

# Summit on School Policing



## Aaron Kupchik—School Policing: What the Research Shows

In the aftermath of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, the issue of police in schools has been getting more attention. Some have argued in favor of assigning more armed police officers and even arming teachers in hopes of deterring future mass shootings.

The two main claims made by proponents of increased policing are that School Resource Officers (SROs) can control and prevent crime among students, and prevent or thwart armed attacks on schools (i.e., school shootings).\*

Yet the existing evidence for SROs increasing safety is mixed at best, with evidence of unintended harmful consequences that come with SRO programs, including thrusting students into the criminal justice system and perpetuating racial inequality.

Let's take a look at the research.

### Does the presence of police reduce student crime?

There is no clear empirical basis for the claim that school police reduce student crime. While several research studies have considered whether the presence of police predicts lower rates of school crime,<sup>1</sup> this is difficult to study, since one cannot randomly assign officers to schools and evaluate differences across schools. 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.

While some well-designed studies suggest that the presence of SROs prevents student crime,<sup>2</sup> a greater number suggest that there is either no impact on student crime rates, or that addition of SROs is associated with additional student misconduct, once taking into account preexisting school conditions.<sup>3, 4</sup>

### 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 rare. There were 20 homicides of students at schools across the U.S. in the 2014-2015 school year, the most recent year reported by the National Center for Education Statistics. In comparison, there were 1,148 homicides of youth ages 5-18 outside of school during that same school year, illustrating how relatively rare it is that students suffer violent deaths in school.

While some school shootings have occurred in schools without SROs or other armed security present (e.g., Newtown), others occurred in schools with such protections in place (e.g., Columbine, Parkland, Santa Fe). As a result, we have no empirical evidence on how SROs may or may not prevent such horrific events.

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## Potential consequences of increased policing schools

While there is no conclusive evidence that SROs reduce crime among students or prevent mass shootings, the research demonstrates a number of potential problems. Evidence shows that the presence of SROs can mean increased rates of arrests of students for minor offenses such as disorderly conduct and simple assault, resulting in greater numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the justice system.<sup>4,5</sup>

Importantly, youth of color are considerably more likely than white youth to be arrested at school and suffer the consequences of an arrest record. Other studies have uncovered abusive treatment at the hands of SROs, and SROs who provoke students in ways that escalate minor student misbehavior into criminal behavior.

Moreover, SRO programs are very expensive. Funding SRO programs may result in evidence-based school crime reduction programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or Social-Emotional Learning programs, not being implemented, based on presumptions of the effectiveness of policing.<sup>6</sup> In these instances, schools communities miss opportunities to pursue strategies shown to be effective in improving school climates.

## 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 part of a community.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

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There is much that we still don't understand about policing in schools. With no solid evidence that SROs reduce either student crime or risk of mass school shootings, claims that more policing is the solution are unsubstantiated. But there is evidence that the presence of SROs results in criminalization of routine discipline issues, with students being arrested for misbehaviors (e.g., a fist fight) that used to result in a trip to the principal's office. The evidence also shows that schools are better off investing in evidence-based practices that build students' social and emotional competence and build better school climates.

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

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\* In this article, the term School Resource Officer (SRO) refers to all types of sworn law enforcement officers stationed in schools, including School Police Officers (employed by a school district) and School Resource Officers (commissioned by a law enforcement agency and stationed in a school).

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[3] Brady, Kevin P., Sharon Balmer, and Deinya Phenix (2007) "School-Police Partnership Effectiveness in Urban Schools: An analysis of New York City's impact schools initiative." *Education and Urban Society* 39: 455-478.

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

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[5] 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

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

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

[8] Kupchik, Aaron (2010) *Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear*. NY: NYU Press.

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