

Chapter 4

School Resource (Police) Officers in Schools: Impact on Campus Safety, Student Discipline, and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Having police officers in schools (school resource officers – SROs) is controversial with a growing debate as their presence has proliferated nationally over the past 20 years. A majority of high schools and middle schools today have police on campus providing a variety of services, though primarily law enforcement. While the intent is to provide improved school safety and protection to students, unexpectedly this has not been the outcome for many school campuses when reviewing most criminal activity and school shootings. While the presence of SROs is complicated, the unintended impact has harmed more students than anticipated by criminalizing misbehaviors and disorderly conduct, making the learning environment less conducive by negatively changing school climates and disproportionately impacting many already at-risk young people.

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INTRODUCTION

Police officers in schools, commonly referred to as school resource officers (SRO's), have become the norm for many school districts across the United States. These SROs are officers from the local police district assigned to work on school campuses; only a limited number of larger school districts have formed their own internal police force (Los Angeles and Chicago, for example). In 2017, 42 percent of all schools had a full- or part-time SRO on campus during the week, with a majority of high schools (68 percent) and middle schools (59 percent) compared to elementary schools (30 percent) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These police officers are disproportionately located at schools with majorities of students of color (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017) and their presence has been increasingly controversial since their establishment during the mid-1990s zero tolerance and tough on crime approaches, often spurred on by the fear of school shootings (Mallett, 2016).

It was the Safe Schools Act of 1994 (and the 1998 Amendment Act) that first promoted and funded partnerships with the COPS in Schools grants for in-school police forces for primary and secondary schools (Mallett & Fukushima-Tedor, 2018). These Acts were initiated by the Clinton Administration's reaction to the school shootings and killings at Westside Middle School in Arkansas and had two policy objectives: to help build school and police force collaborations and to improve school and student safety (Rich-Shea & Fox, 2014). Driven by public support, misperceptions of school violence incidents, and a tough on crime approach to youthful offenders, this movement to establish police in schools has been quite successful. Nearly one billion dollars was spent from 1994 to 2012 employing over 17,000 officers annually; growing to that same one billion dollars being spent in just 2018 across 26 states (Fulks, Garcia, & Harper, 2020).

Before these changes in school security and the increased presence of SROs on campuses, the following was quite unlikely to have occurred:

A 14-year-old girl was arrested in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, after refusing to stop texting on her cell phone in class. A school resource officer's report says the student refused to stop texting during class after a teacher told her to stop and the student told the resource officer she didn't have a phone after she was pulled out of the classroom. She continued denying she had a phone, forcing the resource officer to return to the classroom twice and find other students who saw her with it, according to the report. The male school resource officer called for a female officer to conduct a search, the report says. The student laughed as the female officer explained that she found the Samsung phone in the student's clothes, hidden near her buttocks. The officer notes that the student "is known to me and the administrations based on prior negative contacts." The officer gave the student a \$298 ticket for disorderly conduct

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