

Research in Brief: School-Based Law Enforcement

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Public school districts and police departments in the United States have been collaborating since the 1950s, often in efforts to build school-police relationships and to address school-based violence and other threats to the safety and well-being of students, teachers, and staff. One result of these partnerships is that law enforcement officers have become an increasingly common presence in schools around the country. Recent events, particularly the police killing of George Floyd, have increased the public's scrutiny of police and their roles, including their presence in schools. Since May 2020, several districts in the United States have undergone deliberations about whether to maintain a police presence in their schools, which has resulted in some local jurisdictions opting to remove or reduce police presence. This brief sets out what is currently known about school-based law enforcement.

Definition, Main Types, and Primary Roles of School-Based Law Enforcement

The term "school-based law enforcement" refers to any number of situations in which one or more trained police officers work full-time or part-time on school property.¹ In all cases, the police are sworn officers who carry firearms, have arrest powers, and carry a police department badge.² There are two common types of school-based law enforcement strategies employed in the United States.³ The most common is to have a school resource officer (SRO), which involves the school or district establishing a relationship with the local police or sheriff's department to have one or more officers devote their time to maintaining a presence on school property. The other common approach, particularly for large urban districts (e.g., Miami-Dade County Public Schools), is for the district to establish its own police department that is independent of the municipal police agency.

Officers working in schools generally play three main roles: law enforcer, educator, and informal counselor/mentor.⁴ The *law enforcer* role includes crime prevention, the application of appropriate law, and the apprehension of violators. The *educator* role involves teaching students (and sometimes staff) on a

¹ This first paragraph draws on Stern, A., & Petrosino, A. (2018). *What do we know about the effects of school-based law enforcement on school safety?* WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/effects-of-school-based-law-enforcement-on-school-safety/>.

² Although all types of police officers can respond to schools in the event of an emergency, the difference for school-based law enforcement is that police officers are regularly assigned responsibility for maintaining a presence on school property.

³ Although some schools rely on security guards to implement specific security measures (e.g., managing a metal detector) or to provide support in case of emergency, this brief does not address the use of security guards because they are not an extension of law enforcement, as they are not necessarily sworn officers.

⁴ See, for example: National Association of School Resource Officers. (2012). *To protect and educate: The school resource officer and the prevention of violence in schools*; and Raymond, B. (2010). *Assigning police officers to schools*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

variety of topics related to crime, the law, and positive decision-making. The *informal counselor/mentor* role involves aiding students (and, at times, their families) with law-related and other issues.

Growth of and Funding for School-Based Law Enforcement

The number of school districts with police presence in their schools has increased dramatically in the last several decades. Although there are several factors theorized as being responsible for this growth,⁵ concerns about crime and violence in the schools have been one driver. Only one percent of schools reported a stationed law enforcement officer present in the 1970s.⁶ Federal survey data from academic year 2017-2018 indicates that nearly 50% of all schools have sworn police officer presence at least one day per week; for schools with 1,000 or more students, the percentage increases to nearly 80%.⁷ Among secondary schools, 61% have police or security presence at least one day per week; this is up from 42% in academic year 2005-2006.⁸ Three presidential administrations (Clinton, Obama, and Trump) have authorized increases to federal funding to support more police in schools as a policy response following the highest-casualty mass shootings at U.S. schools (Columbine in 1999, Sandy Hook in 2012, and Parkland in 2018). In fact, many task forces established after the Parkland massacre, including the Federal Commission on School Safety, have recommended increasing the presence of police in schools.⁹

Evidence on School-Based Law Enforcement's Impacts

Although there are some research findings that support the merits of school-based law enforcement,¹⁰ the consensus of the available evidence does not support the belief that police presence makes schools safer overall. In a recently published quasi-experimental study, Gottfredson and colleagues (2020) used an interrupted time series design to examine the impact of increasing SRO staffing in 33 schools in California, compared with 72 schools that did not increase SRO staffing. The authors report that increased numbers of SROs was associated with increases in drug- and weapon-related offenses, as well as exclusionary discipline.¹¹ The authors acknowledge that increased surveillance due to increasing SROs could be playing a role in the rise in offenses. But they also note that increases in offenses did not level off after the initial rise in SRO

⁵ See, for example: Hirschfield, P. J. (2008). Preparing for prison? The criminalization of school discipline in the USA. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12, 79–101.

⁶ National Institute of Education. (1978). *Violent schools—Safe schools: The safe school study report to Congress*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

⁷ Wang, K., Chen, Y., Zhang, J., and Oudekerk, B.A. (2020). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2019* (NCES 2020-063/NCJ 254485). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC.

⁸ Wang, K., Chen, Y., Zhang, J., and Oudekerk, B.A. (2020). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2019* (NCES 2020-063/NCJ 254485). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC.

⁹ Federal Commission on School Safety. (2018). *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety*.

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>

¹⁰ Wells, T. (2020, June 17). RSU 21 voters: School resource officers stay. *Kennebunk Post*. <https://www.pressherald.com/2020/06/17/rsu-21-voters-school-resource-officers-to-stay/>

¹¹ Gottfredson, D. C., Crosse, S., Tang, Z., et al. (2020). Effects of school resource officers on school crime and responses to school crime. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 1–36.

staffing, but rather persisted for 11–20 months afterward. In an earlier study, Devlin and her colleagues (2018) also reported no impact of SROs on bullying.¹² Additionally, reviews of studies examining schools with police versus schools without them do not indicate reductions in crime or increased perceptions of safety.¹³ The evidence base, however, has not yet included any randomized controlled trials testing the impact of school policing on subsequent measures of safety. The National Institute of Justice funded several rigorous studies on different aspects of school-based law enforcement under its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative beginning in 2015; however, results from the studies have not been released yet.¹⁴

One of the motivating factors for implementing school police programs is that officers may deter shootings or be able to intervene more quickly if a shooting does occur. There have been instances in which school police have intervened in shootings.¹⁵ School-based law enforcement officers have also been present at some of the highest-casualty school shootings in U.S. history.¹⁶ The Congressional Research Service noted that the “body of research on the effectiveness of SROs does not address whether their presence in schools has deterred mass shootings.”¹⁷

An important consideration is whether having school-based law enforcement contributes to more arrests or other formal responses to behavior by students that, without policing, would have been handled informally by the schools (e.g., by calling in parents). One systematic review of empirical research examining the relationship between the presence of SROs and rates of out-of-school suspension or expulsion found that schools recorded an increase of 21 percent more incidents of exclusionary discipline after the introduction of SROs.¹⁸ In a recent analysis of data of California schools by the UCLA Project on Civil Rights’ Center for Civil Remedies, researchers report that increases in the security staff-to-student ratio (including police and non-sworn security officers) were related to increases in the rate of lost instruction due to suspensions, and the relationship was strongest for Black students.¹⁹ Wiestburst (2019) also conducted a quasi-experimental study of the impact of funding for school police on student outcomes, focusing on federal funding from the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office and utilizing records from over 2.5 million students in Texas.²⁰ She reported that federal grants for police in schools increased middle school discipline rates by 6 percent, driven in most part by punishments for low-level offenses or violations of schools’ codes of conduct. The increase was most in evidence for Black students. Other recent studies also report an association

¹² Devlin, D. N., Santos, M. R., & Gottfredson, D. C. (2018). An evaluation of police officers in schools as a bullying intervention. *Evaluation & Program Planning*, 71, 12–21.

¹³ Stern, A., & Petrosino, A. (2018). *What do we know about the effects of school-based law enforcement on school safety?* WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/effects-of-school-based-law-enforcement-on-school-safety/>

¹⁴ <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/nij-comprehensive-school-safety-initiative>

¹⁵ Barrakat, M., & Holland, J. J. (2018, March 20). Armed SRO stopped Md. school shooting, 2 students shot. *Police 1*. <https://www.police1.com/active-shooter/articles/armed-sro-stopped-md-school-shooting-2-students-shot-BvrrgaXiOdlQIngg/>

¹⁶ Terkel, A. (2012, December 23). Columbine High School had armed guard during massacre in 1999. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/columbine-armed-guards_n_2347096

¹⁷ James, N., & McCallion, G. (2013). *School resource officers: Law enforcement officers in schools*. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, page 11.

¹⁸ Fisher, B. W., & Hennessy, E. A. (2016). School resource officers and exclusionary discipline: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Adolescent Research Review*, 1(3), 217–233.

¹⁹ Losen, D., & Martinez, P. (2020). *Is California doing enough to close the school discipline gap? Executive summary*. UCLA Project on Civil Rights, Center for Civil Rights Remedies.

²⁰ Weisburst, E. K. (2019). Patrolling public schools: The impact of funding for school police on student discipline and long-term education outcomes. *Journal of Policy Analysis & Management*, 38, 338–365.

between the presence of police on school campuses and more crime reporting and more student arrests.²¹ These studies highlight the role that school police may play in exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline.²²

Racial Differences in How School-Based Law Enforcement is Experienced

Research indicates that people of different races and ethnicities experience and perceive police differently. For example, a WestEd survey examined California high school students' perceptions of municipal police in their communities and police in their schools. Overall, compared to their White peers, students of color, especially Black students, had fewer positive perceptions of police in both contexts, although this disparity was smaller in relation to students' perceptions about police in their school.²³ In a survey of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, "60 percent or more of Black students in the district did not believe that school police were trustworthy or cared about them, 73 percent found police overly aggressive, and 67 percent said they tended to escalate situations rather than calming them down."²⁴ Although results from survey data of other racial or ethnic student subgroups were not reported, these data indicate that a substantial majority of Black students did not have positive perceptions of school police. Recent data from Virginia also show a gap between Black and White students in terms of their perceptions of SROs, although this gap is smaller than reported by the WestEd study.²⁵ Fisher and his colleagues conducted a study in which they interviewed SROs from one majority White district and from one majority Black district. They found that SROs from the majority White district considered the most vital threat to school safety to be intruders, and the SROs from the majority Black district considered the most vital threat to be the students themselves.²⁶

Recommended Strategies for School-Based Law Enforcement

If a local jurisdiction is going to use school-based law enforcement, there are a number of strategies that have been suggested by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and others to ensure that the role can be maximized and meet community expectations for fairness and equity. These recommendations should be considered with caution, as they are more on the order of "lessons learned" from years of experience implementing school-based law enforcement rather than being hard findings supported by a strong empirical research base.

²¹ See Na, C., & Gottfredson, D. (2013). Police officers in schools: Effects on school crime and the processing of offending behaviors. *Justice Quarterly*, 30(4), 619–650; Homer, E. H., & Fisher, B. W. (2020). Police in schools and student arrest rates across the United States: Examining differences by race, ethnicity, and gender. *Journal of School Violence*, 19(2), 192–204; and Owens, E. G. (2016). Testing the school-to-prison pipeline. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 36, 11–37.

²² See, for example: Hirschfield, P. J. (2008). Preparing for prison? The criminalization of school discipline in the USA. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12, 79–101.

²³ Nakamoto, J., Cerna, R., & Stern, A. (2019). *High school students' perceptions of police vary by student race and ethnicity: Findings from an analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017/18*. WestEd.

²⁴ Sparks, S. (2020, June 24). Do school police make Black students feel more or less safe? *Education Week*. https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2020/06/do_school_police_make_black_students_feel_less_safe.html

²⁵ Breen, A. (2020, July 13). Survey: Most VA high schoolers agree SROs make them feel safer, some disagree. *Curry School News*. <https://curry.virginia.edu/news/survey-most-va-high-schoolers-agree-sros-make-them-feel-safer-some-disagree>

²⁶ Sidery, S. (2020, June 5). U of L study: SROs perceive threats differently based on racial demographics of student populations. *WDRB.com*. https://www.wdrb.com/news/education/u-of-l-study-sros-perceive-threats-differently-based-on-racial-demographics-of-student-populations/article_154bc0fe-a792-11ea-bc2d-a3c328df9b22.html

- **Have a clear Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) governing the relationship between the district (or school) and law enforcement, and clarifying whether or how officers can be involved in enforcing school discipline.**²⁷ An MOU can govern the roles and responsibilities for law enforcement and educators, clarifying when and how an officer should be involved in the school. Research indicates that officers do get involved in various ways in school discipline, for example, approaching students in the hallway and reprimanding them for non-criminal behaviors such as being late to class, so the MOU needs to explicitly address these different pathways of how the officer can get involved in discipline.²⁸
- **Undertake careful processes to select which officers work in schools.** Research is not clear on the kind of characteristics that an officer should have for working with young people in schools. It is recommended that such officers should not be selected on the basis of seniority or be involuntarily appointed to the role. The Police Foundation, a nonprofit specializing in law enforcement research and policy, identifies several strategies, such as making the selection open for application by officers on a voluntary basis; involving the schools and community in the selection process; and scrutinizing several characteristics of applicants, including “demonstrated ability to teach and engage with youth, such as past coaching or mentoring experience.”²⁹ One recommended critical ingredient for an officer who works in schools is for the officer to be someone who wants to work with young people and help secure the supports that students need for staying in school and succeeding in the community. SROs, as recommended for law enforcement officers in general, should adopt the “guardian” rather than the “warrior” mentality.³⁰
- **Provide significant specialized training for school-based law enforcement officers.** Research does not indicate the level of training needed, but it is widely understood that the standard municipal police academy training is insufficient for preparing an officer to work exclusively with young people from different backgrounds and to work inside a school community.³¹ Several states are mandating a specialized curriculum that all school-based law enforcement must take.³² Although research on the impact of de-escalation training for police is still needed,³³ some researchers have recommended training for law enforcement to use verbal and other techniques to defuse situations. In Texas, a 2019 law requires school-based law enforcement to complete 16 hours of additional training that includes child development, positive behavioral interventions, conflict resolution techniques, de-

²⁷ Rosiak, J. (2019). How to write a compelling Memorandum of Understanding for your school resource officer program. *Community Policing Dispatch*. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/08-2019/mou.html>

²⁸ Curran, F. C., Fisher, B. W., Viano, S., & Kupchik, A. (2019). Why and when do school resource officers engage in school discipline? The role of context in shaping disciplinary involvement. *American Journal of Education*, 126(1), 33–63.

²⁹ *A toolkit for California law enforcement: Policing today's youth*. (2015). Police Foundation. http://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PF_IssueBriefs_Defining-the-Role-of-School-Based-Police-Officers_FINAL.pdf

³⁰ Aden, H., & Rosiak, J. (2016, March). 21st century youth-focused policing: Engaging youth through the six pillars. *The Police Chief*, 36–39.

³¹ See the National Association for School Resource Officers, <https://www.nasro.org/>.

³² For example, Maryland’s Safe to Learn Act in 2018, passed following the Parkland massacre, requires the development of a new training curriculum by which all school officers must be certified. <https://www.mabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018-Safe-to-Learn-Act-Summary-5.30.18-1.pdf>

³³ Engel, R., McManus, H. D., & Herold, T. D. (n.d.). *The deafening demand for de-escalation training: A systematic review and call for evidence in police use of force reform*. Report for the International Association of Chiefs of Police. <https://docplayer.net/155248199-The-deafening-demand-for-de-escalation-training-a-systematic-review-and-call-for-evidence-in-police-use-of-force-reform.html>

escalation techniques, and techniques for limiting the use of force, including the use of physical, mechanical, and chemical restraints.³⁴

- **Provide training specifically to address implicit bias and racism.** The current focus on racial injustice has led many companies, government agencies (including police departments), and nonprofit organizations to implement training to address implicit bias and racism.³⁵ The National Association of School Resource Officers, for example, provides specific training modules on addressing implicit bias. Research is needed to indicate if and how this training impacts subsequent police attitudes and behavior, particularly among school police.
- **Emphasize non-law enforcement roles.** Research indicates that the outcomes of having school-based law enforcement may differ depending on which roles are emphasized by the officer — law enforcer, educator, or informal counselor/mentor³⁶ — with some experts recommending that officers should focus more on the educator and informal counselor/mentor roles. Another recommendation is that school-based law enforcement officers should divert youths from contact with the formal justice system.³⁷ Some districts are experimenting with different uniforms for SROs so they appear more approachable and less intimidating.³⁸ In any case, specialized training (see prior points in this list) must be provided to help school police perform these roles to help the young people they serve.³⁹
- **Integrate officers within the schools and communities they serve.** Some guidance documents emphasize that school-based law enforcement officers must be situated within the educational mission of the school as their primary focus, as well as fully integrated within the school's climate model and connected to the communities that the school serves.⁴⁰ Building relationships with the school (as part of the community) was one of the driving forces for police in establishing the original school policing models.⁴¹ Although this community-based approach has not been tested, several local jurisdictions are moving even more purposefully toward systematically involving the outside community in their school policing models.⁴²
- **Use data for accountability and improvement.** A school-based law enforcement program is like any other district program in that data should be collected and analyzed to ensure that the program is meeting its intended goals and is well received by parents, students, and staff. These data should be

³⁴ See <https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/law-toolkit/updates/house-bill/2684>.

³⁵ For example, after similar national incidents, the New York City Police Department instituted anti-bias training in 2018. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/nyregion/bias-training-police.html>.

³⁶ Fisher, B. W., & Devlin, D. N. (2019). School crime and the patterns of roles of school resource officers: Evidence from a national longitudinal study. *Crime & Delinquency*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011128719875702>

³⁷ Rosiak, J. (2018, October 15). How SRO programs can actually divert youth from the pipeline. *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*. <https://jije.org/2018/10/15/how-sro-programs-can-actually-divert-youth-from-pipeline/>

³⁸ Renkowski, K. (2016, March 12). School resource officers look to be more approachable with new, “soft” uniforms. *Columbian Missourian*. https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/k12_education/school-resource-officers-look-to-be-more-approachable-with-new/article_7ad980f2-e7b4-11e5-9b13-1b33c1893169.html

³⁹ McKenna, J., Martinez-Prather, K., & Bowman, S. (2014). The roles of school-based law enforcement officers and how these roles are established: A qualitative study. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 27(4), 420–443.

⁴⁰ Kim, C., & Geronimo, I. (2009). *Policing in schools. Developing a governance document for school resource officers in K–12 schools*. American Civil Liberties Union. <https://campussuite-storage.s3.amazonaws.com/prod/15657/1240bd87-2879-11e6-b537-22000bd8490f/1688546/3a477e70-009b-11e8-9ff5-129f546fee9a/file/ACLU.pdf>

⁴¹ McNicholas, C. F. (2013). *Public protection officers for public schools*. International Foundation for Protection Officers. <https://www.ifpo.org/resource-links/articles-and-reports/school-security-training/school-resource-security-officers/>

⁴² For example, Philadelphia's school district police force underwent changes in 2018. See <https://www.inquirer.com/education/kevin-bethel-diversion-school-safety-philadelphia-school-district-police-20191202.html>.

disaggregated to examine differences that may exist regarding race, ethnicity, gender, special education status, and other characteristics. For example, data that would be important to collect and analyze to allow for the monitoring and improvement of the law enforcement role in schools include:

- Perceptions of students, parents, and staff
- Activities of the school police on campus (e.g., non-enforcement and enforcement actions)
- Arrests and other formal actions by the school-based law enforcement officers
- Exclusionary punishments (e.g., suspension, expulsion, referral to alternative school)
- Complaints against officers for use of force, disrespectful conduct, and so on
- Interactions between officers and students, parents, and staff
- Averted violence and other safety threats handled by the officers

Some Considerations for Local Jurisdictions

There are many safety concerns for schools. Active shooter incidents provoke the most fear but are very rare.⁴³ School personnel need to be prepared for active shooter scenarios and for a range of other situations such as bomb threats, accidents, unidentified persons on the grounds, medical emergencies, weather threats, and other natural disasters.⁴⁴ Local jurisdictions may want to consider the following questions:

- All things being equal, would parents, students, and staff prefer to have a trained person handling such emergencies on school grounds? Does this person need to be a police officer?
- If school-based law enforcement is removed, what is the alternative for handling safety incidents in schools? What happens if there is a safety incident without police presence in the schools?
- How will the district or school respond if parents, students, and/or staff call for police to be reinstated?
- What was the reason for bringing police onto school grounds in the first place? Were there safety concerns? Do those concerns still exist? When these goals are met, will the police be removed?
- Whose voices are being heard in the decision to add, retain, or remove police from schools?
- Are there concerns about officers' disparate treatment of students along race, ethnicity, special education status, or other characteristics of the students?
- If there is no school-based law enforcement, what is the response time for municipal police to arrive at the school if there is a safety incident?

Conclusion

Whether to implement a school-based law enforcement program is an important local jurisdiction decision. This brief reviews the research and some practice-based recommendations for improving the school-based

⁴³ Wang, K., Chen, Y., Zhang, J., & Oudekerk, B. A. (2020). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2019* (NCES 2020-063/NCJ 254485). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. (2019). *The role of districts in developing high-quality school emergency operations plans*.

law enforcement role. States and districts should consider evaluating any school safety policies that are implemented, including as they relate to school-based law enforcement. Carefully carrying out further studies can clarify policy successes, challenges, and unintended positive and negative consequences.

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