

WHAT A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF 32 EVALUATIONS SAYS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL-BASED LAW ENFORCEMENT

Ben Fisher, Florida State University
Anthony Petrosino, WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center

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Findings

- Research indicates that SBLE contributes to increased punishment of students without providing improvements in school safety.
- Research suggests that SBLE may improve perceptions of safety at school, but the evidence is from just two studies.
- Research suggests that the presence of SBLE is unrelated to learning outcomes.

Background

Over the past several decades, the presence of school-based law enforcement (SBLE) has grown steadily in the United States. SBLE includes a variety of forms of law enforcement officers stationed in schools on at least a part-time basis, often on a full-time basis. SBLE might include local police officers, sheriff's deputies, officers from school-based police agencies, or a variety of other possible arrangements. Although data are elusive regarding the number of schools using police, some estimates are available. The most recent version of the nationwide *School Survey*

on Crime and Safety indicates that according to principals' reports, 67 percent of public schools had at least one police officer present at least one day a week during the 2017/18 academic year (Diliberti et al., 2019).

In recent years, along with the steady growth of SBLE, criticisms of SBLE have grown louder and more pointed. Many districts reexamined the use of SBLE given the greater scrutiny on policing generally following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020 (Petrosino et al., 2020). Large school districts serving Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, and Oakland, among others, removed

SBLE. Notably, however, some schools that initially removed SBLE have reinstated it due to concerns about school safety (Armus & Natanson, 2021; Geha, 2021). Calls to remove SBLE have largely focused on two criticisms: that SBLE does not make schools safer and that it has disproportionately negative impacts on students who may already experience marginalization in school settings, including Black and Latino students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and others (see, for example, Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018; Crosse et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Homer & Fisher, 2020; Owens,

2017; Sorensen et al., 2021; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Weisburst, 2019). SBLE has been implicated in the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline,” a process by which students, particularly those who are already marginalized due to racism and other systems of oppression, are funneled from schools into the juvenile and adult justice systems (see, for example, Homer & Fisher, 2020; Owens, 2017; Theriot, 2009).

Potential Areas of Impact

Although SBLE has become a common intervention, there is debate about whether it is effective or harmful. There are at least three broad domains in which SBLE might have an impact, either positive or negative, on students and schools:

- crime and behavior
- perceptions of school (e.g., safety, climate)
- learning outcomes

One expectation for how SBLE might work is grounded in the logic of crime deterrence, which posits that crime is less likely to occur if a potential offender perceives a high risk that they will be caught. By this logic, having more police surveillance activities and police interaction with students and staff at a school is expected to reduce criminal behavior and noncriminal misconduct by students; increase student, staff, and parent perceptions of safety; and lead to relationships that are more positive between police and young persons and the school as a whole. Students who trust officers may be more likely to share information about potential safety threats. This perspective may also assume secondary consequences such as

increased attendance, improved test scores and grades, and perceptions that are more positive regarding other aspects (beyond safety) of the school and its climate.

However, there is also the possibility of unintended negative consequences. That is, police presence may lead to overuse of the formal justice system for behavior that otherwise would be resolved by school administration, leading to more punishment of students, particularly among already marginalized students such as racial and ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. SBLE programs could also lead to increased fear of crime if the presence of an officer sensitizes students to the possibility that violence may occur. Additionally, increased police scrutiny could lead to objective measures of misbehavior increasing simply because the police are on site and able to detect more student offenses. These increases in surveillance, fear, punishment, and focus on behavior problems could have a radiating effect on the school environment in which they foster negative perceptions of the school and harm learning outcomes such as grades, test scores, and attendance.

Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

This brief reports on the results of a study that applied a rigorous literature synthesis method—a systematic review—to synthesize the empirical literature on the relationship between SBLE and crime and behavior, perceptions of school, and learning outcomes. Systematic reviews use explicit, transparent, and comprehensive methods to reduce bias that can unfairly steer conclusions in

literature reviews, particularly those that focus on the effectiveness of an intervention. Efforts to reduce bias included developing clear criteria for which studies were eligible for being included in the review, conducting a reproducible search for relevant studies, and collecting information from each study in a consistent way. The study also included a meta-analysis—a statistical analysis of prior research studies. Meta-analyses are useful for quantitatively summarizing findings and providing impact estimates that are drawn from a potentially wide range of studies. The methods used for the analyses that were done for this brief—and a full report of all evaluations included in the analyses—are detailed in a submitted report for the Campbell Collaboration (Fisher et al., 2022).

The study’s systematic review and meta-analysis summarized findings of quantitative studies that examined SBLE and any outcomes related to crime and behavior, perceptions of school, and learning. Included studies must have compared outcomes in units with SBLE to outcomes in units without SBLE. The units of analysis could be either students or schools. The study examined over 16,000 reports for potential inclusion in the literature synthesis and meta-analysis conducted for this brief, finding that 32 studies were eligible to be included. Researchers identified 1,002 effect sizes from these 32 studies to analyze. Some of these studies focused on only one of the three domains in which SBLE might have an impact—crime and behavior, perceptions of school, and learning outcomes—whereas others focused on multiple kinds of impact. Because some of the included studies used

data from individual students and others used data from schools, the analyses estimated student-level and school-level effects separately.

Impact on Crime and Behavior

Among the 27 studies that examined crime and behavior outcomes using schools as the unit of analysis, SBLE presence was associated with *higher levels of crime and behavior*. This result appears to have been driven by an increase in the use of exclusionary discipline, such as suspension. The analysis did not find that SBLE was associated with any statistically significant differences in the levels of criminal justice system contact, violence, substance-related outcomes, or weapon-related outcomes. Similar results were found when looking at four studies that used students as the unit of analysis; again, there were higher rates of exclusionary discipline in schools with SBLE but no differences for the other sets of outcomes. These findings indicate that SBLE contributes to increased punishment of students without providing improvements in school safety.

Impact on Perceptions of School

There were two studies that linked SBLE to perceptions of school using schools as the unit of analysis and two studies that used students as the unit of analysis. For both kinds of studies, analyses found that there was no statistically significant relationship between SBLE and perceptions of school. The analyses also examined studies that measured perceived safety as an outcome. Among the two school-level studies, SBLE was associated with improved perceptions of safety. However, the two student-level studies found no statistically significant relationship. These findings suggest that SBLE may improve perceptions of safety at school, but the evidence is from just two studies.

Impact on Learning Outcomes

The systematic review identified eight studies that examined learning outcomes using schools as the unit of analysis and three studies that used students as the unit of analysis. None of the meta-analytic models showed a statistically significant relationship between SBLE and learning outcomes, including measures of achievement, proficiency, and attendance. These findings suggest that the presence of SBLE is unrelated to learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The systematic review and meta-analysis done for this brief indicate that according to the evaluation research published to date, SBLE does not on average have a crime prevention effect but instead contributes to higher rates of student discipline. However, these conclusions must be tempered by the reality that many of the studies used designs that do not permit strong causal inferences. There were no findings available yet from randomized control trials, which are often considered the “gold standard” of research designs seeking to make causal claims. Nevertheless, a handful of strong quasi-experiments published in the last few years (Gottfredson et al., 2020; Owens, 2017; Sorensen et al., 2021; Weisburst, 2019) indicate that this field of study is benefiting from increased rigor, a trend that the authors of this brief hope will continue. A recent report to Congress by the National Institute of Justice made that very point and laid out a suggested path for future research and evaluation on school police (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022).

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