

Emerging Models for Police Presence in Schools

Background

The rise of police officers in schools, often referred to as School Resource Officers (SROs), can be [traced back](#) to the 1990's. An increase in reported juvenile crimes and several high-profile school shootings [sparked interest](#) in assigning sworn police officers to work inside public schools. Most research and policy officially describes SROs as sworn police officers working inside public schools, and this document will address officers matching that definition. While SROs were once viewed as a critical resource in reducing deadly violence in public schools, many advocates for school discipline reform and community members have expressed concern over their presence in recent years. These advocates cite [racial and ethnic disproportionality](#) in school arrests, the [criminalization of school misbehavior](#), and the possibility that the presence of SROs contributes to the [School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) as particular causes for concern. As a result, several communities have developed progressive models around school policing.

This document first looks at existing research on the effects of SROs in schools, including impacts on racial and ethnic disproportionality, criminalization of misbehavior, and school violence. In the next section, it compiles recommendations for progressive models, as well as examines existing models in three school districts around the country. Where possible, the document looks at outcomes of these progressive models. In the final section, it provides a guide to help you think critically about SROs in your context.

Research Summary

Because larger-scale pushback over the role of police officers in schools is a recent development, most progressive models are in their infant stages. Therefore, research on their efficacy is limited. As one [systematic review](#) explains, “[a] report published by the [US Department of Justice’s] [COPS Office](#) notes that there is a lack of research on SRO programs, so it is not possible to identify a ‘one-size-fits-all’ series of recommendations for implementing a maximally successful SRO program.” However, early data are included below.

The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU), the [Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing](#) (DOJ), and the [National Juvenile Justice Network](#) (NJJN) have compiled recommendations regarding policing in schools.¹ This document employs those recommendations in describing three newer, progressive models for school resource officers in Clayton County, Georgia; Broward County, Florida; and Denver, Colorado.

The Impact of School Resource Officers

This section breaks down information from several studies conducted over the past seven years to identify key trends in outcomes associated with SRO presence in schools.

School Crime Rates

A [2011 study](#) out of the University of Maryland notes that “as schools increase their use of police, they record more crimes involving weapons and drugs and report a higher percentage of other non-serious

¹ The Council of State Governments also produced a comprehensive guide to school discipline which includes recommendations for police partnerships and holistic strategies.

violent crimes² to law enforcement.” Specifically, schools with SROs have 12.3% more non-serious violent crime³ referrals to police. The study shows that schools with SROs report a “significantly higher percentage of all crimes (except serious violent crimes)” than schools without police.

The 2009 study [School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior](#) found that the largest number of law enforcement referrals from SROs were for “disorderly conduct,” and there was a significant disparity between the number of “disorderly conduct” referrals between schools with SROs and schools without.

Rates of Disciplinary Incidents

The study from the University of Maryland found no decrease in the number of disciplinary incidents with the addition of school resource officers, and in some cases the presence of police officers was correlated with an increase in reported crime.

A 2015 study, [School Resource Officers and Exclusionary Discipline in U.S. High Schools: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis](#), found that the presence of an SRO is associated with an increase of approximately one disciplinary incident per week.

Impact of Race/Ethnicity, Disability, and Poverty on the Presence of SROs and Law Enforcement Referrals

[Several studies](#) have found that students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately referred to law enforcement for school-based incidences, though there do not appear to be any data linking this trend directly to the presence of SROs. However, the Justice Policy Institute’s 2011 [report](#) on the impact of school resource officers notes that, at the time of publication, there were no data to explicitly examine the correlation between race and SROs, but that data from Florida, South Carolina, Colorado, and Connecticut show vastly disproportionate rates of law enforcement referrals for students of color. The extent to which these referrals are related to the increased presence of SROs at schools with high minority enrollment is unknown. However, a [recent study](#) reported “74 percent of black high school students attend a school with at least one on-site law enforcement officer, compared with 71 percent of both Hispanic and multiracial high school students, and 65 percent of both Asian and white high school students.” Also, *School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior* points to a much higher number of SROs assigned to schools in high poverty areas, compared to low poverty areas, and a 2009 study points to higher minority enrollment at schools with SRO’s

Impact of SROs on School Climate

There is little research on the relationship between school climate and SROs, however, one study was released in 2016: [The Impact of School Resource Officer Interaction on Students’ Feelings About School and School Police](#). It found that students’ feelings of safety and positivity increased as they had more interactions with SROs, especially for students who had multiple interactions with SROs; however, these students also often felt less connected to the school community itself. These seemingly contradictory

² In this study, “[S]erious violent crime includes rape, sexual battery other than rape, robbery with or without a weapon, physical attack or fight with a weapon, and threat of physical attack with a weapon. Non-serious violent crime includes physical attack or fight without a weapon and threat of physical attack without a weapon. Property crime includes theft and vandalism. Weapon/drug crimes include possession of a firearm or explosive device; possession of a knife or sharp object; and distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs or alcohol.”

data points may be explained by the fact that the study does not appear to distinguish between “positive” and “negative” interactions between students and SROs.

Trends in School Violence

The [Congressional Research Service](#) and the National Association of School Resource Officers point out the inverse correlation between the national trend increases in SROs and the decreases in crime rates in schools, suggesting that more SROs are associated with reduced crime rates.

Progressive Models for Policing in Schools: Best Practices and Emerging Examples

The Model Elements below are collected from ACLU’s [Policing in Schools: Developing a Governance Document for School Resource Officers in K12 Schools](#), the US Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing’s [Assigning Police to Schools](#), and the [National Juvenile Justice Network’s School Discipline and Security Personnel Tip Sheet](#).

Model Elements	Recommendations	Clayton County, Georgia	Broward County, Florida	Denver, Colorado
Governance Documents	<p>Formal governance document that demonstrates shared understanding of goals of SRO program, including support and training. Define roles and responsibilities of SROs. [ACLU]</p> <p>Establish protocol and/or Memorandum of Understanding. [DOJ]</p> <p>Enter into Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) or intergovernmental agreement to clarify respective roles. [NJJN]</p>	Developed cooperative agreement aimed at limiting the overall number of school referrals to juvenile court and reducing disproportionality.	Developed collaborative agreement on school discipline in 2013. Agreement is not exclusive to SROs, but the SRO relationship is an element of the larger-scale agreement.	Developed 2013 Intergovernmental Agreement between Denver Public Schools and Denver Police Department.
Distinguish disciplinary misconduct and criminal offenses	<p>Children should not be subject to formal law enforcement intervention for ordinary school discipline issues. [ACLU]</p> <p>Specify that citations, court referrals, and arrests should not be used against children</p>	<p>“[M]isdemeanor delinquent acts” (fighting, disrupting public school, disorderly conduct, etc.) do not result in filing of a complaint except in repeated circumstances. Elementary students cannot be referred at all.</p>	Initial incidents of non-violent misdemeanors do not result in the filing of criminal complaints or arrests.	Middle/High School SROs must “[d]ifferentiate between disciplinary issues and crime problems and respond appropriately.”

	<p>for most behavioral infractions, particularly normal adolescent behavior and nonviolent infractions (trespassing, loitering, defiance, profanity, failure to follow classroom rules, etc.). Security personnel should only cite, refer, or arrest students when there is no other alternative, and only when there is a serious threat to school safety. [NJJN]</p>			
<p>Ensure transparency and accountability</p>	<p>Provide mechanisms for transparency and accountability, including mandatory public reporting on SRO activities and meaningful complaint resolution system. [ACLU]</p>	<p>School resource officers wear body cameras.</p>	<p>Data on “all school-based arrests, referrals to law enforcement, and filing of criminal complaints and disaggregated by location of arrest/school, charge, arresting agency, gender, age, race/ethnicity, disability and ESL status” collected by school district and Department of Juvenile Justice. Each month data are delivered to Juvenile Justice Advisory Board and the Eliminating the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Committee. Data are also reported publicly at the end of each semester. All parties meet twice per year to provide oversight and offer recommendations.</p>	<p>N/A</p>

<p>Define SROs within context of educational missions of schools</p>	<p>Make clear that the primary role of the SRO is to improve school safety and the educational climate of schools, and not to discipline or punish students. Set forth lines of communication and authority between the SRO and building-level administrators. [ACLU]</p> <p>Clearly define all roles and responsibilities of SROs, considering potential philosophical differences between parties. [DOJ]</p> <p>Strictly limit law enforcement involvement in student behavior. [NJNJ]</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Principal and designees are the first stop for intervention and disciplinary issues. Principals must consult discipline matrix before engaging or consulting SROs.</p>	<p>SRO role defined as positive partner with Police Department and other agencies. Clearly defined as direct agents of the Police Department and not employees of the school district.</p>
<p>Provide minimum training requirements</p>	<p>Require minimum training parameters for SROs assigned to K-12 public schools, recognizing that police training is geared toward adult citizens and may be developmentally inappropriate for children and adolescents. [ACLU]</p> <p>Provide training in: community policing in schools, legal issues, cultural fluency, problem solving, safe</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Training required within three months of signing onto agreement, training is unspecified.</p>	<p>Principals and SROs attend three two-hour citywide trainings per year on topics such as child and adolescent development and psychology; age-appropriate responses; cultural competence; restorative justice techniques; special accommodations for students with disabilities; practices proven to improve school climate; and the creation of safe spaces for</p>

	<p>school preparation, child development, mental health intervention, teaching and classroom management strategies. [DOJ]</p> <p>Train officers in adolescent development, conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques, identification and appropriate service of students with special needs, and restorative practices. [NJNJ]</p>			<p>lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students.</p>
<p>Promote non-punitive approaches to student behavior</p>	<p>Integrate research-based practices to improve school climate and student behavior. [ACLU]</p> <p>SROs should engage in “problem-solving policing rather than simply responding to incidents as they occur.” [DOJ]</p>	<p>A “commission of focused act by student” should be determined using a system of graduated sanctions, disciplinary methods, and/or educational programming before complaints filed with Juvenile Court.</p>	<p>Guidelines ask parties to consider alternative accountability programs, such as the Collaborative Problem Solving Team, PROMISE program, or community-based program.</p>	<p>Emphasizes restorative practices and agreement requires SROs to understand the policy.</p>
<p>Partners Enlisted</p>		<p>Juvenile Court of Clayton County, Clayton County Public School System, Clayton County Police Department, Riverdale Police Department, Jonesboro Police Department, Forest Park Police Department, Clayton County Department of Family & Children Services, Clayton</p>	<p>School Board of Broward County, Chief Judge of Seventeenth Judicial Circuit, Office of the State Attorney, Law Office of the Public Defender, Sheriff of Broward County, City of Fort Lauderdale/Fort Lauderdale Police Department, Florida Department of Juvenile</p>	<p>Denver Police Department</p>

		Center for Behavioral Health Services, District Attorney Robert E. Keller, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice	Justice, Fort Lauderdale/Broward Branch NAACP, Juvenile Justice Advisory Board	
Outcomes		Dangerous weapons on campuses decreased 70%; fighting offenses decreased 87%; 36% decrease in acts such as disorderly conduct; 86% decrease in African American student referrals for fighting; 64% decrease in African American student referrals for disruption of public schools; and graduation rates have increased by 20% since protocol was implemented.	Within one school quarter , suspensions were down 66 percent and expulsions down by 55 percent. There was a 42% drop in school-based arrests within one year.	Total suspensions down 60 percent, suspensions of youth of color down 58 percent; expulsions for all youth and youth of color down 54 percent; and referrals to law enforcement for all youth and youth of color dropped 57 percent.

Member Guide

Understanding information about SROs is critical to determining what's best for your community. Use the questions below to identify your gaps in knowledge and the resources to learn more.

Questions

- What are positive and negative consequences of having SROs in your community's schools?
- What are barriers to success in engaging affected stakeholder groups, such as students, teachers, principals, parents, local law enforcement, and the juvenile judicial system?
- Have similar districts successfully integrated SROs into their schools?

If your school district currently employs sworn police officers to work inside its schools, does it:

- have an up-to-date Memorandum of Understanding with the police department?
- clearly define the role of SROs, including differentiating student misbehavior and criminal offenses?
- include diverse stakeholders as part of its policies on SROs, such as representatives from the legal and judicial communities?
- collect data on the interactions between students and SROs?
 - If yes, are these data broken down by demographics?
 - If yes, do these data differentiate between positive and punitive interactions?
- require SROs to undergo pre-service training? If so, does this include training on child and adolescent psychology, de-escalation techniques, positive behavior reinforcements, special education interventions, equity and race discussions?

If your school district is looking to bring sworn police officers into its schools, has it considered:

- investing in positive behavioral programs?
- how SROs will fit into the educational mission of the school?
- developing relationships or creating coalitions to create a plan for SROs?
- the potential impacts, both positive and negative, on school climate?
- managing racial and ethnic disproportionality in law enforcement referrals?

Additional Resources

- To learn more about your community context, look at your:
 - school district web page
 - municipal/local department of juvenile justice web page
- American Civil Liberties Union's model language for governance documents on [School Resource Officers](#)
- U.S. Department of Education resources on [appropriate use of school resource officers](#)
- U.S. Department of Justice [Community Oriented Policing](#) initiatives