one

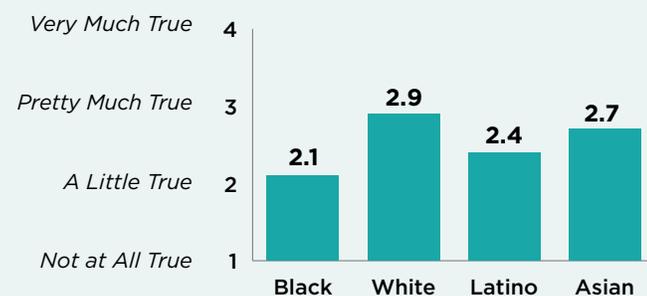
<sup>2</sup> For this report, researchers tested statistical significance in two different ways, with each one statistically controlling for the clustering of students within schools. For data in exhibits 2 and 5, statistical significance was based on an analysis of the students’ average responses to the items. For data in exhibits 3 and 6, it was based on an analysis that compared the proportions of each group responding “not at all true” or “a little true” and “pretty much true” or “very much true.”.

## Exhibit 1. Survey Items Assessing Students’ Perceptions of Police in Their Community

- I trust the police.
- I respect the police.
- The police make me feel safer.
- The police treat all people in the community fairly.
- The police are respectful of all people in the community.
- The police are helping to reduce crime and improve safety.
- Police officers treat people in my community with respect regardless of race, ethnicity, or perceived immigration status.

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

## Exhibit 2. Students’ Average Responses to Seven Positive Statements About Police in Their Community, by Student Racial or Ethnic Group



Note: The mean for each group is based on an analysis that statistically controls for the clustering of students within schools.

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

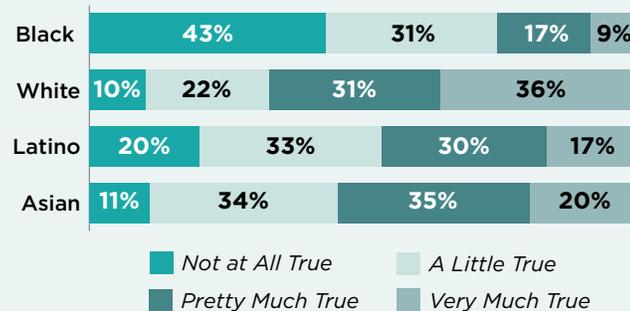
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survey item as an example: *The police make me feel safer [in the community]*. Among Black students in the sample, 74 percent responded that this statement was “not at all true” or was “a little true.” Roughly, 32 percent of the sample’s White students, 53 percent of its Latino students, and 44 percent of its Asian students had the same responses. For this item, the differences between Blacks and all other groups, between Whites and Latinos, between Whites and Asians, and between Asians and Latinos are all statistically significant. The disparities in students’ reported feelings of safety are consistent with the disparities in students’ average responses to all survey items assessing perceptions of police in the community.

**Exhibit 3. Students’ Responses to the Statement *The police make me feel safer [in the community]*, by Student Racial or Ethnic Group**



*Note:* Percentages are based on a descriptive analysis that does not account for the structure of the data where students are clustered within schools. Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100.

*Source:* California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

## How do students from different racial and ethnic groups feel about police in their school?

Ninety percent of students in the sample reported attending a school with a school resource officer or other school-based law enforcement presence. These students responded to a set of survey items consisting of nine positive statements (listed in exhibit 4) about police presence in a student’s school, and students were asked to indicate, on the same four-point scale, how true they believe each statement to be. Here, too, Black students in the sample reported the least positive perceptions of police, compared with their peers in other racial and ethnic groups; however, the disparities among the groups’ responses were smaller than the

**Exhibit 4. Survey Items Assessing Students’ Perceptions of Police in Their School**

- I like having an officer at school.
- I feel safer with the officer at school.
- The officer is helpful to students needing help.
- The officer has a good relationship with students.
- The officer treats all students fairly.
- The officer treats all students with respect regardless of race, ethnicity, or perceived immigration status.
- The officer does a good job stopping violence at school.
- I respect the officer in my school.
- I feel comfortable with the officer in my school.

*Source:* California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

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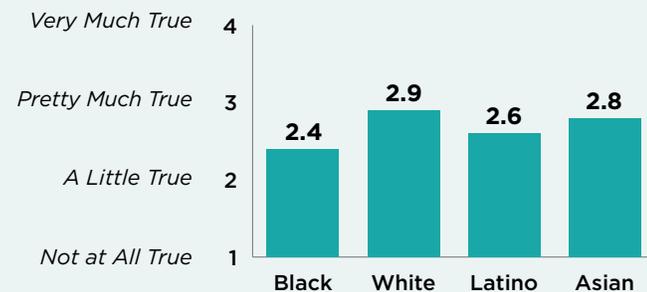
disparities among their responses to the items assessing perceptions of police in the community.

Exhibit 5 illustrates the disparities in students' overall perceptions of police in their school, by student race or ethnicity, based on the numerical averages of students' responses across the nine survey items. At 2.4, the average response given by Black students for these items was between "a little true" and "pretty much true." At 2.9, the average response for White students was the most positive of the groups, approaching "pretty much true." While the difference between the average responses of the two groups is less than the difference for items about police in the community, the disparity is statistically significant, as are the differences between the average responses of Black and Latino students and between Black and Asian students. The differences in average responses between Whites and Latinos, between Whites and Asians, and between Asians and Latinos are also statistically significant.

Still, the survey results indicate that students of color had more positive perceptions of school-based law enforcement than they had of police in their community. Among Black students, this difference is three tenths of a point, and among Latino students, the difference is two tenths of a point. In comparison, on average, White students' perceptions about police at school and their perceptions about police in the community were much the same.

Data displayed in exhibit 6 reflect students' reported feelings of relative safety with police in their school, based on one survey item as an example: *I feel safer with the officer at*

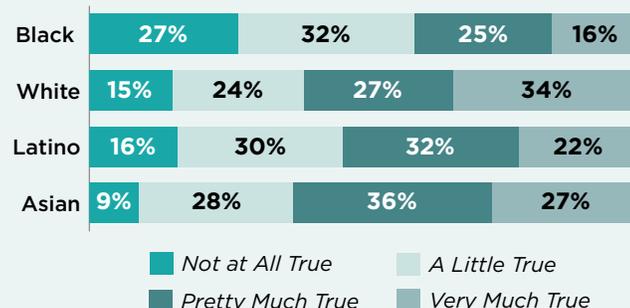
**Exhibit 5. Students' Average Responses to Nine Positive Statements about Police in Their School, by Student Racial or Ethnic Group**



Note: The mean for each group is based on an analysis that statistically controls for the clustering of students within schools.

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

**Exhibit 6. Students' Responses to the Statement *I feel safer with the officer at school*, by Racial or Ethnic Group**



Note: Percentages are based on a descriptive analysis that does not account for the structure of the data where students are clustered within schools. Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100.

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey for 2017/18 school year.

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*school.* Among Black students in the sample, 59 percent reported that this statement was “not at all true” or “a little true,” compared with 39 percent of the sample’s White students, 46 percent of Latino students, and 37 percent of Asian students. The differences in these responses between Black students and all other groups, between Whites and Latinos, and between Asians and Latinos are statistically significant. The disparities in students’ reported feelings of safety are similar to the disparities in their average responses to all survey items assessing perceptions of police in their school.

## Conclusion

The data presented in this report demonstrate that, for the high school students in this sample, perceptions of the police in their community and of law enforcement officers in their school varied depending on students’ race and ethnicity. Specifically, compared to their White peers, Asian, Black, and Latino students in this sample reported feeling less safe with the police in their communities. This trend was particularly pronounced for Black students. The data also suggest that the presence of police in school was less likely to make students of color, particularly Black students, feel safer at school. The findings highlighted here indicate that there is still work to be done to improve students’ experiences of and relationships with school- and community-based law enforcement. As is true in many parts of the country, community members, schools, and local law enforcement departments across California share the common goal of providing a positive and supportive environment for the young people in their community. Using data to understand and address students’ disparate experiences of law enforcement is an important step toward making all young people feel safer in their schools and communities.

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## More About the California Healthy Kids Survey Sample

This brief draws on survey data from over 21,000 high school students in 67 schools from 8 school districts across California. The sample included schools in small, medium, and large districts. The majority of the schools were located in urban or suburban settings, with a small number in rural locations. These 8 districts were among 14 participating in The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative, aimed at building local capacity to improve the health and well-being of residents (see <https://www.calendow.org/>). Forty-seven percent of the sample's students were in grade 9, 6 percent in grade 10, 38 percent in grade 11, 5 percent in grade 12, and 4 percent in non-traditional high school settings. Sixty-four percent of the students identified as Latino, 12 percent as White, 10 percent as Asian, 5 percent as Black, and 7 percent as Mixed/Two or more races. The California Healthy Kids survey asks all students to identify their race and also asks if they are of Latino or Hispanic origin (hereafter Latino). For purposes of this analysis, students were categorized as Asian, Black, or White if they identified themselves as such when asked about race and did not also identify themselves as being Latino. Regardless of race, if students identified as being Latino, they were classified as Latino and were not counted in their racial group. This brief does not explore data for students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or as Mixed/Two or more races.

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