PROTECTING OR PUSHING OUT: THE PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS IN CONNECTICUT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

School resource officers (SROs) are sworn law officers assigned to work within schools on a long-term basis. SROs have been a feature of schools in Connecticut for decades, and they are maintained in schools across the country. They have, in many cases, been touted as an effective response to security concerns for school children. In light of the impact that policing has had on certain communities across the country and the salient concerns raised about the school to prison pipeline, partnerships between schools and the police are under renewed scrutiny. In Connecticut, the 2021 legislative session included debates on the role of SROs in schools and whether they should be phased out.1 The Connecticut General Assembly introduced seven bills related to school policing in 2021. These bills spanned removing SROs from schools to providing expanded training for SROs and increasing funding from SROs.

As the country reflects on the racialized impact of interactions with agents of the criminal legal system, it is essential to also consider this in the context of the disparate impact that the presence of SROs may have on children from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups. SROs have the power to arrest students, which other school staff are unable to do. In 2019, Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices) released a report on the impact of SROs in Connecticut schools. The report found evidence that SROs increased exclusionary discipline for students of color, and it failed to find evidence that SROs make schools safer.

This 2021 report by CT Voices seeks to further build the limited literature on the impact of SROs in Connecticut. We analyze the prevalence and impact of SROs in Connecticut using 2017-2018 data from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). This analysis uses the more recent data to replicate our 2019 report and compare our findings with the 2015-2016 school year findings to begin to illuminate trends over time. This paper also reviews the literature and findings from across the country on the presence and impact of SROs.

REVIEW OF NATIONAL RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN 2019-2021

Feelings about SROs in school are often mixed. A survey found that parents and teachers tended to have more supportive views of SROs and police officers in school more generally, while a survey of students reflected more ambivalence.2 Fewer students showed support for their presence, and a larger portion of students expressed being undecided on the issue. There seems to be a general lack of awareness of the role and impact of SROs among the adults.

While some research has suggested that SROs reduce violent school incidents, they have also been linked to increased school disciplinary incidents.3 Research has found that SROs do not improve learning outcomes for students but, in some cases, decrease
student achievement by keeping students out of school through increased use of exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline, in turn, hurts future earnings for these students.⁴

Scholarly work across the country has consistently found a disproportionate impact of SROs on students of color. A study that surveyed SROs identified that SROs’ perception of students as a threat in schools was linked to students’ racial makeup in the school district.⁵ A consistent finding across locations and research methods show that Black and Latino/a/x children were disproportionately represented in the negative interactions with SROs.⁶,⁷

**THE CONTEXT FOR RENEWED STUDY**

The highly charged and often highly political discussions that surround education, policing, and race are difficult to ignore. While there are variations in student experiences, in the past two years, most students have experienced trauma. The learning environment has changed due to the pandemic, and many students have lost family members to the virus. In addition, the country has entered a reckoning on racial injustice, police brutality, and their heightened impact on Black and Latino/a/x residents. Due to these factors, many students will return to school with greater levels of need than they had in 2019. As students return to school carrying big traumas and engaging in big conversations, we must ask ourselves whether current policies regarding police in schools reflect a desire to make white people feel comfortable at the expense of Black and Latino/a/x students.

CT Voices released a report of the prevalence and impact of SROs in 2019, presenting an analysis of the 2015-2016 school year. The current report analyzes the 2017-2018 school year. From a methodological perspective, examining more than one year of data lets us tease out whether the statistically significant relationships we found were a product of the particular year or whether they are stable over time. The increased attention the issue has gotten in Connecticut’s 2021 legislative session reflects the importance of this work and compels us to present an up-to-date analysis. We were also able to present our findings to young advocates who gave more context to the results of our data analysis based on their experiences.
ANALYSIS OF 2017-2018 CONNECTICUT DATA AND FINDINGS

PREVALENCE OF SROs IN CONNECTICUT

- Twenty-three percent of schools across all District Reference Groups (DRGs) had SROs during the 2015-2016 school year. This is a slight overall reduction when compared to the 2015-2016 school year.8,9

- Further tests reflected a significant relationship with the socioeconomic characteristics of the community where school districts with SROs were located. Better-resourced school districts were more likely to have SROs than schools in less affluent districts. Schools in the highest four DRG classifications (DRGs A-D) had a higher prevalence of SROs than schools in DRGs E-I.

- Consistent with past findings, the average percentage of Asian (5 percent), Black (12 percent), Latino/a/x (23 percent), and white students (56 percent) did not differ between schools with SROs and schools without SROs.

- Larger schools were more likely to have SROs than smaller schools. Schools with SROs averaged 667.1 enrolled students, while schools without SROs had an average of 381.9 students. This is in line with the 2019 analysis of the 2015-2016 school year data.

IMPACT OF SROs ON EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

- We find that students attending schools with SROs are at greater risk of experiencing exclusionary discipline overall.

  - In general, students in schools with SROs were 1.58 times as likely to be expelled as those without an SRO. We also found this to be the case for Black, white, and Latino/a/x students. Black or African American children attending schools with SROs were at 1.83 times greater risk of being expelled than Black or African American children attending schools without SROs. Hispanic or Latino/a/x children attending schools with SROs were at 2.32 times greater risk of being expelled than Hispanic or Latino/a/x children attending schools that do not have SROs.

  - In considering the risk of referral to law enforcement, the risk for students in schools with SRO was almost two times greater. For Black or African American children and Hispanic or Latino/a/x students, the relative risk was three times higher for students in schools with an SRO than for those in schools without an SRO.

  - Students in schools with SROs were over three times more likely to be arrested than those in schools without an SRO. The risk was much higher for Black and Latino/a/x students, with both groups seeing a risk of arrest that was over five times higher than the risk for Black and Latino/a/x students in schools with no SROs present.
• SROs may uniquely contribute to Black and Latino/a/x students in Connecticut being arrested and referred to law enforcement. After adjusting for the effects of school size and District Reference Group, we find:

  • When we adjust for other factors, the differences in expulsion disappear, which is how it should be; SROs should not be involved in enforcing school discipline like expulsion.

  • The average percent of Black and white students referred to law enforcement in schools with SROs was over twice as high as in schools without SROs. On average, less than seven in every 1000 Black students were referred to law enforcement in schools without SROs. In schools with SROs, 15 in every 1000 Black students were referred to law enforcement.

  • When we compared the percentage of Black students arrested in schools with SROs to those without SROs, the average percentage of Black students arrested in schools with SROs was over 17 times as high as those without SROs. It is over 10 times as high for Latino/a/x or Hispanic students and 5 times as high for white students.

**IMPACT OF SROS ON SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

• We measure safety based on the number of problematic incidents that happen in schools. If SROs are making schools safer, we would expect schools with SROs to have a reduced number of problematic incidences (like weapons, assault, etc.) compared to schools without SROs. SROs did not appear, on average, to contribute statistically to a measurably safer school climate. This is slightly different from the findings in the 2019 report, where we found statistically significant differences for fighting and battery and school policy violations, where schools with SROs had more school policy violations and fighting and battery on average than schools without SROs. In this analysis, the variations we observed in the data that appeared to be in response to the presence of an SRO were actually due to specific schools with extreme factors as opposed to patterns across schools.

• If students feel safer in schools, they should perform better. We examine this by looking at the relationship between SROs in schools (who may make students feel safer) and test scores (a measure of student performance). Lack of a relationship suggests that SROs may not be making students feel safer. In line with our 2019 report, when adjusting for the effects of school size and DRG, we do not find evidence that the presence of SROs is statistically associated with better or worse academic outcomes for students. We measured academic outcomes by examining Smarter Balanced test scores. We couldn’t find any significant evidence that the presence of an SRO in any way impacted the difference in academic performances across the schools.
RESULTS OF DATA WALK

We presented our findings to a group of youth activists, many of whom have had experiences with SROs. Participants engaged in a lively discussion that gave context to our findings and the importance of research on the issue. We have included some key takeaways that we heard during the session.

- Some data walk participants had experienced SROs enforcing school rules and being part of the discipline process in cases where no laws were broken.
- Data walk participants discussed that SROs are not the only police officers interacting with students in and around schools, so our data do not capture the entirety of the impact of police on students.
- Data walk participants were not surprised that the impact of SROs on referrals to police and arrest was worse for students of color.
- Participants raised the question regarding how English language learner students interact with SROs given language barriers.
- Participants expressed that it’s time to make smart policy decisions based on data and students’ voices.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer these policy recommendations, which are rooted in our research results and the reflections of data walk participants, to help the state create safer and fairer schools for Connecticut’s students.

- Policymakers and school administrators should re-write policies, procedures, and administrative practices to move away from relying on SROs in schools.
- Policymakers and school administrators should build school capacity to offer school-based behavioral support and intervention services and to promote restorative, non-exclusionary approaches to managing student behaviors.
- Districts should redirect funding spent on SROs toward behavioral health support staff, including school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, and paraprofessionals trained to promote positive school climates.
- Policymakers should mandate that all districts and police departments have public Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). These should detail expectations for how all police—not just SROs—should interface with children and families, and policymakers should enforce districts publishing these MOUs publicly on their website.
- There should be more vigorous enforcement of laws that are in place to protect student rights as it relates to their interactions with law enforcement, and schools should be mandated to document and inform students and parents of these rights.
• Policymakers should mandate that police interacting with students may only do so after at least 40 hours of youth-specific training as well as training to help reduce racial biases. Policymakers should also mandate that schools and police departments ensure that students can understand interactions with the police through deploying officers who can speak fluently in a student’s native language or an interpreter to accompany officers.

• Policymakers should prohibit school authorities from calling the police when a child is under the age of 12.

• The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) should at minimum begin publishing data for each school regarding referrals to law enforcement and in-school arrests. CSDE should also collect data regarding law enforcement and non-law enforcement activities of the police in schools, complaints against officers, instances of averted violence and safety threats, and data on non-SRO police interactions with students.

Conclusions

SROs are a significant driver of exclusionary discipline, particularly those closely related to the criminal legal system. The negative impact of SROs disproportionately affects Black and Latino/a/x children. We find no evidence that SROs help students do better academically or improve the school’s climate. Aside from keeping students away from schoolwork, negative interactions with the police can cause trauma and even set students on a path that further isolates them from proper social and emotional learning necessary for their development. Removing police officers from the school system’s disciplinary apparatus will be incredibly beneficial to Connecticut’s students and contribute to a fairer, more favorable environment for all students.


8 We examined the presence of SROs across DRGs as a proxy for community characteristics. CSDE assigned districts to DRGs based on the size and wealth of the community, though CSDE doesn’t use these classification anymore for the sake of research it is still a good proxy for socio-economic characteristics of school districts and present a valuable predictor of outcomes.