Chapter 2
School-to-Prison Pipeline:
The Role of School Resource Officers (SRO)

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile crime rates have declined steadily since 1994 (Nelson & Lind, 2015) and the number of youths in juvenile detention centers has dropped (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011; Hockenberry, 2014; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Smith, 1998); however, school discipline polices are moving in the other direction (Nelson & Lind, 2015). In recent years, the lines between the public school system and the juvenile justice system have become indistinct. There are several trends in K-12 education contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline such as declining school funding, resegregation of schools by race and class, under-representation of students of color in advanced placement, over-representation of student of color in special education, the creation and expansion of "zero-tolerance" policies, tracking, increased presence of SROs, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), standardized testing, and rising drop-out rates (Heitzeg et al., 2009). However, the focus here is the expansion and increased reliance on "zero-tolerance" policies and the use of the SRO to enforce those policies which play an immediate and integral role in feeding the school-to-prison pipeline.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile crime rates have declined steadily since 1994 (Nelson & Lind, 2015) and the number of youths in juvenile detention centers has dropped (Annie e. Casey Foundation, 2011; Hockenberry, 2014; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Smith, 1998); however, school discipline polices are moving in the other direction (Nelson & Lind, 2015). In recent years, the lines between the school system and the juvenile justice system have become indistinct. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of seamlessly moving juveniles out of the school and into the juvenile justice system. There are several trends in K-12 education

contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline such as declining school funding, resegregation of schools by race and class, under-representation of students of color in advanced placement, over-representation of student of color in special education, creation, and expansion of 'zero-tolerance" policies, tracking, increased presents of SROs, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), standardized testing, and rising drop-out rates Heitzeg et al., (2009). However, the focus here is the expansion and increased reliance on "zero-tolerance" policies and the use of the SRO to enforce those policies which play an immediate and integral role in feeding the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school resource officer (SRO) program began in the United States in the early 1950s. However, the program did not gain popularity until the mid-1990s in response to the rise in the number of public-school shootings. Currently, no one knows exactly how many SROs there are in the United States because they are not required to register with any national database, police departments are not required to report how many officers work as SROs, and school systems are not required to report how many SROs they use. The National Association of School Resources Officers (NASRO), (2021), estimates that approximately 40% of all K-12, public and private, are served by SROs. The most recent available data on the number of SROs comes from a 2018 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): U.S. Department of Education. The Center (Musu et al., 2019) reported that 42% of public schools were being served by at least one SRO, at least one day a week during the 2015-2016 academic year. Many SROs serve more than one school and some schools have more than one officer; therefore, we cannot reliably extrapolate the number of SROs there really are.

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) is the national association for SROs dedicated to making schools safer by providing high quality training to SROs. In addition, each state has been divided into regions; ten regions. Each region has its own board and provides trainings and conferences to its members.

THE SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER (SRO)

School resource officers (SROs) are sworn law enforcement officers who are deployed by a police department/sheriff's department in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools (Coon & Travis, 2012). SROs are responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools.

NASRO (2021) recommends that law enforcement agencies utilize a rigorous selection process when selecting officers for SRO assignments and that officers received at least 40 hours of specialized training, beyond basic law enforcement training/academy, in school policing before being assigned.

According to NASRO (2021), the goals of a well-founded SRO program include:

- providing safe learning environment,
- providing valuable resources to school staff members,
- fostering positive relationships with youth, and
- developing strategies to resolve problems affecting youth and protecting all students.

Finally, NASRO considers it a best practice to use what they call a "triad concept" (2021) to define the three main roles of school resource officers: educator (i.e., guest lecturer), informal counselor/mentor, and law enforcement officer.

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