

## School arrests in CT going down, but the impact is the same

By Brian Lockhart  
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Sha’Nia Cooper was trying to get to her locker when the 13-year-old seventh grader heard other girls talking about her in the hallway of her Waterbury middle school.

The next thing she knew, fists were flying. A teacher intervened and got hit. Cooper left the school that day in handcuffs. Three years have passed. Things have not been the same.

“It was my downfall, basically,” Cooper said from her living room couch where she spends much of the day, home-schooled. “Once that one thing happened, it was basically like I let off a bomb.”

In the 2018-19 school year, the last full year of school before the COVID-19 pandemic, school-based arrests statewide were reported to be down 44 percent compared with a decade ago. Fewer “bombs” are going off, but there remained a huge difference between school districts when it comes to who is arrested and for what.

For some, the impact weighs heavily.

Each year, the state Department of Education collects arrest data — collecting both sanctions levied and the reason for the arrests — from school districts, recording publicly any school system where the count is five or more in a single year. Upon request, the state released 10 years worth of such data to Hearst Connecticut Media, beginning with the 2009-10 school year and ending with the 2018-19 year.

**Although on the decline, arrests disproportionately impact kids of color, said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children’s Advocacy in Hartford, which has been tracking data on school-based arrests data for the past three to four years as it relates to entry into the juvenile justice system.**

**“A lot of it is shining a light on the data,” Stone said. “Then brainstorming on how to get numbers down, particularly as it relates to race, ethnicity and gender.”**

In 2018-19, the state reported 1,444 students were arrested. Of those, 386 were black and 548 were Hispanic, combined making up about 65 percent off all student arrests.

State officials acknowledge the racial and ethnic disparities and a Connecticut School Discipline Collaborative was formed two years ago to work to reduce both the number and the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices — including arrests.

In all that year, there were 1,560 arrests recorded in public schools around the state, state records show. That means some students were arrested more than once.

The year before the arrest count was 1,797, a significant decrease from the 2,789 recorded a decade ago. Fights remained the number one reason listed for school-based arrests in 2018-19, followed by drugs, confrontations and threatening. Weapons accounted for 71 arrests; breaking school rules led to 84 arrests. A smaller number of students were arrested for theft, sexually-related behavior and property damage. The majority of students arrested were male.

### **Waterbury, Bridgeport show data problems**

Each year over the past decade, Waterbury, which last year had a student population of 18,847, had the largest number of arrests — consistently triple the number of any other school district. Last year, 18 percent of the arrests made statewide — 287 — were in Waterbury.

State officials are at a loss to explain why. When asked last fall, Commissioner of Education Miguel Cardona said it was something the state was watching.

“Overall the state is working with districts more closely to see what districts are doing and how we can support them,” said Cardona at a state Board of Education meeting in February. “Sometimes the best way we can help a Waterbury is have them talk to a district with similar demographics and similar history who use different strategies.”

Earlier this month, Sarah Eagan, the state’s child advocate, issued a report that found police were called to Waterbury pre-K through 8th grade schools 198 times between September 2018 and March 2019. Eighteen percent of the time, an arrest resulted. The median age of the child arrested was 12.

“Concerned, overwhelmed and under-resourced school administrators may rely on police to respond to children’s crises,” according to the report. “Unfortunately, use of law enforcement as a behavioral health first response system is problematic.”

The OCA report also found an inconsistency in arrest data provided by school districts and police departments. “Police should have no role in maintaining school climate or school discipline,” the report concluded.

Jaclyn Davis, climate and attendance coordinator for the schools in Waterbury, told Hearst Connecticut last fall it also seems that not all cities “code” — or define — arrests in the same way. Still, she said, Waterbury recognizes there is work to be done, but is making strides to try and bring its numbers down.

Elsewhere last year, the numbers varied. In southwestern Connecticut there were 92 in Danbury, 41 in Ansonia, 36 in Stamford, 35 in New Haven, 33 in Stratford, 28 in Norwalk and 16 in Greenwich. Bridgeport only had 12, a number that Bridgeport Police Lt. Paul Grech, in the last school year, questioned.

Grech, who has overseen school resource officers in the city school district for nine years, insisted the arrests were higher than what was reported to the state. The discrepancy could not be fully explained by state or local officials.

State officials say it could be the definition for “school-based arrest” kept by the police department is broader than what is counted and recorded by the district. State law defines a school-based arrest as an arrest of a student for conduct on school property or a school-sponsored event.

“It is possible that Bridgeport may have had other arrests of school-age students but perhaps those are not school-based as defined in state law,” Peter Yazbak, a state Department of Education spokesman, said. Grech said some of his arrest count could end up being deferred — or not ultimately counted — if the case is handled by the Juvenile Review board. Arrest counts kept by Grech, starting in 2011, shows arrests are going down, but were in the low 50s as of the 2017-18 school year.

Schools Superintendent Michael Testani said the district’s data management department collects arrest data from schools and provides it to the state. He too could not explain the discrepancy between state and local police department numbers. He said there is a concerted effort made to support rather than arrest students.

Services such as restorative practice came about, Testani said, because when the district was arresting a lot of kids, nothing was changing.

Bridgeport’s tally would be higher, Grech maintains, if Bridgeport didn’t change how it handles student misconduct. Before the shut down, many more students were being referred to a juvenile review board — often before arrests are made. There is also an increase in the use of restorative justice practices, where an effort is made to improve the culture and climate in schools plus repair the harm caused by misbehavior before it is labeled a crime.

“We don’t want to make arrests,” Grech said, calling them a last resort.

At a Waterbury school board meeting in December 2017, Cooper spoke about her arrest. “Can you imagine being 13 years old telling your parents that you’re in jail?” she asked the board. Her mom, Erika Cooper, said when she picked up her daughter from the police station that day she was hysterical.

Cooper went through a five-week program that stripped the arrest from her record. She got a certificate and went back to school, but with a reputation she couldn’t shake. “It was like, ‘When Cooper is in the hall there is going to be trouble,’” she recalled. Her grades slipped and she claims she was placed in less challenging classes.

Her mom said her attitude was different, too. “She was like ‘I am going to protect myself at any means,’” Erika Cooper said.

She said she understands her daughter had to face consequences but said the arrest, on top of a 10-day suspension, made matters worse. Waterbury, she said, should have a program to help students who commit non-serious offenses. Instead of suspension, she said, students should be compelled to attend school more often, such as on a Saturday. Iliana Pujols, director of Community Connections at the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, also knows firsthand the impact an arrest can have on young people.

The 22-year-old was arrested more than once as a New Haven Public Schools student.

Her freshman year and sophomore years, it was for getting into fights. She got probation the first year and recalls no one ever asking for her side of the story.

The sophomore year arrest eventually changed things for the better. Pujols was put in Passages, a program for students who had been in the juvenile justice system. “Reflecting on it now, it was probably the best thing that happened in my life,” she said. The program, she said, focused on purposefulness, integrity, resiliency and courage. The director to this day is like a mom to Pujols.

Pujols said it shouldn’t have taken an arrest to get her into the kind of program she needed. “Passages would have worked without the arrests,” she said. “The fact that they have to get arrested (to get in) was the problem.”

Two years after she graduated, Passages was closed. She is not sure why.

In her current job, Pujols, who now lives in Bridgeport, hires and trains justice advisers who work with student offenders. Her long-term goal is to open an alternative high school like the one that helped her. She also wants to see restorative justice and juvenile review boards used on a much larger scale.