



## What Effects do School Resource Officers Have on Schools?

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Over the last two years there has been a small, but very vocal, segment of the U.S. population that has raised concerns in opposition to having law enforcement officers permanently assigned to schools as school resource officers (SROs). Those in opposition to school resource officers have claimed that assigning officers to schools has resulted in youths being formally arrested for minor conduct issues that would have otherwise been handled informally by school staff if the SROs had not been present in the school. They have suggested that SROs have resulted in thousands of children being marked for life with criminal records for behaviors that previously would only have resulted in minor in-school discipline. They claim that the presence of SROs in schools has contributed to the disproportionate confinement of minority youth because they are disproportionately assigned to schools in minority neighborhoods, and that by arresting minority youth for minor offenses, it gives them a criminal record that will follow them the rest of their lives. In sum, **many argue that police officers in schools are responsible for a “school to prison pipeline”**.

One should ask, however, **are these allegations supported by the research evidence?** To date, there is very little social scientific research regarding SROs and their roles and operations within schools. This research brief will review the small set of existing social scientific research studies about SROs to see what impact they appear to have on students and schools.

### **Not All School Resource Officers are Alike**

The first important research finding is that SROs are individuals and, like all people, individual school resource officers act differently from one another. Therefore, examples can likely be found of individual SROs who have taken an unnecessarily heavy enforcement stance toward student conduct problems, and others who have not. Undoubtedly, officers with temperaments unsuited for working with children and youths should not be assigned to SRO positions. However, solely focusing on isolated incidents receiving national media attention is not a reasonable way to determine the effects of the thousands of SROs assigned to schools throughout the country.

It is also important to keep in mind that every jurisdiction has different rules, policies, and organizational tables for their SRO programs. While some agencies require SROs to engage in some teaching activities, or deliver the D.A.R.E. or G.R.E.A.T. programs, other agencies strictly limit their SROs to law enforcement and order maintenance duties. School districts also vary in the amount of control school administrators have over the roles, responsibilities, and actions of the SROs within their schools. These jurisdictional differences undoubtedly also impact how SROs engage in their work. The following research findings will discuss the limited amount of research to date on SROs and the general trends that have been revealed thus far. It is important to keep in mind, however, that not all SROs fit into the general trends.

### **Are SROs Too Enforcement Oriented?**

The most publicized study to examine this question used data from a nationwide survey of 470 high school and middle school principals in the U.S. from 2003 through 2008. This study, conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland, found that schools with SROs reported more serious crimes, more minor crimes, and higher rates for student expulsions than schools without SROs (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). While the authors of this study immediately jumped to the conclusion that the presence of SROs caused normal problem student behaviors to be treated as serious crime, and to be punished more severely through arrests and expulsions, it is also just as likely that they have the order reversed. In other words, this study fails to address the likelihood that SROs tend to be assigned to schools that *already* have significant crime and problem student behavior issues, and less likely to be utilized in schools that do not experience as severe safety and student conduct issues.

In a more thorough and controlled study, published in 2009, a researcher from the University of Tennessee examined school discipline data for 28 middle and high schools in the Knoxville metropolitan area over a three-year period (Theriot, 2009). Thirteen of these schools were assigned SROs, and the remaining 15 schools called patrol officers when law enforcement assistance was needed. No differences were found between the schools in the overall number of arrests per student, suggesting that SROs arrested just as frequently as schools that relied on calling patrol officers. Compared to schools without SROs, schools with SROs experienced fewer arrests for serious crimes such as assault and weapons charges, and more arrests for disorderly conduct charges. The researcher also examined the SRO schools before an SRO was assigned to the school, and after the SRO was assigned. After an SRO was assigned, the schools experienced fewer arrests for felony and violent misdemeanor offenses, and more arrests for disorderly conduct charges.

**These findings suggest that SROs, although they are exposed to more student criminal and misconduct situations than are patrol officers, arrest students at equal rates as patrol officers. The evidence in this study also suggest that when SROs do arrest students, they tended to downgrade the severity of the charges against the student to disorderly conduct rather than an assault or felony charge.**

A study by researchers at Mississippi State University examined statewide juvenile court data from 2009 through 2011. They wanted to see if charges brought by SROs differed from charges brought by other types of officers (May, Barranco, Stokes, Robertson, & Haynes, 2016). This study found

that SROs and other types of officers were equally likely to refer juveniles to the juvenile court when encountering a report of a felony offense. The study also found, however, that SROs were *less* likely to refer juveniles to the juvenile court for misdemeanors or status offenses. **This study suggested that most SROs act no differently than other officers when it comes to felony crimes. It also suggested that SROs are more lenient than are patrol officers when encountering misdemeanor and status offenses.**

Researchers from Eastern Kentucky University were interested in how school principals perceived the presence of SROs within their schools (May, Fessel, & Means, 2004). Surveying 119 elementary, middle, and high school principals across Kentucky, they found that 98% of principals supported SROs in high schools, and 94% supported SROs in middle schools. Fifty percent even supported SROs in elementary schools. The vast majority of principals (92%) believed that SROs in their state were properly trained and acted appropriately. Most (88%) of those who had SROs in their schools reported that crime decreased in their schools after SROs were assigned. These findings suggest that school principals in Kentucky overwhelmingly approve of SROs.

### **What is the Role of the SRO?**

**Interviews with SROs themselves also reveal that SROs are far more than agents of law enforcement in schools.** One study by Texas State University interviewed a small sample of 26 SROs from across Texas (McKenna, Martinez-Prather, & Bowman, 2016). These interviews revealed that, in addition to their law enforcement role, 46% of SROs described their role as that of a social worker, 38% described their role as an educator, and 35% described their role as being a surrogate parent.

A similar study conducted by the University of Nebraska at Omaha surveyed 52 SROs and 320 patrol officers around the Omaha metropolitan area (Rhodes, 2015). Compared to patrol officers, SROs performed fewer law enforcement tasks (issuing citations, making arrests, and investigating crimes) in a given work day, and also performed fewer order maintenance duties (handling disputes and disorderly persons). **Compared to patrol officers, SROs spent more time on non-crime service related activities, such as giving advice, medical assistance, community relations activities, and traffic direction.** SROs also had higher levels of job satisfaction when compared to patrol officers.

### **Conclusion**

**There have been very few social scientific studies about SROs, but the studies that have been conducted so far do not indicate that the presence of SROs creates a “school to prison pipeline” in which children are saddled with criminal records for behaviors that previously would only have resulted in minor in-school discipline.** SROs generally appear to be more lenient than are patrol officers when dealing with minor student criminal behavior and conduct problems. But there seems to be no difference between SROs and patrol officers when dealing with serious felony crimes.

The available evidence indicates that SROs tend to see their role as that of a social worker, educator, and surrogate parent to the students. The work that they do tends to focus on service

activities unrelated to crime and disorder, but principals still tend to notice reductions in crime and conduct problems when SROs are present. School principals generally approve of the presence of SROs at high schools and middle schools, and sometimes even at elementary schools.

**No empirical research evidence was found to suggest widespread actions by SROs in the U.S. to criminalize the minor behaviors of students in general, or minority students in particular.** The general pattern is that SROs make arrests under the same circumstances that would cause a principal to call the police if an SRO were not already present.

**Furthermore, SROs create the opportunity for school-aged children to have non-confrontational, non-enforcement contacts with law enforcement officers. that may contribute to more positive opinions of the police later in life.** Finally, the known presence of an SRO on campus may enhance the safety of our children, as the mass shootings at grade schools in the U.S. to date have not occurred at schools with an SRO presence. **The research to date does not support the “school to prison pipeline” theory,** and further research may well support the widespread belief held by principals that **the use of SROs tends to have a positive impact on schools and students.**

## References

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