

The Effect of School Resource Officers on High School Crime and Violence Rates

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### **Introduction:**

With the rates of crime and violence rising in the United States, it is important to understand how the education system has both contributed and prevented this pressing social issue. As school resource officers' (SRO) have integrated many public schools, their role plays a crucial part in understanding students' contact with the juvenile justice system with special emphasis on the impact on marginalized populations. Ultimately, "the goal of education is to have children in school and engaged in the academic environment" and are meant to be safe environments that encourage students' growth as well as ambition (Bell, 2015, p. 9). Although "police in schools can help prevent or react to incidents of extreme violence, there remains a need to re-examine and possibly change the role of SROs in schools" to protect students (Schlosser, 2014, p. 131). Effective training for security employees could have positive impacts on students of color by reducing the consequences that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline considering children of color are subjected to far more zero-tolerance policies than their white counterparts" (Harris, 2005, p. 56).

The database on Chapman University's Leatherby Libraries contributed to the findings of studies that examine the outcomes of SROs' presence in the education system, with a special focus on secondary schools. Through sixteen peer-reviewed, scholarly articles published between the years of 2012 and 2019, the literature looked into specific outcomes of the implementation of SROs – including the barriers and benefits to students' educational experiences. The research focused on keywords and phrases including school resource officers, school-to-prison pipeline, zero-tolerance, schools, students, and race. Although some literature has questioned whether

school resource officers influence the school-to-prison pipeline, most research suggests the rates of suspension, expulsion, and crime increase in their presence.

### **School Resource Officers:**

The National Center on Education Statistics defines an SRO as a “career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations” (Counts et al., 2018, p. 406). The implementation of SROs in the education system was introduced following school shootings in tandem with the increase of violence in schools, with the intention of preventing such measures. In 1997, “there were an estimated 9,446 SROs in America’s schools. By 2009, the numbers jumped to approximately 17,000 nationally” (Gonsoulin et al., 2012). As an attempt to merge law enforcement with education, SROs are trained within a 40-hour course to serve as counselors and support students through positive problem-solving as well as intervention and prevention techniques (Gonsoulin et al., 2012). With no prior experience in serving marginalized populations as mediators and guidance counselors, the literature suggests an imperative need for SROs to receive ongoing training with adaptive classes.

Literature addresses effective school discipline as being most effective when addressing issues before misbehavior occurs and providing intervention following incidents, which indicates the need for school staff and personnel to build positive relationships and engagement with students. With more of a familiarity with their students, the literature discusses how staff and faculty could contribute to programs that are less punitive and exclusionary, focused on personal and social development. It also mentions how teachers could play roles that promote positive behavior and serve as less authoritative figures than SROs. Ryan et al. (2018) mention that “an

increasing number of schools have embraced the use of SROs to address safety issues ranging from drugs to weapons; [however], their presence has not been without controversy (Ryan et al., 2018). SROs have been “seen as under-trained, unfamiliar with adolescent behavior and the effects of peer pressure, and unaccountable and insensitively humiliating students by entering classrooms to make arrests” (Browne, 2003, p. 16).

### **Zero-Tolerance Policies:**

Zero-tolerance policies were originally introduced in order to address violent and disruptive behavior in schools that often distracted students from the education system’s purpose of focusing on learning, growth, and academic achievement. These measures were taken to deter violent offenses, weapon possession, and drug activity – developing into preventative actions that shut down all problematic behaviors. Students have been subject to disciplines such as suspension and expulsion as a means of removing troublesome distractions from classrooms and safe environments. “While the removal of students from school has been touted as an effective method to promote school safety, there are no studies that conclude the use of school suspension and expulsion reduces disruption in the school setting and some studies actually propose the opposite” (Bell, 2015, p. 7).

These policies were especially normalized after a social scientist, Dr. Dilulio, and his colleagues announced a surging number of super-predators which they described as “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more teenage boys, who murder assault, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious disorder” (Bennett et al. 1996). As zero-tolerance policies became more common in the education system, many K-12 urban schools began to resemble juvenile detention facilities, with metal detectors, security cameras, and armed guards that have since been titled school resource officers (Bell,

2015, p. 4). Officers started to disproportionately target Black or disabled students, and studies show that they were suspended and expelled at much higher rates than Hispanic, white, Indian, and Asian students (Bell, 2015, p. 5). At this point, most studies conclude that students were starting to be spending more time kicked out of classrooms than learning inside of them, despite zero-tolerance policies being meant to prevent distracting classrooms. Skiba (2014) describes these disciplinary actions as having “negative effects on student outcomes and the learning environment” (p. 30).

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline:**

Reviewing the literature, most articles suggest that the presence of zero-tolerance policies, suspension, expulsion, and school resource officers is moderately associated with lower graduation rates, high dropout rates, lower outcomes on state-wide test scores, and greater contact with the juvenile justice system. These practices are widespread in the United States, and ultimately “schools are a significant contributor to the current prison crisis with more than half of incarcerated individuals entering prison without a high school diploma” (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). Wilson (2014) claims that the very policies that schools adopted to “manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 50).

This phenomenon is described as the school-to-prison pipeline, which poses that policies, practices, systems and processes that criminalize behaviors in the educational setting aim to push poor, disadvantaged, marginalized, and disabled students out of school and into the juvenile justice system (McDonald, 2018). As school resource officers are a branch of law enforcement, some literature claims their presence in schools contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, as they make student arrests and issue suspensions or expulsions that otherwise could have been prevented or de-escalated. McDonald (2018) contends that “the pipeline affects students who are

impoverished, children of color, who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and those with identified and unidentified special education disabilities. The subgroups most impacted are racial minorities and students with disabilities” (p. 5). The use of school discipline has resulted in inequitable practices throughout the nation and practices that punish students have become a gateway into the juvenile justice system, linking to unnecessary and ineffective policies (Hannigan, 2019).

**Disproportionate Impact:**

The literature suggests that minorities are disproportionately arrested by SROs or face increased zero-tolerance policies than their counterparts. Verdugo (2002) mentions that the manner in which many zero-tolerance policies are being implemented has caused many problems and raised issues about equity and their effectiveness. Black students and students with disabilities in particular are targeted by punitive authorities and mistreated the most, with issues of suspension and expulsion occurring at higher rates than white students (Browne, 2003). The suspensions, expulsions, arrests, or charges imposed on white students are typically referred for smoking, leaving without permission, obscene language, and vandalism – whereas for Black students the punishments are for disrespect, excessive noise, threats, and loitering (McDonald, 2018). Comparing the incidents to one another, it can be concluded that SROs refer white students for more objective actions compared to referring Black students for subjective perceptions.

Demographic characteristics are highly correlated with expulsion, considering students who are older, male, African American, and/or disabled are disciplined more often no matter what the school is like socioeconomically (Martin, 2018). “While socioeconomic status was initially used to explain the differences in the suspension of white and Black students, studies

have controlled for socioeconomic status and still found that Black students were suspended at higher rates than whites” (Bell, 2015, p. 4). Considering disproportionate mistreatment towards Black or disabled students, nearly 25 percent of Black boys with disabilities were suspended with 20 percent of Black girls facing the same punishment (Bell, 2015). Unfortunately, schools can often times become unsafe, uncomfortable environments for marginalized students who feel that they are being observed closely every day by the eyes of SROs and by security cameras, knowing that the worst is expected of them.

**Conclusion:**

Throughout this literature review, I have summarized the research available in a variety of articles covering the impact of school resource officers and zero-tolerance policies on students’ educational experiences. These articles emphasize a great need for school administration to re-evaluate their use of SROs and policies, providing suggestions that prevent and manage behavior while supporting students to develop. With the prison population and crime rates across the country increasing, the presence of SROs in positive and safe environments is not ideal. The studies suggest that the disproportionately growing population of Black youth in prisons could stem from the school system and its use of zero-tolerance policies as well as law enforcement. We are able to conclude that “schools are a vital link to mass incarceration and racial disparities in the criminal justice system, and protocols need to be put in place in order to address these trends to hopefully put a stop to the overrepresentation of minorities in the correctional system in the future” (Pigott, 2016, p. 25).

While there is thorough research on how zero-tolerance policies influence the school-to-prison pipeline, there is not ample evidence on how school resource officers fit into this picture. The literature suggests that increased rates of suspension, expulsion, and crime in educational

settings cause an increase in contact with the juvenile justice system; however, it is undecided whether SROs play a role in these high statistics. Considering SROs are a branch of law enforcement and are perceived as officers that implement punitive actions and follow zero-tolerance policies, studies assume their presence correlates with increased crime and drop-out rates in schools. Unfortunately, the literature does not adequately address the impact that SROs have on students' entrance into the criminal justice system, so it is imperative that future research includes qualitative and quantitative methods to describe this correlation.

It would also be beneficial for research to be conducted with sample sizes of marginalized populations, considering a majority of the literature was focused on entire school populations – some of which lacking demographic information. Future studies should ask each participant to provide their race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and age if they choose. This information could be crucial to insight on students' experiences and take their lives outside of the school environment into consideration. In order to better understand the population of students, teachers, administration, and SROs, future studies' samples also need to be representative of all backgrounds.

I am left with several questions following the review of available literature on SROs, zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the disproportionate impact of mistreatment on Black and/or disabled students. Are schools facing more suspension, expulsion, and crime rates due to SROs recording each instance more carefully than in the past, or due to the impact their presence has on students? Are marginalized populations disproportionately targeted for disciplinary actions due to officers' lack of implicit and explicit bias training? How does SRO training discuss zero-tolerance policies, and does it mention the school-to-prison pipeline? Are there studies on the impact of SROs on college campuses rather than elementary

and secondary schools? Lastly, why is there a lack of studies focusing on students who have experienced the school-to-prison pipeline (Jones et al., 2018)? Overall, the literature poses a correlation between SROs, zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, and disproportionate impacts on marginalized populations; however, further research needs to evaluate this relationship further.

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