

States' School Safety Centers: A Brief Look Into History, Characteristics, and Activities

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Background

Tragedies such as those in 2018 at Marjory Stoneham Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida, and in Santa Fe High School in Texas have raised national concern about school safety. The high concern across the country is evidenced by more than 40 states creating task forces or commissions to examine school safety and by nearly all states passing legislation to address school safety, all since Parkland (Petrosino et al., 2018). Additionally, early data from the 2021/22 academic year indicates that violence, including shootings, is becoming more concerning given the return of students from the pandemic, many of them suffering from increased trauma (Smith, 2021).

One vehicle used to maintain an organized and consolidated effort at the state level to address school safety is the creation of state school safety centers (SSSCs). SSSCs generally have a mission to be the centralized state unit that provides a wide range of services to enhance the safety and security of schools in their jurisdiction (National Crime Prevention Council, 2020). Although trends show an increased interest from states to establish such centers (Carlton et al., 2017) and from the federal government to support these efforts (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2019), more information is needed to better understand how these centers should operate and what leads to a successful SSSC. The exact number of SSSCs in existence today is unknown. Additionally, finding empirical studies that describe how SSSCs function or “what works” relative to SSSCs is a difficult process.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following key findings are based on an online survey of key informants in each state to assess the history, characteristics, and activities of state school safety centers (SSSCs):

- » Over 65% of respondents reported that their state has or has had an SSSC, and over 96% reported that the SSSC was still operational.
- » A majority (62%) of SSSCs have been established in the last decade.
- » Over 65% of respondents reported that their SSSC was started in response to state legislation, with 28% attributing the creation to a response to incidents of violence in schools.
- » Over 70% of currently operational SSSCs were reported to be situated within larger state agencies.
- » A large majority of respondents indicated that their SSSC was funded by state and/or federal funds.
- » Over 75% of respondents reported that their SSSC had 10 or fewer staff.

Goals of This Evaluation Study

Given the interest in SSSCs, their potential role in improving safety, and the lack of information currently available to inform the development of high-quality centers, WestEd’s Justice and Prevention Research Center (JPRC) has begun the first empirical evaluation focused on SSSCs. The goals of this 3-year evaluation are to

- » document the history of SSSCs;
- » describe the characteristics, practices, structures, and activities of SSSCs;
- » assess their perceived impact;
- » develop a framework outlining promising structures and practices in order to facilitate the development and improvement of SSSCs; and
- » guide future research to examine the impacts and outcomes associated with SSSCs.

This brief is the first in a series that will highlight findings from this larger evaluation. The brief conveys information about these centers in states that have had SSSCs, in states that have had SSSCs but discontinued them, and in states that have never had such centers. For those states that reported ever having an SSSC, JPRC researchers gathered data on the characteristics of these SSSCs, including how each center is structured within the state government, how the center is funded, how many staff are employed by the center, and what activities the center engages in. One of the main aims for this initial data collection activity is to develop a uniform definition of what constitutes an SSSC.

Methodology

This study aimed to survey key informants who were knowledgeable about school safety in their respective states. The findings in this brief are from an online survey of these informants that included both multiple choice and open-ended

response items to assess the history, characteristics, and activities of SSSCs across the United States. The survey was divided into four broad sections: (a) Background Information, (b) SSSC History, (c) Characteristics of Active SSSCs, and (d) Characteristics of Discontinued SSSCs.

To identify at least one key informant for this survey in each state, the evaluation team drew on the relationships established by WestEd’s extensive networks in education across the country coupled with a robust review of resources available online (e.g., school safety legislation, websites, media coverage). The survey was sent to 51 identified key informants via email invitation in May 2021. The data collection period concluded on June 30, 2021. Forty-three respondents submitted a survey, which is a response rate of about 84 percent. Key informants who responded to the survey included SSSC staff, state education agency staff, policymakers, and staff from other state agencies.

Data from the state key informant survey were analyzed primarily by descriptive and basic inferential statistical approaches. The data were analyzed at an aggregate level to understand overall histories as well as disaggregated to examine data specific to each state, where appropriate.

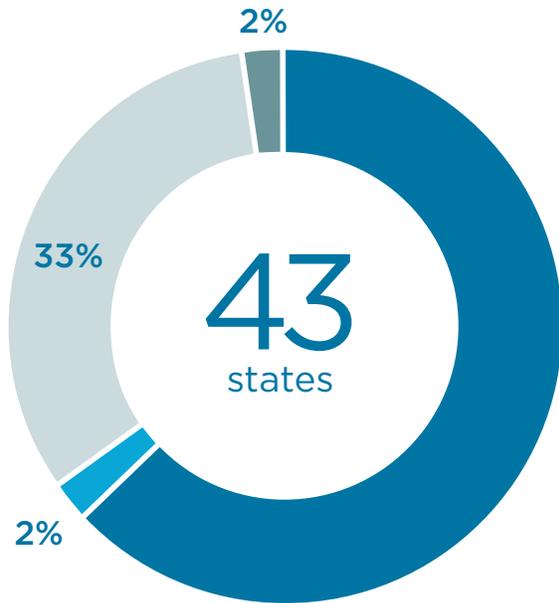
Findings

A growing number of states have SSSCs. Over 65 percent of states responding to the survey reported having an SSSC, with most of these centers serving their entire state (see Exhibit 1). Of those states that reported ever having an SSSC, over 96 percent indicated that the SSSC was still operational at the time of the survey. This finding indicates that not only are many states choosing to adopt SSSCs, but once implemented, an SSSC tends to remain in operation to support school safety. As states likely continue to add, and perhaps even expand, SSSCs, it will be critical for policymakers, state leaders, and federal agencies to have a firm understanding of how centers

can be established and/or reworked to ensure the greatest impact on school safety.

respondents specifically noting the creation of the center as a response to highly publicized school violence incidents (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 1: States That Have Ever Had a State School Safety Center



- One SSSC that serves/served the entire state
- Multiple SSSCs that collectively serve/served the entire state
- Never had an SSSC
- Not sure

School violence is often the motivation for having an SSSC. A majority of SSSCs have been established in the last decade, with 62 percent of respondents indicating that the center in their state was started between 2010 and 2020 (see Exhibit 2). Just over 75 percent of SSSCs were established over the past two decades (2000–2020). This finding indicates that SSSCs are still relatively new in a large majority of states, although several were established even prior to 2000. Additionally, over 65 percent of respondents shared that their SSSC was started because of state legislation requiring the creation of a center, with 28 percent of

Exhibit 2: Starting Year of State School Safety Centers

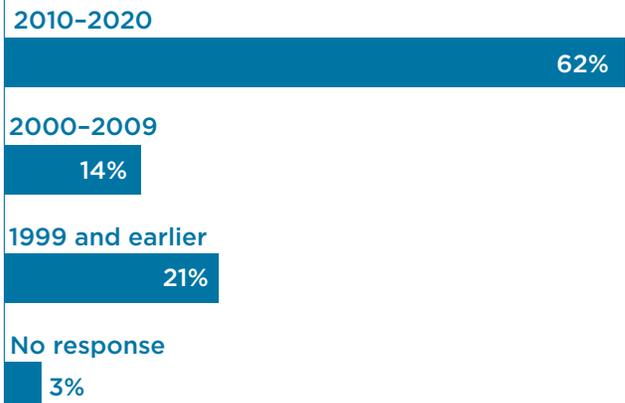
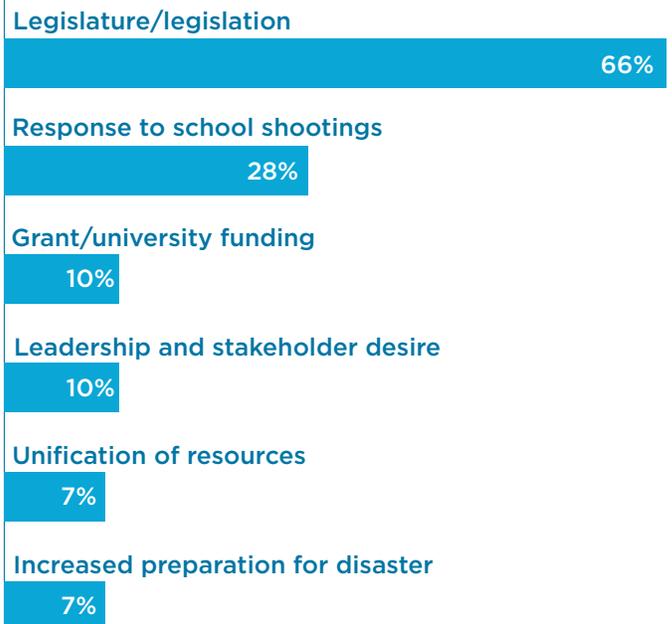


Exhibit 3: Reasons for Starting State School Safety Centers

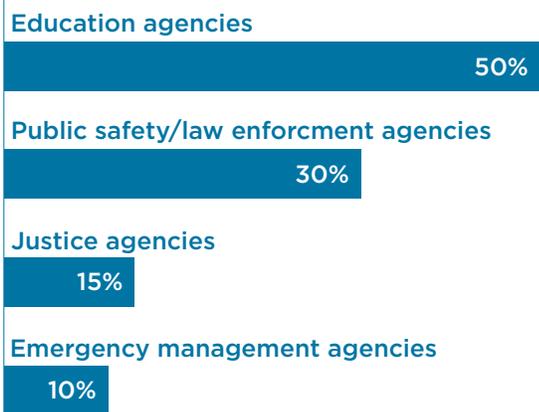


Note: The percentages in this exhibit are based on a write-in response item in which respondents could describe why the SSSC in their state started. The sum exceeds 100 percent because some respondents described multiple reasons and/or several themes were identified in analysis (e.g., legislation stemming from a school violence incident).

Most SSSCs are situated within larger state agencies and are supported by state/federal funds. Over 70 percent of currently operational SSSCs were reported to be situated within larger state agencies. These agencies included those related to education, public safety (i.e., law enforcement), justice, and emergency management (see Exhibit 4). This type of structure — being a part of a larger state agency with additional resources, services, and obligations, as opposed to being a standalone independent center — is important not only for defining what SSSCs are but also for understanding how they go about achieving their work (e.g., potentially having additional agencywide supports such as communications, human resources, and so on). Additionally, a large majority of respondents indicated that the SSSC in their state was funded using state and/or federal funds. In some cases, these funds were state appropriations within the state’s budget (75%), but in other cases these were grants given by federal (over 46%) and/or state agencies (nearly 18%). Many respondents reported multiple funding streams for their SSSC.

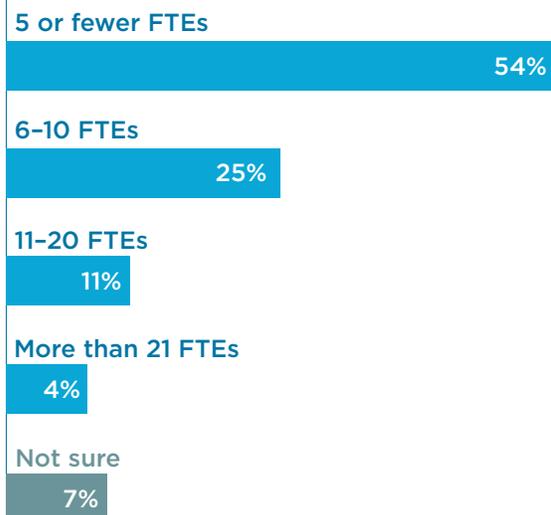
Most SSSCs comprise a small staff engaging in a wide range of activities. Over 75 percent of respondents reported that the SSSC in their state had 10 or fewer staff, with over 50 percent reporting that their SSSC had 5 or fewer staff (see Exhibit 5). However, respondents also indicated that their SSSCs are responsible for a wide range of activities in support of school safety in the state. For instance, in each of the following categories, over 50 percent of respondents reported that their SSSC engaged in the activity: technical assistance (93%), training (86%), resource development (82%), grant administration (54%), and compliance (50%). These findings suggest that, in most cases, a small staff dedicated to the SSSC is responsible for a diverse set of activities that support schools and districts in their safety efforts. Many respondents also noted that the SSSC’s work is often achieved through collaboration with various partner agencies and groups that also have an interest in school safety.

Exhibit 4: State Agencies That House State School Safety Centers



Note: The percentages in this exhibit total more than 100 percent because one respondent reported that their SSSC is shared by more than one agency.

Exhibit 5: Full-Time Employees (FTEs) of State School Safety Centers



Note: The percentages in this exhibit total just over 100 percent due to rounding.

A uniform definition of SSSCs is needed. Of the 28 respondents who reported that their state had an operational SSSC at the time of the survey, over 70 percent indicated that this SSSC was part of a larger state agency (e.g., department of education, department of public safety). In contrast, 3 respondents reported that their state did not have an SSSC, but, when asked to provide a rationale as to why the state did not have a center and how the state addressed school safety, each of the respondents indicated that school safety was already handled by an existing state agency and there was therefore no need for an SSSC. There are several potential explanations for their answers. For instance, it is likely that some states have legislation that specifically mandates the creation and support of an SSSC, even if it is housed within a larger state agency. Other states may not have such legislation. Alternatively, states may just differ in their terminology of how they refer to this specific office or department within a larger agency that is responsible for school safety. Thus, when completing the survey, if such an entity is not commonly referred to as an SSSC within the state, the respondent reported their state as not having an SSSC. Despite the respondents' varied perspectives, the authors of this study propose the following as at least an initial definition of what constitutes an SSSC, based on these survey data:

A state-level resource that is funded through state appropriations, state/federal grants, or some combination of the two; that, at a minimum, serves the entire state as a central clearinghouse for school safety information and resources; and that may provide technical assistance and training and/or develop resources to support school safety efforts.

Conclusion

To build on the initial data collected by survey in this study, the JPRC's future evaluation work will include collecting additional data from SSSC directors; gathering detailed activity data from

each SSSC; and conducting interviews and surveys with policymakers, superintendents, principals, school resource officers, and others involved in school safety efforts in each state. Findings from these data collection activities could lead to further refinement of the definition of SSSCs suggested in this paper. Further data collection will also support other aims of the evaluation, such as developing a measure of the perceived impacts or effectiveness of SSSCs in order to guide policy, practice, and future research related to SSSCs.

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