



Most U.S. School Districts Have Low Access to School Counselors

Poor, Diverse, and City School Districts Exhibit Particularly High Student-to-Counselor Ratios

Douglas J. Gagnon and Marybeth J. Mattingly

In education today, diverse movements such as the “whole child” approach, “conveyor belt” services, and “Let’s Move!” share a common understanding that children bring a host of needs to school and often require more than academic support.¹ Students living in poverty often benefit from more intensive support, as they are much more likely to come from difficult circumstances such as less stable homes² and more violent environments.³ It is difficult to estimate the number of children with social or emotional impediments to learning, but by any measure it is substantial.⁴ Addressing the non-cognitive challenges these students face is important not only for them but for their peers, who can experience harmful spillover effects.⁵ Even students who perform well can face “last mile” hurdles that prevent them from successfully transitioning to suitable college or career options.

School counselors,⁶ tasked with addressing the academic, career, personal, and social needs of students, play a crucial role in bridging these gaps. Perhaps the most popularized aspect of their work is conducting one-on-one and small group counseling with students in need, but in addition school counselors often work closely with school administrators, teachers, school support staff, parents, and outside community members to design, implement, and evaluate comprehensive wellness programs within schools. For instance, such curricula may aim to provide drug abuse awareness, foster non-cognitive academic skills, or develop appropriate social connections.⁷ Additionally, school counselors play an important role in meeting the needs of, and advocating for, students with a disability.

Consequently, the impact of school counselors may be felt throughout schools. Researchers have found that greater access to school counselors is associated with higher graduation rates,⁸ fewer disciplinary incidents,⁹

KEY FINDINGS

17.8%

Only 17.8 percent of school districts meet the American School Counselor Association’s recommended student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1 or lower. The median ratio is 411:1.



Although rural districts are the most likely to lack any school counselors, the median caseload in rural districts is lower, at 380:1, and 25.5 percent meet ASCA recommendations.

4.2%

Only 4.2 percent of city districts nationwide meet or exceed a ratio of 250:1, with the median city district reporting a student-to-counselor ratio of 499:1.



Access to school counselors varies considerably across states. Median ratios are over 1000:1 in Arizona and California but under 250:1 in North Carolina, North Dakota, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Montana.

and other improved measures of academic, emotional, and social performance.¹⁰ The breadth and consistency of these findings about the efficacy of school counselors’ work provide strong support for establishing manageable caseloads. However, we know little about what types of school districts provide adequate access to school counselors. In this brief, we examine the level of access to school counselors, and how this access is mediated by district demographic and location characteristics. We use a large nationally representative data source compiled from the 2013–2104 Civil Rights Data

Collection (CRDC), the 2014 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), and 2007 urban centric locales made available by the U.S. Census Bureau to examine trends in school counselor access. See Box 1 for a description of variables examined.

Findings

Nearly 90 percent of U.S. school districts report employing at least one school counselor (Table 1). The median student-to-counselor ratio is 411:1, considerably higher than the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommended ratio of 250:1.¹¹ In fact, only 17.8 percent of districts meet or exceed this recommendation. There is considerable variability across districts, with those at the 25th percentile reporting a 292:1 ratio and those at the 75th reporting 642:1. Additionally, districts' student-to-counselor ratios vary across states, with nearly 10 percent¹² of the total variation in ratios being found between rather than within states. Figure 1, which shows the median student-to-counselor ratio for districts in each state, illustrates the range in school counselor access: in only five states is the median ratio for school districts at or below the ASCA-recommended 250:1; in eleven states the median ratio is more than double that. Regional trends are apparent, too: 25.1 percent of districts in the Northeast meet the ASCA recommended ratio; they have a median ratio of 340:1. The comparable statistics in the West are 15.2 percent and 632:1, respectively.

Poor districts and districts with higher rates of traditionally disadvantaged races exhibit less access to school counselors across

Box 1. Definitions

Any school counselor access: A district has “any” access if there is at least one school counselor employed by the district.

Student-to-school counselor ratio: The number of enrolled students per school counselor in a district. Due to a skewed distribution and the presence of districts without any school counselor access (and therefore an infinite/undefined student-to-school counselor ratio), we examine median as opposed to mean ratios.

Meeting recommended ratio: A district meets ASCA recommendations if it has a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1 or lower.^a

Poverty rate: The percentage of school-aged youth in a school district who live in a family with income below the official poverty threshold.

Traditionally disadvantaged race composition: The percentage of non-white/non-Asian students in a district.

Urbanicity: The U.S. Census generates urbanicity coding for U.S. school districts using four major types: city, suburb, town, and rural.^b

Region: A district falls into one of four regions in the country (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West), determined by U.S. Census designations.

a. Ultimately, the establishment of recommended ratios is based on a confluence of factors, including practitioner perceptions, the efficacy of lower ratios, and political factors. For this reason, it is understandable that recommended ratios are more akin to rules of thumb than they are precise requirements. We argue that the most important conclusion to take from this is that the evidence regarding lower caseloads is fairly convincing, and that examining the ratios recommended by professional organizations serves as a reasonable benchmark in a study such as this.

b. See https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp for complete definitions.

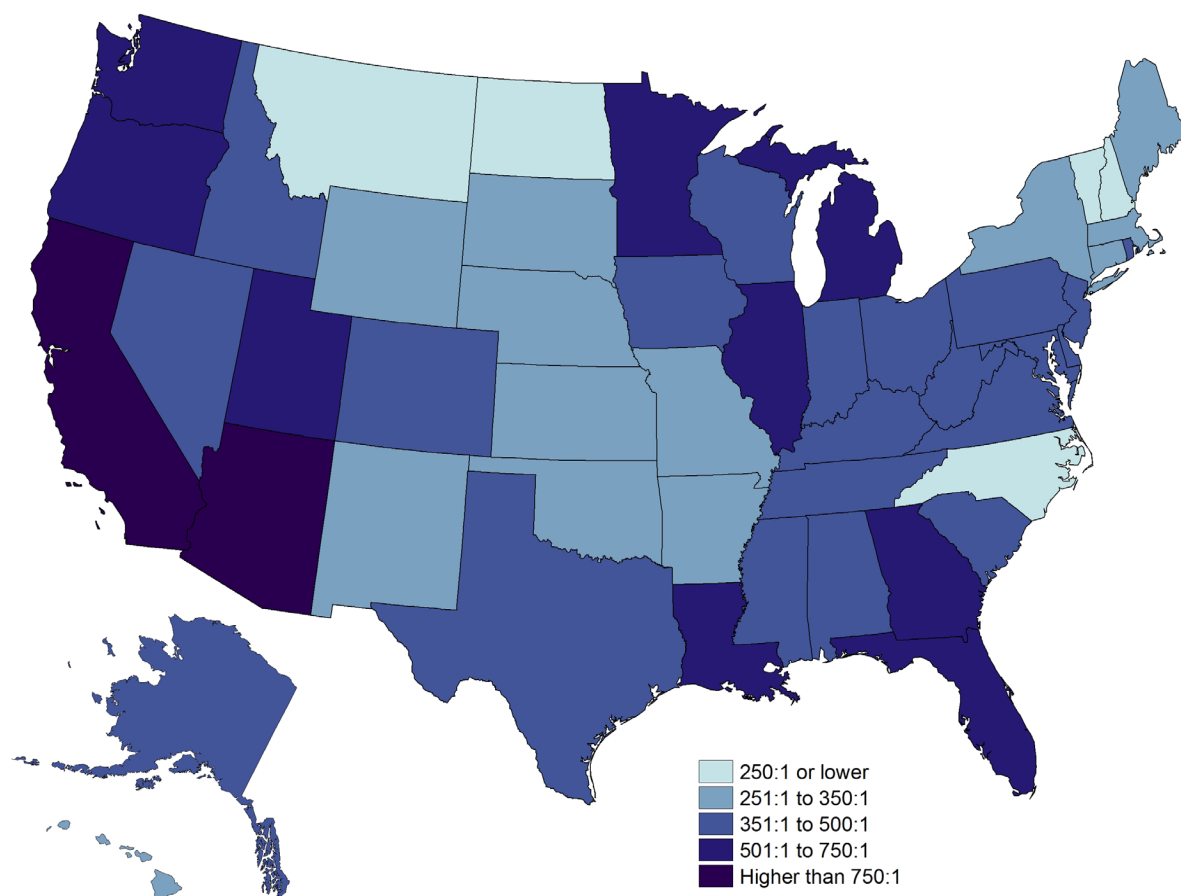
TABLE 1. ACCESS TO SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN THE UNITED STATES, BY REGION

	Percentage of Districts With Any Access	Median Student-to-School Counselor Ratio	Percentage of Districts Meeting Recommended Ratio
United States	89.2%	411	17.8%
Northeast	94.2%	340	25.1%
South	93.9%	389	17.5%
Midwest	89.6%	455	15.0%
West	76.0%	632	15.2%

Source: 2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection

all examined measures (Table 2). A slightly more complicated trend emerges across urbanicity. We find that rural districts are less likely than districts in cities, suburbs, or towns to employ a school counselor. However, due to the smaller

size of many rural districts, those districts that have at least one counselor generally exhibit better ratios: the median ratio for rural districts is 381:1, and over a quarter of rural districts meet the recommended 250:1.

FIGURE 1. MEDIAN STUDENT-TO-COUNSELOR RATIO OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN EACH STATE

Note: The ranges for each color category on this map may be interpreted with respect to the ASCA's recommended counselor-to-student ratio: a median ratio of 250:1 or lower (the lightest color) meets the ASCA's recommendation; 251:1 to 350:1 "nearly" meets the recommendation; 351:1 to 500:1 is approaching twice the recommended ratio; 501:1 to 750:1 is more than double the recommended ratio; more than 750:1 is an extremely high median ratio. **Source:** 2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection

TABLE 2. ACCESS TO SCHOOL COUNSELORS ACROSS DISTRICT POVERTY, RACIAL COMPOSITION, URBANITY, AND REGION

	Percentage of Districts With Any Access	Median Student-to-School Counselor Ratio	Percentage of Districts Meeting Recommended Ratio
Poverty Quartile			
1st (most affluent)	91.1%	398	18.6%
2nd	90.0%	403	19.3%
3rd	89.7%	410	17.0%
4th (poorest)	85.8%	435	16.4%
Disadvantaged Race Quartile			
1st (lowest rate)	91.1%	370	24.0%
2nd	91.8%	390	19.7%
3rd	87.6%	435	14.2%
4th (highest rate)	86.2%	461	13.5%
Urban Locale			
City	93.7%	499	4.2%
Suburb	91.7%	446	9.8%
Town	94.8%	421	8.3%
Rural	85.9%	380	25.5%

Source: 2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection

Discussion

Despite the importance of school counselors and the trends which suggest that too few students have adequate access to them, school counselor caseloads have increased in the past decade.¹³ District budgetary concerns have caused some schools to shed counselor positions. But unlike some more visible instances of belt tightening, such as increased class size, reductions in school counselors may be at greater risk of going unnoticed.¹⁴ Yet there is reason for optimism: public policy can affect access to school counselors. Research has shown that states can influence

the ratios of school health professionals,¹⁵ and that states with more progressive policies toward school counselor staffing show improved student outcomes.¹⁶ It is important that states acknowledge the role that school counselors play and work toward policy solutions to ensure adequate access to these professionals. Given the tremendous range across U.S. states in terms of access to school counselors, it seems that some states have more work to do than others.

The most obvious steps that states can take to improve school counselor access are to establish maximum caseload requirements and ensure that schools have adequate funds to meet such requirements. The relationship between these policy levers and a state's median school counselor ratio is striking. For instance, of the seven states with the highest median ratios (least access), none have mandated a maximum student-to-counselor ratio. Conversely, of the six states with the lowest median ratios (greatest access), all either have a mandated student-to-counselor ratio or a recommended ratio with dedicated state funding to help support counselor access.¹⁷

Our finding that districts with more students in poverty and/or of a disadvantaged race have less access is particularly troublesome, for a number of reasons. First, in many states, poor schools may not have the necessary funding to support the hiring of school counselors, so simply highlighting this lack of disparity may do very

little.¹⁸ In addition, the ASCA actually recommends lighter caseloads for counselors in such schools, as the level of student need there is often greater. Ultimately, the moderate disparities in ratios shown here may actually underestimate the true disparities in unmet needs. Finally, research suggests that low student-to-counselor ratios are most effective in high-poverty schools,¹⁹ and so the high ratios found here reveal an acute lost opportunity for some of our most desperate schools.

Data

Data analyzed here are merged from three sources: the 2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), the 2014 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), and data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census on the urban-centric locale of school districts. Districts are merged using NCES district identification codes. The district serves as the ideal level of analysis in this study, as school counselors may split time between multiple schools within a district, especially in the case of smaller schools.²⁰ We exclude all schools that are juvenile justice facilities, serve only special-education students, or enroll fewer than 10 students. When we merged CRDC data with SAIPE and NCES data we dropped 655 districts that lacked either poverty or urbanicity estimates. Our final sample consists of 12,891 districts in the United States, representing roughly 95 percent of traditional districts in the country.

Endnotes

1. For a description of whole child approaches, see <http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx>. For an account of conveyor belt services, see P. Tough, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009). For an overview of the *Let's Move!* initiative, see <http://www.letsmove.gov/>.

2. See Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014," *Current Population Reports P60–252* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

3. See <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/violence.aspx>.

4. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that 10 percent of students suffer from a mental illness severe enough to significantly impair their functioning (see NIMH, *Blueprint for Change: Research on Child and Adolescent Mental Health* [Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2001]). In addition, roughly 13 percent of public school students have an identified disability (see National Center for Education Sciences [NCES], *The Condition of Education 2015: Children and Youth With Disabilities* [Washington, DC: Institution of Education Sciences, NCES, 2015], https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp); this represents a group of students that is at heightened likelihood of requiring additional services from counselors. Another report argued that a quarter of students are at risk of failure in school due to social, emotional and/or health factors (see J.G. Dryfoos, *Full Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families* [San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994]).

5. For instance, research suggests that students with unmet emotional needs may prove especially disruptive in schools (see R. Kobak et al., “Attachment Disruptions in Seriously Emotionally Disturbed Children: Implications for Treatment,” *Attachment & Human Development* 3, no. 3 (2001): 243–58, doi:10.1080/14616730110096861), and that disruptive students negatively impact their peers (D.N. Figlio, “Boys Named Sue: Disruptive Children and Their Peers,” Working Paper 11277 [Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005]).
6. According to Civil Rights Data Collection, a school counselor is “a professional staff member assigned specific duties and school time for any of the following activities: counseling with students and parents, consulting with other staff members on learning problems, evaluating student abilities, assisting students in making education and career choices, assisting students in personal and social development, providing referral assistance, and/or working with other staff members in planning and conducting guidance programs for students.” Thus, “school counselor” in this brief is used broadly, and can include the more specific positions of guidance, mental health, and adjustment counselors.
7. S.E. Carrell and S.A. Carrell, “Do Lower Student to Counselor Ratios Reduce School Disciplinary Problems?” *Contributions to Economic Analysis and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2006): 1–24.
8. J.C. Carey and K.M. Harrington, “The Impact of School Counseling on Educational Outcomes in High School: What Can We Learn About Effectiveness From Statewide Evaluations in Nebraska and Utah?” (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2010), <https://www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling/uploads/Research-Brief-8.2.pdf>.
9. R.T. Lapan et al., “Missouri Professional School Counselors: Ratios Matter, Especially in High-Poverty Schools,” *Professional School Counseling* 16, no. 2 (2012a): 108–16; and R.T. Lapan, S.A. Whitcomb, and N.M. Aleman, “Connecticut Professional School Counselors: College and Career Counseling Services and Smaller Ratios Benefit Students,” *Professional School Counseling* 16, no. 2 (2012b): 117–24.
10. R. Reback, “Noninstructional Spending Improves Noncognitive Outcomes: Discontinuity Evidence From a Unique School Counselor Financing System,” *Education Finance and Policy* 5 (2010a): 105–37; and R. Reback, “Schools’ Mental Health Services and Young Children’s Emotions, Behavior, and Learning,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 29, no. 4 (2010b), 698–725.
11. ASCA, “The Role of the Professional School Counselor,” <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/RoleStatement.pdf>.
12. Calculated using one-way random effect ANOVA on the inverse of student-to-counselor rates (as otherwise districts without a counselor would be undefined).
13. Authors’ own calculations using the NCES table generator; see <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/tableGenerator.aspx>.
14. See R.J. Wright, “Great Expectations for Middle School Counselors,” *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 48, no. 2 (2012): 78–81. Others have found a similar fate met by school nurses; see M. Hall, “School Nursing: Before and After Budget Cuts in the Juneau School District,” *Alaska Nurse* 64, no. 1 (2014): 8–11.
15. See E. Maughan, “Part 1—Factors Associated With School Nurse Ratios: An Analysis of State Data,” *Journal of School Nursing* 25, no. 3 (2009): 214–21. This study found that per-pupil funding and laws mandating specific school nurse-to-student ratios to be related to school nurse ratios within a state.
16. For instance, Reback (2010a) found that the state adoption of such policies as a counselor subsidy or a minimum counselor-student ratio reduces teacher reports of numerous deleterious student behaviors, including physical fights, cutting class, stealing, and using drugs.
17. For more information on state policies pertaining to school counselor access, see <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/careers-roles/state-school-counseling-mandates-and-legislation>.
18. While overall per-pupil funding for higher- and lower-income schools is nearly equal, on average, across the United States, there remains tremendous variability in this relationship across states (see B.D. Baker and S.P. Corcoran, “The Stealth Inequities of School Funding: How State and Local School Finance Systems Perpetuate Inequitable Student Spending” (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2012), <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/09/StealthInequities.pdf>). States that provide a greater proportion of state aid—and thus avoid a heavy reliance on local property taxes to pay for public education—typically have more equitable school funding.
19. Lapan et al. (2012a).
20. Charter-only Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are excluded from this analysis for two reasons. First, the majority of these LEAs lack poverty and urbanicity estimates. Second, charter LEAs reported very low access to school counselors (only 51 percent have any access); it may be the case that typical counseling duties are performed by other professionals within their school (for example, “Dean of Students”), or if many charter school students do, in fact, lack access to many of the services typically performed by school counselors.

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