



Policing Connecticut's Hallways: The Prevalence and Impact of School Resource Officers in Connecticut

Executive Summary

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The presence of sworn law enforcement in Connecticut schools deserves close attention. Statewide, there is a growing conversation regarding how state policy and school practices can best keep students safe while in school, mainly from external threats such as school shootings, but also from internal conflicts like bullying. In many local and national discussions about improving school safety, the use of law enforcement officials in schools – or school resource officers (SROs)--is proposed as a potential solution. Given a national rise in school shootings, stationing police in schools may seem like an intuitive way to ensure the safety of America's most valuable resource—its children. However, when SROs are present in a school, administrators may defer disciplinary duties to SROs. Unlike security guards and school administrators, SROs have the power to arrest students. Experiencing arrest can be traumatizing for children who are arrested, their families, and other observers who may be present. Even one arrest can result in children experiencing reduced access to future educational and employment opportunities.

Connecticut Voices for Children staff sought to understand the prevalence and the potential impacts of school resource officers on Connecticut's students and their educational experiences. To that end, this paper accomplishes two goals. First, the paper reviews the existing scholarly literature related to the presence and impact of school resource officers nationally. Second, this paper presents an analysis of Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data on the prevalence of SROs in Connecticut and the relationships between the presence of SROs and student/school climate outcomes.

National Literature Review on the Roles and Impacts of SROs

- **There is no uniform definition or job description for SROs, and their roles and responsibilities vary widely. Responsibilities may include maintaining school security, teaching, mentoring students, and supporting diversion efforts.** While their knowledge of emergency procedure means that SROs can play an important role in a crisis event like a school shooting, **their efforts cannot supplant those of teachers, school administrators, and mental health professionals in both preventing and managing a crisis event.**

- Because legal standards for both searches and interrogations are much lower within schools than in other locations, in jurisdictions without adequate, clear legal protections, **SROs may operate with more leeway to engage in searches or question students than other police officers**, putting student's rights at risk.
- While national guidance suggests that SROs should not have a role in enforcing non-criminal disciplinary concerns, focus groups with SROs show that many times **SROs feel pressured by educators and administrators to enforce school rules as well as arrest for criminal acts**.
- Research also suggests that **SROs may escalate conflicts when there is significant room for discretion in how to respond to student behavior**. A survey of Delaware SROs showed that 77 percent of officers surveyed reported that they had at some point arrested a student simply to calm them down.
- Student perceptions of SROs vary. While **several studies show that on average students experience positive relationships and increased feelings of school safety when an SRO is present**, later research shows that a student's identity may impact the degree to which they feel safer or less safe in the presence of an SRO. In one study, **students who are Black and students who have experienced victimization felt less safe in schools where SROs were present when compared to their other peers**.

Our Analysis of Connecticut Data

- **More schools in Connecticut do not have SROs than have SRO's**. Statewide, 24 percent of schools have SROs. However, between the 2012-2013 school year and the end of the 2015-2016 school year, the number of schools with SROs increased by 29 percent.
- **Larger schools are more likely to have SROs than smaller schools**. The average size of a school with an SRO is 681 students, while schools without SROs average 373 students.
- When adjusting for the effects of school size, student body demographics, and District Reference Group, **we do not find evidence that the presence of SROs is statistically associated with better or worse academic outcomes for students**.
- They also do not appear, on average, to contribute statistically to a measurably safer school climate, however **their presence may contribute to more students experiencing discipline for school policy violations**. After adjusting for the effects of school size, student body demographics, and District Reference Group, in schools where an SRO is not present, the average number of reported school policy violations was 43.5, but in schools with an SRO the average number of school policy violations reported was 86.2. It is unclear whether SROs participated in reporting school policy violations, whether their presence allowed administrators time to report more school policy violations, or whether schools with SROs have environments that result in more punitive treatment of school policy violations.
- We do find that students attending schools with SROs are at greater risk of discipline overall, and SROs may uniquely contribute to Latino students in Connecticut being arrested and referred to law enforcement. After adjusting for the effects of school size, student body demographics, and District Reference Group, **the average arrest rate of Latino students at schools with an SRO was six times greater than the average arrest rate of Latino students at schools without an SRO**.

Policy Recommendations:

The Connecticut General Assembly should request a study on:

- The presence and prevalence of SROs versus security guards across the state;
- The use and content of MOUs and;
- The impact on exclusionary discipline rates by race, gender, and disability status.

All school districts with school resource officers present should have clear, publically accessible memoranda of understandings, pursuant to Public Act 15-168.

All school districts with SROs present should be required to include questions regarding student experiences of school resource officers in school climate surveys.

All school districts should be required to include information on the legal rights of students in their student handbooks and to review these rights with parents on an annual basis.

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