

# Every Child Should Be Safe at School: K–12 Policing Needs Reform, Not Elimination

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Public school officials should not cut ties with the police because of some bad cops—schools are responsible for keeping students safe.

Instead of removing police officers, schools should team up with police departments and ensure school resource officers receive the best training.

Police in schools improve safety and can save lives in violent situations. Students deserve to learn in a safe environment.

Since the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police on Memorial Day, protestors and policymakers have been calling for reform to, and in some cases the defunding of, police departments around the country. Though Floyd’s death is unrelated to K–12 schools, the Minneapolis Board of Education has severed its contract with city police, which had provided school resource officers (SROs) to area schools.<sup>1</sup> The SRO program, which had been operational in city schools since the 1960s, was designed to “foster positive relationships between youth and the police; strengthen police–community connections; and support safe learning environments by protecting students and staff from high-threat situations that either start inside the school or from the outside.”<sup>2</sup>

According to reports from *The 74 Million*, school districts in California, Colorado, Illinois, New York,

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North Carolina, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin are now considering revoking SRO contracts with police.<sup>3</sup> Just days after the Minneapolis board's vote, Portland (Oregon) Public School Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero stated that he is "discontinuing the regular presence of school resource officers" in district schools.<sup>4</sup> The Montgomery County, Maryland, school board is also reconsidering the use of SROs.<sup>5</sup> Minneapolis school officials say they will create a new school safety plan by August, but school board chair Kim Ellison told NPR that SROs may not be included.<sup>6</sup>

Disbanding the use of SROs in local schools is a risky proposition. Even one incident of an officer being too aggressive with a child is too many, such as when an officer slammed an 11-year-old student to the floor in a North Carolina school last year, but so, too, is just one shooting on school grounds that injures or kills a student or teacher. (The North Carolina officer was fired.)<sup>7</sup>

Over the past 23 years, the number of SROs has steadily increased in the wake of Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and other school shootings. A 2013 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report found a general "lack of research" on SRO programs, but, overall, "the expansion of SRO programs coincided with a decrease in reported serious violent victimizations of students while at school and generally lower numbers of violent deaths and homicides at schools."<sup>8</sup>

The share of schools reporting crimes is lower today than at any point since the 1999–2000 school year, according to U.S. Department of Education data.<sup>9</sup> Still, federal research and recommendations from local law enforcement agencies underscore that, as the number of police officers in schools increases, these officers need specific training to operate in a school setting. The number of reported incidents of "violence, theft, or other crimes" totaled 1.4 million crimes—a large number of events. The rare incidents of improper SRO actions receive media attention, while the thousands of other, properly managed, incidents do not.

Instead of removing all SROs, local school districts and police departments should employ officer training programs specifically for SROs, as policing in a school environment is inherently different from street policing. Ultimately, the most effective way to protect students is to allow parents to report dangerous schools and move their children to safer learning environments. At the same time, school officials' responsibility to keep the students in their care safe remains, which makes training for these officers of critical importance.

## Surveys Favor SROs and More Training

Even before the terrible school violence in Parkland, Florida, where 17 students and educators lost their lives in 2018; and Santa Fe, Texas, where 10 students and faculty died in a shooting that same year, the percentage of schools using SROs had been increasing. Few data are available on the number of SROs, though estimates based on CRS research, U.S. Department of Education data, and the National Association of School Research Officers (NASRO) suggest that the number of SROs has nearly doubled since 1997 and now stands at approximately 20,000 officers.<sup>10</sup>

This increase corresponds with surveys and other research indicating that school community members wanted SROs. Survey results released in 2001 by Virginia's Department of Criminal Justice Services found that 99 percent of school staff and 91 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: "I support having an SRO assigned to my school."<sup>11</sup>

A 2005 survey of Pennsylvania school districts found that officials in 12 of 13 districts that responded to the survey continued to use SROs even after state funding for their program expired.<sup>12</sup> School officials who responded to interviews as part of the survey favored "open door" policies between students and SROs that include anonymous tip lines, e-mail communication, and business cards that provide students and teachers with an SRO's contact information.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, "School administrators stressed the importance of the personality of SROs, responding more favorably about SROs that had volunteered for the position as opposed to being assigned." Fifty-one percent of students said they felt safer at school because of the SROs, with 30 percent saying they were not sure.

Another 2005 survey of three large school districts (not named in the survey) found "a statistically significant relationship between the number of students and SRO conversations and comfort reporting crimes," demonstrating that SROs can build positive relationships with students, giving students confidence that they can talk to an officer in the event of a problem.<sup>14</sup> These reports are valuable for SROs, the researchers said, because SROs "must be aware of problems." Seventy-four percent of students in the survey had a "positive opinion" of his or her school's SRO, reporting characteristics such as "thoughtful," "fair," "smart," and "a good role model."<sup>15</sup>

A 2006 survey of Florida school districts that did not measure satisfaction with SROs but rather the prevalence of these officers in schools, found that SROs perform multiple services in addition to their security responsibilities: 93 percent of officers taught classes; 97 percent provided student

counseling; 43 percent were athletic coaches; and 71 percent chaperoned field trips.<sup>16</sup>

With increasing numbers of SROs in schools and these officers taking on more and varied responsibilities, surveys show that SROs themselves want more training. A 2014 survey of Minnesota SROs found that the officers want more such opportunities. While 87 percent of respondents had participated in a school-specific officer training program, less than half of officers had been trained in counseling or mentoring, teaching, and juvenile case law, leading the survey authors to recommend that more training is needed.<sup>17</sup>

A 2018 survey of SROs in North Carolina found that while most officers had attended some sort of training program, the SROs wanted more opportunities for school-specific training:

Many SROs stated that they desired equality in opportunities for training.

During the summer, many or most SROs are placed back on [street] patrol to cover for other officers that need to go to training resulting in little to no time for the SRO to attend conferences or other training only held in the summer months.<sup>18</sup>

In 2018, a CRS report also recommended additional school-specific training for SROs.<sup>19</sup> The researchers wrote: “While it is possible to recruit officers with some of the skills necessary to be effective SROs, it is nonetheless considered important to provide training so officers can hone skills they already have or develop new skills that can make them more effective.” The report cited the need for training in the areas of child development and the effects of trauma and crisis intervention for youth.

## SROs Are Not the Solution to Every Problem

Though SROs should develop relationships with students and educators, not every incident of student misbehavior warrants officer intervention. In recent years, as smart phones and security cameras have become more prevalent in schools, videos have surfaced of SROs abusing students or using aggressive physical tactics to restrain children, such as the North Carolina example cited above. Two years ago, students in a Pittsburgh school were awarded damages in a lawsuit against the district after accusing officers of assault.<sup>20</sup> Similar reports have come from other large school systems, dating back many years.<sup>21</sup> Any incident of an SRO improperly restraining or harming a student deserves close scrutiny, and the officers should be held responsible for their actions after due process.

The reaction from progressive media, educators, and policymakers has been to advocate for schools to use “restorative justice” practices, such as “face-to-face dialogue” and “circle processes,” in which a victim and offender meet in person to discuss the incident, and limit student punishments by restricting suspension and expulsion (“exclusionary discipline”).<sup>22</sup>

The 2018 CRS report cited above listed these approaches as areas in which SROs need more training.<sup>23</sup> However, research from the University of Texas and researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, to name a few, demonstrate that when officials limit exclusionary discipline, disruptive students put their peers at risk if they are allowed to remain in the classroom or are returned to the classroom with little or no sanction.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, surveys of teachers around the country show that educators do not feel safe in schools that limit suspensions and expulsions.<sup>25</sup>

A sizeable body of research has developed over the years on the relationships between exclusionary discipline and student race, some of these studies involving SROs. A 2015 meta-analysis of the literature that reviewed the research finds that “the relationship between the presence of SROs and rates of exclusionary discipline may vary significantly across contexts based on other unmeasured characteristics” and “it is unclear whether SROs are the mechanism” that affects rates of student discipline.<sup>26</sup> The report also lists studies that found that SROs can develop positive relationships with students and that this “improves outcomes for adolescents.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the research does not demonstrate that SROs are creating problems for students or schools, but that school needs vary from place to place, and best practices exist that local school and law enforcement officials can share amongst themselves.

Meanwhile, SROs can save lives when called on to respond to violent situations. In 2018, an SRO at Dixon High School in Illinois stopped an armed assailant from shooting a gym full of students.<sup>28</sup> SROs in Maryland and Florida performed similar heroic acts in recent years, saving the lives of educators and children.<sup>29</sup>

The solution for school officials and law enforcement, then, is not to remove all SROs, or to limit the reasonable options available to educators for disciplining students, but for local officials to remove underperforming officers and for law enforcement to change how SROs are trained to work in schools.

## School Resource Officers and the School Community

With the increase of police on school grounds, training for these officers is valuable, and law enforcement agents must design these programs with

local needs in mind. Police and school officials should share best practices with each other, while proposals to create federal SRO standards would be a mistake.

Just as with academic standards and school-discipline policies, Washington cannot define the appropriate response to local school decisions that will provide the right security measures for every school. Federal lawmakers are now considering a proposal that would standardize SRO training and activities, limiting the ability of parents, educators, and local law enforcement agents to determine which security measures and activities are appropriate for their schools.<sup>30</sup>

NASRO developed the “triad” concept for the role of SROs: (1) teacher, (2) informal counselor, and (3) law enforcement officer.<sup>31</sup> NASRO state affiliates provide access to training based on these ideas. The combination of these responsibilities is an ambitious but essential calling for police officers.

NASRO Executive Director Mo Canady said that when he reviews the events involving overly aggressive SROs, he has not yet found an offending officer in the NASRO database of officers the organization has trained.<sup>32</sup> Canady also says that the officers that failed to intervene and stop the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018 had not participated in NASRO training.

In addition to NASRO programs, examples from district programs around the U.S. offer models for how SRO training can help officers to fill these roles:

- The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement offers a training program for SROs called the “School Marshals” program.<sup>33</sup> In order for officers to be eligible to serve as an SRO, “a qualifying institution must send the candidate to an 80 hour training course, conducted by a law enforcement academy that has been specifically prepared to provide the school marshal curriculum.” Comparable training is available in South Dakota and Arkansas.<sup>34</sup>
- In Indiana, law enforcement officials created the Indiana School Safety Specialist Academy, which “facilitates collaboration between educators and law enforcement officers.”<sup>35</sup> Similar training programs are available in Virginia and Ohio.<sup>36</sup>
- In Oakland, California, school district SROs are trained to use empathy, self-awareness, and communication skills to de-escalate situations before they spiral out of control.<sup>37</sup> The strategies are taught under

the auspices of “Socio-Emotional Learning,” a contemporary fad in K–12 schools today, but the central concepts are neither new nor a fad. According to the education-research foundation Edutopia, “Officers... are directed to build relationships with staff and students first, asking questions that might give them insight into why a student is upset or disengaged, or what really caused a fight.”<sup>38</sup>

Parents, educators, and SROs should be sure to consider the unique circumstances surrounding each event involving student discipline. As the CRS reported nearly a decade ago, “[It] is not possible to identify a ‘one-size-fits-all’ series of recommendations for implementing a maximally successful SRO program.”<sup>39</sup> The 2018 Federal Commission on School Safety agreed: “The Commission recognizes that the problem of school violence is long-standing and complex and that there are certain limits to what the federal government can do.... There can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach for an issue this complex.”<sup>40</sup>

Members of some school districts may choose to devote some resources to hiring more student counselors. Others may need a combination of counselors and better-trained security. Parents, educators and other school leaders should determine the appropriate arrangement based on the needs of their students. Eliminating SRO positions, however, especially because of an event that has nothing to do with school security, such as the death of George Floyd, leaves students and educators vulnerable to harm.

## Conclusion

When parents deem a school to be unsafe, they should be able to report those concerns to school officials and move their child to a different school, whether public or private. In 2018, Florida lawmakers enacted a proposal that provides K–12 private-school scholarships to public-school students who have been bullied, robbed, or threatened in school.<sup>41</sup> Lawmakers in Arizona and Kansas have considered similar proposals in recent years.<sup>42</sup>

Giving parents the ability to protect their children by changing the public school their child attends is the best way to make families active partners with local schools for the benefit of students. Even if these options were more widely available in public schools, school leaders would still have a responsibility to evaluate local needs and keep students safe.

Over the years, as the number of SROs increased, surveys demonstrated local support for these officers. At the Minneapolis school board meeting where members voted to remove SROs after the tragic Floyd incident, a

student told the board, “With SROs being gone, nobody’s going to feel safe at school.”<sup>43</sup> Proper training for these officers to operate in a school setting must be a priority for local officials. Disbanding school law enforcement unnecessarily puts children and educators at risk.

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