PennState

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students

School Resource Officers: Rapid Review

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

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Introduction

Although identifying best practices for responding to student behavior concerns is always of importance, the current political and civil rights climate is perhaps pushing schools to re-evaluate the effectiveness and equity of their current disciplinary systems. One branch of the disciplinary process in many schools today is school resource officers or SROs. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO, n.d.) estimates that there are somewhere between 14,000 and 20,000 school resource officers spread across a third of American schools, for kindergarten through 12th grade. Although the number of schools with SRO programs is increasing steadily, especially in urban high schools (James & McCallion, 2013), few studies of school police officers have been conducted and there is little understanding about the role of SROs in these programs (Brown, 2006). This review of literature on SRO programs in schools aims to discuss the history, purpose, and both intended and unintended effects of integrating law enforcement with school disciplinary procedures and will conclude with recommendations for training and specific responses in order to reduce harm to students.

There is extensive literature on the implementation of SRO programs in schools; this review presents only a brief summary. It is not in the direct interest of this review to "take a side" as it comes to implementing SRO programs in schools; however, there is a disproportionate amount of data that does not necessarily reflect these programs positively.

History and Purpose of School Resource Officers

The first instance of a SRO program was implemented in Flint, Michigan (Counts et al., 2018) in 1953, although SRO programs were not widely publicized until an 1968 program in Fresno, California attempted to redefine the image of the local police and promote community relations between the public and law enforcement (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). From there, the number of schools with embedded SROs has increased exponentially, and the purpose of these programs has shifted from integrating community resources to increasing compliance and issuing disciplinary responses to student misbehavior or simply, maintaining order. Philips and Cochrane (1985) developed a list of seven objectives that SROs should be expected to achieve on school campuses- most of these focus on community support (education about risks, encouraging social responsibility, etc.), and none are about behavior management. To summarize the detailed explanation of the lack of clarity surrounding an SRO's role given by Ryan and colleagues (2018),

this transition from a community resource to policy enforcer is affected by: a lack of clear policy from both law enforcement and schools, a disparity in court decisions about the role of SROs, and public outcry for safety measures as a response to perceived threats to students such as drugs, gun violence, and racial tension. The purpose of SROs as defined by NASRO (n.d.) is a combination of law enforcement, teaching, and mentoring; however, Lawrence (2007) suggests that the true purpose is closer to traditional law enforcement functions like patrolling school buildings and grounds, investigating criminal complaints, handling students who violate laws, and trying to minimize disruptions during the school day and at after-school activities.

Perhaps the most important events in increasing SRO programs nationwide have been school shootings. School resource officers did not become commonplace until the mid to late 1990s- at first, the slow increase of SRO programs could be attributed to a 'moral panic' about crime, especially in youth. This was the era of the term "super predator" to describe young people who commit crimes, California's 3 strike law, and other initiatives. However, SRO programs skyrocketed after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of SROs in schools rose by about 6,700 (James & McCallion, 2013). The purpose of these new programs was, again, ostensibly to increase a feeling of safety, a topic which will be explored later in this paper, but the preview is that, as to whether these programs actually produced a safer environment, there are no answers grounded in research. Research does show that school shootings are incredibly infrequent, are actually decreasing, and might be better addressed with psychological prevention than with a law enforcement response (US Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, 2018).

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Impact on School Climate

Few researchers have attempted to assess the impact of SRO programs and have instead attempted to generate recommendations for addressing the changing role of SROs, such as suggesting clearer roles and training (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). Many evaluations of SRO programs are more directed at examining the contents of these programs, rather than the effects. Na and Gottfredson (2013) state that no studies of SRO programs to date sufficiently meet the standard for research- studies lack an effort to identify and describe a control school, or do not provide significant pre-post data, or do not include enough observations in order to be

generalizable. Theriot (2009) states that most studies surrounding security strategies in schools have “varying levels of methodological rigor” and “often report conflicting findings”. This section of the present review will focus on two areas that there is some research evidence for including effects on school safety and psychological effects.

While it seems clear that community stakeholders feel that SROs do increase school safety as evidenced by the continual growth of these programs, there is limited research as to whether or not school resource officers make *students* feel more safe (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). Multiple reviews on SRO programs’ effect on school climate (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Tillyer, Fisher & Wilcox, 2011; and Arrick, 2002, respectively) found that overall, these programs do not increase feelings of safety, do not contribute to a sense of school community, and disproportionately negatively affect marginalized students. There is also little conclusive research as to whether SRO programs can actually produce a safer environment, separate from feelings or the appearance of safety. Results from existing research are mixed. Na and Gottfredson (2013) compared groups of schools that increased these programs with schools that did not, and they found no evidence that adding SROs to schools prevented or reduced violence; Arrick (2002) found similar results. Tillyer, Fisher, & Wilcox (2011) did not find any evidence that SROs increased either actual safety or feelings of safety, reporting that the only strategy that significantly reduced fear was metal detectors. However, there is also some conflicting evidence for example, Johnson (1999) found that the addition of SROs in one school district decreased offenses.

Ryan et al. (2018) reports that incorporating law enforcement into school discipline systems creates a sense of tension between students and authority that can have lasting effects as students can learn that law enforcement is something to be feared and resented, rather than a resource. Na and Gottfredson (2013) suggest that the mere physical presence of SROs in the schools they studied was seen as threatening. They write that this is an impediment to other attempts to provide a positive school culture and foster community and connectedness. In other words, the impact of having SROs in schools results in a loss of a trusting, positive culture that is conducive to student learning. This conflict between students and authority creates an adversarial environment between students and authority figures, including teachers and administrators who often show higher support of SRO programs (Crushiel et al., 2015), that is detrimental to student outcomes.

Impact of More Punitive Disciplinary Measures

In addition to the discrepant effects on safety that SRO programs provide and the adversarial environment that incorporating law enforcement with schools can create, multiple reviews (Theriot, 2009; Ryan et al., 2018; Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Tillyer, Fisher & Wilcox, 2011) conclude that SRO programs also have little to no actual effect on criminal behavioral outcomes and rates of victimization or school violence.

To some, the idea that the addition of SROs increases arrest rates might sound like a positive outcome, suggesting that crime is being identified and addressed; however, this actually means that students whose misbehavior would ordinarily be dealt with “in-house” as a school disciplinary issue are instead being funneled into the youth justice system. Even when controlling for poverty, Theriot (2009) found that in schools that employ SROs, students are five times more likely to be charged and arrested for disorderly conduct. In addition to arrests, Theriot writes that students are likely to have concurrent in-school punishments, such as suspensions and expulsions, which are correlated with lower graduation rates and higher future involvement with law enforcement. Not only do suspensions and expulsions result in missed class time, research shows that these responses also increase drop-out rates (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014) and decrease sense of school connectedness. These direct causal links exist between the criminalization of minor school offenses like misbehavior and future adult incarceration (Ryan et al., 2018) and thus, make up the *school to prison pipeline*. The school to prison pipeline describes a system of injustices present in educational systems that funnel at-risk youth into corrections, rather than into treatment like counseling, mentorship, and rehabilitation. The U.S. Department of Justice (Statement of Interest, 2015) warns that SRO presence means that minor behaviors are more likely to be criminalized, forcing students unnecessarily out of schools and into corrections. Again, there is some evidence to the contrary, for example, May et al. (2018) reports that SRO presence does not necessarily increase the size of the school to prison pipeline, reporting that school officials and outside law enforcement are much more likely to refer students to corrections than SROs. This could suggest that schools that already have a tendency to criminalize student misbehavior are perhaps more likely to hire SROs.

One specific example of criminalization of minor behaviors is so-called “disturbing schools” laws. These laws can be found in 22 states and can prohibit everything from “boisterious behavior” to all forms of “annoying conduct” (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). While we may think of SROs as being involved in only serious criminal cases in schools, SROs are increasingly being used to address misbehavior in schools using these disturbing schools laws, for instance, seeing an increase in arrests for students having tantrums (Turner & Beneke, 2020). A quintessential

example of these disturbing schools laws is a New Mexico school that had a 13-year-old student arrested for burping (Associated Press, 2016). Without SRO programs, students displaying disruptive, though not harmful or criminal, behavior are redirected and disciplined in-house, and do not have permanent misdemeanor, felony, or criminal charges, let alone the stigma and trauma that come with being arrested.

It is important to note that the groups most affected by negative impacts of SRO programs are Black and other racial minority students (Nellis, 2016), disabled students (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018), and poor students (Hirschfield, 2008). Black and ethnic minority students are much more likely to be affected by disturbing school laws, are more likely to be suspended and expelled, and account for a disproportionate amount of arrests (Nellis, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) survey, Black students represented 15% of the total school population but accounted for 31% of law enforcement referrals representing a 16 percentage point disparity. Black students are also four times as likely to be suspended than White peers (CRDC); again, suspension is correlated with drop-out. In adult detentions, Black people are incarcerated at five times the rate and Hispanic people at 1.4 times the rate of White people (Nellis, 2016)- this is relevant because, as discussed, early exposure to law enforcement is a predictor of future incarceration. Disabled students might be targeted more by disturbing school laws as a result of "strange" behavior, as well as a rigid following of school rules that do not leave room for neurodivergency- students with autism, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and mental health disorders are more likely to suffer (Ryan et al., 2018). Again, according to CRDC, students with disabilities make up 12% of the school population but comprise 28% of law enforcement referrals. Finally, as Theriot (2009) found, poverty was a successful predictor of arrest likelihood; the author also noted that ethnicity and poverty are often closely tied.

Recommendations for Effective Programs

There are no national standards for SRO training and only 11 states have specific certification requirements (Ryan et al., 2018). Ideally, systematic preparation would involve specific information on juvenile justice and how to work with children; however, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2011) report that three quarters of states do not mandate this training, and that these officers would not have more training than that already in police academy materials accounting for only 1% of total training hours. For one potential starting place in thinking about child-centered SRO training, the National Association of School Resource Officers offers a

paid 40-hour training block that includes ethics, diversity, child development, trends in juvenile justice, and informal teaching and counseling strategies (the NASRO Basic School Resource Officer Course).

Given the high correlation between employing SROs in schools and the criminalization of misbehavior, another suggestion for training would be in behavior management principles. Teachers and administrators are, for the most part, able to navigate challenging behaviors every day without turning to law enforcement. No teacher can have complete control over every student in the classroom, and no classroom has 100% compliance. There is a give and take when it comes to control and choice, and these choices allow students to retain their agency while they make better decisions. Training in behavior management ranges from week-long courses to free online modules. A place to gather basic information could be the Crisis Prevention Institute’s behavior management materials, at crisisprevention.com/Blog/Behavior-Management.

Another general training recommendation, for SROs as well as schools, is restorative practices. Restorative practices focus on empathy, community building, and problem-solving, rather than punishment which could be a more effective route than harsh disciplinary reactions like suspension and expulsion that have lifelong consequences for students. Most online trainings are paid, but one recommendation from the Restorative Justice Institute is to look for local training opportunities through youth organizations, local colleges, legal organizations, or community centers. There are also a variety of books on the subject. For instance, Restorative Circles in Schools: Building Community and Enhancing Learning by Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel (2010) is a quick read. The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools by Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet (2005) is has practical school-based suggestions for discipline and building community.

Something else that is important in discipline is trauma-informed care, given the correlation between crime and difficult life circumstances. Although not mandated, a trauma-informed perspective is essential to understanding students who commit crimes and is even more important in attempting to rehabilitate problem behaviors. There are free online trainings, such as these- traumainformedcaretraining.com/free-trauma-informed-care-courses/- or there are resources readily available, such as through SAMHSA- samhsa.gov/childrens-awareness-day/past-events/2018/child-traumatic-stress-resources.

Although these are arguably ways to improve student experiences of SROs and produce better outcomes, Turner and Beneke (2020) caution that improving existing systems is not ultimately a solution to the school to prison pipeline. Making these systems better does not address the root cause of inequity in these systems and is not likely to eliminate problems.

Specifically, they remark about the difference between hiring better trained SROs versus dismantling structures that criminalize students in favor of building more democratic and equitable schools.

Review

One of the main reasons that new SRO programs are implemented in schools is to increase school safety. However, not only do school resource officer programs often not deliver a “feeling of” safety, meaning they might actually make students and staff feel less safe, or more watched, there is also little evidence that they deliver actual safety, either; specifically, schools with SROs are not statistically less prone to the gamut of school behavior concerns. Additionally, programs are associated with the criminalization of misbehavior, which is harmful to academic success and increases risk of future incarceration, fueling the school to prison pipeline. All of these negative effects disproportionately affect students of color, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. While there is some evidence, much of it less recent, that SRO programs are effective at decreasing crime in schools, research overwhelmingly shows that these programs have few positive impacts on police perception, school safety, and behavioral outcomes. There is no federal policy to guide the procedures or goals of SRO programs and as such, roles for SROs and expectations for these programs are undefined and difficult to research. Due in part to a lack of continuity in mission and implementation, it is difficult to evaluate SRO programs in general, and many reviews simply look at components of programs, rather than effectiveness. A lack of standardized training that SROs must accomplish in order to understand how to work with children or in schools further confounds concerns about effectiveness for students. For schools who choose to integrate SROs, it is imperative that SROs be trained in juvenile justice, behavior management, restorative practices, and trauma-informed care.

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