

Research on the Impact of School Policing



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Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others, and calls for defunding the police that arose in their wake, the issue of police in schools has received new attention. Several jurisdictions, including Oakland, CA, Denver, CO, and others have decided to remove police from schools, and many others have considered it. Too often, policy debates are based on individual experiences, anecdotes, or presumptions, rather than on rigorous evidence. This is unfortunate and unnecessary, since there is a growing body of research on the impact of school policing and School Resource Officers (SROs).*

Two main claims made by proponents of increased policing are that school police and SROs can control and prevent crime among students, and prevent or thwart armed attacks on schools (i.e., school shootings). However, the existing evidence for police increasing safety is mixed, at best, with strong evidence of unintended harmful consequences that come with policing programs, including thrusting students into the criminal justice system and perpetuating racial inequality.

Does the presence of police reduce student crime?

There is no clear empirical basis for the claim that SROs reduce student crime rates. While several research studies have considered whether the presence of SROs predicts lower rates of school crime¹, this is difficult to study, since one cannot randomly assign SROs to schools and evaluate differences across them. Similarly, one must be careful when comparing schools with and without SROs, since schools that are more dangerous to begin with might respond by adding SROs. Given these difficulties, the evidence base is thin.

While some well-designed studies suggest that the presence of SROs prevents student crime², a greater number of studies³, each of which uses credible methods to compare schools with and without SROs, suggest that there is either no impact on student crime rates, or that the addition of SROs is associated with increased student misconduct (once taking into account preexisting school conditions). These inconsistent results might be due, in part, to variations in what SROs do.

One recent study finds that, while schools with SROs report more crimes than do schools without SROs, overall, the difference is particularly large among schools where SROs perform only law enforcement roles, rather than engage in mentoring or other tasks as well.⁴

Do school police prevent mass shootings?

When it comes to the goal of preventing mass shootings, we also know very little. This is because it is difficult to know how to prevent events that happen rarely. Thankfully, despite public fears and media attention, school shootings are indeed very rare.

There were 18 homicides of students at schools across the U.S. in the 2016-2017 school year, the most recent year reported by the National Center for Education Statistics. In comparison, there were 1,587 homicides of youth ages 5-18 outside of school during that same school year, illustrating how relatively rare it is that students suffer violent deaths in school.⁵



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While some school shootings have occurred in schools without SROs or other armed security present (e.g., Newtown), others occurred in schools with such protections in place (e.g., Columbine, Parkland, Santa Fe). As a result, we have little empirical evidence on whether, or how, SROs may or may not be able to prevent such horrific events.⁶

The costs of increased policing in schools are real

While there is no conclusive evidence that SROs reduce crime among students or prevent mass shootings, the research shows that the potential costs to students and communities are real. Evidence shows that the presence of SROs can mean increased rates of arrests of students for minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct or simple assault, resulting in greater numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the justice system.⁷

Efforts are being made to reduce this harm of policing in schools. In particular, The National Association of School Resource Officers advocates for training for all SROs, including training in de-escalation and other tactics to avoid arrest unless school safety is being threatened.⁸ However, the available evidence still suggests that the presence of SROs results in a greater likelihood of justice system involvement for youth.

Research also shows that schools with SROs tend to have higher rates of exclusionary school discipline than do other, comparable, schools. One recent meta-analysis (a method used to statistically analyze and summarize findings of prior empirical studies) finds that the presence of SROs is associated with greater use of exclusionary discipline such as suspension.⁹

While many Memoranda of Understanding between schools and police departments dictate that SROs should not be involved in discipline for misbehavior that does not rise to the level of criminal behavior, recent research suggests that SROs still involve themselves in school discipline in subtle and informal ways.¹⁰ Further, even when SROs are not directly involved in school discipline, their presence can shift schools' practices in subtle ways that make exclusionary discipline more likely.¹¹

Importantly, youth of color are considerably more likely than white youth to experience these harms. A large volume of research demonstrates consistently that youth of color are at significantly greater risk of exclusionary punishment, and that this discrepancy is not accounted for by different rates of student misbehavior.¹² Youth of color are also more likely to be arrested at school and suffer the consequences of an arrest record.¹³

One recent study suggests that this risk of arrest faced by youth of color is shaped by how SROs perceive threats that they might face.¹⁴ This study compared SROs' perceptions of threats in two jurisdictions: one with mostly middle-class white students, and one with mostly low-income students of color. In the school with more white students, SROs were concerned primarily about external threats such as an adult who comes to school wishing to do harm. But in the school with more students of color, SROs saw the students themselves as the primary threat they faced. To the extent that this describes perceptions elsewhere as well, it might mean that students of color are policed while their white peers are protected.



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SRO programs are very expensive, as well. To the extent that funding SRO programs means that evidence-based school crime reduction programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or Socio-Emotional Learning programs, go unimplemented, this would mean missed opportunities to pursue strategies shown to be effective, based on presumptions of the effectiveness of policing.¹⁵

The presence of police can make schools less inclusive

One other branch of research on schools is relevant here: that on school social climate. Scholars studying student behavior have found that students are less likely to misbehave, including criminal behavior, in schools with inclusive social climates. These are schools where students feel valued, respected, listened to, and are part of a community.¹⁶

While not representative of SROs nationally, a number of qualitative studies have found that the presence of SROs can make schools less inclusive social climates in subtle ways. In my prior work, for example, I found that well-intentioned SROs can still influence schools to be somewhat more focused on law and order and less focused on students' social and emotional well-being.¹⁷ Other studies have uncovered abusive treatment at the hands of SROs, showing clear negative effects on school social climate and students' bonds to schools.¹⁸

In other words, despite their care for students' well-being and the best intentions toward them, the presence of police in schools can sometimes undermine effective student behavior management strategies.

There is much that we still don't understand about policing in schools. With no solid evidence that SROs reduce either student crime or risk of mass school shootings, claims that more policing is the solution are unsubstantiated.

However, there is evidence that the presence of SROs results in criminalization of routine discipline issues, with students being sent to juvenile court rather than to the principal's office, and that this criminalization disproportionately harms students of color. The evidence also shows that most schools are better off diverting their resources toward evidence-based practices that build students' social and emotional competence and build better school climates.

Proponents of SRO programs typically argue that SROs can effectively mentor students.¹⁹ Certainly, additional mentoring is beneficial for students. But using SROs as mentors comes with risk, since it means that the mentor has information about a student, or his/her family, that would not otherwise be available to law enforcement.

Moreover, research demonstrates that youth younger than 16 tend to have relatively poor understandings of their legal rights²⁰, which raises important questions about the extent to which most students understand the legal risks to themselves, family members, or friends that may result if they confide in SROs acting as mentors. Further, it is not at all clear why we should expect SROs to be more effective as mentors compared to social workers, school psychologists, or counselors who have extensive training in child development.

Whatever decisions school districts make should be informed by actual evidence, not presumptions.

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* There is inconsistency in the use of the term School Resource Officer (SRO). In this article, SRO is used as shorthand for all sworn law enforcement officers stationed in schools, whether they work for a school district police department (typically called School Police Officers; e.g. Los Angeles and Philadelphia) or are members of local or state law enforcement assigned to schools (called SROs in many schools). The latter arrangement is the fastest growing school policing program, and it is the subject of most of the recent school policing research.

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