

School Police Prevent Some Violence, But Not Shootings, Research Finds

Their presence also heightens discipline disparities, according to a new study



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School-based police have been marginally successful in preventing some violence on the campuses they patrol, but their presence doesn't prevent school shootings, and it's linked to disproportionate discipline of boys and Black and disabled students, according to new research that largely affirms years of other studies.

The study, published earlier this week in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* by researchers from the University at Albany and the RAND Corporation, found that the presence of school resource officers had mixed results for schools and “change school environments and student outcomes in important ways.”

While the recent findings are largely unsurprising because they resemble what past research has shown, they're relevant as schools in recent years have reassessed their relationships with police. Dozens of districts ended or shrank their school policing programs following the 2020 police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. But some more recently have brought officers back following high-profile school shootings, and a new Texas law will require that every school have an armed security officer.

The researchers used federal data from 2014 to 2018 to evaluate the impact of school-based police, often called school resource officers, which were present at least once a week in nearly half of U.S. public schools during the 2017-18 school year. Using school-level data collected by the U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights,

they compared schools served by local police departments whose federal grant applications to fund SROs scored just above the threshold for a successful grant with those that scored just below it.

They found that SROs can likely be credited with reducing some forms of violence in schools—like threats and physical attacks without weapons—but don't prevent shootings. In fact, firearm-related offenses often increased after the hiring of an SRO, but that could be due to increased reporting to on-site officers, the researchers wrote.

The presence of SROs does, however, increase the use of suspension, expulsion, arrests, and referrals to police, particularly for Black students, boys, and students with disabilities, the researchers concluded.

Over the past three years, a number of districts reduced or eliminated school police in the wake of racial and social justice movements. But some districts' reversals have come as students have returned to classrooms after widespread pandemic closures and brought more social-emotional and behavioral needs with them—and following high-profile shootings in Texas, Tennessee, and elsewhere. Even more are considering following their lead.

“I think that's a reasonable response, wanting to do something to try and help reduce the violence that's happening in schools and try to prevent school shootings,” said Lucy Sorensen, an associate professor of public administration and policy at the University at Albany and one of the researchers who conducted the study. “But I think it's also not necessarily tackling the roots of school violence.”

In the years studied, they found schools with SROs had similar rates of student infractions across the categories studied as schools without the officers, but significantly higher discipline rates, as well as police referral and arrest rates.

The presence of an SRO “increases the chance that behavior that would have otherwise been dealt with by the school disciplinary system is referred to the juvenile justice system,” they wrote.

The findings “makes it clear that any potential benefits in violence reduction or gun detection come at very high costs to students.”

Research has consistently found a link between the presence of police officers in schools and these discipline patterns. The disparities between white students and their non-white peers were the basis for much of the recent movement to remove officers from schools or reduce their presence.

When it comes to safety, only 25 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders in a recent EdWeek Research Center survey said that increasing the presence of police at their schools would make them feel safer at work. More than 50 percent said the same about hiring more mental health counselors to work with students with behavioral problems.

School resource officers reduce fights and attacks, but not gun offenses

The results of the most recent study give district leaders much to consider when evaluating schools' SRO programs, the researchers concluded.

On one hand, SROs do meet some of their objectives, like reducing a “non-trivial number of” fights and attacks, which could have long-term benefits by reducing students' exposure to violence and academic disruptions.

But on the other hand, the researchers “find no evidence that SROs reduce more serious gun-related offenses,” and their presence can lead to harsher discipline for minor infractions, which can also have long-term negative consequences, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities.

“We do see some evidence that they’re meeting some of their goals, but then we also see this series of potentially unintended consequences where they’re making the school environment more punitive,” Sorensen said.

With that in mind, Sorensen suggested that schools that do have SROs establish clear memorandums of understanding with the police agencies that tend to employ them to outline the officers’ roles. Specifically, it’s important to detail in what situations the officers are to be involved in student discipline, if at all.

“I think having that type of accountability could potentially avoid some of these disciplinary consequences we’re seeing of having SROs in schools,” Sorensen said.