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FY 2021 Report to the Committees on Appropriations: Research on School Resource Officer Programs

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Report to the Committees on Appropriations
Research on School Resource Officer Programs

The Department of Justice (DOJ) provides this report on school resource officers in response to report language in House Report 115-704 that seeks an examination of "the current role of School Resource Offices in schools" and "recommendations on how [School Resource Offices] can better serve the needs of the students." Moreover, the report (to be submitted "not later than 180 days after enactment" of P.L. 116-260)--

> should include, but is not limited to, an examination of the roles and duties of [School Resource Offices] in schools and [School Resource Offices'] effects on student outcomes and school safety, crime rates, and an examination of the instances of disciplinary actions including demographic characteristics of the student, and the details and severity of the infraction [, in addition to including] the Department's plan for disseminating this information to the public and relevant government entities.

The Office of Justice Programs (OJP), National Institute of Justice (NIJ), was designated to write this report. On January 10, 2020, the Department provided an interim report on research on school resource officer programs. At the time, NIJ had not yet developed a sufficient evidence base on school resource officer/officers (SRO), or other school safety programs. To provide a more comprehensive response to the questions raised by the House report language, NIJ reviewed research on school policing, including ongoing and recently completed research funded by NIJ, and held discussions with researchers and law enforcement practitioners in school policing. This review was supported by the work of two subject matter experts contracted by NIJ, Joseph McKenna (School Safety Solutions) and Anthony Petrosino (WestEd).

1. *What are the current roles and duties of SROs in schools?*

Two common models for school policing have been implemented in the United States. The first, the school resource officer (SRO), is the most common. The SRO is an officer employed by a local or county law enforcement agency who is assigned regularly to the school. The second most common model is the school-based law enforcement officer (SBLE officer), who serves on a school district's own police force. The way these different models are implemented can vary considerably across jurisdictions, and even across schools in the same district. This report uses "school policing or school police" as a general term to refer to both SROs and SBLE officers and their work.

The first documented school policing program was implemented in the 1950s with the goal of using full-time police officers in the school to deter and prevent crime. Within the following decade, other school districts began similar programs and the term SRO was first used. Under the SRO model, there is typically a contract or memorandum of understanding between the school district and the local law enforcement agency for responsibilities that extend beyond responding to calls for service.

The "triad concept" is commonly used to describe three primary roles of a school police officer: law enforcer, educator, and informal counselor/mentor.[1] The *law enforcer* role entails typical law enforcement activities such as crime prevention, the application of appropriate law, and the apprehension of violators. The *educator* role involves officers teaching students (and sometimes staff) a variety of topics related to crime, the law, and positive decision-making. The *informal counselor/mentor* role refers to officers aiding students and, at times, their families with law-related issues.

More recently, the roles of school police officers have expanded beyond the traditional triad. For example, the *emergency manager* is a new role for some officers. This includes developing and implementing comprehensive school safety plans and strategies in consultation with other first responders and school administrators. Roles and duties differ by campuses or school districts, depending on local priorities and the situation being addressed.

As a result of their various roles, school police officers may be challenged to make quick decisions about which role (or combination of roles) to apply in a particular situation, to switch roles as new situations arise, or to avoid involvement altogether. McKenna and Pollock described the conflict that emerges when the law enforcer role is at odds with the educational and mentoring goals of a school setting.[2] For example, student misbehavior could be met with a law enforcement response (e.g., arrest), an educational response (e.g., detention), or a mentoring or counseling response.

School police have faced legal challenges and serious criticism when they have applied a law enforcement response to student misbehavior that others thought could be handled through a school disciplinary process. In fact, DOJ's Civil Rights Division has investigated and developed settlement agreements with school districts that establish clear guidelines to be followed in the limited circumstances in which law enforcement intervention may be appropriate.[3]

2. ***What are the effects of SROs on student outcomes, school safety, crime rates, and disciplinary actions by student demographics and infraction details and severity?***

The research evidence does not, as a whole, yield support for school policing as an effective strategy to improve safety and security. Though some positive impacts have been reported for school policing, they are fragmented and inconsistent across the studies. School policing has been correlated with harmful effects on students. These harmful effects include physical harm, increased use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension from schools), arrests, and differential experiences with school policing depending on student race, ethnicity, and disability status and

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[1] Mike Kennedy, "Teachers With a Badge," *American Schools and Universities,* February 1, 2001; and Anthony Petrosino, Trevor Fronius, and Darius Taylor, "Research in Brief: School-Based Law Enforcement" (San Francisco, CA: REL West, 2020), https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/relwestFiles/pdf/4-2-3-20_SRO_Brief_Approved_FINAL.pdf.

[2] Joseph M. Mckenna and Joycelyn M. Pollock, "Law Enforcement Officers in Schools: An Analysis of Ethical Issues," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 33 no. 3 (2014): 163-184, https://doi.org/10.1080/0731129X.2014.982974.

3 See for example, "Settlement Agreement between the United States of American and the City of Meridian" https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/778016/download

sex[4]. This is the case regardless of the outcome examined: perceptions of school safety, student behavior at school, or prevention of unauthorized entry of individuals to schools to commit violence, as with the shootings in Parkland, Florida, and Newtown, Connecticut. In summary, the research to date does not conclude that school police have an overall positive impact on student outcomes, school safety, crime rates, or disciplinary actions by student demographics and infraction details and severity. This is due to a number of factors, which may include, but are not limited to, the quality of research completed and the variation in school policing models.

Research assessing the impact of school policing is currently limited, as few studies have used strong research designs. Evidence quality is improving due to more recent studies using stronger, quasi-experimental designs, and some randomized experiments, but results are not yet available. Critically, school policing is not one standardized set of procedures — implementation (including the extent of training) varies by jurisdiction, and even within schools in the same district, which makes it difficult to make blanket statements on school policing's effectiveness. To date, the studies conducted have not been sufficiently nuanced to detect, for example, how different roles employed by school police may impact outcomes.

3. What are some recommendations for how school police can better serve the needs of students?

For school police to better serve the needs of students, improvements are recommended in two areas: 1) the practice of school policing; and 2) additional research to improve our knowledge on best practices in school policing.

To begin, it is important for all key stakeholders — including individual school police officers, local law enforcement agencies, school staff and administrators, and community members — to

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[4] Anthony Petrosino et al., "School-Based Law Enforcement Strategies To Reduce Crime, Increase Perceptions of Safety, and Improve Learning Outcomes in Primary and Secondary Schools," *Campbell Systematic Reviews,* In press; Anthony Petrosino, Sarah Guckenburg, and Trevor Fronius, "Policing Schools' Strategies: A Review of the Evaluation Evidence," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation* 8 no. 17 (2012): 80-101, https://journals.sfu.ca/jmde/index.php/jmde_1/article/view/337/335; Jennifer M. Reingle Gonzalez, Katelyn K. Jetelina, and Wesley G. Jennings, "Structural School Safety Measures, SROs, and School-Related Delinquent Behavior and Perceptions of Safety: A State-of-the-Art Review," *Policing: An International Journal* 39 no. 3 (2016): 438-454, https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-05-2016-0065; Denise C. Gottfredson et al., "Effects of School Resource Officers on School Crime and Responses to School Crime," *Criminology & Public Policy* 19 no. 3 (2020): 905-940, https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12512; Nathan James and Gail McCallion, "School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools," CRS Report for Congress, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf; and Barbara Raymond, *Assigning Police Officers to Schools,* Problem-Oriented Guides for Police, Response Guides Series, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2010, NCJ 232120, https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/assigning-police-officers-schools; Monique W. Morris, Rebecca Epstein, and Aishatu Yusuf, "Be Her Resource: A Toolkit About School Resource Officers and Girls of Color," Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 20-21, 27-28, 33-35 (undated, but URL suggests date is June 17, 2020), https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/17_SRO-final-_Acc.pdf; Amanda Merkwae, *Schooling the Police: Race, Disability, and the Conduct of School Resource Officers*, 21 Mich. J. Race & L. 147 (2015),. https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl/vol21/iss1/6.

clearly understand what role officers have in the school setting.[5] Coming to agreement on this and sharing this understanding widely will help address issues regarding role conflict and clarify how officers should respond to school code of conduct violations that are not crimes.

Where school police officers are used, selecting individuals well-suited to the position is an important step toward better serving student needs. The approach used to select officers for school policing should consider the goals of the school policing program and the duties and roles the officer will fulfill for the school. Interest in a school assignment and an understanding of the unique needs of children are additional important factors to consider in selection. Rigorous research is needed to identify particularly important characteristics and specialized skills to look .for in selecting school police officers.

Improved, specialized training is also critical to improve the practice of school policing. School police officers need additional specialized training, because the roles they play, the educational environment in which they operate, and the populations they serve differ in a number of respects from those of traditional officers in the community. To be successful, training should focus on the dynamics of the school environment and the roles an officer will engage in.[6] Though some questions remain on the specifics of training, it should include basic training, training on the nuances of the school district (e.g., the role(s) they are expected to play) and the setting in which officers will carry out their work, and ongoing training to improve skills over time.

There is a need to develop, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive framework for operating school policing programs aimed at creating best practices for implementation that includes information on various outcomes including crime reduction as well as favorable and adverse impacts on students. This framework should allow for design flexibility to meet school needs. It should include established governance documents, accountability systems, defined officer roles, training, and the regular examination of data to assess impact. Further, future research should be targeted to areas where knowledge is particularly needed: understanding how program characteristics impact outcomes, issues associated with the selection and training of officers for school positions, innovations in school policing, and identifying the impacts of removing police from schools, (including assessing outcomes when funds for school police officers are redirected toward mental health professionals and other non-law enforcement staff and programming to support students). There is a need to improve research such that the outcomes studied are well-aligned with the approaches school police use. Research should use the most rigorous and appropriate designs possible.

[5] F. Chris Curran et al., "Understanding School Safety and the Use of School Resource Officers in Understudied Settings," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2016-CK-BX-0020, April 2020, NCJ 254621, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/254621.pdf; Steven Clark, "The Role of Law Enforcement in Schools: The Virginia Experience — A Practitioner Report," *New Directions for Youth Development* 2011 no. 129 (2011): 89-101, https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.389; and Peter Finn et al., "Comparison of Program Activities and Lessons Learned Among 19 School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2000-IJ-CX-K002, NCJ 209272, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209272.pdf.

[6] Paige Pihl Buckley, Geneva Gann, and Lisa H. Thurau, *If Not Now, When?: A Survey of Juvenile Justice Training in America's Police Academies* (Cambridge, MA: Strategies for Youth, 2013), http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/SFYReport_02-2013_rev.pdf; James and McCallion, "School Resource Officers"; and Kathy E. Martinez-Prather, Joseph M. McKenna, and Scott W. Bowman, "The Impact of Training on Discipline Outcomes in School-Based Policing," *Policing: An International Journal* 39 no. 3 (2016): 478-490, https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2016-0022.

4. ***How will this report be disseminated to the public and relevant government entities?***

NIJ intends to produce a publication on the existing research on SROs and SBLE officers covering the issues raised by the House report language and discussed in this report. This publication, to be made available on the NIJ website, will cover these issues in greater depth and offer recommendations for how to move forward with school police. NIJ estimates that the report will be completed and published by the end of January 2022.