

# WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL-BASED LAW ENFORCEMENT ON SCHOOL SAFETY?

by Alexis Stern & Anthony Petrosino

## Background

U.S. public school districts and police departments often collaborate in efforts to address school-based violence and other threats to the safety and well-being of students, teachers, and staff. One result of these partnerships is that law enforcement officers have become an increasingly common presence in schools around the country, even at the elementary school level (Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2012). This research brief defines school-based law enforcement and summarizes some of the research about its effects on students and schools.

## What is school-based law enforcement?

The term “school-based law enforcement” refers to any number of situations in which one or more trained police officers work full-time or part-time on school property. In all cases, the police are sworn officers who carry firearms, have arrest powers, and carry a police department badge.<sup>1</sup> Although all types of police officers can respond to schools in the event of an emergency, the difference for school-based law enforcement is that

police officers are regularly assigned responsibility for maintaining a presence on school property.

There are two common types of school-based law enforcement strategies employed in the United States. The most common is to have a school resource officer (SRO), which involves the school or district establishing a relationship with the local police department to have one or more municipal police devote their time to maintaining a presence on school property. The other common approach is to have school district police. Rather than using municipal police, some school districts have established their own police departments. For example, large urban districts (e.g., Miami-Dade County Public Schools) often have their own sworn police with responsibility for maintaining presence on school grounds.

Whether the school-based law enforcement personnel are SROs or the district’s own police officers, they occupy a range of roles and have responsibilities that vary depending on school and district policies. Their activities may include coordinating school security measures, monitoring

and responding to criminal activities on school property, establishing relationships with school officials and youth, or referring students to external services or resources (Shaw, 2004; Cray & Weiler, 2011).

Although officers who teach the curricula of prevention programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) or Gang Resistance Education Awareness Training (G.R.E.A.T.), are also considered school-based law enforcement, this brief does not include research on these programs because such officers typically do not have other responsibilities at the school and are there *only* to teach the curricula. In addition, studies of those programs usually focus on individual outcomes such as self-reported drug abuse or gang involvement rather than outcomes specific to school safety.

## The policy debate over school-based law enforcement

Authors who advocate for school-based law enforcement write that when law enforcement officers are carefully selected and trained for placement in schools, their presence

<sup>1</sup> Although some schools rely on security guards to implement specific security measures (e.g., managing a metal detector) or to provide support in case of emergency, this brief does not address the use of security guards because they are not an extension of law enforcement, as they are not necessarily sworn officers.

can reduce crime and improve students' feelings of safety and their learning outcomes (Canady, James, & Nease, 2012). Other authors contend that school-based law enforcement has led to increased criminalization of developmentally typical misbehavior and to the disproportionate targeting of youth of color, leading to their increased contact with the juvenile justice system (Justice Policy Institute, 2011). This brief summarizes what we currently know about the impact of school-based law enforcement on school safety outcomes.

## Reviews of relevant literature

Research syntheses that comprehensively cover the prior research on a topic can be valuable for ascertaining what evidence exists on the impact of school-based law enforcement. Such syntheses have an advantage over individual studies in that the syntheses contemplate all of the evidence collectively. This brief draws on existing syntheses of research on school-based law enforcement.

A strong consensus from these syntheses is that the evaluation evidence is still premature and presents a number of methodological challenges for researchers attempting to draw conclusions from the studies. For example, many of the completed studies are descriptive rather than evaluative and do not report on outcomes. Of those evaluations that do include outcome data, most were not conducted with research designs that are credible in establishing the impact of school-based law enforcement (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). Indeed, almost all of the rigorous evaluation studies of school-based law enforcement have focused on the effects of police-taught

prevention curricula (such as D.A.R.E. or G.R.E.A.T.) on student outcomes such as self-reported drug use but, as previously mentioned, not specifically on whether these programs have improved school safety.

The syntheses identified for this brief vary considerably in terms of purposes, inclusion criteria, comprehensiveness, and outcomes of interest, but what they share is a recognition that there is insufficient evidence for drawing a decisive conclusion about the overall effectiveness of non-educational, school-based law enforcement programs (Petrosino et al., forthcoming; Petrosino et al., 2012; Gonzalez, Jetelina, & Jennings, 2016; James & McCallion, 2013; Raymond, 2010). The following sections summarize the available evidence as reported in these syntheses for three school safety outcomes: perceptions of safety, discipline and arrests; and school shootings and other extreme violence.

## Evidence of school-based law enforcement's effects on perceptions of safety

There is no conclusive evidence that the presence of school-based law enforcement has a positive effect on students' perceptions of safety in schools. In their review of 12 quasi-experimental studies, Petrosino and colleagues (forthcoming) found that school-based law enforcement is not associated with statistically significant changes in students' perceptions of safety at school. For this review, the authors conducted a systematic and exhaustive search of literature to find studies of school-based law enforcement, identifying and reviewing 12 quasi-experiments that met criteria for focus, rigor, outcomes, use of a comparison group, types

of data used, and the scale of the program studied.

## Evidence of school-based law enforcement's effects on discipline and arrests

The review conducted by Petrosino and colleagues (forthcoming) also suggests that common non-curricular policing strategies have no overall effects on measures of crime or discipline in schools. Although multiple analyses were reported in the 12 reviewed studies, none of these analyses indicated a positive impact on school safety outcomes.

A review by Fisher and Hennessy (2016) examined studies that looked at the relationship between having a school resource officer (SRO) and the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., out-of-school suspension, expulsion). They report that school-based law enforcement in the form of an SRO may be associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline. In their review, the authors found that schools recorded an increase of 21 percent more incidents of exclusionary discipline after the introduction of SROs. This finding is correlational, and the authors note that it is impossible to determine whether this difference reflects a change in student behavior or a change in the level of disciplinary or police enforcement. However, they hypothesize that schools with SROs may be applying harsher responses to student disciplinary infractions compared to schools without a police presence. This research echoes a report from the Congressional Research Service — produced as a response to the December 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut — that reviewed the research and found that children who

attend schools that have police in the schools might be more likely to face arrest for minor offenses than children who attend schools without police (James & McCallion, 2013).

### Evidence of school-based law enforcement's effects on school shootings and other extreme violence

The mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, has again increased attention on the role of school-based law enforcement in preventing more serious acts of violence such as school shootings. The Congressional Research Service's 2013 review noted that "the body of research on the effectiveness of SROs does not address whether their presence in schools has deterred mass shootings" (James & McCallion, 2013, p. 11). The report does indicate that some studies showed that schools with police on campus are more likely to have emergency plans in place and receive regular safety checks.

### Conclusion

There is currently very little rigorous evaluative research on the effects — in terms of school safety — of having a police presence in schools. However, what evidence exists to date, as summarized by syntheses of the available studies, fails to support a school safety effect. In addition, syntheses do point to an increase in the use of exclusionary disciplinary actions toward students in schools with SROs when compared with schools that do not have SROs, although the reason for this increase cannot be ascertained from the review (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016).

Another weakness of the existing studies is that they often focus on just the presence or absence of school-based law enforcement on campus, not on any other factors that might influence the impact of school-based law enforcement, such as how officers are selected, what roles they have in the school, their training, and the support they receive from the school and police administration.

Fortunately, to strengthen the existing evidence base, the U.S. National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative funded dozens of additional rigorous studies of school safety beginning in 2015. Several of these studies are looking specifically at the impacts of school-based law enforcement. For example, WestEd is working in partnership with Texas State University and the Texas School Safety Center to conduct an experimental study of the effects of a new framework for SROs on student perceptions of safety at 26 middle schools and high schools in central Texas (McKenna & Martinez-Prather, 2017). This study's use of random assignment will make it an important addition to this body of research. Ideally, future studies will continue to improve the quality of available evidence on the effectiveness of school-based law enforcement and could be valuable in informing the decisions of schools, districts, and policymakers.

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

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