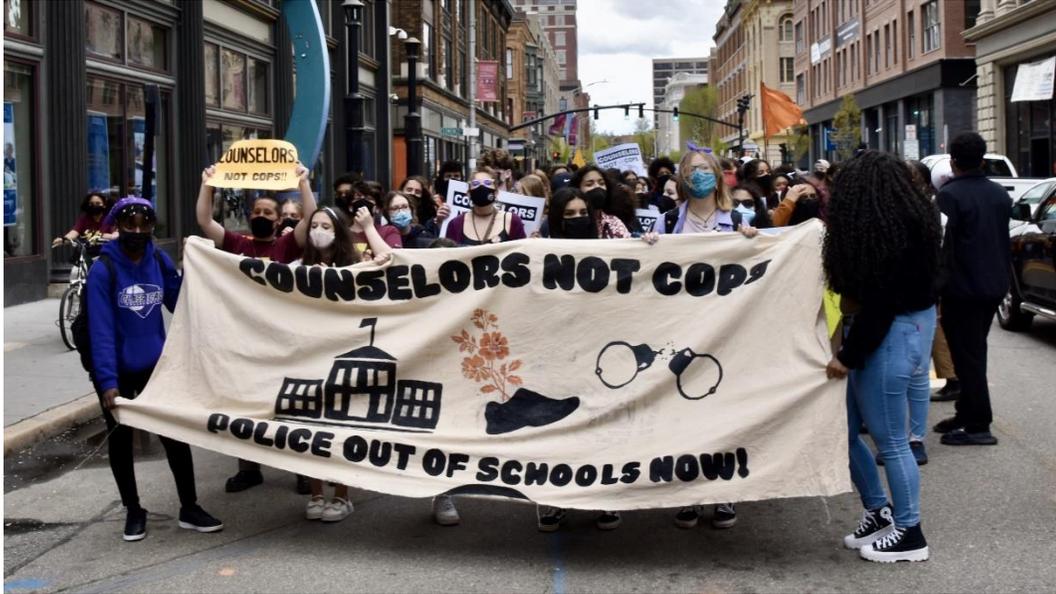


Revisiting police presence on campus in post-covid times: the impact of school resource officers on student safety and school climate



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Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive literature review of the current body of research on School Resource Officers (SROs) and programs, and it is organized in 7 sections. The first section describes the methodological approach utilized to collect data and the sources that were consulted in the literature search. The second section recounts the origins of school policing and the emergence of formal SRO programs, with a focus on the historical development of SRO programs from the mid-20th century into the present day. The third section describes the four main roles that SROs are expected to play in schools and explains that in terms of training and daily school practices one of those roles (school disciplinarian and law enforcer) has been overemphasized to the detriment of the other roles, particularly in schools serving low-income students and students of color. The fourth section describes in detail two of the most common school safety practices undertaken by SROs in their day-to-day presence in schools: exclusionary practices (which are related to zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison nexus) and security measures (which are related to searches, seizures, and surveillance methods). This section also discusses findings that reveal disproportionalities in adopting and applying these practices across the lines of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This leads to the fifth section, which analyzes the research on the impact of SRO programs in improving school safety and school climate. The sixth section briefly summarizes the literature on stakeholders' perceptions on SROs. The final section provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

Introduction

In 2020, the combination of remote learning due to covid-19 and the debates on police after the killing of George Floyd led some school districts to not renew the contracts with School Resource Officers (SROs) while their campuses were without students. Now as school districts are adjusting to the return of in-person activities, they are considering whether to re-hire SROs or re-allocate those funds to other initiatives and programs to promote student safety.

In the United States, educational institutions have collaborated with law enforcement agencies to address school safety through partnerships with police departments and through formal programs since the 1950s, but these programs expanded significantly in the 1990s and the early 21st century. Just in the decade between 2005-2015, the share of public schools employing security professionals increased considerably. Security staff grew from 42% to 57%, law enforcement officers from 36% to 48%, and SROs from 32% to 42%. By 2018, attending a school with a police officer was a typical experience for 68% of high school students in public schools. The presence of police officers was more prevalent in schools with higher proportions of Black and Hispanic students (Warnick & Kapa, 2019).

SROs -also called law enforcement officers, school safety officers or school liaison officers- are sworn police officers assigned to a school or a group of schools during the school year. They have authority to enforce the penal code, carry firearms, engage in searches of students and their possessions, enforce school dress codes, and enforce arrest or removal from school property without parent consent (Javdani, 2019). As their presence on campus expanded, SROs became one of the most visible intersections between policing and schooling and between the criminal justice system and the education system, and eventually were at the center of discussions about effective approaches to improving school safety (Petrosino et al., 2020). These debates were amplified in 2020 in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, with several cities revisiting their police budgets and deciding whether to reinvest in alternative initiatives to promote health and safety in their communities. This was followed by the decision of several school districts to discontinue the presence of SROs and explore other programs and initiatives that may prove more fruitful to improve school safety, nurture positive school climates and promote equity and inclusion. This is a significant shift, from a punitive, law-and-order, tough-on-crime approach to a socio-educational one that emphasizes prevention, social services and pedagogical interventions.

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The concept of school safety usually refers to schools and school-related activities where students, teachers, staff and other members of the educational community are free from physical, emotional and psychological danger. This includes violence, bullying, harassment, substance use, exposure to weapons and threats, theft, and other forms of harm. School safety has a subjective dimension (e.g. the extent to which individuals feel free of danger) and an objective one (e.g. the extent to which they are free of danger). These two dimensions are related, as feelings of protection or danger are based on real-life experiences in specific contexts that change over time depending on individual, collective and institutional actions.

Nonetheless, school safety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon consisting of a wide range of factors that encompass the physical and socio-emotional welfare of all members of the school community. These factors are interrelated and intricately connected with schools' obligation to both prevent violence and crime and educate students. Physically, school safety consists of the material environment of a school, its architectural design, and the ability of a building to resist and respond to emergency events like fires, earthquakes, flooding or mass shootings. Socio-emotional conditions include the creating and maintaining of a welcoming place free from intimidation, violence or fear, providing a climate of openness and freedom, and paying attention to personal needs (Diaz-Vicario & Sallan, 2017). Additionally, school safety is positively correlated with academic performance. Conversely, students attending unsafe schools are at a higher risk for poor attendance, course failure and dropout. School safety is also correlated with a welcoming and positive school climate that is conducive to learning. Hence creating a safe school environment is a necessary precondition to promote positive physical, socio-emotional and academic outcomes among students (Kutsyruba et al., 2015).

Ensuring school safety has consistently been of primary importance for educational institutions, and SROs have played a central role in schools for many decades. Presently, as noted above, there is an intense debate on the impact of SROs on school safety and school climate. This debate has practical consequences. While many school districts believe that SROs play a pivotal role in decreasing school violence and crime and hence are maintaining their presence on campus, other districts have a different perspective. They have opted to discontinue their contracts with local police departments, temporarily remove SROs from schools, and re-allocate those funds to alternative programs and initiatives. As a modest contribution to this debate, we have produced two reports. This first report examines the research literature on SROs,

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with a focus on their relation to school safety, student discipline, school climate, and the educational experiences of students. The second report discusses 17 promising practices that schools and school districts can consider if they decide to explore viable alternatives to SROs to promote school safety. We hope that this report, in tandem with the second one, assists those school districts across the country that are re-examining the effectiveness of school resource officers in promoting school safety and weighing their positive and negative impacts. This includes considering the cost and benefits of alternative approaches, particularly in the light of advancing equality of opportunities to learn and flourish in the larger context of national debates on racial justice and police accountability.

Methodological approach and sources

This comprehensive systematic review was conducted in five phases to ensure both breadth and depth of material on school safety related to SRO programs and school police. In the first phase, we conducted a broad search of the literature published from 2000-2020 to identify the main foundational studies, key definitions, and major themes. The second phase consisted of a more focused and exhaustive search that included five research databases: Education Full Text, ERIC, SpringerLink, JSTOR, and SAGE. These databases were selected for their rigor, their contributions to the field of education and their relevance to the topics of this study. After conducting a search of terms related to school safety and school resource officers, these five databases yielded the highest number of results. We began by using a wide range of key terms that addressed SROs and school safety, like school safety, school police and school resource officers.

In terms of scope, we focused on articles published in English during the last 50 years (1970-2020) for this review. Following this, to further increase specificity, we conducted a second search using eight terms: school safety and SROs, roles of SROs, history of SROs, data on SROs, impact of SROs, perceptions of SROs, effectiveness of SROs, and removal of SROs. The titles and abstracts of the yield were then inspected, and the most relevant and highest quality citations consisting of empirical research studies were retained for detailed review. In the third phase, we reviewed key journals dealing with topics of education, juvenile justice, and school safety to uncover additional peer-reviewed articles that we may have missed in the previous phase. In the fourth phase, we reviewed grey literature to identify institutional reports, theses, dissertations and government publications on the topic. Finally, in the fifth phase we consulted

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archival materials including media reports to locate information related to the historical development of police presence in schools (particularly programs involving School Resource Officers) and examined other research papers and academic books that were not part of the original five databases but were considered relevant.

Background: A Brief History of School Resource Officers

Schools and law enforcement agencies have had relations for a long time, but the first formal partnership between schools and law enforcement agencies (the “Police-School Liaison Program”) occurred in 1958 in Flint, Michigan. Several states followed suit, and the first formal school resource officer (SRO) program was implemented in Tucson, Arizona in 1963. Within a decade, schools and districts in Michigan, Ohio, California and Florida established similar programs (Noble, 2017). Most of these programs were concentrated in urban schools largely attended by low-income, racialized students. The following decade, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 allocated \$380 million dollars to policies and programs to control delinquency. This act represented a shift towards viewing juvenile delinquency as an issue of crime control rather than social welfare. Moreover, the language used in this legislation linked “common markers of poverty with perspective criminality, and thereby classifying nearly all youth living in low-income neighborhoods as “potentially delinquent” (Hinton, 2016, p. 237). Increasingly, urban public schools in low-income neighborhoods experienced an increase in punitive crime control measures that criminalized youth behavior, including SRO programs, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, padlocked gates, police helicopters, and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Hinton, 2016). Throughout the last decades of the 20th century, the federal government significantly divested in the education system while investing hundreds of millions of dollars into the juvenile justice system (Urban & Wagoner, 2013; Noble, 2017). In 1994, the *Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act* (SDFSCA) was passed with the purpose of ensuring safe, disciplined, and drug-free learning environments that would help students meet challenging academic standards. The same year, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) was created to oversee funds allocated under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.

During the following years, the number of SROs increased throughout the country, and by 1999 over 54% of students were experiencing police presence in schools (ACLU, 2017;

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Stinson & Watkins, 2013). In the first decades of the 21st century, amidst fears of terrorism and school shootings, and in the context of homeland security measures, police presence and authority in schools continued to expand. Just in the short period between 2009 and 2013 the number of SROs increased from 9,000 to 17,000 (NASRO, 2012; James & McCallion, 2013, ACLU, 2017). Many federal, state, and local programs were created to establish formal partnerships between law enforcement agencies and schools through sub-grants, block grants, and state grants, and by 2015 there were 83,600 schools reporting having at least one SRO on campus (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Each year, the number of police officers employed in K-12 schools continued to grow, enabled by enormous investments of federal and state governments, which have been influenced by effective lobbying of the security industry. In the first two decades of the 21st century, state and federal governments have invested nearly \$2 billion dollars in SRO programs, further enmeshing criminal justice policy with education policy (Thurau & Or, 2019; U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2018).

The Roles of School Resource Officers

SROs are expected to perform different roles in schools, with the most common roles being emergency responder, positive role-model and informal counselor, educator, and school disciplinarian and law enforcer. These roles, however, are not always clearly delineated in policies or agreements, which can create confusion and problematic situations (Cray and Weiler 2011; Javdani, 2019).

Emergency Responder

To begin, SROs are positioned as immediate first responders to emergency situations that could happen in a school setting campus (NASRO, 2012, p. 31). Those incidents including active shootings, health emergencies, natural disasters, and fires. Because police are expected to be the first responders to all issues related to school safety, however, many incidents that school administrators may otherwise handle include the use of SROs and are then often enforced under criminal codes. It has been pointed out that this situation blurs the lines between law enforcement and school discipline, and sometimes undermines the development of comprehensive emergency response plans in collaboration with other community partners (ACLU, 2017).

Positive Role Model and Informal Counselor

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Secondly, SROs are expected to serve as role models and informal counselors to students. This includes mentoring and guiding students through personal, social and educational pressures, and developing positive relationships with them and their families (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2001; NASRO, 2012). It is pertinent to note that SROs are not licensed counselors nor social workers and thus are not adequately trained to provide the social and supportive services that children may need in a school setting. Although schools are becoming more diverse in terms of students' racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, ability levels and languages, SROs are not required to conduct antibias or antiracist training and often have difficulties to respond to the unique needs of children with disabilities and children from diverse backgrounds. Training requirements, such as de-escalation techniques and preventative strategies, for this role are extremely limited for SROs. Currently, only 12 states require SROs to undergo specific training prior to working with children in a school setting, and this training usually focuses on active shooter situations and other emergency-response school safety issues (ACLU, 2017; James & McCallion, 2013; Keierleber, 2015).

Educator

For the third role, SROs are expected to use their personal experiences and professional knowledge to educate the school community on emergency preparedness and on law enforcement-related issues like crime and violence prevention, bullying and cyberbullying, underage drinking, drug use, and Internet safety (Canady et al., 2012; NASRO, 2012). Although SROs are often expected to design and implement educational programming in school settings, there is no evidence that such programming alleviates existing tensions between police and marginalized communities, nor that such programming effectively addresses issues related to racial and ethnic disparities, bias, or racism in the education and criminal justice systems (Nunez-Eddy, 2020). Moreover, SROs have received criticism from communities who assert that they have attempted to advance personal agendas through implementing specific programs designed to promote positive perceptions of police (Heitzeg, 2014). In essence, SROs do not receive adequate training that would enable them to effectively teach and educate children and other members of the school community. Likewise, most SROs do not receive training related to child and/or adolescent development, de-escalation techniques, or preventative strategies to school safety. Moreover, police officers hired under the state police academy are only required to undergo 3.5 hours of training on juvenile justice issues including cultural responsiveness,

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demographic considerations, and child psychology. As a result of this situation, SROs tend to resort to traditional models of policing to handle school safety issues, like enforcing school discipline under criminal codes and detaining, arresting, and referring children to the justice system (Keierleber, 2015).

School Disciplinarian and Law Enforcer

Although SROs are expected to undertake four different roles in their positions in schools (NASRO, 2012), they tend to focus on law enforcement and discipline functions, especially in schools with higher levels of educational and social disadvantages (Lynch et al., 2016). Most of an SRO's time is typically spent on school-safety and law-enforcement activities, from assisting with their school's emergency response plan to arresting students selling illegal drugs on campus to monitoring the school entrance and parking lot before and after school (NASRO, 2012). In those schools, the presence of SROs blurs the lines between law enforcement and school discipline, as student behavioral issues and school-based offenses that were once handled by administrators, teachers, and staff can now be constituted as crimes under the discretion of the school police officer. When school discipline is enforced under criminal codes, the behavior of children and youth is criminalized, resulting in their exclusion from schools and involvement in the juvenile or adult criminal justice system. In these contexts, SROs enforce two school safety practices (exclusionary discipline and surveillance/security measures) that have significant consequences for Black and Brown students, students of low socioeconomic status, LGBTQ+ students and students with disabilities.

School Safety Practices Enforced by SROs

Exclusionary Practices, Zero-Tolerance Policies, and the School-Prison Nexus

Zero-tolerance policies represent one way in which educational policies have intersected with criminal justice policies, resulting in criminalization and school exclusion. These policies employ a system of mandatory, predetermined punishments for any offense in the form of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the justice system. Despite stable or declining rates of school crime and a lack of evidence that zero-tolerance policies improve school security and safety, zero-tolerance policies have proliferated in U.S. schools since their inception in the early late 20th century (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Yell & Rozalski, 2000). Many zero-tolerance policies include mandatory expulsions for weapons, drugs, or gang-related activity. In addition, many school districts have adopted zero-tolerance policies that are vague and broadly applicable, often

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involving student behavior such as noncompliance and disorderly conduct. Rather than addressing only serious or violent offenses, zero-tolerance policies have been applied to non-serious student behaviors as well, including tardiness and general “school disruption” (ACLU, 2017, p. 9). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reported that over 90% of school systems had implemented some form of zero-tolerance policies (2018). Thus, it is not entirely surprising that Robers et al. (2013) found that in the 2009-2010 school year, 83% of public high schools administered at least a five-day suspension or expulsion for over 400,000 students. The research on the impact of zero-tolerance policies shows that such practices result in students missing instructional time, scoring lower on standardized tests, and exhibiting lowered academic achievement (Arcia, 2006; Kupchik, 2010; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Suh & Suh, 2007). Moreover, students who are suspended are more likely to exhibit negative behavioral and socio-emotional outcomes and are more likely to have contact with the criminal justice system (Christle et al., 2005; Fabelo et al., 2011; Tobin et al., 1996). On a broader scale, schools that employ zero-tolerance policies exhibit higher dropout rates, lower scores on standardized tests, and lower graduation rates (Perry & Morris, 2014; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Rausch et al., 2004). As the pervasiveness of zero-tolerance policies continues to grow, many students feel powerless amongst disciplinary practices that are increasingly punitive and exclusionary. As one student from a mid-Atlantic high-security public high school described, “[Administrators and teachers] write people up like there’s no tomorrow. There’s no detentions; I mean there are detentions, but they’ll skip detention and go straight to referral; they want them out of the class and they want suspension” (cited in Bracy, 2011, p. 380).

According to the NAACP (2018), zero-tolerance and punitive policies in schools serve to “remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison” (NAACP, 2018). The Advancement Project, a human rights organization focused on equality and justice initiatives, describes how zero-tolerance policies have “engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of students” (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 11). Although zero-tolerance policies are neutral in theory, in practice they do not apply equally to all students and have a “profoundly racialized effect” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 276) as they disproportionately affect students of racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and students of low

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socioeconomic status (Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2012; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Witt, 2007). Zero-tolerance policies have dramatically increased rates of suspensions and expulsions for all students, but students of color – especially Black students – are disciplined through suspensions, expulsions, and arrests at disproportionately high rates, despite committing infractions at comparable rates (Advancement Project, 2011). These disparities result from institutional racism within the education and justice system, biases from administrators and SROs, and the “statutory vagueness, inconsistent application, and lack of due process” associated with zero-tolerance policies (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 96).

There are copious amounts of data highlighting the severe racial disparities in discipline. In a testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, researchers from the Applied Research Center (ARC) reported that research findings show that racial disparities in suspensions and expulsion existed in every school district studied and that zero-tolerance policies have a “disproportionate adverse impact on students of color” (Keleher, 2000). Along the same lines, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Education reported that Black students are three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled when compared to their white peers. Black students make up only 18% of the entire student population, but they account for 35% of those suspended once, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of all expulsions (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Heitzeg, 2014). Even when classroom characteristics and child behavior is controlled, children of color are six times more likely to be suspended for disruptive behavior than their white peers (Blad & Harwin, 2017). Under zero-tolerance policies, Black and Latino students represent 56% of all expulsions, even though they make up only 45% of the entire student population (Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2012; Heitzeg, 2014; Lewin, 2012). These populations of students represent 70% of all school-based arrests and referrals to the justice system (Heitzeg, 2014). In some states, these dynamics are even more intense. A study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania found that 13 states in the south were responsible for 50% of all expulsions of African American students (Kappeler, 2014). The same study found that in 84 of these school districts, 100% of the students suspended were Black (Kappeler, 2014). Even preschool-aged students face significant disparities in disciplinary practices, with Black preschoolers accounting for half of all suspensions, despite being only 18% of the children in preschool (Kappeler, 2014). Another study (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018) reported that Native American students attending a school with an SRO have 66% greater odds

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of being disciplined. Likewise, Losen & Martinez (2020) found that the 20 highest-suspending districts for Native American students were located in just six states: eight in Arizona, five in Montana, and three in Minnesota. In one of those districts, administrators suspended approximately 3 out of every 4 Native American students. Since there is no evidence that differences in race or types of misbehavior result in racial disparities in discipline, the most likely explanation is that school administrators and police differentially enforce zero-tolerance policies, resulting in significant racial disproportionality.

In the day-to-day realities of many schools, zero-tolerance approaches rely on punitive policies that enforce suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the justice system, often for minor and trivial offenses. In schools that employ police through SRO programs, zero-tolerance policies are enforced by these law enforcement officials (Heitzeg, 2014). When law enforcement officials are present in schools through SRO programming or other means, student behavior and disciplinary issues under zero-tolerance policies are constituted as crimes. As noted above, in these cases law enforcement officials often deal with disciplinary issues that were once handled within the school by administrators, enforcing discipline under criminal codes. The involvement of SROs in disciplinary issues and actions at school has significant implications for students targeted by exclusionary practices. Prior research has demonstrated a causal link between the presence of SROs and the zero-tolerance policies that serve as a form of behavior management and social control. Gonzales (2012) found that 41 states have implemented legislation that requires school administrators to report students to law enforcement for a range of offenses under zero-tolerance policies; SROs serve as a vehicle for dramatically increasing interactions between students and the justice system. Moreover, Theriot (2009) found that students at schools that employed an SRO were five times more likely to be arrested at school for disorderly conduct than students who did not attend a school with an SRO. This researcher also found that the presence of SROs at schools with zero-tolerance policies results in an increased rate of criminal charges being filed against students (Theriot, 2009). Similarly, other studies have shown that the presence of an SRO increases the rates of arrests of students for minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct and simple assault (Teske & Huff, 2011). In theory SROs are conceived as key programs to increase school safety. However, the research strongly suggests the presence of detrimental effects associated with their implementation (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016).

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SROs also exacerbate the existing racial disparities in enforcement of zero-tolerance policies through arresting and referring students to the justice system at disproportionately high rates; Black and Latino students represent more than 70% of all students arrested or referred to the juvenile or adult criminal justice system at school, despite making up only 45% of the student body (Eckholm, 2013; Heitzeg, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies are not only ineffective in improving school safety but are also counterproductive, resulting in countless children of color being excluded from schools and entrenched in the justice system (Scott et al., 2017). The enforcement of zero-tolerance policies by SROs effectively criminalizes children's behavior, pushing them out of schools and into the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline or the school-prison nexus (Meiners, 2007; Hirschfield, 2008).

The school-to-prison pipeline is fueled by the enforcement of these punitive zero-tolerance policies by SROs. The proliferation of zero-tolerance policies and the expanding presence and power of police in schools “provide the immediate impetus for the flow of children from school to legal systems” (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 8). Zero-tolerance policies and police presence in schools are two direct mechanisms by which students are excluded from schools through suspensions and expulsions, arrested, and referred to the juvenile or adult justice system, resulting in them being pushed out of schools and funneled into prisons (Heitzeg, 2009). The school-prison nexus is also highly racialized, and educational policies and practices such as zero-tolerance policies and SROs serve to systematically criminalize the behavior of children of color and force them into incarceration; these policies are thus “designed by intent or default, to ensure an endless stream of future bodies into the prison industrial complex” (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 19). Thus, SROs serve as a direct link in the school-prison nexus, with police in schools providing “the immediate impetus for the flow of children from school to legal systems” (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 23). Though the school-prison nexus is most directly attributable to the expansion of school police and their enforcement of zero-tolerance policies, it was also the result of other trends like the rise of searches, seizures, and surveillance methods in schools.

Searches, Seizures, and Surveillance Methods

Searches, seizures, and surveillance methods define the current school security culture in the United States. These methods of surveillance have been found to work in tandem with police officers to exploit the rights of children. Moreover, states across the country have employed

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policies that constitute direct surveillance and monitoring of the behavior of children (Yell & Rozalski, 2000). While some methods like locker checks and school staff hallway monitoring have declined over the last decade, other methods such as required IDs for campus entry, security cameras, locked exits/entrances, and metal detectors have flourished (Irwin et al., 2021). Interquest Detection Canines in Texas provides drug-sniffing dogs to over 1,000 schools in 14 states (Beger, 2002). In Arizona, the Sierra Vista school district has partnered with the U.S. Customs Service to train drug-sniffing dogs by searching student lockers, classrooms, and school property (Blad & Harwin, 2017). A high school in Massachusetts remotely feeds surveillance footage from 20 cameras to the local police department. In Dallas, a “security conscious school” houses six metal detectors, 37 surveillance cameras, and a security command center for school police (Beger, 2002). In Los Angeles, undercover police officers engaged in a sting operation in which they infiltrated local schools, pretending to be students to make over 200 drug buys (Lait, 1999). One of the undercover officers described his work attending classes, school events and off campus parties with students: “I knew I had to fit in, make the kids trust me and then turn around and take them to jail” (Schneider, 2001, p. 12). Schools employ SWAT team raids and “blitz operations”, in which students are driven into school hallways unannounced for weapons searches and discipline enforcement (Keleher, 2000). Many schools post signs warning students that they consent to searches of their vehicles and property “with or without cause” by parking in school lots, using school lockers and otherwise being on campus (James & McCallion, 2013). Whether schools utilize security cameras, metal detectors, drug-sniffing dogs, locker searches, undercover blitz operations, or all of the above, SROs both enforce and reinforce these surveillance and security measures that criminalize the behavior of students.

Research shows that some surveillance measures such as CCTV’s are most often used to monitor and investigate minor disciplinary violations (Hope, 2009; Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2018; Taylor, 2011). A number of large-scale quantitative studies demonstrate that increasing the surveillance and security measures in a school do not affect students’ misbehavior and may in some cases increase instances of misbehavior (Fisher et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2019; Servoss, 2017; Tanner-Smith et al., 2018). Importantly, studies also demonstrate that the presence of school surveillance and security measures decreased students’ perceptions of safety (Mowen & Freng, 2019). A similar study on student perceptions of safety in educational environments with high levels of surveillance and security measures found that the implantation of security cameras

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within the school was related to “lower perceptions of safety, equity, and support” (Johnson et al., 2018).

Repressive and aggressive police tactics not only create a climate of fear, mistrust, and alienation by students at school but are differentially applied to schools across the lines of race, ethnicity, and social class. Recent Indicators of School Crime and Safety reports have found that the highest concentration of surveillance measures can be found in urban areas with high populations of students of racial and ethnic minorities, indicating that security measures and privacy violations may disproportionately impact students of color (Madhukar, 2019; McFarland et al., 2018). Other studies have evidenced how students in high-poverty urban schools experience “invasive police searches and security screening far more often than their suburban counterparts” (Monahan & Torres, 2009, p. 11). In the urban schools in which surveillance and security measures are concentrated, hyper-surveillance serves as an environmental stressor, impacting the physical and psychological health of Black students. These students report higher rates of anxiety, stress, depression, and PTSD (Brondolo et al., 2011; Brondolo et al., 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

Impact of SROs on School Safety and School Climate

In this section we examine the impact of SROs on school climate and school safety. Overall, the research literature reveals that SROs perform more law-enforcement activities in schools serving low-income students and students of color and that school size is correlated with increases in reported acts. Prior research also indicates that SROs are associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline (sanctions resulting in missed school) and higher rates of arrest for minor offenses. Moreover, the escalation of non-criminal misbehavior is more likely to escalate into criminal charges (“disorderly conduct”) when SROs are involved. This can lead to students accruing charges with lifelong consequences that could have been avoided (Anderson 2018; Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Fisher & Hennessey, 2016; Javdani, 2019; Lynch et al., 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Nolan, 2011; Teske & Huff, 2011; Zhang, 2018). However, one study (May et al., 2018) found that SROs were less likely than law enforcement officers outside of school to refer juveniles for minor offenses and suggest that schools, not solely police in schools, make a large contribution to the number of juveniles referred to the juvenile justice system for less serious offenses.

School Climate

The research literature notes that the presence of police in schools can interfere with school climate and students' learning in several ways. SROs are deeply entwined in the process of exclusionary practices that can remove students from school, effectively denying children their right to an education, because they can directly arrest and refer students to the justice system, which often involves a subsequent suspension or expulsion from school. As students are excluded from school and involved in the justice system, they face a lifetime of collateral consequences including "missed opportunities, poorer life outcomes, and increased chances of future incarceration" (Petteruti, 2011, p. 18).

Some studies have reported that an increased police presence at schools can interfere with students' learning by creating a climate of fear, mistrust, and alienation (Theriot, 2016; Petteruti, 2011; Theriot & Orme, 2016). School police can participate in a cycle of hostility and antagonism with students, which may increase incidences of violence and misbehavior that in turn lead to more arrests (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Petteruti, 2011). SROs have been increasingly exposed for instances of abusive use of force and brutality against students. When police are present in schools, police brutality extends into the classroom. Students as young as five years old have reported being tasered, body-slammed, choked, pepper-sprayed, and hit with batons by school police (Klein, 2018).

Despite anecdotal evidence of abusive use of force by police against students, there are no official data sources to track the rates by which students are receiving physical punishment by police in schools. Independent researchers have begun to investigate incidents of police brutality in schools, finding that in 2017, 20 students were tasered, 16 were pepper-sprayed, and 2 were victims of physical assault (including body slamming, choking, dragging, or wrestling) at the hands of SROs (Klein, 2018). A lack of transparency regarding how often police use force, including weapons, against students is of grave concern. Although school police are intended to increase school safety and improve community relations between students and law enforcement, at times they engage in practices that promote the opposite (Beger, 2002; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Students become victims of emotional and physical trauma that increase tensions between police officers and the communities of color they have sworn to serve and protect. In Futterman and colleagues' (2016) work on youth/police interactions in Chicago, they interview Jazmine, a

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high school senior who had a friend who was shot and killed by police. She describes the fear and physical reaction she experiences when around school police:

It's scary because you don't know what's gonna happen next. So, when it's going on... my heart will be beating real fast, I'll be scared, my legs'll be shaking... I'll be like, 'What's gonna happen next if I do something wrong, if I move a certain way, and they interpret it wrong?' They might... pull out a gun... You hear it in my voice, like it's trembling (p. 9-10).

Although the evidence regarding the impact of SROs on school climate is not consistent, the majority of the studies examined for this paper using five academic databases (74% of articles) revealed that SROs harm school climate. Many qualitative research studies have shown that the presence of an SRO decreases the inclusivity of a school (Shedd, 2016). Importantly, studies on the impact of SROs on school climate reveal that there are differences across the lines of race and ethnicity in how students perceive of and experience the climate of a school. Students with more frequent interactions with SROs feel less connected to their school, and Black students are more likely to feel unsupported, unsafe, and disconnected in schools with SROs when compared to white students (Theriot & Orme, 2016; Theriot, 2016). The research also shows that students are less likely to misbehave in schools in which they feel supported, respected, valued, and safe, whereas schools with SROs are more likely to report “negative effects on school climate and students’ bonds to school” (Kupchik, 2020, p. 3). Given that a positive and safe school climate is essential to promoting students’ learning, achievement, and involvement in school, the expanding presence and power of police in schools is especially problematic, especially among students from marginalized backgrounds (Theriot & Orme, 2016).

School Safety

It is pertinent to note that there is limited data on the effectiveness of SRO programs in promoting positive school and student outcomes related to safety, achievement, and discipline, and that prior studies on specific states or district-wide SRO programs have revealed mixed results. Variation in the training, policies, organizational frameworks and school contexts of SRO programs in different jurisdictions makes it difficult to generalize about the impact of police in schools. Moreover, the amount of control that school administrators have over SRO programming differs significantly from one district to the next. The roles, responsibilities and actual practices of police in schools also deviate considerably in different jurisdictions, with

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some focusing on educational programming and others (typically schools attended by students of color) on law enforcement and discipline (Shuler-Ivey, 2012; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). In sum, the research on the impact of SRO programs on school safety and on stakeholders' perceptions provides a complex and unclear picture, although some trends are emerging.

Overall, prior studies have found a correlation between the presence of SROs and school violence, particularly in high schools. However, it is not clear if this is a result of actual rates of violence in schools or simply higher recording of violent incidents due to the SRO presence (Crawford & Burns, 2015; Crawford & Burns, 2016; Lane, 2009; Maskaly et al., 2011). A few studies showed a positive impact. For instance, a study in Alabama showed that the presence of SROs decreased the number of violent infractions and disciplinary actions among students between two school years in 1994 and 1995 (Stinson & Watkins, 2013). Other studies found limited or no impacts. The 1993 National Household and Education's survey on school safety and discipline revealed that the presence of SROs had no effect on school violence or crime (United States Department of Education, 1996). Likewise, an evaluation of a South Carolina program in 2008 revealed that the presence of a school resource officer had limited effects on school safety (Shuler-Ivey, 2012). In this study, both SROs and school administrators were surveyed on their perceptions of the program's effectiveness. The researchers found that both groups did not associate the SRO program with a safer school environment. These perceptions were aligned with the facts: an analysis of crime rates revealed no statistically significant changes before and after implementation of the program. Some studies reported that there is no evidence that SRO presence is related to a deterrence effect on school violence, gun violence or mass shootings (Brady et al., 2007; James & McCallion, 2013), or to perceptions of student safety or positive social behaviors (McKay et al., 2006).

Other studies reported negative impacts, especially in schools attended by low-income and racialized students. During the 1990s, two studies on school safety approaches revealed that SRO programs utilizing repressive approaches increased levels of student misbehavior and school crime (Noguera, 1995; Hyman & Perone, 1998). Likewise, the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey found that school police led to higher rates of school disorder (Musu-Gillette, 2018). In the 21st century, a study from the University of Tennessee revealed that schools with SROs experienced higher rates of arrests for nonviolent misdemeanor charges such as disorderly conduct, and lower rates of arrest for serious violent crimes and

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felony charges (Theriot, 2009). Na and Gottfredson (2011) found that the presence of law enforcement officers was positively correlated with increases in minor crime, serious crime, and school expulsions. Around the same time, a study found that SROs utilizing mid-level force capabilities including tasers and firearms led to an increase in school crime, and that SROs were associated with higher rates of violence in schools (Maskaly et al., 2011). Similar findings emerged a few years later in a study on the effectiveness of safety measures in high schools which revealed that the presence of SROs resulted in significant increases in serious violence (Crawford & Burns, 2015).

Overall, meta-analyses of prior studies found that SRO programs do not provide reliable evaluations on their effectiveness. For instance, in 2011 the Congressional Research Service conducted a national evaluation on the body of research surrounding SRO programs. This analysis showed no reliable evaluations on the effectiveness of programs that met standards for control conditions and objective outcome measures (James & McCallion, 2013). A recent systematic review of 28 papers found that the impact of SROs on school discipline, safety, crime, and arrests is null at best, and at worst produces increases in exclusionary discipline, crimes and arrests (Javdani, 2019).

Similarly, in our own systematic review the majority of the studies (82%) showed that SROs either have no impact on school safety or that their presence increases rates of student misconduct, crime, and violence (see also Anderson, 2018; Crawford et al., 2015; Na et al., 2013; Tillyer et al., 2011). In a recent longitudinal study, Devlin & Fisher (2021) found that although SROs play a variety of roles within schools, most of them have no effect or have a detrimental effect on social disturbances such as bullying, disorder and disrespect.

While the current state of research regarding the impact of SROs on improving school safety and school climate has yielded mixed results, the majority of evidence supports the notion that SROs decrease safety, increase rates of crime and violence, and negatively impact school climate. Among all these measures, students of color, especially Black students, were most negatively impacted by SROs; these groups experienced the greatest disproportionality in exclusionary discipline and surveillance measures and felt the least safe at schools with an SRO. Given that the research does not support the notion that SROs improve school safety or school climate and may negatively impact students (especially students of color), their presence needs to be re-examined.

Stakeholders' Perceptions of SROs

While some studies on the effectiveness of SRO programs in increasing school safety and reducing crime use large data sets to analyze crime and arrest rates quantitatively, other studies explore the perceptions and experiences of different stakeholders about the presence of SROs in schools. Findings are mixed, partly because a lack of uniformity in SRO programs makes it difficult to adequately assess the phenomenon of police in schools. Most studies on stakeholders' perceptions tend to focus on the opinions of police officers, administrators and teachers about SRO programs. In comparative terms, less studies have been conducted on students' perceptions, although emerging research on this topic reveals that white and affluent students have different perceptions than low-income students and students of color.

A study on the perceptions of SROs and staff on school safety found that both groups felt that the presence of SROs positively impacted school safety. This study also found that SROs do not consider themselves to be contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Miller, 2019). While research shows that most administrators feel that SROs are a valuable addition to school safety on campus, research on teachers' perceptions is significantly more mixed (May et al., 2004). A study on teacher perceptions of SROs found that although teachers felt safer and more secure at schools employing SROs, they believed that SROs decreased feelings of safety and security among their students (Wood & Hampton, 2021). Other studies show that some teachers believe SROs are helpful and beneficial, but most studies (57%) revealed that teachers felt their marginalized students, including students of color and students of low socioeconomic status, were less likely to feel safe and supported by the SRO. Many of these teachers also voiced explicit concerns about racial profiling and racial disproportionately in discipline for their Black and Brown students (Schuetz, 2019).

Despite police presence in schools for over 50 years, students have only recently begun to be surveyed about their perceptions and experiences with police. Overwhelmingly, the majority (78%) of the studies in the databases reviewed reveal that many students do not feel that SROs positively positive impact on school climate and school safety. This is confirmed by a recent study that found that students felt less safe at schools with a greater presence of police (Gonzales et al., 2016). Along the same lines, another recent study in which researchers interviewed high school students in three districts that emphasized exclusionary practices like suspensions and

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expulsions found that these youth wanted to be engaged in school but felt that the administration and penalization methods inhibited them from doing so (Pufall Jones et al., 2018). From an equity perspective, it is pertinent to report that students' perceptions of SROs are significantly influenced by their race. Black and Brown students feel less safe interacting with SROs than their white peers, and even some white students acknowledged the ways in which their peers of color were treated differently by SROs and were more likely to be disciplined for committing minor offenses (Donnell, 2016; Pentek & Eisenberg 2018; Pufall Jones et al., 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016).

Other studies have found that the presence of an SRO had no impact on student's feeling of safety at school (Theriot & Orme, 2016). For instance, a study on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of SRO programs found that students overwhelmingly felt that SROs were not effective in deterring misbehavior, decreasing crime or violence, or improving school safety; these students felt that the presence of SROs merely increased the number of disciplinary incidents being identified. This study also found that although there were no statistically significant differences among grade level or gender, there were statistically significant differences among race, with Black, Hispanic, and Native American students being more likely to find SROs ineffective in maintaining and improving school safety (Donnell, 2016). Considering that children bear the direct burden of interacting with police in schools, including through increased contact with the juvenile justice system and increased rates of exclusion from school, there is a need for additional studies into student perceptions of SRO programs. Moreover, given that most research on this topic found that students generally do not feel that SROs are effective, with students of color reporting the harmful effects of SROs on their educational experiences, their presence in schools should remain under scrutiny.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Concluding remarks

The term "school-based law enforcement" describes a wide range of situations where at least one police officer works either full-time or part-time on a school campus. In the United States, school-based law enforcement most commonly takes the form of a school resource officer, in which a school or school district establishes a formal partnership with the local police department to employ one or more officers on school property. For large urban districts, a secondary approach involves having the school district establish its own police agency

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independent of the municipal police department. The school-based law enforcement officer is a police officer trained through the police department, carries a badge and weapon, and has the power to arrest individuals. The key difference between regular police officers and SROs is that SROs are regularly stationed at a particular school and maintain a constant presence in that environment (Stern & Petrosino, 2018).

School approaches to safety can be broadly conceptualized into two main categories: educational programs that focus on prevention, and enforcement programs that focus on exclusionary discipline, surveillance and security measures. The second category reflects differing ideals of justice. On the one hand, programs that focus on restorative justice and use practices such as conflict resolution, anger management, mediation and self-governance. On the other, retributive approaches that focus on punishment in close connection to the juvenile justice system and prisons. In both polarities, one approach favors pedagogical and social interventions, while the other approach emphasizes the role of police and particularly school resource officers. In short, school policing focuses on enforcement and surveillance while prevention, mentoring and education take a secondary role. Although there has been a gradual shift towards implementing alternative programs and initiatives in educational settings, schools overwhelmingly continue to use disciplinary, punitive and retributive approaches to addressing school safety that rely heavily on SROs. Hence the need to better understand the roles played by these officers, and particularly their impact on school safety and school climate.

Based on our systematic review, the evidence shows mixed results, with most research showing that SROs do not improve school safety or school climate. The empirical research on the impact of SROs on school safety found that the presence of SROs is related to higher rates of exclusionary discipline in schools. This includes student incidents reports, arrests for fighting at school, removals, and suspensions. Several studies show that the presence of SROs is positively correlated with higher rates of misbehavior, crime, violence, and arrests, particularly of students of color and low-income students. A large proportion of these students report that the presence of SROs in their schools make them feel less safe, connected, and supported. Moreover, the high degree of authority and discretion enjoyed by SROs is not matched by sufficient or adequate training. In short, the SRO approach represents a high-cost punitive approach that contributes to reinforcing the school-prison nexus, a situation that has long-term negative consequences for

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many students (Brady et al., 2007; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Javdani, 2019; Pufall Jones et al., 2018; Zhang, 2018).

Implementing more pedagogically oriented, more holistic and more cost-effective preventive approaches to school safety is long overdue. Multifaceted school safety programs exist to promote a healthy and positive school climate, reduce rates of crime and violence, and maintain physical, emotional, and social safety. Approaches used to create safe, supportive, and effective schools vary greatly depending on a number of factors, including the ideas, perceptions, norms, and cultures of the school and district, as well as the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the broader community (Lacoe, 2015). Advancing justice and equity for all students, however, demands that schools re-envision school safety approaches that do not rely solely on punitive policies, exclusionary practices, or SROs. By pursuing equitable, just, and humanizing alternatives to police in schools, education can strive toward its transformative potential for all students.

Following the brutal murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement, several cities, from St Louis, Austin, Baltimore and Minneapolis to Seattle, New York and San Francisco, decided to revisit their budgets and reallocate funds from police to social services, local community initiatives and preventive strategies. Around the same time, several school districts have agreed not to renew their contracts with law enforcement agencies and sever their SRO programming. Many of these decisions were spurred by student- and community-led protests, walkouts, and demonstrations that called for police accountability and racial justice. These groups advocated against having SROs in schools, citing evidence of racial disproportionality in discipline, arrests, unnecessary referrals to the justice system, and contending that SROs create a climate of fear, mistrust, and alienation at school. In July 2020, the Phoenix Union High School District voted to discontinue its contract with the City of Phoenix Police Department, with the superintendent stating, “As the district responsibly yet courageously addresses two pandemics, racism and COVID... this is the right time for PXU to revisit and even rethink school safety” (Phoenix Union High School District, 2020). The Denver School Board also voted unanimously to slowly remove police from schools, followed by school boards in Seattle, Oakland, Minneapolis, Portland and Los Angeles, among others. As districts continue to cancel contracts with local law enforcement agencies, alternative models of school safety are being implemented as a means for more meaningfully promoting the safety and

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wellbeing of students with particular attention to advancing equity and justice for traditionally marginalized students.

The proliferation of police in schools in the last decades has become an issue of equity, as children of color are increasingly excluded from the education system and funneled into the criminal justice system. The expanding presence and power of police in schools should be exhaustively examined not only to increase educational equity and enable schools to achieve their transformative potential but also in terms of safety itself. Indeed, there is an overwhelming lack of substantial evidence regarding the effectiveness and positive impact of SROs on school safety and school climate, with most studies reviewed in this research revealing that SRO programs have little impact, no impact or even a negative impact on these measures. There is also evidence that SROs contribute to disproportionality in discipline for students of color, students of low socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities, with these disparities being most severe for Black students. SROs enforce exclusionary policies and surveillance and security measures in schools, both of which also have a disproportionate impact on students of color. Through enforcing these policies and practices, SROs serve as a direct link in the school-prison nexus by excluding students from school and involving them in the justice system. These actions lead to a lifetime of collateral consequences for children, including higher dropout and lower graduation rates, lower rates of academic achievement, higher rates of mental and physical illness, and higher rates of future arrests, incarceration, and even death. Sometimes a minor incident involving a child that could be addressed with pedagogical strategies becomes a criminal act that could have long-term negative consequences. In the book *Punished* (Rios, 2011), José, a student from Oakland, California, recounts the first time a police officer at school arrested him when he was only eight years old:

The first time was in third grade. I had set the bathroom garbage can on fire. We ran away, and they caught us and handcuffed us... I was just trying to do something funny. Police came and arrested me and my friends. They only had one pair of handcuffs, and they handcuffed me and my friend together. This is the first time I got arrested. I also flunked that year (p. 57-58).

In closing, although according to federal policy exclusionary discipline is mandated only for dangerous and violent behavior or possession of weapons and drugs, in practice an important portion of school removals are for non-dangerous violations of school rules like tardiness, or

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behaviors that are open to interpretation such as disrespect. This is relevant because research on this topic shows that suspending and expelling students does not help them to improve behavior, address underlying causes of misbehavior, or make schools safer. On the contrary, exclusionary discipline practices are associated with a variety of negative outcomes including lower academic performance and school engagement, and higher levels of school violence, dropout rates, antisocial behavior and interactions with the criminal justice system. In short, exclusionary discipline practices do not make schools more conducive to learning, do not improve student behavior, and do not even make schools safer (Pufall Jones et al., 2018). Moreover, as discussed above, the research on this topic shows that these punishments are disproportionately levied at students of color and students with disabilities. For all these reasons, it is time to revisit this approach and explore the potential benefits of other strategies to promote school safety. We address this in the next section.

Recommendations

Ensuring school safety demands that all education stakeholders, especially those in the position to design, implement, and evaluate policies and practices at the district- and school-level, become more familiar with the body of research surrounding SROs. Maintaining and promoting a school climate that is inclusive, safe, and supportive of diverse students requires educators, administrators, and policymakers to be more aware of how SROs may increase school safety, but also how they may exacerbate problems within the school, resulting in significant negative lifelong repercussions for students, especially those that are already marginalized.

Although the studies that we examined tend to support the argument that the presence of SROs in schools is not highly effective in promoting school safety and a positive school climate and could even be harmful to many students, we are cognizant that the research on this topic is still limited and inconclusive. Hence, there is a significant need for conducting rigorous, high-quality qualitative and quantitative research on the topic of SROs, especially as it relates to effectiveness in improving school safety (through reducing crime, violence, bullying, and other misbehaviors), effectiveness in improving school climate (concerning safety, inclusivity, support, connectedness, etc.), and disparities in discipline and surveillance/security measures (especially across the lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other identity markers).

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Moreover, more research should be conducted to understand student perceptions of and experience with SROs, since youth are the group of stakeholders most directly impacted by such programming. Research on the relationship between SROs and various short-term behavioral and academic outcomes should also be pursued, including the relationship between SROs and academic achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, and mental health issues. Long-term outcomes should also be explored, including future socioeconomic status, mental and physical health issues, and incarceration rates.

Further, there is a dearth of randomized control trials conducted on SROs (due to it being unethical and/or unfeasible); thus, as research increases on the topic, meta-analysis will become critical (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). By combining ethnographic observations and case studies together, these studies will be able to “form a position on SRO implementation that is based on the general experience of the program rather than the individual circumstances of a school district or restricted population sample” (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018, p. 253). In addition, given the importance of experimental designs in developing and evaluating school-wide programs such as SROs, such designs should be emphasized in school safety research (Kern & Manz, 2004). Despite the importance of experimental designs, such research comes with its own unique set of challenges as it can be challenging to conduct in applied, collaborative contexts such as schools. In sum, the two main general recommendations are that, to expand and deepen our understanding of the impact of SROs, researchers continue to conduct high-quality, qualitative and quantitative scholarship on a wide range of topics related to SROs, and that any research conducted pay attention to differences across student identity markers and demographics.

Another challenge is the lack of comprehensive nationwide statistics regarding SRO outcomes and performance, a myriad of differences between schools and districts, variation in roles/responsibilities of SROs, and an absence of state or federal reporting requirements related to schools and police departments regarding discipline rates, behavior management strategies, police assaults, as well as broader data on schools and their contexts, among other information. Hence, it is important to build this database with consistent and comparable indicators that also pay attention to different social contexts. Thus, state departments of education should require school districts to document, evaluate, and report data and statistics on SROs. Ideally, the U.S. Department of Education should help guide these efforts to ensure uniformity across states to

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develop a general understanding of the broad implications of SRO programs. Such data would aid immensely in research and evaluation efforts.

We also recommend that school districts revisit the prevailing focus on physical security measures and infrastructure hardening. Emerging research suggest that target hardening to protect students from gun violence is not very effective and may even be counterproductive as a school safety strategy. For instance, a recent study conducted by Ohio State University found that students and staff in schools that employ hi-tech security measures experience higher levels of fear. Moreover, the study could not find any demonstrable gains in student safety through target-hardening, which should be a matter of concern considering the high financial costs associated with this approach. The authors recommend that educators pay more attention to “soft” approaches to building school environments characterized by mutual trust, active listening, respect for student voices and expression, cooperation, and caring relationships with and among students (Warnick & Kapa, 2019).

These recommendations depend on the decision whether to continue with a high level of SRO involvement in schools, to reinvest those funds in alternative programs that focus on preventive and restorative initiatives with a strong educational component, or to undertake a hybrid approach that combines the two models in creative and effective ways. As we documented in this report, the research suggests a myriad of problematic issues and consequences associated with police’s expanding presence and power in schools may outweigh their potential benefits. Considering the impact of SROs in exacerbating educational and social inequities, especially regarding students of color, we recommend that SRO programs be carefully reviewed and that schools explore other programs to promote school safety that could be more cost-effective and pedagogically sound. These programs could complement the role of SROs in schools or could mean replacing them with other professionals like social workers or mental health counselors. However, even in this case, schools would continue their relationship with police departments for legal, institutional and practical reasons.

Although it is beyond the scope of this report, there is extensive research on alternatives to school safety and justice that do not depend upon punitive practices enforced by police. School districts should consult the research to determine the most promising school safety approaches, programs and interventions that are most appropriate for their students and communities’ unique needs. Advancing equity and justice and ensuring inclusive, safe, and

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supportive learning environments for all students requires reimagining school safety. This demands that stakeholders – including administrators, educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, students, and community members – critically examine alternatives to SROs in order to re-envision school safety and justice. This will be the topic of the second report of this series, which details 17 promising practices to increase school safety.

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