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

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JUST FACTS

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Sworn law officers, called School Resource Officers (SROs), have been a regular part of many Connecticut schools since the late 1990s. Recently, conversations about the impact of police in schools have swept the country, with passionate arguments both for and against police officers being stationed in schools. Proponents have touted the benefits of SROs, pointing to how they can increase youth diversion, mentor students, and teach students about police interactions. Opponents of SROs argue that police in schools are more likely to arrest young people for behaviors that are not criminal, can escalate situations and create violence in schools, and funnel students of color and students with disabilities into the criminal legal system.

These debates are happening in Connecticut among multiple levels of policymaking. While there’s ample national evidence to inform these debates, Connecticut-specific research remains scarce. This report replicates a previous 2019 SRO report written by Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices), which used 2015-2016 data. In the current research, we examine data from the 2017-2018 school year. In the current research, we examine data from the 2017-2018 school year to unpack differences in Connecticut schools that employ SROs and the impact of SROs on school climate and exclusionary discipline. This report allows us to compare two different years of data to begin to understand which patterns seen within the data are predictable and stable over time. We contextualize our quantitative findings within increased student trauma amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and with reflections from Connecticut’s young activist community. Advocates in impacted communities can use the findings from this report to advocate for policies that best serve them in their schools, and policymakers can use these findings to make sound policy decisions based on Connecticut-specific data trends.

**JUST FACTS ABOUT SCHOOLS WITH SROS**

- Just under 23 percent of Connecticut schools have an SRO. This is a reduction compared to the 2015-2016 school year.
- A greater percentage of schools in higher-resourced districts have SROs than in lower-resourced districts. District Reference Groups (DRGs) A-D each had more than 27 percent of schools in their districts reporting SROs, while DRGs E-I each had less than 27 percent of schools in their districts reporting SROs.
- Consistent with past findings, the average number of students in schools with an SRO was almost twice as large as schools without an SRO.
- Consistent with past findings, the presence of younger children in schools (Pre-K and Kindergarten) was a significant predictor of not having SROs in schools, while older students in schools (grades 9 and 12) was a significant predictor of having SROs in schools.
- Consistent with past findings, the average percentage of Asian (five 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.
Consistent with past findings, the presence of SROs in schools is associated with a significant increase in the risk of students experiencing exclusionary discipline.

Students in schools with SROs were 1.58 times as likely to be expelled as those without an SRO. The increased risk of expulsion was even greater for Black and Latino/a/x children.

While there were significant differences in the risk of referral to law enforcement in schools with SROs for Black, Latino/a/x, and white students, it was over three times higher for Black and Latino/a/x students in schools with SROs.

Students in schools with SROs were over three times more likely to be arrested than students in schools without SROs. For Black and Latino/a/x students, the risk of arrest was over five times higher in schools with SROs than in schools without SROs.

Consistent with past findings, SROs had a significant impact on students being referred to the police and arrested even after adjusting for factors that may increase the likelihood of students experiencing exclusionary discipline.

After adjusting for school size and DRG, the average percent of Black and white students referred to law enforcement in schools with SROs was over twice as high as those without SROs.

After adjusting for school size and DRG, the average percent of Black, Latino/a/x, and white students arrested was significantly higher in schools with SROs than in schools without SROs.

The percentage of Black students arrested was over 17 times as high in schools with SROs, and the percentage of Latino/a/x students arrested was over ten times as high in schools with SROs.

Just Facts about SROs and Discipline

Feelings of safety at school are associated with higher academic achievement. If students feel safer in schools with SROs, this should translate into higher academic achievement for students in schools with SROs.

Consistent with past findings, after adjusting for school size and DRG, there was no statistically significant effect of SROs on student academic achievement.

The average percent of all students and of white students who met or exceeded Smarter Balanced test standards on English language arts and math tests did not statistically differ between students in schools with SROs and students in schools without SROs.

We do not find any evidence that SROs influence student test performance. This may mean that students in schools with SROs do not feel safer than students in schools without SROs.

A primary reason reported for employing SROs is that they make schools safer. If SROs are making schools safer, we’d expect schools with SROs to have fewer reports of incidents where students could get hurt than schools without SROs.

After adjusting for school size and DRG, we found no statistically significant effects of SROs on the average count of incidents in schools. Consistent with our past report, the average count of school policy violations and fighting and battery was elevated at schools with SROs. These elevations appear to be due to specific schools rather than an overall pattern.

These findings suggest that schools with SROs are not measurably safer than schools without SROs, and they may have more punitive climates than schools without SROs.
JUST FACTS ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCES WITH SROs

• 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.

• 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 FOR SAFER, FAIRER SCHOOLS

- 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.
- Local governments should redirect funding that is being spent on SROs toward behavioral health support staff, including school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, and paraprofessionals trained in promoting positive school climates.
- Policymakers should mandate that all districts and police departments have public Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that 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.

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