Understanding School Safety and the Use of School Resource Officers in Understudied Settings

F. Chris Curran, PhD
University of Florida
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Benjamin W. Fisher, PhD
University of Louisville

Samantha Viano, PhD
George Mason University

Aaron Kupchik, PhD
University of Delaware

About the Authors

F. Chris Curran, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Florida's College of Education. He conducts research in the areas of school discipline and safety. He has experience as both a middle school teacher and department chair. More on his work can be found at www.fchriscurran.com and www.edsuspended.com

Benjamin W. Fisher, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Louisville. His research focuses on school safety, security, and discipline, with particular emphases on how school-level contextual factors shape student and school outcomes and areas of inequality. More on his work can be found at www.benjaminwfisher.com

Samantha Viano, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Education at the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research focuses on the evaluation of policies and programs that predominately affect at-risk or traditionally-marginalized youth. You can find more of her work at www.samanthaviano.com

Aaron Kupchik, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. His work focuses on the policing and punishment of youth in schools and other contexts. He is the author of The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment (U. California, 2016) and Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear (NYU Press, 2010).

Overview

Context

The use of law enforcement officers in schools has increased dramatically over the last several decades. As of 2015-16, 48% of public schools in the United States had a sworn law enforcement officer present at least part time. In the wake of several recent high-profile school shootings, some states have passed laws vastly expanding the presence of law enforcement in schools.

Commonly, these officers are integrated into schools under the school resource officer (SRO) model. SROs are generally sworn law enforcement officers with full arrest powers who are assigned to schools as their primary beat, while still being under the administrative oversight of the law enforcement organization.

Expansion of SROs

In recent years, the presence of SROs in elementary schools and non-urban settings has increased dramatically. From 2005 to 2015, the percentage of primary schools with an SRO increased by 64% (18.5% to 30.4%). Over the same period, suburban schools saw a 26% increase (34.6% to 43.6%) in the presence of SROs while rural schools saw a 48% increase (26.7% to 39.7%). SROs are now more common in suburban, town, and rural settings than in cities. Despite this, much of the current research on SROs tends to focus on high schools and more urban environments.

New Research on SROs in Understudied Settings

This report draws on cutting edge findings from an ongoing study of school resource officers in two suburban school districts in the South. The study draws from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations with a number of stakeholders including SROs, school leadership, teachers, parents, and students. Like many districts nationwide, the school districts in this study had recently expanded SROs to all their elementary schools.

This report includes eight policy briefs that highlight our findings on a number of policy and practice relevant questions about SROs. As districts nationwide continue to expand the use of SROs, the findings here provide insights that may help districts navigate the consideration and implementation of SROs. It is our hope that these insights contribute to safer, more equitable, and welcoming school environments.

-The Research Team

Table of Contents

Who's Disciplining? How Policy and Context Shape SRO Involvement in School Discipline

Research Brief #1 – 2019

F. Chris Curran, Benjamin W. Fisher, Samantha Viano, & Aaron Kupchik

SRO involvement in school discipline can vary significantly within the same school district. Some SROs view discipline as "treading the lines of the job description" but others take on active roles, sometimes even acting as a lead enforcer of discipline. Variation in SRO involvement in discipline can be impacted by official policy, differences in understanding of what "discipline" means, and the preferences of building-level school personnel (principals and teachers). Official policies developed in conjunction between school officials and law enforcement leadership that clearly define "discipline" and the SROs' role therein, as well as supports and accountability for promoting desired implementation, are recommended.

School resource officers (SROs) have become an increasingly common fixture in American public schools, with nearly 48% of public schools now having a sworn law enforcement officer present at least part time[1]. While SROs can provide quick response in the case of an emergency, prior research has raised concerns that their day to day activities may contribute to a higher likelihood that students experience exclusionary discipline like suspension, though this finding is not consistent across all studies[2]. Our recent research points to significant variation in how SROs approach school discipline as well as the factors that shape such involvement.

Key Finding 1: Official policy influences SRO involvement in discipline.

In our partner districts, the school districts and local law enforcement agency had developed an official policy that SROs were not to be involved in routine school discipline. This official policy greatly influenced how SROs viewed discipline, with almost all immediately noting that discipline was "not their role" or "outside the job description".

Key Finding 2: SROs' roles in discipline vary considerably.

As shown at right, we found that despite official policy, the day to day activities of many SROs did include actions that could be considered involvement in school discipline.

Lead Enforcer	• Primary respondent to misbehavior • Arrests
Reporting to Admins	• Reporting misbehavior to school personnel • Bringing students to school personnel
Disciplinary Meetings	• One-on-one with student • Classroom talks
Verbal Reprimands / Proximity	• Verbally correcting students • Standing near misbehaving students

Key Finding 3: "Discipline" is in the eye of the beholder.

For many SROs in our study, following the official policy to not discipline equated to not administering formal sanctions like suspensions or detention. Actions like verbally reprimanding a student, using physical proximity to deter behaviors, or reporting behaviors to school staff were, for many of the SROs, not conceptualized as discipline and were therefore fitting with official policy.

> *"Acting loud in the halls or when I step out of my door-you know, yeah. I-I'm-I'm obviously stepping out to change their behavior. Not so much because I'm a police officer, but because I'm an adult."* - SRO Interview Participant

Key Finding 4: Building level context may shape SRO involvement in discipline.

Many SROs in our study described becoming involved in discipline at the request of teachers and school administrators. Many viewed doing so as being a supportive member of the school community.

> *"They try to get us involved in pretty much everything and which sometimes, I have to draw the line and tell them like, "I'm not getting involved in that, that's a school issue." You know? Don't use me as the guy that, you know, as the intimidator or any of that kind of thing. That's not what we're here for."*
> - SRO Interview Participant

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- School district leadership and local law enforcement leadership should develop guidelines for SRO involvement in discipline that clearly define "discipline" and appropriate roles for SRO involvement.
- Expectations for SROs' involvement in discipline should be clearly communicated to school personnel (administrators and teachers).
- Leadership should maintain adequate levels of support and oversight to ensure that individual SROs are supported in adhering to the agreed upon role in discipline.

Read More: Curran, F.C., Fisher, B.W., Viano, S., Kupchik, A. (Forthcoming). Why and when do school resource officers engage in school discipline? The role of context in shaping disciplinary involvement. *American Journal of Education*.

References: [1] Musu-Gillette, L. et al. (2018). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017. National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics. [2] Fisher, B. W., & Hennessy, E. A. (2016). School resource officers and exclusionary discipline in US high schools: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Adolescent Research Review*, 1(3), 217-233.

Police Ambassadors: The Lessons SROs Teach Students About Law Enforcement

Research Brief #2 – 2019

Aaron Kupchik, F. Chris Curran, Benjamin W. Fisher, & Samantha Viano

The recent influx of police officers into U.S. public schools has changed how frequently children interact with police, and what those interactions look like. This brief summarizes research that analyzes data from interviews with SROs, and from focus groups with parents, teachers, and students, to consider what lessons SROs teach students about law enforcement. SROs make great efforts to build relationships with students that instill trust in police among students. They teach students that police should be trusted and relied on, and that negative views of policing or loved ones' involvement with the justice system are the result of a negative news media and individual citizens' criminality, respectively. Importantly, officers discussed how they devote particular attention to imparting these lessons on youth of color and others who may see police in a negative light. While there are benefits to better student-police relations, there are also important potential negative consequences, particularly to youth of color.

The expanded presence of SROs nationwide means new opportunities for police and children to build relationships. These relationships are important, since they offer the chance to build trust and avoid what legal scholars call "legal cynicism." Recent research helps stakeholders better understand how SROs approach relationship building and what potential lessons students might learn from their interactions with SROs.

Key Finding 1: SROs consistently identified relationship building with students as a primary goal.
Relationship building was second only to maintaining a secure school environment. They discussed at length their efforts to befriend students. They sought to teach students to trust police – *all police*, not just their SRO. They also taught students that negative perceptions of police are the result of a few bad apples and a negative news media, and that the arrest of loved ones is the fault of their loved ones' criminal behavior. These lessons were particularly directed at youth of color, low-income youth, (potentially undocumented) immigrant youth, and those whose families are involved with the justice system.

> *"Um, just kinda being there as a face, and you know, out there also as a- it's a PR thing of ... on the elementary side, we're wanting to make sure that those kids know that, you know, police are not the bad guys. Police are not these- this negative aspect. We're not-, we shouldn't be seen in this negative light, so we're trying to develop that relationship with our students, so they know that if they ever have a problem, be it at home, be it at school, they can come to us and come talk to us if they aren't comfortable talking to anybody else."* – SRO Interview Participant

Key Finding 2: SROs build relationships of trust.

Comments from students, teachers and parents suggest that SROs are successful in building relationships of trust. Students talk about being more likely to trust police and to turn to police if they need help. Prior research suggests that as a result, students may be more likely to abide by laws and to seek help rather than settling disputes on their own.[1]

> *"Well it definitely changes my way of thinking about police officers because I always see on the news police officers doing everything to hold people down and stuff and I'm like 'nope, don't want to run into them.'...Uh, and..., it makes me think about them, they are doing the right thing, they like, sometimes [the news] doesn't say the whole story about it ...So, ... it just makes me think different about them, they may be doing the right thing, so makes me feel safe around them.."* – Student Focus Group Participant

Key Finding 3: There may be unintended consequences of police in schools.

Despite the potential benefit, there are also potential problems. Extra efforts to build relationships with youth of color and others results in additional surveillance over these students. It might also result in difficulty, such as bullying, for students who bring pro-police views into communities that do not share their views. Further, refusal to acknowledge the empirical reality of inequitable policing across people and communities is a lost opportunity for building deeper police-community partnerships.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- SROs should continue to build relationships with students. These relationships should be focused on mentoring and building up youth, not only on improving public perceptions of police.
- SROs and their police agencies should be careful to not watch over some students more than others.
- Law enforcement agencies should be aware of, and ready to engage in dialogue about, legitimate concerns about policing in communities of color.

Read More: Kupchik, A., Curran, F.C., Fisher, B.W., & Viano, S. (Under Review) Police Ambassadors: Student-Police Interactions in School and Legal Socialization.

References: [1] Tyler, T.R., & Trinkner, R. (2017) Why children follow rules: Legal socialization and the development of legitimacy. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Why SROs Are Expanding into Elementary Schools and the Implications of this Expansion

Research Brief #3– 2019
Samantha Viano, F. Chris Curran, & Benjamin W. Fisher

SROs have more recently become common in elementary schools. This brief highlights new research from a case study of two school districts that implemented SROs in all elementary schools following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Findings suggest that SROs were placed in elementary schools to serve as a deterrent against school shooters in addition to acting as goodwill ambassadors to elementary-aged children on behalf of all law enforcement. SROs assisted with school security and built relationships in different ways, but we noted several areas of potential concern including SRO involvement in student misconduct and SRO interactions with students with disabilities.

As the number of school shootings has increased over time so has the presence of SROs in schools. While only one percent of elementary schools had an SRO in the mid-1990s, over a third of elementary schools had an SRO by the 2016-17 school year[1, 2]. This brief reports on a case study of two school districts and the local Sheriff's Department to explore why they decided to adopt SROs in all elementary schools following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, the beliefs that guided this decision, and how these beliefs influenced implementation of SROs in elementary schools.

Key Finding 1: SROs were seen as addressing issues beyond a potential school shooting, including addressing problematic behavior of parents and, most notably, the poor perception of law enforcement in the community.

While SROs were placed in all elementary schools in these districts very quickly after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, there was a long history of discussions among leadership in the school districts and the Sheriff's Department discussing other potential reasons why an SRO would be useful in elementary school. These discussions centered on custodial disputes or generally poor parent behavior that the school needed assistance to keep under control as well as the potential for young children to learn to trust law enforcement at a younger age.

Key Finding 2: The school districts and Sheriff's Department were guided by the common belief in the general goodness of law enforcement and that all young people should learn to trust law enforcement.

While it is predictable that the Sheriff's Department leadership agreed that law enforcement should be trusted, viewed positively, and be seen as a resource for all students, this is not necessarily true of all those in school leadership. We identified several potential reasons that those in schools

nationwide might see a conflict between the traditional goals of public education and believing in the general goodness of law enforcement, although those in this study did not see this as a conflict.

"Um, well, number one is safety and security of the children and the staff at the school. And then, number two, the, um, becoming involved with the children in the school and, and, and, you know, being a role model for them... an official relationship with the children to, um, nurture the respect for law enforcement and, um, let them know that we're there for them when they need something, uh, that we're there to, for them to come to us when they're in trouble, when they're having issues" – Sheriff's Department Leadership Interview Participant

Key Finding 3: When the elementary school SROs were told to (1) keep schools safe and (2) build relationships with students, they interpreted these roles differently, leading to many SROs engaging in disciplining students and helping to manage the behavior of students with disabilities. How SROs engaged with students differed across schools. In many schools, SROs took their school safety role to mean they should be part of student misconduct discussions as a resource to the school administration and a counselor to the student, a role that some might argue could be construed as taking part in school discipline. SROs often observed and assisted teachers when students with disabilities would have behavioral incidents that were symptoms of their disabilities, a role for which they had received little training or guidance.

Policy and Practice Recommendations
- School districts need to consider whether they believe having a full-time member of law enforcement acting as a kind of goodwill ambassador in elementary schools is aligned with their vision of the goals of public education.
- When implementing SROs in elementary school, schools and districts should attend to the following potential areas of conflict:
    - SROs' role in school discipline,
    - SRO training in interacting with students with disabilities,
    - and whether SROs prioritize school security or student relationship building.

References: [1] Heaviside, S., Rowand, C., Williams, C., & Farris, E. (Eds.). (1998). Violence and discipline problems in U.S. public schools: 1996-97. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
[2] Musu-Gillette, L., Zhang, A., Wang, K., Zhang, J., Kemp, J., Diliberti, M., & Oudekerk, B.A. (2018). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017 (NCES 2018-036/NCJ 251413). 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.

Protecting the Sheep: How SROs in Suburbia View Threats

Research Brief #4– 2019

Benjamin W. Fisher, Ethan M. Higgins, Aaron Kupchik, F. Chris Curran, Samantha Viano, Bryant T. Plumlee, & Brandon Coffey

Better understanding SROs' perceptions of the main threats to schools in suburban communities is likely to inform broader conversations about why SROs do what they do and what effects they have on students and schools. This research brief highlights recent research that examines SROs' perceptions of threats to schools and the extent to which race shapes those perceived threats. We draw on interviews from approximately 50 SROs from two school districts in a suburban setting to summarize their perceptions on threats to school safety.

Although the increase in funding for SROs following high profile school shootings suggests that one of the main purposes of SROs is to prevent such incidents from taking place in the future, not all SROs may consider these threats to be as imminent. Because school shootings are rare events, SROs may instead perceive more common occurrences (e.g., student misbehavior or angry parents) as the primary threats to the school. Our research examined suburban SROs' perception of both external and internal threats in school environments using qualitative interviews. We sought to identify what they considered to be the main threats to their schools and how their perceptions might be informed by race/ethnicity.

Key Finding 1: Intruders were the most salient threats.

SROs expressed the most concern about possible intruders to the school, with most of their concerns centered on the possibility of school shooters. This concern was largely driven by the fact that a majority of the officers in the districts were implemented in schools as a direct response to the gun violence that occurred in Sandy Hook Elementary School. The SROs in our sample saw demographic similarities between their community and those in Newtown, CT or Littleton, CO, where high-profile acts of gun violence in schools seemingly came out of nowhere. Given those similarities, the SROs viewed their community as a potential site of gun violence in schools. This concern was consistent across all school levels (i.e., elementary, middle, high) and schools with varying racial compositions. Beyond individuals intent on doing violence, SROs expressed concern about irate parents and strangers that might wander onto school grounds.

Key Finding 2: Student and environmental concerns were less prevalent.

SROs also identified student-based and environment-based threats, but these were generally of less concern to the SROs than intruder-based threats. Student-based threats included student aggression

and cyberbullying, but suburban SROs felt student-based threats were not a great concern. Because they did not consider students to be a great threat to school safety, SROs were rarely involved in formal acts of discipline (though they did engage in discipline in more nuanced ways as described in research brief #1). Environment-based threats, including physical features of the school (e.g., old playground equipment) as well as weather (e.g., natural disasters), were also of concern to the SROs in this suburban context.

Key Finding 3: SROs rarely explicitly referred to race and ethnicity.
Very few SROs mentioned students' race or ethnicity in relation to threats during the interviews, and SROs' perceptions of student-based threats were largely consistent regardless of the ethnic/racial composition of the school.

> *"…generally, the school is safe now. I mean, everybody knows that anything could happen at any time. It's not 'If,' it's 'when.' Uhm, hopefully that 'when' never comes…You know, comparatively, our demographics match almost identically with the demographics of what, uh, Newtown…same thing with Columbine … And, you know, just being, just being hyper vigilant and that's, that's gonna keep pushing that 'when' out further and further and further."* - SRO Interview Participant

Policy and Practice Recommendations
- Given the rarity of school shootings, schools should carefully consider whether the cost of SROs is necessary if their primary purpose is to address such an uncommon occurrence.
- Schools implementing SROs should look to models, such as those in our sample, where SROs are not focused on policing student behavior or being involved in formal school discipline.

Beyond the Triad: The Role of SROs in School Security

Research Brief #5– 2019
Benjamin W. Fisher, F. Chris Curran, Samantha Viano, & John Skinner

SROs typically engage in a variety of activities beyond law enforcement, often including functions as educators and informal counselors.[1] As such, SROs are expected to not only keep schools safe, but to become integrated into school communities, build relationships with students and adults in the school, and otherwise provide added benefits beyond their roles as law enforcement officers. This research brief highlights findings from ongoing research that uses interviews, surveys, and activity logs from SROs in two suburban school districts to identify SROs' activities in schools. The results show that most SROs saw their two main responsibilities as interacting with students and staff and maintaining building security. Disciplining students had little importance in the SROs' daily routines.

SROs are distinct from other forms of security and law enforcement in that they are sworn officers with arrest powers that are assigned to a particular school or set of schools. That said, they do not engage solely in law enforcement activities. The National Association of School Resource Officers proposes a triad model for the functions of SROs with officers acting in three distinct roles: law enforcement officer, educator, and informal counselor.[1] There is very little research examining why and how SROs engage in various activities. The recent research highlighted in this brief provides an in-depth analysis into the activities of SROs, whether they are law enforcement-related tasks or not.

Key Finding 1: Goals of security and relationship-building were apparent in the activities of almost all SROs.
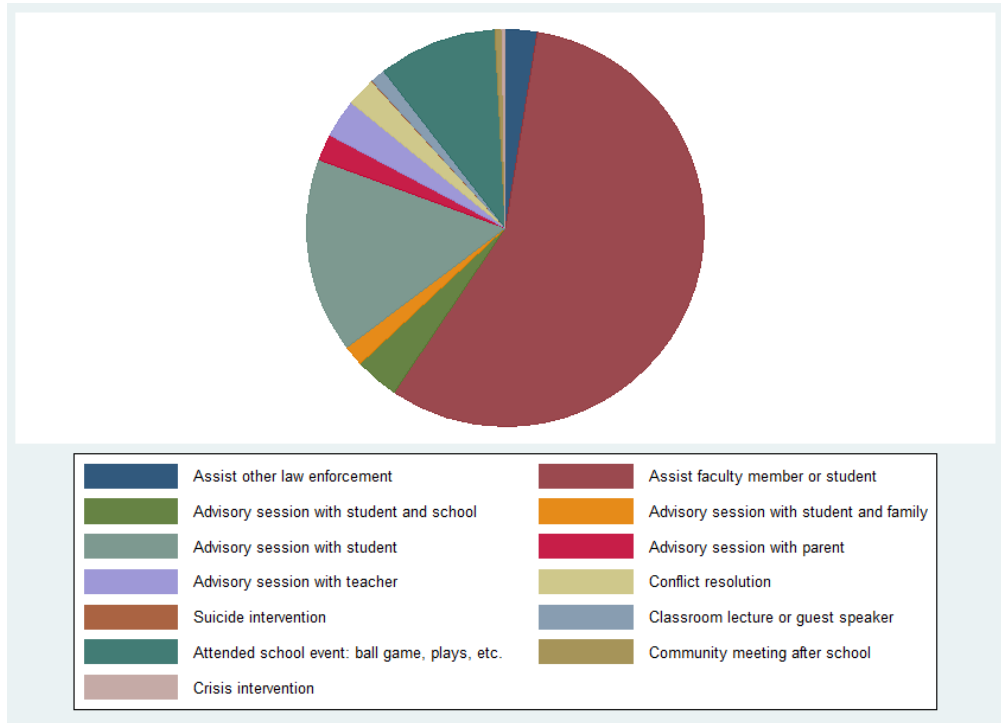
Many of the SROs' routines were similar, arriving early to school and engaging in security maintenance including an initial perimeter check of the building, inspecting entrances/exits, and turning on or checking security cameras. As students began arriving at school, SROs shifted to more relationship-centric activities, greeting students as they arrived. After students were in class, SROs conducted activities that were both security-oriented and relationship-oriented.

Key Finding 2: Several SROs expressed the importance of students having a male role model and saw themselves as filling that role for students.

The desire to satisfy students' perceived need for a male role model motivated some SROs to prioritize building relationships with certain students, a priority that they saw as nearly as important as—although distinct from—maintaining the safety and security of the building.

Key Finding 3: SROs did not engage frequently in formal school discipline issues.

In our survey, less than 10% of SROs reported maintaining school discipline. The average SRO reported addressing fewer than one incident per year of criminal misconduct.

Legend:
- Assist other law enforcement
- Advisory session with student and school
- Advisory session with student
- Advisory session with teacher
- Suicide intervention
- Attended school event: ball game, plays, etc.
- Crisis intervention
- Assist faculty member or student
- Advisory session with student and family
- Advisory session with parent
- Conflict resolution
- Classroom lecture or guest speaker
- Community meeting after school

Key Finding 4: SROs' activities complicate the triad model, especially with regard to law enforcement and educator.

SROs did not view maintaining school security as a law enforcement function. They viewed their primary duties as ensuring safety and security as opposed to identifying and stopping criminal activities. Similarly, SROs reported very rarely being involved in educational activities.

> *"I'll eat lunch with the kids, um, ask them about their day, and just kinda start getting to know them so they know, 'Hey, I can trust this person' and 'I see her every day, and she's really nice.' And try to get to know the students, too."* – SRO Interview Participant

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- Specialized law enforcement training may not be required for SROs because their activities largely include ensuring physical security and relationship-building vs. law enforcement. Security activities could be performed by school personnel or security guards rather than trained law enforcement.
- SRO training should extend beyond standard law enforcement training to include training specific to the roles SROs take on in school environments.

References: [1] Canady, M., James, B., & Nease, J. (2012). To protect and educate: The school resource officer and the prevention of violence in schools. National Association of School Resource Officers. Retrieved from: https://nasro.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/NASRO-To-Protect-and-Educate-nosecurity.pdf

Keeping Students Safe or Heightening Perceived Risk?

Research Brief #6– 2019
F. Chris Curran, Samantha Viano, Aaron Kupchik, & Benjamin W. Fisher

School resource officers (SROs) are an increasingly common presence in schools. While SROs are often placed in schools to enhance student safety, their presence has the potential to send alternative messages to students about the risks that they face at school. Drawing on new research, this brief highlights findings that suggest that more frequent interactions with SROs may increase students' feelings that SROs contribute to their safety but may do so at the cost of heightening students' sense of overall risk at school. Recommendations are offered for ways schools can minimize SROs' impact on students' sense of risk while still ensuring they are safe at school.

Following a series of high-profile school shootings in 2018, many states and localities have increased the presence of law enforcement in schools. These officers, often referred to as school resource officers (SROs), are framed as a safety enhancing mechanism that might deter future shootings, respond quickly in the case of a shooting, and generally reduce student and parent fear of violence at school. This brief highlights findings from a recent research study that examines the relationship between interacting more frequently with an SRO or expressing higher levels of trust or comfort in an SRO and students' feelings of safety at school.

Key Finding 1: Students who report more frequent interactions with SROs are more likely to report that the SRO makes them feel safer but no more or less likely to report feeling safe at school.

As shown in the figure at the right, students who frequently interact with the SRO were no more or less likely to fear an attack at school or feel safe at school than those that interact less frequently with the SRO. They were, however, more likely to see the SRO as contributing to their sense of safety.

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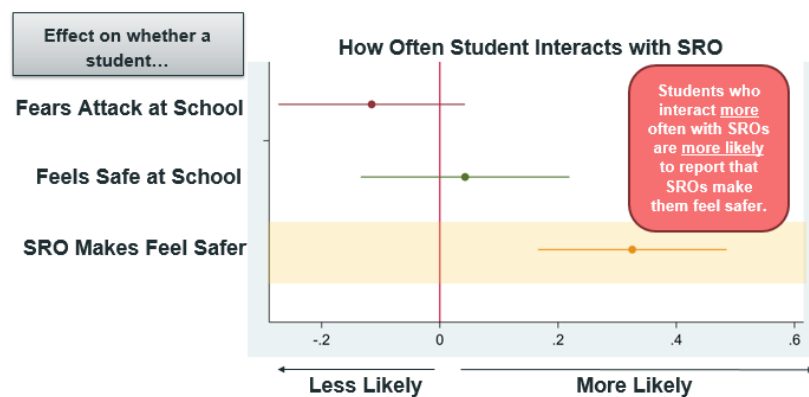
Key Finding 2: SROs may increase students' perceived sense of risk at school.

How is it that students who interact more frequently with SROs see SROs as increasing their feelings of safety yet do not feel safer overall at school? Student comments during focus groups suggest that SROs, while seen as there for student safety, may increase students' likelihood of believing that there are serious threats to their safety.

> *"But then without the [SRO], it just makes me feel worried and don't want to come to school because you don't know what could happen when they aren't here"* – Student Focus Group Participant
>
> *"And um, my mom said she didn't have a police officer when she was in school. Like, nothing really bad happened at her school… And then the, back then my mom's day they didn't think that they needed one. But now we need one"* – Student Focus Group Participant

Many students expressed that they feared what could happen if the SRO was not present. Others described how active shooter drills or other security drills were fear inducing. In other words, there was evidence that the presence or greater interactions with SROs made students feel that there is something to fear at school. So, while interacting with an SRO may make students more likely to see the SRO as there to keep them safe, it may also heighten their sense of risk at school. This is despite the fact that schools are, empirically, one of the safest environments for young people.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- SROs should consider the messages their presence and dialogue with students send regarding the risks that students face at school.
- Rather than focusing on a message that they are in schools to prevent harm, SROs might consider a primary message around developing relationships or helping school staff, one that does not implicitly suggest that students are at risk.
- Schools should carefully consider the costs and benefits of conducting active shooter drills. In some cases, particularly for younger students, such drills may be better done with staff when students are not present so as to not heighten their sense of fear.

Read More: Curran, F.C., Viano, S., Kupchik, A., Fisher, B.W. (Under Review). How do interactions with school resource officers predict students' likelihood of being disciplined and feelings of safety? Mixed-methods evidence from two school districts.

SROs and Students with Disabilities

Research Brief #7 – 2019
Samantha Viano

Students with disabilities (SWD) have many legal protections from school-based punishment when their behavior is a symptom of their disability. However, SWD do not have the same legal protections. This research brief highlights findings from an ongoing study of school resource officers (SROs) and their interactions with students. Without training, SROs often perceive the behavior of SWD as breaking the law, and they can struggle with the decision to intervene and how to intervene when SWD exhibit negative behaviors. We recommend all SROs receive training specifically on interacting with SWD as well as school districts setting clear policies on how SROs are to interact with SWD.

SROs naturally interact with all students when placed full time in a school setting, but their interactions with a specific groups of students, SWD, has not been as carefully examined. Often, SWD will exhibit negative, sometimes violent, behaviors that are symptoms of their disabilities. Federal law protects SWD from being punished because of their disability when it comes to school-based consequences. Outside of school, SWD do not have the same legal protections.

Key Finding 1: SROs often assist school staff to help manage the behavior of SWD
It was very common, especially at the elementary level, for SROs to report spending a significant amount of time helping school staff when SWD who exhibited harmful behavior. This included blocking exits when students tried to exit the building, observing when teachers restrained a student, and monitoring students in exclusion rooms.

Key Finding 2: SROs do not consistently receive training on working with SWD.
The SROs in the districts we studied had not received specific training on working with SWD. They were told that SWD are a "gray area" without further instructions on working with SWD.

Key Finding 3: SROs sometimes show a willingness to arrest SWD even if the school administrators decline to punish the SWD for their behavior.
Some SROs commented that they understood they were not expected to arrest SWD while others, especially at the high school level, said that they would arrest a SWD if they broke the law.

Policy and Practice Recommendations
- All SROs should receive training specifically on working with SWD.
- School districts should clearly define how and under what circumstances SROs are to interact with SWD and intervene with SWD when there are behavioral incidents.

A Guide for Thinking About Costs and Benefits of SROs

Research Brief #8 – 2019

Aaron Kupchik

As a number of schools nationwide consider the expansion of school resource officers (SROs), they are faced with weighing the benefits and potential unintended consequences of integrating law enforcement into a school environment. This research brief summarizes findings from the extant body of research on SROs and provides school district leadership with a list of potential benefits and potential negative consequences associated with the use of SROs.

Over the past twenty years, increasing numbers of schools have created School Resource Officer (SRO) programs, where police officers work full- or part-time in schools. Given recent school shootings, even more school districts may be considering such a strategy. While an SRO program makes sense for some schools, research on their impacts suggests that schools should cautiously evaluate the costs and benefits before deciding to implement SROs. The following brief summarizes what we know about this subject, based on our own research and on the existing body of scholarly research.

Benefits of SROs

Certainly, there can be benefits to having SROs in schools, including the following:

- In many schools, students report feeling safer because of an SRO's presence.
- In some schools, students and staff report that SROs help prevent weapons in school.
- Their presence means a first responder can take action in case of emergency or crisis.
- The school has an additional adult who can mentor students.
- Stronger relationships, including greater trust, between students and law enforcement can be beneficial.
- They can advise school staff and students or direct them toward legal resources and other needed social services.

Costs of SROs

At the same time, research has shown that the presence of police in schools can have negative consequences as well, including:

- The presence of SROs increases the number of arrests for minor misbehavior.
- The presence of SROs increases the number of school suspensions.
- Students' privacy and rights against search and seizure can be compromised.
- SROs' actions can increase racial disproportionality in school exclusion.

- The presence of an SRO can subtly shift the school's behavioral focus from social/emotional supports to law enforcement.
- SROs can alienate some students, particularly students of color.
- Limited resources are spent on security rather than counseling and student supports.

Summary

It is difficult to determine whether the presence of SROs helps keep students safe. The research on this topic is inconclusive, with very few high-quality studies finding greater school safety because of their presence. A greater number of studies instead find no effect on criminal behavior, and that their presence means students are at greater risk of arrest for minor misbehavior. Further, to the extent that limited personnel resources go to hiring SROs instead of other student supports found to help students avoid crime and victimization, SROs' presence may not be the best choice for schools.

For some schools with a documented crime problem that interferes with student learning and student and staff safety, an SRO may be helpful. But schools facing such challenges are rare, as school victimization nationwide, including violence, is much lower than it was a generation ago. For others, we urge cautious deliberation in deciding whether a regular police presence is the best course of action.

Read More:

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

Kupchik, A. (2010). *Homeroom security: School discipline in an age of fear*. NYU Press.

Na, C., & Gottfredson, D. C. (2013). Police officers in schools: Effects on school crime and the processing of offending behaviors. *Justice Quarterly, 30*(4), 619-650.

Nolan, K. (2011). *Police in the hallways: Discipline in an urban high school*. U of Minnesota Press.

Owens, E. G. (2017). Testing the School-to-Prison Pipeline. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *36*(1), 11-37.

Technical Appendix

The research briefs included in this report draw from a larger study of school safety and the use of school resource officers that occurred between 2015 and 2018 in two suburban school districts in the southern United States. Analytic details specific to each research brief can be found in the full research papers referenced throughout. This technical appendix provides a brief summary of the analytic approach for the project as a whole.

To date there has been little research on the reasons why law enforcement personnel become involved with schools, what they do in schools, and the impacts they may have on schools. This is particularly the case in elementary school settings and in schools located in non-urban environments. Studying these settings is particularly important given trends towards an increasing presence of law enforcement in them. The research project these research briefs are based on investigated school resource officers (SROs) within an affluent county that housed two high performing school districts. The purpose of the study was to understand why they were implemented, what they do, and how they impact the school environment.

The sample for this study included students in grades 4-12 (younger students were excluded because of concerns with question comprehension) as well as school resource officers, administrators (principals and vice principals), teachers, and parents. Samples were generally convenience samples based on availability of participants. Data in this study were collected in two school districts located in the American South. These districts are generally described as "suburban" though the schools across the two districts fall in a range of urbanicities including a small city, large suburbs, fringe rural areas, fringe town, and distant rural areas. One district served a small city while the other was a county wide district serving the surrounding areas. Interview, focus group, and survey data was collected between Spring of 2017 and Fall of 2017.

SROs and school administrators took part in one on one interviews while other stakeholders took part in focus groups with 2-10 participants. The interviews and focus groups included questions on school safety, school discipline, and the use of SROs in schools. Interviews and focus groups tended to range in time from 20 minutes to one hour with most around 45 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were conducted by trained research staff and took place at schools. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcribed data was coded in an iterative manner using the constant comparative method.

All SROs in both school districts were invited to participate in the survey. For other stakeholders, all schools in the city school district participated in the survey. Schools were selected in the county school district based on a sampling design meant to be representative of the range of different school settings in the district without having to include all schools in the sample. The sampling was based on

four high schools each within a different urbanicity type (one rural, one town, one suburban, and one city) and included the feeder elementary and middle schools for these high schools.

Overall, non-SRO stakeholders in 25 schools were included in the survey. Administrators, teachers, parents, and students within these selected schools were invited to participate. All principals and at least one vice principal per school were sampled. All teachers were also sampled. SROs, administrators, and teachers all completed the survey digitally. Sampling of students and parents within schools varied depending on the school. Many schools, especially in the lower grades, gave the survey to all students in the grade while the high schools and most middle schools tended to survey only about three classrooms per grade. The research team requested a minimum of three classrooms per grade be selected, and principals were encouraged to randomly select classrooms by sorting teachers' names alphabetically and selecting the teachers whose names appeared first. Students selected to be in the study based on their classroom assignment were sent home paper consent forms or their parents were sent links via email to an online consent form. The research team then distributed paper surveys to all students who had received parental consent (the students were asked for their assent/consent at the beginning of the survey), and students completed the paper surveys during class time. We received 938 student surveys. Parents completed the survey digitally. In many schools, all parents with active email addresses on file for the school were invited, while in others, the school administration invited only parents of students in sampled classrooms. Therefore, our survey design included components of purposeful sampling (of schools), a census of some subgroups (SROs, administrators, and teachers), random sampling of some students (where administrators agreed to randomly sample classrooms for participation), and convenience sampling (where administrators chose classrooms for student participants in a non-random way).

The surveys were intended to be short (around ten minutes total for students and no more than 20-30 minutes for other stakeholders) and focused on school resource officers, school safety, and school discipline. Scales on feelings of safety, school climate, and the school disciplinary system were on the survey.

Further details on data analysis are available in the specific papers referenced throughout the research briefs.