

## Policing in Schools

There has been an increasing interest in the effects school police can have on students. For the purposes of this research summary, the term *school police* refers to all officers who are employed in a law enforcement role and work in school settings. This includes, but is not limited to, school resource officers (SROs), deputies and police officers, school police departments, and armed school-based security personnel.

Although found in many schools, school police often lack specific policies and procedures to guide their work. Indeed, data from the U.S. Department of Education show that, during the 2017–2018 school year, more than half of public schools had a school police officer. Among those schools, only 64% had a policy outlining the roles and responsibilities of the officers (Diliberti et al., 2019). Although the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends against school police being involved in student discipline, only 55% of schools with school police and a policy outlining their roles had a policy regarding school police's role in school discipline (Diliberti et al., 2019). This leaves nearly two thirds of schools with school police without a policy on school police's role in student discipline.

In addition to a lack of consistent policies and procedures, there is a lack of required training standards for school police. Indeed, research about police in schools is often unable to clarify whether school police are formally trained by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), are patrol officers with no school-based training, or include other police officers working in schools at the time of the study. Data from one study showed that 40% of school police officers receive no training related to their specific role in schools (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016).

Importantly, although the research on policing in schools is complicated by the inconsistent policies and training of school police, it does demonstrate clear findings about some outcomes. Findings from high-quality research, using large samples, indicates that the presence of school police is related to several harmful outcomes (e.g., exclusionary discipline; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Legewie & Fagan, 2019; Weisburst, 2019). Bias may explain why such harmful outcomes are disproportionately suffered by students from minoritized groups. One study found that school police in districts with a larger proportion of White students were primarily concerned about external threats (i.e., intruder-based and environment-based) that might harm the students, whereas school police in the districts with a larger proportion of Black students were primarily concerned with students themselves as threats (Fisher et al., 2022).

Highlights from the research literature are included below, organized by the possible benefits, harms, role, and training of school police. All studies summarized below were reviewed by the NASP Policing in Schools Task Force led by co-chairs Drs. Tara Raines and Janay Sander. The task force focused primarily on research conducted after 2010 given the expansion in more robust, empirical studies following that year.

## BENEFITS

- The presence of school police may lower firearm presence in schools, particularly if the school is in a high crime area. However, this outcome could simply reflect increased adult monitoring rather than being a benefit inherent to presence of school police (Theriot, 2009).
- A collaborative police–school partnership that focused on reducing truancy increased students’ willingness to attend school and decreased overall rates of truancy (Mazerolle et al., 2017).
- The length of time the officer is in the same building matters; rates of violent crime decrease when the school police officer was in the same setting for 3 years (Zhang, 2019).

## HARMS

### Exclusionary Discipline and Arrest

- The presence of school police can amplify racial inequalities in school discipline (James & Dragoo, 2018; Javdani, 2019; Turner & Beneke, 2020).
- Schools with school police are associated with higher numbers of arrests for disorderly conduct (though similar amounts of arrests in total), even when controlling for poverty (Theriot, 2009).
- With police presence in schools, the arrest rate goes up for all students, but more so for Black students than White or Latinx students (Fisher et al., 2022)
- Controlling for a variety of other variables (e.g., incidents of bullying, school location, poverty, suspensions) the increased association between school police presence and arrest rates was due to race alone, independent of other factors. (Homer & Fisher, 2020).
- As school police presence increases, exclusionary discipline goes up more for Black and Latinx as compared to White students (Crosse et al., 2022).
- As schools increased the use of police, there were higher frequencies of exclusionary practices and schools reported a higher percentage of nonserious violent crimes to law enforcement (Na & Gottfredson, 2013).
- School police’s weekly presence increases the number of students who will be involved in the justice system. The rate of referral for lower level offenses, such as fighting without using a weapon or making a threat without using a weapon, substantially increases when there is regular police presence in schools (Nance, 2016).
- Increasing school police does not improve school safety, and school police presence increases exclusionary discipline and increases criminalization of student discipline matters (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016; Kupchik et al., 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2013); increases minor drug crime arrest rates, crimes involving weapons, and serious violent crimes, particularly for minors ages 7–14 years (Owens, 2017); increases arrest rates for Black students and boys (Crosse et al., 2022; Fisher & Hennessey, 2016; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Homer & Fisher, 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2013).
- School police presence increased the number of drug- and weapon-related offenses and exclusionary disciplinary actions for treatment schools relative to comparison schools. These negative effects were more frequently found for students without special needs (Gottfredson et al., 2020).
- Federal grants for school police increase middle school discipline rates by 6%. The rise in discipline is driven by sanctions for low-level offenses or school code of conduct violations. Furthermore, Black students experience the largest increases in discipline (Weisburst, 2019).

- As school districts spend more on school police, minority students at the middle school level experience greater disciplinary actions for more minor incidents (Weisburst, 2019).

### **Academic Achievement**

- The impact of law enforcement presence is usually based on outcomes such as crime rates, not school effectiveness indicators such as academic achievement or other societal outcomes for students and community members. In one of the few studies that included academic performance as outcomes, extensive police contact in neighborhoods for low-level behaviors in a community decreased the academic performance of Black boys, ages 13–15 years (Legewie & Fagan, 2019).
- Exposure to a 3-year federal grant for school police is associated with a 2.5% decrease in high school graduation rates and a 4% decrease in college enrollment rates (Weisburst, 2019).

### **Perceptions of Safety**

- Students of color report lower feelings of safety and less positive perceptions of school police. The presence of school police was also associated with an increase in discipline for Black students relative to White students. (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016).

### **Mixed or Inconclusive Findings Related to Harm**

- Overall crime rates may decrease in the immediate location where school police are present (Bowers et al., 2011; Owens, 2017). However, adults in general who are providing high monitoring and positive connections with students may provide similar benefits. That is, reduced crime rates may not be due specifically to school police presence (Gregory et al., 2010).
- Perceptions of school safety in the presence of school police vary by student demographics. For example, students who feel more connected with school, have more positive attitudes about school police, and are male tend to feel safer in the presence of school police. However, Black students and those who report being victimized report feeling less safe in the presence of school police (Theriot & Orme, 2016).
- Students who interact with school police more frequently have more positive attitudes about school police but report lower school connectedness (Theriot, 2016).
- In comparison to general security guards, the presence of school police may be associated with lower numbers of serious violent crimes, but some studies did not report the same lower crime rates, and there may be no effect in high schools (e.g., Crawford & Burns, 2015; Maskaly et al., 2011; James & McCallion, 2013; Pigott et al., 2018).

## **ROLE OF SCHOOL POLICE**

- School police consider *students* the likely source of threat in schools with a large proportion of Black students, and they consider external threats more important in majority-White suburban schools. This pattern is consistent with the racial classification model and is one explanation of ongoing racial inequity, that is the criminalization and policing of school behavior is often based on subjective attitudes and biases (Fisher et al., 2022).
- School police who are assigned to schools with higher levels of social and educational disadvantage tend to use greater law enforcement functions (e.g., arrests, ticketing) when compared to school police who are assigned to schools with low levels of social and education disadvantage. School police in

schools with low levels of social and educational disadvantage tend to perform more education-related functions (Lynch et al., 2016).

- School police in urban schools tend to perform more conventional police tasks involving law enforcement and order maintenance as opposed to service and mentoring tasks (Rhodes, 2015).

## TRAINING

- School police identify training as a critical need in their profession. Approximately 40% of school police report not receiving any training specific to their position in schools, and 62% report needing more specialized training. Specifically, school police report needing more training in dealing with students and parents, understanding juvenile law, and gaining knowledge of school district policies (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016).
- School police who report not receiving any training tend to engage in legal interventions as a disciplinary method (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016). Similarly, school police who identify more strongly with a law enforcement role also tend to engage in more legal interventions at school (e.g., arrests, citations, ticketing; McKenna & White, 2018).
- Several agencies and organizations make recommendations for how SROs can be effective, such as having training in child development, implicit bias, and restorative justice and having a clear memorandum of understanding in place on their role, but it is unclear how many officers have this training or whether it is effective in helping promote positive student outcomes or in reducing crime (James & Dragoo, 2018).

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