Research on the Impact of School Policing

ACLU Pennsylvania

Aaron Kupchik, University of Delaware

Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, and calls for defunding the police that arose in their wake, the issue of police in schools has received new attention. Several jurisdictions, including Oakland, CA, Denver, CO, and others have decided to remove police from schools, and many others have considered it. Some of these jurisdictions (e.g., Denver) reversed course and brought police back into schools. Too often, debates about school policing are based on individual experiences, anecdotes, or presumptions, rather than on rigorous evidence. This is unfortunate and unnecessary, since there is a growing body of research on the impact of school policing and School Resource Officers (SROs).[*]

Two main claims made by proponents of increased policing are that school police and SROs can control and prevent crime among students, and prevent or thwart armed attacks on schools (i.e., school shootings). However, the existing evidence regarding whether police presence in schools helps improve school safety is mixed, with strong evidence of unintended harmful consequences that come with policing programs, including thrusting students into the criminal justice system and perpetuating racial inequality.

Does the presence of police reduce student crime?

Simply put, it is unclear whether or not SROs reduce student crime rates. While several research studies have considered whether the presence of SROs predicts lower rates of school crime[1], this is difficult to study, since one cannot randomly assign SROs to schools and evaluate differences across them. Similarly, one must be careful when comparing schools with and without SROs, since schools that are more dangerous to begin with might respond by adding SROs. Given these difficulties, the evidence base is thin and inconsistent.

While some recent well-designed studies suggest that the presence of SROs prevents some forms of student crime[2], a greater number of studies[3], each of which uses credible methods to compare schools with and without SROs, suggest that there is either no impact on student crime rates, or that the addition of SROs is associated with increased student misconduct (once taking into account preexisting school conditions). These inconsistent results might be due, in part, to variations in what SROs do.

Recent research finds that, while schools with SROs report more crimes than do schools without SROs, overall, the difference is particularly large among schools where SROs perform only law enforcement roles, rather than engage in mentoring or other tasks as well.[4]

Do school police prevent mass shootings?

When it comes to the goal of preventing mass shootings, we also know very little. This is because it is difficult to know how to prevent events that happen rarely. Thankfully, despite public fears and media attention, school shootings are indeed very rare.

There were 11 homicides of students at schools across the U.S. in the 2020-2021 school year, the most recent year reported by the National Center for Education Statistics, representing around 1% of all youth homicides that year. In the most recent pre-pandemic year reported, 2018-2019, there were 10 homicides of students at schools. In 2022, there were 23 casualties due to active school shooter incidents, according to data from the FBI. While horrific events such as school shootings and homicide of students are important

problems, it is important to keep in mind that they are relatively rare events that pale in comparison to the frequency of violence that children are exposed to outside of schools.[5]

While some school shootings have occurred in schools without SROs or other armed security present (e.g., Newtown), many others occurred in schools with such protections in place (e.g., Columbine, Parkland, Santa Fe). As a result, we have little empirical evidence on whether, or how, SROs may or may not be able to prevent such horrific events.[6]

The costs of increased policing in schools are real

While there is no conclusive evidence that SROs reduce crime among students or prevent mass shootings, the research shows that the potential costs to students and school communities are real. Research consistently shows that the presence of SROs results in increased rates of students being reported to law enforcement and/or arrested, particularly for minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct or simple assault, resulting in greater numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the justice system.[7]

Efforts are being made to reduce this harm of policing in schools. In particular, The National Association of School Resource Officers advocates for training for all SROs, including training in de-escalation and other tactics to avoid arrest unless school safety is being threatened.[8] However, the available evidence still suggests that the presence of SROs results in a greater likelihood of justice system involvement for youth.

Research also shows that schools with SROs tend to have higher rates of exclusionary school discipline than do other, comparable, schools. One meta-analysis (a method used to statistically analyze and summarize findings of many prior empirical studies) finds that the presence of SROs is associated with greater use of exclusionary discipline such as suspension.[9]

While many Memoranda of Understanding between schools and police departments dictate that SROs should not be involved in discipline for misbehavior that does not rise to the level of criminal behavior, research finds that SROs still involve themselves in school discipline in subtle and informal ways.[10] Further, even when SROs are not directly involved in school discipline, their presence can shift schools' practices in subtle ways that make exclusionary discipline more likely.[11]

Importantly, youth of color are considerably more likely than white youth to experience these harms. A large volume of research consistently demonstrates that youth of color are at significantly greater risk of exclusionary punishment, and that this discrepancy is not accounted for by different rates of student misbehavior.[12] Youth of color are also more likely to be arrested at school and suffer the consequences of an arrest record.[13]

One recent study suggests that this risk of arrest faced by youth of color is shaped by how SROs perceive threats that they might face.[14] This study compared SROs' perceptions of threats in two jurisdictions: one with mostly middle-class white students, and one with mostly low-income students of color. In the school with more white students, SROs were concerned primarily about external threats such as an adult who comes to school wishing to do harm. But in the school with more students of color, SROs saw the students themselves as the primary threat they faced. To the extent that this describes perceptions elsewhere as well, it might mean that students of color are policed while their white peers are protected.

Research on the Impact of School Policing

SRO programs are very expensive, as well. To the extent that funding SRO programs means that evidence-based school crime reduction programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or Socio-Emotional Learning programs, go unimplemented, this would mean missed opportunities to pursue strategies shown to be effective, based on presumptions of the effectiveness of policing.[15]

The presence of police can make schools less inclusive

One other branch of research on schools is relevant here: that on school social climate. Scholars studying student behavior have found that students are less likely to misbehave, including criminal behavior, in schools with inclusive social climates. These are schools where students feel valued, respected, listened to, and are part of a community.[16]

While not representative of SROs nationally, a number of qualitative studies have found that the presence of SROs can make schools less inclusive social climates in subtle ways. In my prior work, for example, I found that well-intentioned SROs can still influence schools to be somewhat more focused on law and order and less focused on students' social and emotional well-being.[17] Other studies have uncovered abusive treatment at the hands of SROs, showing clear negative effects on school social climate and students' bonds to schools.[18]

In other words, despite their care for students' well-being and the best intentions toward them, the presence of police in schools can sometimes undermine effective student behavior management strategies.

There is much that we still don't understand about policing in schools. Without consistent evidence that SROs reduce either student crime or risk of school shootings, claims that more policing is the solution are unsubstantiated.

However, there is evidence that the presence of SROs results in criminalization of routine discipline issues, with students being sent to juvenile court rather than to the principal's office, and that this criminalization disproportionately harms students of color. The evidence also shows that most schools are better off diverting their resources toward evidence-based practices that build students' social and emotional competence and build more inclusive school climates.

Proponents of SRO programs typically argue that SROs can effectively mentor students.[19] Certainly, additional mentoring is beneficial for students. But using SROs as mentors comes with risk, since it means that the mentor has information about a student, or his/her family, that would not otherwise be available to law enforcement.

Moreover, research demonstrates that youth younger than 16 tend to have relatively poor understandings of their legal rights[20], which raises important questions about the extent to which most students understand the legal risks to themselves, family members, or friends that may result if they confide in SROs acting as mentors. Further, it is not at all clear why we should expect SROs to be more effective as mentors compared to social workers, school psychologists, or counselors who have extensive training in child development.

Whatever decisions school districts make should be informed by actual evidence, not presumptions.

Aaron Kupchik is Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. He is the author of *The Real School Safety Problem: The Long-Term Consequences of Harsh School Punishment and Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear*

* There is inconsistency in the use of the term School Resource Officer (SRO). In this article, SRO is used as shorthand for all sworn law enforcement officers stationed in schools, whether they work for a school district police department (typically called School Police Officers; e.g. Los Angeles and Philadelphia) or are members of local or state law enforcement assigned to schools (called SROs in many schools). The latter arrangement is the fastest growing school policing program, and it is the subject of most of the recent school policing research.

1. Brown, Benjamin (2018) "Evaluations of School Policing Programs in the U.S," in Deakin et al. (eds.) *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance and Social Control,* London: Palgrave-Macmillan
2. Owens, Emily G (2017) "Testing the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 36: 11-37; Sorensen, Lucy. C., Yinzhi Shen, and Shawn D. Bushway (2021). "Making Schools Safer and/or Escalating Disciplinary Response: A study of police officers in North Carolina schools." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 43: 495-519; Sorensen, Lucy C., Monterrat Avila-Acosta, John B. Engberg, and Shawn D. Bushway (2023) "The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New evidence on school-based policing across the U.S." Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 42: 941-970.
3. Anderson, Kenneth Alonzo (2018) "Policing and Middle School: An evaluation of a statewide school resource officer policy." *Middle Grades Review,* 4: Article 7; Crawford, Charles, and Ronald Burns (2015) "Preventing School Violence: Assessing armed guardians, school policy, and context." *Policing: An international journal of police strategies & management* 38: 631-647; Crosse, Scott, Denise C. Gottfredson, Erin L. Bauer, Zhiqun Tang, Michele A. Harmon, Carol A. Hagen, and Angela D. Greene (2022) "Are Effects of School Resource Officers Moderated by Student Race and Ethnicity?" *Crime and Delinquency* 68: 381-408; Gottfredson, Denise, Scott Crosse, Zhiqun Tang, Erin L. Bauer, Michele A. Harmon, Carol A. Hagen, and Angela D. Greene (2020) "Effects of School Resource Officers on School Crime and Responses to School Crime." *Criminology & Public Policy* 19: 905-940*;* Tillyer, Marie Skubak, Bonnie S. Fisher, and Pamela Wilcox (2011) "The Effects of School Crime Prevention on Students' Violent Victimization, Risk Perception and Fear of Crime: A multilevel opportunity perspective." *Justice Quarterly* 28: 249-277
4. Devlin, Deanna N. and Benjamin W. Fisher (2021) "An Examination of School Resource Officers as an Approach to Reduce Social Disturbances in Schools: Evidence from a national longitudinal study." *Journal of School Violence* 20: 228-240; Devlin, Deanna N. and Denise C. Gottfredson (2018) "The Roles of Police Officers in Schools: Effects on the recording and reporting of crime." *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 16: 208-223. See also Fisher, Benjamin W. and Deanna N. Devlin (2020) "School Crime and the Patterns of Roles of School Resource Officers: Evidence from a national longitudinal study." *Crime & Delinquency* 66(11):1606-1629, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128719875702
5. See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a01
6. Congressional Research Service (2018) *School Resource Officers: Issues for Congress.* R45251
7. Heise, Michael, and Jason P. Nance (2021) "'Defund the (School) Police'? Bringing data to key school-to-prison pipeline claims." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 111: 717-772; Homer, Emily M., and Benjamin W. Fisher (2019) "Police in Schools and Student Arrest Rates Across the United States: Examining differences by race, ethnicity, and gender." *Journal of School Violence* 19(2): 192-204; Na, Chongmin, and Denise D. Gottfredson (2013) "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on school crime and the processing of offending behaviors." *Justice Quarterly* 30: 619–650; Owens (2017); Sorensen et al (2023); Teske, Steven A., and J. Brian Huff (2011) "The Court's Role in Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *Juvenile and Family Justice Today* Winter 2011: 14- 17; United States Government Accountability Office (2024) *Differences in Student Arrest Rates Widen When Race, Gender, and Disability Status Overlap.* Washington, DC: GAO (GAO-24-106294); Vernon, Keenan, and F. Chris Curran (2024) "On Guard but Not Sworn: The relationship between school security guards, school resource officers, and student behavior, discipline, and arrests." *Criminology & Public Policy* 23: 327-360.
8. https://nasro.org/training/nasro-training-courses/
9. Fisher, Benjamin W. and Emily A. Hennessy (2016) "School Resource Officers and Exclusionary Discipline in U.S. High Schools: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Adolescent Research Review* 1: 217-233; see also Crosse et al. (2022); Gottfredson et al. (2020); Sorensen et al. (2021); Sorensen et al. (2023); Weisburst, Emily K. (2019) "Patrolling Public Schools: The impact of funding for school police on student discipline and long-term education outcomes," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 38(2): 338-365,*

10. Curran, F. Chris, Benjamin W. Fisher, Samantha Viano, and Aaron Kupchik (2019) "Why and when do school resource officers engage in school discipline? The role of context in shaping disciplinary involvement." *American Journal of Education* 126: 33-63

11. Kupchik, Aaron (2010) *Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

12. Crosse et al. (2022); Jacobsen, Wade C., Garrett T. Pace, and Nayan G. Ramirez (2019) "Punishment and Inequality at an Early Age: Exclusionary discipline in elementary school." *Social Forces* 97(3): 973-998; Owens, Jayanti, and Sara S. McLanahan (2020) "Unpacking the Drivers of Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Expulsion." *Social Forces* 98(4): 1548-1577; Skiba, Russell J., Choong-Geun Chung, Megan Trachok, Timberly L. Baker, Adam Sheya and Robin L. Hughes (2014) "Parsing Disciplinary Disproportionality: Contributions of infraction, student, and school characteristics to out-of-school suspension and expulsion." *American Educational Research Journal* 51: 640-670; Sorensen et al. (2023).

13. Homer and Fisher (2019); Sorensen et al. (2023); United States Government Accountability Office (2024); Weisburst (2019)

14. Fisher, Benjamin W. , Ethan M. Higgins, Aaron Kupchik, Samantha Viano, F. Chris Curran, Suzanne Overstreet, Bryant Plumlee, and Brandon Coffee "Protecting the Flock or Policing the Sheep? Differences in School Resource Officers' Perceptions of threats by school racial composition," (2022) *Social Problems*, 69: 316-334.

15. Kupchik, Aaron (2016) *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press

16. Cook, Philip J., Denise C. Gottfredson, and Chongmin Na (2010) "School Crime Control and Prevention." *Crime and Justice* 39: 313-440

17. Kupchik (2010)

18. https://www.aclu.org/other/criminalizing-classroom-over-policing-new-york-city-schools; see also Shedd, Carla (2016) *Unequal City: Race, schools, and the perceptions of injustice*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation

19. https://nasro.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/NASRO-To-Protect-and-Educate-nosecurity.pdf

20. Grisso, Thomas, Lawrence Steinberg, Jennifer Woolard, Elizabeth Cauffman, Elizabeth Scott, Sandra Graham Fran Lexcen, N. Dicon Repucci, and Robert Schwartz (2003) "Juveniles' Competence to Stand Trial: A comparison of adolescents' and adults' capacities as trial defendants," *Law & Human Behavior* 27: 333-363