



Lives in the Balance

FOSTERING COLLABORATION • TRANSFORMING LIVES • INSPIRING CHANGE

Position Paper: Should School Resource Officers Remain in Schools?

There has been a dramatic increase in the presence of police in schools since the Columbine tragedy. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers¹, “school based policing has become one of the fastest growing areas of law enforcement.” Nearly half of all public schools² have SROs. There has been considerable debate recently about whether the presence of SROs has been beneficial, with some still feeling that police presence is vital to school safety and security and others arguing that the presence of SROs has served to criminalize misbehavior -- thereby fueling the school-to-prison pipeline -- and worked to the particular disadvantage of Black and Brown students and students with disabilities, who account for a disproportionate share of students³ referred to law enforcement.

How did we get here?

Recent surveys⁴ of teachers who have been teaching in the same school for the five or more years have indicated that 62 percent report that behavior issues that interfere with teaching and learning have notably worsened. The National Center for Educational Statistics found that 43 percent of schools have reported inadequate levels of teacher training in behavior management⁵. Most schools still rely on punitive responses to challenging behavior, such as detention and suspension. While such interventions may be considered the norm, they are not benign: students who are suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system⁶ the following year.

But there is also considerable racial disproportionality in the use of these punitive interventions both historically and presently, according to the U.S. Dept. of Education Office for Civil Rights data analyzed by Dan Losen, J.D. and Russell Skiba, Ph.D.⁷ They report that when American schools were integrated in the 1960s, suspension rates increased dramatically. The racial gap in suspension has grown considerably since 1973, especially for Black students. In the 1970s Black students had a suspension rate of about 6 percent, twice the likelihood of suspension as white students. With the advent of zero tolerance policies, suspensions increased for all students, but more than doubled for Black students. Black students are now over three times more likely to be suspended than white students.

Data analysis of the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection report from 2015 showed that while Black students comprise 15.4 percent of the overall student population, they represent 31% of students referred to law enforcement and 36% of students arrested at school. However, it's not only Black students who are disproportionately represented - the data also showed that students with disabilities comprise 12.6% of the overall student population yet they represented 28% of those referred to law enforcement and 27.5% of students arrested at school. Further, the most recent report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics⁸ to measure police interaction with youth found that 88% of the 2.1 million arrests of youth in 2005 were for low level, non-violent offenses.

Do SROs Improve School Safety?

While some studies suggest that SROs do improve certain elements of school safety, other studies suggest that they do not. One study in West Virginia from 2018⁹ found that the presence of SROs, "increases the number of reported incidents related to drug crime as well as the number of out-of-school suspensions for drug crime, but decreases violent crime and disorder when multiple years are considered." A July 2020 study supported by the National Institute of Justice¹⁰ found that, "increasing SRO dosage in schools does not reduce school records of any form of school crime, and results in higher counts of recorded weapon- and drug-related school crimes, effects that persist for at least 20 months after the increase in SROs." Further, "increasing SRO dosage in schools increases the number of exclusionary responses to disciplinary infractions...SROs, by increasing exclusionary responses to school discipline

incidents, increase the criminalization of school discipline.” As for the effect on preventing school shootings, the study¹¹ found that, “No empirical evidence supports this claim,” confirming the findings by Everytown for Gun Safety.¹²

Given these equivocal effects on safety -- and the unequivocal data suggesting that police involvement in school discipline has been particularly detrimental to Black students and students with disabilities -- we find it difficult to justify the continued use of SROs.

In saying this, we are not overlooking the fact that many SROs have established good relationships with many students, while working under often ill-defined circumstances. It also doesn't mean that removing police from schools will solve the complex problems related to school discipline and disproportionality. Simply replacing SROs with counselors and social workers -- but maintaining largely punitive systems of discipline and failing to examine issues of disproportionality -- won't be enough to get the job done.

Moving Forward

At Lives in the Balance, we disseminate a model of care called Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) and heighten awareness of other non-punitive interventions. The CPS model views challenging behavior simply as a signal that a student is having difficulty meeting a particular expectation. Rather than focusing on students' behavior, the CPS model aims to identify the problems that are causing that behavior (i.e., the expectations the student is having difficulty meeting). The goal is to have school staff engage students in solving those problems collaboratively and proactively. Through this process, the problems are solved, the behaviors subside, communication is enhanced, relationships improve, and disciplinary actions plummet. Unfortunately, that's not what SROs (and most classroom teachers) are trained to do.

To stop the flow of children being pushed from the education system into the criminal justice system through punitive interventions, we need more adults equipped to help children figure out what's getting in their way when it comes to meeting the expectations placed upon them, *before* the problem turns into a crisis. And if a crisis does occur (which will happen far less frequently when proactive interventions are used), the focus needs to be on future prevention.

Criminalizing childhood behavior only serves to ostracize and traumatize; it does not teach the skills necessary to solve problems and it does not build strong relationships among students

and adults. And commonly deployed “crisis prevention” strategies -- such as de-escalation, restraint, and seclusion -- don’t accomplish the mission (and are really crisis management strategies).

Shifting away from policing and punishing our children is not only possible, it’s the norm in many places. It is not too late to learn from our past in order to protect all of our children now. It’s time to shift our perspective and prioritize proactive, non-punitive approaches to solving problems in our schools.

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