



University of South Carolina
College of Arts and Sciences
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**Attitudes about Police Officers in Schools in the Aftermath of
the Spring Valley High School Controversy**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible with the valuable research assistance and feedback of Celeste Phillips-Blakeney and thoughtful advice of Dr. Robert Oldendick.

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On August 11, 2016, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of South Carolina’s “disturbing schools” law, which makes it a crime “to interfere with or to disturb in any way or in any place the students or teachers of any school or college in this State” or “to act in an obnoxious manner” on school premises. One of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, Niya Kenny, was arrested at Columbia’s Spring Valley High School on October 26, 2015, after verbally protesting the treatment of one of her classmates by former school resource officer Deputy Ben Fields and encouraging other students to film the officer’s treatment of her classmate. In this incident, which received widespread media attention and led to the officer’s firing from the Richland County Sheriff’s Department, former officer Fields was filmed forcibly removing Kenny’s classmate from a classroom for being disruptive.

Beginning on October 29, 2015, the Institute for Public Service and Policy Research at the University of South Carolina conducted a telephone survey of 334 randomly selected South Carolina adults to assess the public’s reaction to the events surrounding this student’s forcible removal from class at Spring Valley High School. (A description of the methods used in this study and a copy of the questionnaire are provided in Appendices A and B.) The questionnaire used for this survey included items measuring familiarity with the events at Spring Valley High School and opinions about whether the decision to fire Ben Fields was right or wrong, as well as items measuring attitudes about police interactions and school resource officers. This report summarizes the major findings from the study and examines differences in attitudes between Blacks and Whites.

Reactions to the Student’s Forcible Removal from Class at Spring Valley High School

The overwhelming majority of respondents in this study indicated they had heard something about Deputy Fields forcibly removing a student from a classroom for being disruptive. Around 64% of respondents reported that they had heard “a lot” about the incident, and 31% reported having heard “a little”. Only 4.6% of respondents indicated that they had heard “nothing” about this incident, while another 0.8% either said they did not know if they heard about it or they refused to answer the question.

Black respondents were more likely than White respondents to indicate having heard about the forcible removal of a student from her classroom at Spring Valley High School. As presented in Table 1, more than 70% of Black respondents indicated that they had heard “a lot” about this incident, and 24.1% indicated they had heard “a little”. Despite being less likely than Black respondents to have heard about this incident at Spring Valley High School, the majority of White respondents (59.6%) reported having heard “a lot”, and 34.5% reported having heard a little.

TABLE 1

How much, if anything, have you read or heard about Richland County deputy Ben Fields forcibly removing a student from her classroom for being disruptive?

	<u>A Lot</u>	<u>A Little</u>	<u>Nothing</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	63.6	31.0	4.6	0.4	0.4	334
<i>Race</i>						
Black	73.3	24.1	1.1	1.4	0.0	89
White	59.6	34.5	5.5	0.0	0.5	236
Other Race	71.4	10.8	15.3	0.0	2.6	9

When asked whether Richland County made the right decision or the wrong decision to fire Deputy Fields for his conduct in forcibly removing the student from a classroom, as indicated in Table 2, 48.1% of respondents indicated that Richland County made the right decision, 34.6% thought Richland County made the wrong decision, and 10.8% of respondents said they did not know whether Richland County made the right decision or the wrong decision in this case. Another 6.6% of respondents refused to answer the question.

Black and White respondents had markedly different opinions, however, about whether Richland County made the right decision or the wrong decision to fire Deputy Fields. Almost 81% of Black respondents felt that Richland County made the right decision to fire Deputy Fields, yet only 35.5% of White respondents felt this way. Fewer than 12% of Black respondents felt that firing Fields was the wrong decision, but a plurality of 43.2% of White respondents felt that his firing was the wrong decision. Another 2.5% of Black respondents said they did not know whether it was the right or wrong decision, and 5.5% of Black respondents refused to answer the question. Among White respondents, 14.2% indicated that they did not know whether firing Fields was the right or wrong decision, and 7.1% refused to answer the question.

TABLE 2

All things considered, do you think the sheriff's department in Richland County made the right decision or the wrong decision to fire deputy Ben Fields for his conduct in forcibly removing the student from her classroom?

	<u>Right Decision</u>	<u>Wrong Decision</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	48.1	34.6	10.8	6.6	334
<i>Race</i>					
Black	80.8	11.5	2.2	5.5	89
White	35.5	43.2	14.2	7.1	236
Other Race	52.1	36.4	8.0	3.5	9

Opinions about School Resource Officers

The episode at Spring Valley High School and the lawsuit recently filed on behalf of Niya Kenny both prompted increased attention to the role of police officers in schools. With this in mind, this study also included four questions pertaining to the School Resource Officer program, in which police officers are permanently assigned to work in schools.

As presented in Table 3, when asked whether they have ever heard of the School Resource Officer (SRO) program, where police officers are permanently assigned to work in a school in an effort to provide a safe working and learning environment for students, teachers, staff, and administrators, a substantial majority of respondents (90.6%) said “yes”. Only 8.5% of respondents indicated that they have not heard of the SRO program. White respondents were more likely than Black respondents to have heard of the SRO program, with 93.3% of Whites indicating having heard of it; however, a majority of Black respondents (84.8%) also reported that they have heard of the SRO program.

TABLE 3

Have you ever heard of the School Resource Officer program, where police officers are permanently assigned to work in a school in an effort to provide a safe working and learning environment for students, teachers, staff, and administrators?

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	90.6	8.5	0.2	0.7	334
<u>Race</u>					
Black	84.8	11.9	0.8	2.5	89
White	93.3	6.7	0.0	2.2	236
Other Race	79.5	20.5	0.0	2.2	9

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that *permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to reduce rates of juvenile crime*. As indicated in Table 4, the majority of respondents (75.6%) expressed agreement with this statement, while 15.6% of respondents disagreed. Around 7% of respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Though majorities of both Black respondents and White respondents agreed that permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to reduce rates of juvenile crime, White respondents were significantly more likely than Black respondents to agree with this statement. Around 80% of White respondents agreed that permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to reduce rates of juvenile crime, while 63.3% of Black respondents agreed. Roughly 12% of White respondents disagreed that permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to reduce rates of juvenile crime, yet slightly more than a quarter of Black respondents (25.2%) disagreed.

TABLE 4

Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that... Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to *reduce rates of juvenile crime*?

	Strongly <u>Agree</u>	Agree <u>Somewhat</u>	Neither Agree Nor <u>Disagree</u>	Disagree <u>Somewhat</u>	Strongly <u>Disagree</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	29.0	46.6	7.0	12.6	3.0	1.1	1.0	334
<i>Race</i>								
Black	19.7	43.6	8.3	19.4	5.8	0.8	2.5	89
White	32.5	47.6	6.4	10.0	1.8	1.2	0.4	236
Other Race	27.1	48.1	9.5	11.3	4.1	0.0	0.0	9

As indicated in Table 5, when asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that *permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to enhance safety in schools*, more than 90% of respondents expressed agreement with this statement. Only 5.7% of respondents disagreed, while 2% indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. Also, there was no statistically significant difference between Black and White respondents in their answers to this question.

TABLE 5

Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that... Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to *enhance safety in schools*?

	Strongly <u>Agree</u>	Agree <u>Somewhat</u>	Neither Agree Nor <u>Disagree</u>	Disagree <u>Somewhat</u>	Strongly <u>Disagree</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	39.7	50.5	2.0	4.2	1.5	0.0	2.2	334
<i>Race</i>								
Black	27.0	58.0	2.4	7.6	1.8	0.0	3.3	89
White	44.5	47.3	1.9	3.0	1.5	0.0	1.9	236
Other Race	38.4	59.1	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	9

The final question specifically about school resource officers asked respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that *permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police*. As presented in Table 6, slightly more than half of the respondents (50.2%) disagreed with this statement, while 37% of respondents agreed. Another 8.5% of respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police. Black respondents, however, were significantly more likely than White respondents to agree with this statement. The majority of Black respondents (52.1%) agreed that permanently assigning police

to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police, whereas 31.2% of White respondents agreed. Roughly 37% of Black respondents expressed disagreement with this statement, while the majority of White respondents (55.3%) disagreed that permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police.

TABLE 6

Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that... Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to *create barriers between students and police*?

	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree Somewhat</u>	<u>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree Somewhat</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	8.8	28.2	8.5	34.6	15.6	2.0	2.3	334
<i>Race</i>								
Black	14.3	37.8	7.8	25.5	12.1	0.0	2.5	89
White	6.6	24.6	8.4	38.2	17.1	2.9	2.3	236
Other Race	12.0	27.6	18.3	29.2	12.9	0.0	0.0	9

Opinions about Interactions with Police

Given that the incident at Spring Valley High School represented one of a series of events prompting national discussions about police use of force, respondents were also asked whether they think the police are too quick to use force, or do they typically only use force when necessary. As presented in Table 7, around 38% of respondents indicated feeling that police are too quick to use force, while the majority of respondents (53.2%) indicated feeling that police typically only use force when necessary. Another 3.1% of respondents either said they did not know whether police are too quick to use force or only use force when necessary; and 5.5% refused to answer the question.

TABLE 7

In general, do you think the police are too quick to use force, or do they typically only use force when necessary?

	<u>Too Quick to Use Force</u>	<u>Force Used Only When Necessary</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	38.2	53.2	3.1	5.5	334
<i>Race</i>					
Black	73.0	20.7	1.1	5.3	89
White	24.6	65.9	3.9	5.6	236
Other Race	48.8	44.2	3.5	3.5	9

Black respondents and White respondents have strikingly different opinions about police use of force, however. Almost two-thirds of White respondents (65.9%) indicated feeling that police only use force when necessary, whereas only around 20% of Black respondents reported feeling this way. Nearly three-fourths of Black respondents (73%) indicated feeling that police are too quick to use force, while only 24.6% of White respondents expressed the same sentiment.

Because Ben Fields’ forcible removal of a student from her classroom was thrust into the national spotlight, in part, because it was captured on cell phone videos that were made public, this study also asked respondents whether they thought it is mostly a good thing or mostly a bad thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera. As indicated in Table 8, respondents largely reported feeling that it is mostly a good thing, with 89.4% of respondents reporting feeling this way, while only 8.5% reported feeling it is mostly a bad thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera. Black respondents, however, were significantly more likely than White respondents to feel that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera is mostly a good thing; and White respondents were more likely than Black respondents to feel that it is mostly a bad thing. More than 96% of Black respondents said it is mostly a good thing, while 1% of Black respondents said it is mostly a bad thing, that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera. Among White respondents nearly 87% reported feeling that it is mostly a good thing, while 11.4% reported feeling it is mostly a bad thing.

TABLE 8

Do you think it is mostly a good thing or mostly a bad thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera?

	<u>Good Thing</u>	<u>Bad Thing</u>	<u>DK</u>	<u>Refused</u>	<u>N</u>
TOTAL	89.4	8.5	0.9	1.3	334
RACE					
Black	96.5	1.0	0.0	2.2	89
White	86.6	11.4	1.2	0.9	236
Other Race	91.3	5.4	3.3	0.0	9

Summary and Conclusions

In the weeks following the forcible removal of a Spring Valley High School student from her classroom by former school resource officer Deputy Ben Fields, there was a high level of awareness of this incident in South Carolina, as evidenced by the fact that more than 60% of those interviewed for this study reported that they had heard “a lot” about it, while another 31% reported having heard “a little”. Despite this high level of awareness of the incident, however, South Carolinians were largely split in their assessment of whether the firing of Ben Fields for his conduct was the right decision or the wrong decision; and this split among South Carolinians is especially evident along racial lines, with a large majority of Black respondents feeling that Fields’ firing was the right decision while a plurality of White respondents reported feeling that his firing was the wrong decision.

Also, though this study revealed that there is widespread awareness of the School Resource Officers program among South Carolina residents, with large majorities of both White and Black respondents reporting that they have heard of this program, racial differences also emerge in respondents’ assessments of the School Resource Officers program. Though majorities of Blacks and Whites both agree, for example, that permanently assigning police officers to schools is a good way to reduce rates of juvenile crime, Blacks were significantly less likely than Whites to agree and were more likely than Whites to disagree. Also, while there is no statistically significant difference between Blacks and Whites in their assessments of whether permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to enhance safety in schools, White respondents were significantly less likely than Black respondents to agree that permanently assigning police officers to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police. In fact, the majority of Whites expressed disagreement with the statement that permanently assigning police officers to schools is a good way to create barriers between students and police, while the majority of Black respondents expressed agreement.

Hence, though Black and White South Carolinians are generally in agreement regarding the effectiveness of permanently assigning police officers to schools for reducing juvenile crime and enhancing school safety (though Whites express greater agreement with these points than Blacks), they reach decidedly different conclusions about whether permanently assigning police officers to schools undermines relationships between students and police. White respondents appeared universally positive about the consequences of permanently assigning police officers to schools, yet Black respondents appear to be a bit more ambivalent—on the one hand, Black respondents generally feel that permanently assigning police officers to schools reduces juvenile crime and enhances safety, but on the other hand they also feel that permanently assigning police officers to schools creates barriers between students and police.

Regarding interactions with police officers, this study also found marked racial differences in opinions about whether police officers are too quick to use force or only use force when necessary. A large majority of Black respondents reported feeling that police officers are too

quick to use force, whereas an almost equally large majority of White respondents reported feeling that police officers only use force when necessary.

Despite the strong racial differences in opinions about police officers' use of force, large majorities of both Black and White respondents reported feeling that it is mostly a good thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera. This general agreement between Blacks and Whites on this point notwithstanding, however, White respondents were still significantly less likely than Black respondents to feel that it is mostly a good thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera.

Overall, in the aftermath of the controversial events that occurred at Spring Valley High School in the fall of 2015, this study found that, while Black and White South Carolinians generally agree on multiple points pertaining to police officers in school and police interactions, their views on these matters are hardly identical and, on some issues, there are in fact sharp differences between these two groups. Most striking among these differences are those observed in attitudes about the firing of Deputy Ben Fields, whether permanently assigning police officers to schools creates barriers between students and police, and whether police are too quick to use force.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY METHODS

This study used a single sampling frame, based only on cell phone telephone numbers, in selecting respondents for this study. Respondents were randomly selected from a list of cell phone exchanges in South Carolina; and each of these numbers was called by the survey interviewers. Numbers that were found to be businesses, institutions, not-in-service, or otherwise not assigned were ineligible for the survey. The remaining numbers, when called, resulted in contacts with individuals in the cell phone component. When contact was made with an individual, they were asked a series of questions to determine eligibility, including confirming that the number reached was for a cell phone, that the individual who answered was 18 years of age or older, and that they were a resident of South Carolina.

The interviewing was conducted by the interviewing staff of the Survey Research Laboratory in the Institute for Public Service and Policy Research, on the Columbia campus of the University of South Carolina. Prior to the actual fieldwork (interviewing), the interviewers and interviewing supervisors received a specialized training for this survey. Many of the interviews were monitored to insure that instructions were being followed. Calls were made from 9:00 AM to 9:30 PM Monday through Friday, from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Saturday, and 3:00 PM to 8:00 PM on Sunday. The main survey period was from October 29th to December 3rd, 2015. A total of 334 interviews were completed, yielding an AAPOR response rate (RR4) of 13.4%.

In these analyses, the data have been weighted to adjust for variation in the sample relating to age, sex, and race. In theory, in 19 cases out of 20, overall results based on such samples will differ by no more than 5.4 percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by seeking to interview all South Carolina adults. For smaller subgroups, the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variation in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

**APPENDIX B:
QUESTIONNAIRE**

**SOUTH CAROLINA STATE SURVEY II
FALL 2015**

Hello, this is _____ calling for the University of South Carolina. This month the University is conducting a confidential study of public opinion in South Carolina and we'd really appreciate your help and cooperation.

SCREENER:

I just have a few questions to find out if you are eligible for this study. Is this [PHONE NUMBER]?

Is this a cellular telephone?

Are you 18 years of age or older?

Is this a safe time to talk with you now, or are you driving?

And what South Carolina county do you live in? RECORD COUNTY: _____

D1. Some people are registered to vote and others are not. Are you currently registered to vote in South Carolina?

1. YES
2. NO OR DK (DO NOT PROBE)
3. DO NOT KNOW
4. REFUSED

D2. What is your age?

_____ CODE EXACT NUMBER OF YEARS (E.G., 45)

96. NINETY-SIX YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER
97. DO NOT KNOW
98. REFUSED

D3. Do you live in an urban, suburban, or rural area of South Carolina?

1. URBAN (INSIDE CITY LIMITS)
2. SUBURBAN (JUST OUTSIDE CITY LIMITS)
3. RURAL (AWAY FROM A CITY)
4. DK (PROBE: "How would you describe it?")
5. REFUSED

D4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
(READ OPTIONS 1-9, IF NECESSARY)

1. 8th Grade or Less
2. 9th - 11th Grade
3. High School Diploma/G.E.D.
4. Some College or Postsecondary School
5. Two-Year College or Technical Degree
6. Four-Year College Degree (Bachelor's Degree)
7. Some Graduate/Professional School
8. Master's or Professional Degree
9. Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)
10. DO NOT KNOW
11. REFUSED

D6. Which one or more of the following would you say is your racial or ethnic group...
(READ OPTIONS 1-6)

1. Black or African American
2. White or Caucasian
3. Hispanic or Latino
4. Native American or American Indian
5. Asian or Pacific Islander; or
6. Some other racial group? (SPECIFY): _____
7. DO NOT KNOW
8. REFUSED

D7. How many of the persons who currently live in your household are under 18 years of age, including babies and small children?

_____ RECORD NUMBER

7. SEVEN OR MORE
8. DK
9. REFUSED

D8. Including yourself, how many people age 18 or older are currently living in your household?

_____ RECORD NUMBER

7. SEVEN OR MORE
8. DK
9. REFUSED

D9. So that we can be sure we're getting a cross-section of all people, I'd like you to estimate your family's total income for 2014, before taxes were taken out. Include wages, social security, welfare and any other income. Into which of the following categories does it fall?

As with all of the interview, this information will be strictly confidential. Was it...

(READ CATEGORIES)

01. Less than \$5,000
02. \$5,000 - 9,999
03. \$10,000 - 14,999
04. \$15,000 - 19,999
05. \$20,000 - 24,999
06. \$25,000 - 29,999
07. \$30,000 - 34,999
08. \$35,000 - 39,999
09. \$40,000 - 44,999
10. \$45,000 - 49,999
11. \$50,000 - 74,999
12. \$75,000 - 99,999
13. \$100,000 and over

14. DON'T KNOW (PROBE: "Just approximately...")

15. REFUSED

D10. Not counting business lines, cell phones, extension phones, faxes, or modems -- on how many different land line telephone numbers can your household be reached?

1. ONE
2. TWO
3. THREE
4. FOUR
5. FIVE
6. SIX
7. SEVEN OR MORE

8. DK

9. REFUSED

D11. And what is your zip code? RECORD _____

D12B. And I have to ask, are you male or female?

1. MALE
2. FEMALE
3. DK
4. REFUSED

We're almost done; I have just a few more questions.

[NOTE: Whether BLOCK A appears first or BLOCK B appears first is random in WinCati.]

BLOCK A

Q22. In general, do you think the police are too quick to use force, or do they typically only use force when necessary?

- (1) TOO QUICK TO USE FORCE
- (2) ONLY USE FORCE WHEN NECESSARY
- (3) DON'T KNOW
- (4) REFUSED

Q23. Do you think it is mostly a good thing or mostly a bad thing that more interactions between individuals and police officers are being recorded on camera?

- (1) MOSTLY A GOOD THING
- (2) MOSTLY A BAD THING
- (3) DON'T KNOW
- (4) REFUSED

BLOCK B

Q24. Have you ever heard of the School Resource Officer program, where police officers are permanently assigned to work in a school in an effort to provide a safe working and learning environment for students, teachers, staff, and administrators?

- (1) YES
- (2) NO
- (3) DON'T KNOW
- (4) REFUSED

Q25. How much, if anything, have you read or heard about Richland County deputy Ben Fields forcibly removing [a student / an African American student] from her classroom for being disruptive? Have you heard ... **[READ RESPONSE OPTIONS 1-3]**

[NOTE: Whether the question reads a "*student from her classroom*" or "*an African American student from her classroom*" will be random in WinCati.]

- (1) A lot
- (2) A little
- (3) Nothing at all
- (4) DON'T KNOW
- (5) REFUSED

Q26. All things considered, do you think the sheriff's department in Richland County made the right decision or the wrong decision to fire deputy Ben Fields for his conduct in forcibly removing the student from her classroom?

- (1) RIGHT DECISION
- (2) WRONG DECISION
- (3) DON'T KNOW
- (4) REFUSED

BLOCK C

[NOTE: Questions Q27 – Q29 appear in random order in WinCati.]

For my last three questions, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Do you *strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree* that...

Q27. Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to **reduce rates of juvenile crime**?

Q28. Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to **enhance safety in schools**?

Q29. Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to **create barriers between students and police**?