

An open letter to PSU on armed campus police officers

Portland State University administration is currently forwarding a proposal to create a sworn police force on the PSU campus. Faculty and staff of Portland State University's School of Social Work, School of Gender, Race and Nations, and many other faculty, students, and staff strongly oppose this proposal to create an armed police force on our campus. We have seen the negative impacts of policing and recommend that PSU explore alternatives for increasing campus safety. We believe that more guns will not make PSU a safer campus, and assert that arming PSU officers will have the inverse effect. The current proposal cites PSU's urban location and porous campus to instill fear and support for an armed security force. This rhetoric is incomplete. We are deeply concerned that an armed security presence at PSU would create an unsafe environment for many, including people of color and people in distress.

The PSU administration cites fears of a school shooting as a significant reason to create an armed security force on campus. However, violent crimes and school shootings are very rare. PSU administration has stated that currently most campus crimes are property-related, not violent. Only 0.1 percent of reported crimes on U.S. campuses are murders or manslaughter, as documented in the Campus Attacks article by Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010. Research also shows that the overwhelming majority of school shootings are not committed by outsiders, but by people with existing relationships to the school (i.e. students, faculty and staff) as noted by Bonanno & Levenson, 2014, in the journal SAGE Open. In more than 90 percent of all college campus shootings in the United States from 1900 through 2008, the perpetrator had a connection with the institution, as noted in

Drysdale. Consequently, the administration's emphasis on the porous campus as cause for fear is irrelevant to a school-shooting scenario.

The administration has also cited sexual assault response as a central campus security concern. Most sexual assault is perpetrated by acquaintances, and rarely does it happen in public places that are patrolled by armed officers. We understand the need for sworn officers to conduct sexual assault investigations but dispute that guns are needed to do this work.

Further, police departments across the country have a track record of disrespectful responses to sexual assault victims and failure to follow up when charges have been filed as noted in the New York Times article in 2014 by Perez-Pena and Bogdanich. Consequently, many victims of sexual assault never report the crime to the police. Rather than arming PSU officers, we must work to change the culture of rape and continue to build meaningful sexual assault prevention and support services.

News outlets across the country are filled with reports of systemic police harassment and profiling of people of color, often involving people being killed by police officers. Every 28 hours, a person of color is killed by a police officer or security guard in the U.S., as documented in ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness, authored by Movement, 2013. Given this statistic, in discussions about campus safety we must ask: Whose safety is being considered with this initiative? Communities of color will not be kept safer by creating an armed and sworn police force. We are concerned that more police on campus could lead to more police harassment, police brutality, and police-committed killings against people of color in and surrounding the

PSU community.

We are also concerned about how people experiencing extreme emotional distress could be treated by armed police officers. Although the city recently signed a settlement agreement with the Department of Justice regarding the use of excessive force against people with mental illness and those in emotional distress, much work remains to be done. In general, police are not adequately equipped to work with people experiencing emotional or mental health crises.

The last thing we need to do is expand the militarization of our communities in the name of increased safety. We assert that the \$1.5 million cost of arming PSU officers would be better directed towards more mental-health professionals on campus, sexual-assault prevention, and potentially hiring more unarmed campus safety officers. We strongly recommend that the PSU administration explore alternative strategies to enhance campus safety, including looking to efforts happening at other urban campuses across the country that do not rely on the presence of armed police officers. Finally, we recommend that PSU center the needs of its most marginalized community members when considering the implications of this proposal.

Signed by five faculty members of the School of Social Work at Portland State University:

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