

The Structure, Services, and Products of State School Safety Centers

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Background

Tragedies such as those in 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe High School in Texas once again brought school safety to the forefront for the federal government, states, and local organizations. More recent tragedies in Oxford, Michigan, and Uvalde, Texas, have continued to bring attention to school safety. Despite national data indicating that fatalities at schools due to homicide among children ages 5–18 are rare and that other indicators of school safety are improving (Irwin et al., 2022), these high-casualty massacres have substantially elevated national concern about whether youths are safe in school. 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 2018 (Petrosino et al., 2018).

One vehicle for organizing and consolidating efforts at the state level to address school safety is the creation of a state school safety center (SSSC). Typically, an SSSC has a mission to be the centralized state unit that provides a wide range of services to enhance the safety and security of schools in its 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.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » This paper is part of an evaluation aiming to illuminate the history, characteristics, structure, activities, and perceived impacts of state school safety centers (SSSCs) across the United States.
- » The results reported here are based on interviews with SSSC directors and detailed activity data gathered from SSSCs for a 1-year period.
- » Key findings:
 - Most state legislation guiding SSSCs is focused on emergency management.
 - SSSCs utilize various staffing models and have staff with expertise aligned with state legislation requirements.
 - SSSCs likely need diverse funding sources to conduct their work.
 - Most SSSCs provide many services remotely.
 - State legislation and SSSC operations play a role in shaping services.

To begin to address this gap in knowledge, an [initial brief](#) from the WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center’s evaluation study aimed to identify which states have ever had SSSCs, which states have had centers and discontinued them, and which states have

never had centers (McKenna et al., 2021). For those states that reported ever having an SSSC, the report examined 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 products and activities the centers engage in. Finally, the report explored how different states define SSSCs, with the aim of developing a uniform definition of an SSSC.

A clear finding from this work was that many states have implemented SSSCs; over 65 percent of states responding to the survey reported having an SSSC, with most of these centers serving their entire state. A majority of SSSCs were established in the last decade, with 62 percent of respondents indicating that their SSSC was started between 2010 and 2020. Additionally, respondents shared that a majority of SSSCs were started because of state legislation requiring the creation of a center, often in response to school violence incidents with high national profiles. Finally, the report found potential issues in defining SSSCs in terms of where the center is situated within the state government, which has likely been the cause of at least some of the conflicting reports on the number of SSSCs in existence. The full report can be accessed [online from the federal Office of Justice Programs](#).

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 the perceived impact of SSSCs;

- » 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 second in a series highlighting findings from each of the data collection efforts associated with the JPRC's evaluation of SSSCs. Using these data, the brief provides more information on the general landscape of SSSCs; how they operate; and the services they provide, including the types of activities, content areas, and audiences served. The brief then discusses these findings collectively in terms of their utility for the use, focus, and usefulness of SSSCs.

Methodology

The study that is the source of this brief used data from in-depth interviews with SSSC directors to examine the school safety landscape in their states, the history and structure of the centers, the services offered by the centers, and the centers' accomplishments and challenges. Researchers also collected detailed activity data collected from SSSCs to retrospectively document the services provided by each SSSC over a 1-year period (January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021).

For director interviews, based on responses to a prior SSSC Key Informant Survey, 36 SSSC directors were eligible to participate, with 34 directors agreeing to participate, representing 29 states. Interviews took place from September 2021 to January 2022. Each interview was recorded and included a facilitator and a notetaker. The interview protocol for SSSC directors included items about the school safety landscape in their states, the history and structure of the centers, and services offered by the centers. SSSC directors were also asked to reflect on their centers' accomplishments and challenges. To analyze the interview data, the WestEd research team engaged in thematic content analysis of interview notes.

Based on participation in the director interviews, 29 states were invited to participate in the activity data collection phase of this project. In 4 of those states, there were multiple centers within the state; in each of these states, 2 entities were asked to participate, resulting in 33 entities, representing 29 different states, being asked to participate. To retrospectively document the services provided by each SSSC over a 1-year period (January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021), researchers collected data in two phases. First, researchers administered a Qualtrics survey to SSSC directors to gather preliminary information regarding activities related to trainings, technical assistance (TA), resources, grant administration, and compliance. Second, SSSCs received access to a customized workspace in an online, cloud-based platform called Smartsheet, where SSSCs provided more details related to the services applicable to their centers. Seventeen SSSCs from 16 states completed the Qualtrics survey portion of the activity data collection, and 9 SSSCs from 9 states submitted at least one Smartsheet related to the activity data collection. Data from the Qualtrics survey and Smartsheets were analyzed using primarily descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed at an aggregate level to understand services and activities across SSSCs as well as disaggregated to examine data specific to each state, when appropriate.

Findings

Most state legislation guiding SSSCs is focused on emergency management. Consistent with findings from the key informant survey presented in the [first brief](#) (McKenna et al., 2021) in this series, the emergence of SSSCs has been largely driven by high-profile school safety incidents. Tragedies such as those at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary were identified by many directors as catalysts for starting their SSSCs (see Exhibit 1). Directors also noted the impact of state legislation and of grants becoming available to fund their centers. Although not explicitly mentioned, the tragedies can be assumed to have motivated at least some state

legislation and the availability of grant funds. Based on the director interviews, researchers were also able to glean additional context around state legislation already in place related to school safety. An overwhelming majority of SSSC directors shared that much legislation in their states is focused on emergency management requirements (see Exhibit 2).

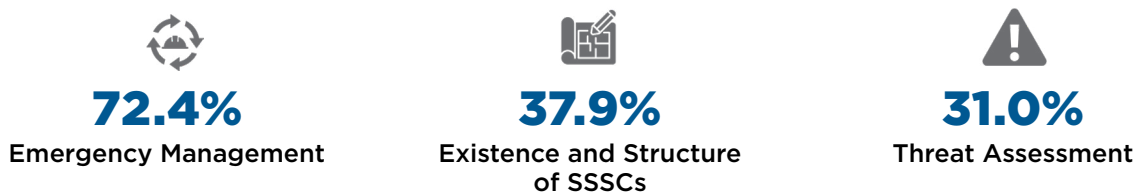
Upon examination of these findings collectively, it makes sense that high-profile incidents would drive the creation of most centers and that most legislation would be focused on emergency management. If SSSCs were created in response to high-profile school safety incidents—both nationally and locally—it is reasonable that they would focus on emergency management plans, response protocols, emergency drills, and assessments. However, legislation, policy, and practice are coalescing around the theme that responding to a tragedy is necessary but not as effective as preventing one from taking place altogether. Thus, directors noted that other topics, such as threat assessment, school policing, mental health, bullying prevention, and anonymous reporting, are also starting to appear more often in legislation. Many of these topics emphasize a preventative focus to addressing school safety as opposed to one that is reactive and focuses on how to manage the aftermaths of mass shootings and other serious events. Increased legislation on these topics is likely an indication that states are looking to better define how the emerging responses to school tragedies should be implemented.

The focus on emergency management and these emerging topics is certainly warranted and relevant, but it is also interesting to note the lack of legislation aimed at having SSSCs focus on other issues related to school safety, such as drugs and alcohol, fighting, and school climate. That does not mean that SSSCs are not focusing on these topics, just that there is a lack of state legislation encouraging them to do so. Perhaps a more comprehensive approach to school safety at a state policy level would provide SSSCs with an overarching umbrella to define and organize their work.

Exhibit 1: Top 3 Reasons for Creating SSSC



Exhibit 2: Top 3 Legislative Focus of SSSC



SSSCs utilize various staffing models and have staff with expertise aligned with state legislation requirements.

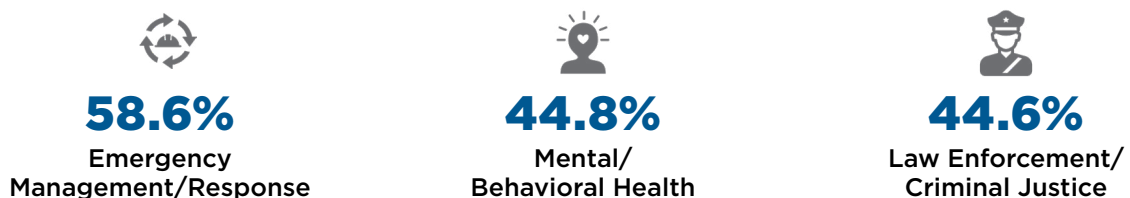
SSSC directors described using a variety of staffing strategies, with most directors reporting the use of full-time staff in addition to contractors. Directors in almost half of the SSSCs also reported having staff who have been “loaned” from other state agencies (see Exhibit 3).

A majority of SSSC directors indicated that their staff have expertise in emergency management, mental health, and law enforcement (see Exhibit 4). These areas of expertise align with the SSSC areas of focus prescribed by state legislation. Accordingly, directors described threat assessment, emergency management, mental health, anonymous reporting, and school policing as the main topics of focus for their work. It is not surprising to see a connection between state legislation and staff expertise given that SSSC directors noted that the reason they focus on the topics they do relates to stakeholder needs, requirements or guidance from legislation, and the nuances of various high-profile events.

Exhibit 3: Top 3 Staffing Highlights



Exhibit 4: Top 3 Areas of Expertise



SSSCs likely need diverse funding sources to conduct their work. Nearly 80 percent of directors indicated their centers are funded—at least partially—through state appropriation (see Exhibit 5). This finding is important in that state-appropriated funds usually provide a more stable and reliable funding base compared to competitive grants that a center may win. Also, a large majority of SSSC directors noted that their centers have more than one funding source, including both federal and state grants. Again, a diversity of funding sources may result in a more stable funding structure that ensures SSSCs can continue to do their work for the long term.

SSSC directors described serving several audiences with these funds (see Exhibit 6). Most directors reported serving educators, including school staff and campus and district administrators. In addition, directors noted serving law enforcement, students, parents, school board members, and mental/behavioral health professionals. Given the range of topics covered by SSSCs and the various audiences they serve, it is understandable and perhaps necessary that SSSCs have various funding sources to support different aspects of their work and a multidisciplinary staff with expertise across content areas.

Exhibit 5: Top 3 Sources of Funding

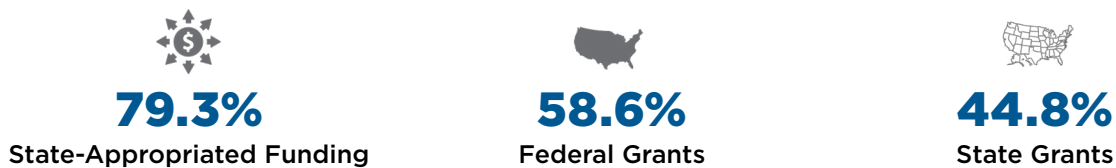
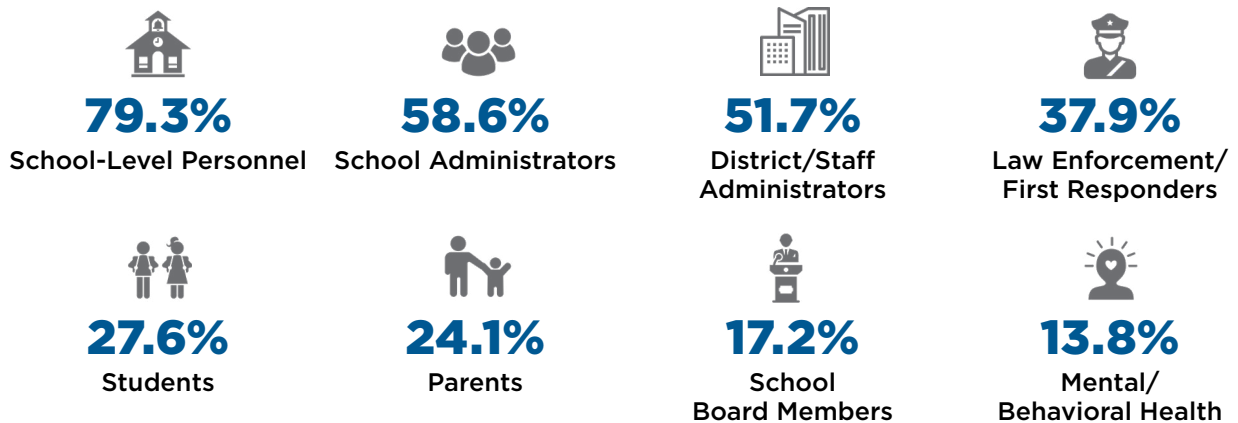


Exhibit 6: Audiences Served by SSSC



Most SSSCs provide many services remotely. Data on the mode in which SSSCs have provided services indicate that most SSSCs have done their work remotely from a central location. This has been the case for trainings, TA, and the dissemination of resources. For instance, although some SSSCs reported hosting in-person training or delivering in-person TA, most SSSCs described providing training online with live instructors; delivering TA remotely via videoconferencing, email, and/or phone; and disseminating resources electronically through email, websites, newsletters, and social media.

The remote nature of services is possibly a byproduct of the pandemic, as these data reflect activities that occurred in 2021 when the effects of the pandemic were still substantial in school settings. Alternatively, or in addition to this finding being the result of the pandemic, the remote delivery of services may be a way for

state-level centers to be able to reach all the geographically spread school districts in their states. As each SSSC aims to serve an entire state and most are staffed with a relatively small number of personnel, providing services remotely may allow for greater reach. For those SSSCs with unreliable or smaller budgets, remote service delivery may also allow them to have a further reach with fewer resources. However, the topic, audience, and purpose of each service should be reviewed by the SSSC to determine whether the service would better lend itself to an in-person delivery, meeting, or site visit.

State legislation and SSSC operations play a role in shaping services. The director interviews and activity data shed light on the services offered by SSSCs. As one would assume based on topics of state legislation, center staff expertise, and focus areas for SSSCs, the most common training topics included threat assessment, emergency management, and school policing (see Exhibit 7). SSSCs dedicate a sizable amount of their time to providing TA to their stakeholders, with over 60 percent of SSSCs indicating that staff spend upwards of 50 percent of their time providing TA. This TA, again in line with other data noted previously, is focused on topics such as emergency management, threat assessment, school safety law/legislation, and mental health. The TA is most often provided to campus and district administrators, law enforcement, and non-law enforcement security staff.

A large majority of SSSCs also reported developing original resources and disseminating existing external resources. The most common types of resources developed by SSSCs are tools (resources that help end users achieve some task) and videos, with these

resources focused on the areas of emergency management, mental health, and school safety law/legislation (see Exhibit 8). To a lesser extent, SSSCs reported engaging in grant administration and compliance activities. The grants administered by the SSSCs consisted of state-funded grants available mainly to local school districts. For compliance activities, most SSSCs focused on reviewing training requirements, conducting required safety audits, and reviewing emergency plans. Regarding monitoring compliance, most SSSCs indicated that they utilize compliance checks and withholding or denying funding as ways to monitor or encourage compliance. Notably, as with the emergence of SSSCs generally, the impetus for compliance activities was typically high-profile school safety incidents.

The strong overlap persists between state legislation, the major focus areas of SSSCs, center staff expertise, and the specific service areas and topics that SSSCs cover. State-level legislation and policy have a profound impact on the services that reach district- and campus-level staff who are working to keep their schools safe. Even more important to consider is that SSSCs and the legislation that governs their work are often the product of high-profile school safety incidents, which appear to impact the types of services provided and influence the content areas of focus. Policymakers at the state level should think carefully when crafting legislation and providing general guidance for SSSCs to ensure that the centers not only support the delivery and implementation of response efforts but also look to a more comprehensive framework that supports prevention, preparedness, mitigation, and recovery.

Exhibit 7: Top 3 Training Topics

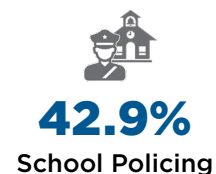


Exhibit 8: Top 3 Resource Topics



58.5%

Emergency Management



35.9%

Mental Health



30.2%

**School Safety
Law/Legislation**

Next Steps

To continue to build on the work in this study, the JPRC's future evaluation work will include conducting interviews and surveys with policymakers, superintendents, principals, school resource officers, and others involved in school safety efforts in each state. Further data collection will support other aims of the evaluation, such as developing a measure of the perceived impacts or effectiveness of SSSCs to guide policy, practice, and future research related to SSSCs.

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