

School Policing Snapshot

Research on Safety and Educational Impacts of School Policing

Compiled by Dr. Ruth Osorio, PhD, member of Norfolk Chapter of Virginia Organizing

Summary: Below is a brief overview of current research on the impacts of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools. [SROs are sworn law enforcement officers](#) placed in schools. Some receive special training for this role, while others do not. Recent research suggests that SROs in schools do not prevent casualties from mass shootings; rather, it seems that unarmed staff have the most success in stopping shooters. Evidence about whether or not SROs decrease crime in schools is mixed. Two studies found small decreases in reported crimes at schools with SROs, while one found no impact. Research overwhelmingly shows that Black and Hispanic students are arrested at a higher rate than other students, with multiple studies showing that school policing results in lower graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students. It is up to school districts and cities to decide, then, if the possible slight decrease in minor crime is worth the long-term educational harms of school policing to Black and Hispanic youth.

Impacts on School Safety

- One of the most persuasive arguments made for police officers in schools is that they might prevent or stop a mass shooting. However, the criminologists at Texas State University's ALERRT program put that claim into question. Out of 25 school shootings examined, "none were brought to an end by armed staff, guards or police officers returning fire. These shootings most commonly ended when the shooters were restrained by unarmed staff" ([FBI, 2013](#)).
- The Washington Post analyzed [200 school shootings](#), 68 of which had school police; in only one did the School Resource Officer stop the shooting. The analysis also shows that "resource officers or security guards were present during four of the five worst rampages (which left the highest number of people dead or injured): Columbine and Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Marshall County High in Kentucky earlier this year and Santana High in California in 2001."
- Gary Zhang's [2019 study of SROs](#) in West Virginia found some positive outcomes when SROs were assigned schools. He writes that his findings "indicate that the presence of PROs increases the number of reported drug-related incidents and out-of-school suspensions." He also saw a decrease of violent crime, but only after SROs had been present for several years at a school. Zhang, however, is concerned about the increase of the impact of suspensions and arrests on students: "although school police officers can develop positive relationships with students, it might be more beneficial in some schools if guidance counselors or social workers are responsible for taking on this role which would allow students to develop positive relationships with adults while minimizing the risk associated with school police, such as increased exclusionary discipline."

- Chongmin Na & Denise C. Gottfredson's [2011 study of school arrests](#) found no evidence suggesting that SRO or other sworn law-enforcement officers contribute to school safety. They continue, "That is, for no crime type was an increase in the presence of police significantly related to decreased crime rates. The preponderance of evidence suggests that, to the contrary, more crimes involving weapons possession and drugs are recorded in schools that add police officers than in similar schools that do not. The analyses also showed that as schools increase their use of police officers, the percentage of crimes involving non-serious violent offenses that are reported to law enforcement increases."
- In [a 2016 study](#), Emily G. Owens did find that schools with SROs funded by a "Cops in Schools" grant reported a "1.1 percent to 1.9 percent reduction in disruptive criminal incidents in school." However, even with the reduction of crime, she is wary to call for an increase of SROs. She finds evidence that "there are potentially important negative consequences to posting law enforcement officials in schools, but also some potential benefits. A well-intentioned grant program aimed at improving school safety for at-risk children appears to have also resulted in the accumulation of arrest records for young students. At the same time, there is evidence that people were more likely to contact police about drug crimes occurring outside of schools, suggesting that posting law enforcement officers in schools may help to improve police-community relations more broadly." The program appears to mostly benefit law enforcement rather than the students.
- Catherine Y. Kim's [2012 Brooklyn Law Review article](#) shows that law enforcement referrals do not deter students from repeating offenses. Quite the opposite, she explains, interactions with law enforcement has "significant consequences on youth educational outcomes." She cites a meta-analysis of "178 individual studies assessing the effectiveness of different school-based disciplinary interventions found no evidence that the use of arrest and juvenile courts to handle school disorder reduces the occurrence of problem behavior in schools."

Impact on Student Wellbeing

- [Numerous studies found troubling racial disparities in SRO arrests, with evidence suggesting that school policing disproportionately harms Black and Latinx students.](#)
- A [2015 study](#) by Jason Nance at University of Florida Levin College of Law found that schools with police presence referred "students to law enforcement for committing various offenses, including these lower-level offenses" at greater rates than schools without police presence. Nance points to the negative effects of incarcerating students, explaining, "The negative consequences associated with incarcerating a youth, which is where the school-to-prison pipeline may ultimately lead, should not be underestimated. Empirical evidence demonstrates that incarcerating juveniles limits their future educational, housing, employment, and military opportunities. It also negatively affects a youth's mental health, reinforces violent attitudes and behavior, and increases the odds of future involvement in the justice system."

- Joscha Legewie and Jeffrey Fagan ([2018](#)) found that aggressive policing and increased police presence in New York lowered the educational performance of African-American boys.
- [Emily K. Weisburst's 2018 study](#) on policing and long-term education achievement in Texas also finds that “low-income students and Black and Hispanic students experience the largest increases in discipline.” Her study notes the long-term costs of increased discipline for those students: “I also find that exposure to a three-year federal grant for school police is associated with a 2.5 percent decrease in high school graduation rates and a four percent decrease in college enrollment rates.”
- [Janel George's 2017 article](#) traces the emergence of school discipline to desegregation efforts in the 1960's and 1970's, as a way to remove African-American students from integrated schools and thus perpetuate school segregation. In her thorough review of the history of school policing and current research on its impacts on students, George concludes, “we must end the practice of policing in public schools and instead, support and foster evidence-based alternative discipline practices to promote better outcomes for all students, as well as foster positive and inclusive school climates. We must examine the motives behind the placement of police in schools, including profit incentives for law enforcement and prison facilities that stand to benefit so long as the school-to-prison pipeline continues to be populated. We must recognize the moral imperative that demands we end harmful and profit-motivated practices that are predicated on the backs and futures of our nation's most promising children and instead, ensure that schools perform the function of providing equal and quality educational opportunities for all of our nation's children.”