

School Policing: What the Research Shows

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Research on SROs

- School shootings
- Student crime
- Student fear
- Arrests of students
- Exclusionary discipline
- Racial equity
- School climate
- Mentoring



School Shootings

- Rare events: 11 homicides of youth 5-18 in schools, 2019-2020;
 - 10 in 2018-19*
 - Little empirical analysis available
- Some shootings at schools with SROs (Columbine, Parkland, Santa Fe); others without (Newtown)
- SROs have intervened (Dixon, IL; St. Mary County, MD); but uncommon
- Shootings at schools with SROs tend to involve more casualties
- No sound empirical evidence showing SROs deter attacks

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Violent Deaths at School and Away From School, School Shootings, and Active Shooter Incidents.



School Shootings: What Does Work?

- Trusted adults
- Madfis (2014) studied 11 averted shootings
 - Students report if they feel supported, respected, valued (inclusive climate)
 - SROs informed in 2 of 11
- National Police Foundation's Averted School Violence Project:
 - Students, parents, teachers need to remain aware, watch for warning signs
- About trust, support, bonds – not law enforcement



Student Crime

- Research is inconsistent
 - Difficult to study:
 - Causal effects uncertain
 - Interaction quantity and quality differs across students and SROs
 - Majority of studies show no effect or more crime after adding SROs
- Can vary based on what SROs do
 - Law enforcement only vs mentoring



Student Fear

- Inconclusive results
 - Some studies find SROs reduce fear; others find increased fear
 - Likely varies based on student trust in SROs
 - Recent study: less stated fear, but more sense of risk



Arrests of Students

- Arrests higher in schools with SROs
 - Particularly minor crimes, e.g., simple assault, disorderly conduct
 - Particularly for Black students
 - Despite efforts to teach de-escalation
- Causes
 - Detection
 - Escalation
 - Shift of focus: behaviors become legal issues, not social/mental health issues



Exclusionary Discipline

- NASRO: SROs should not discipline
 - Yet most secondary school admin report SROs do discipline
 - “Doing discipline” ambiguous
- Suspension rates higher in schools with SROs
 - High-quality research, consistent
 - Particularly Black youth



Racial Equity

- Youth of color, particularly Black students, disproportionately punished and arrested
 - Behaviors do not account for discrepancies
 - Implicit bias: seen as threatening
 - Schoolwide: perception of threat
 - Long-term effects are consequential
- Greater surveillance from SROs



School Climate

- Can make climate less inclusive
 - Despite good intentions
 - Reduce trust, bonds
 - Undermine effective behavior management
- Greater risk in neighborhoods where police are distrusted; following acts of police violence



SROs as Mentors/Informal Counselors

- Part of the “Triad model” (law enforcement/educator/informal counselor)
 - More caring adults is beneficial
- But research raises concerns about SROs in this role
 - Potential for additional surveillance
 - Students may unintentionally implicate themselves or others
 - SROs lack sufficient training



Conclusion

- NASRO training seeks to redress some harms (de-escalation, trauma-informed care, students with disabilities)
 - Little evidence about effectiveness
- Evidence points to more potential harms than benefits *to students*
- Decisions about SROs should be based on evidence, not assumptions of effectiveness

