

Video of 6-year-old girl's arrest shows the perils of putting police in primary schools

February 28 2020, by F. Chris Curran



A school police officer stands watch as students eat lunch at a school in Ohio.
Credit: Kate Way/Shutterstock.com

When states like Florida [pass laws](#) to put more police officers in schools, the idea is to keep kids safe.

The [recent release of body camera footage](#) from the arrest of a 6-year-old in a Florida [school](#), however, shows that sometimes one threat to the students is the officers themselves.

The video shows two [police officers](#) placing a 6-year-old [student](#) in restraints and removing her from the school, all while the student cries and begs to be released. One of the officers goes on to brag about how many people he has arrested and to refer to the student's arrest as setting a "new record" for his youngest arrest.

As it turns out, this was one of two 6-year-olds arrested by the officer at school that day.

Instead of being protected, these very young students were [restrained and arrested](#). Each one faced [misdemeanor battery charges](#) as a result of behavioral outbursts at school, including the student in the video who [kicked a school staffer](#).

While the arrests of the two [elementary students](#) in Orlando are not everyday occurrences, they do reflect a [body of research](#) that suggests cops in schools—they are formally known as school resource officers, or SROs—can take what would otherwise be a routine school disciplinary situation and escalate it to a whole different level.

I base that assertion on my work as a [researcher](#) who has studied school discipline, school safety and the role of school resource officers in elementary schools.

My work sheds light on the potential unintended consequences of school resource officers—as well as ways that school leaders can prevent situations like the arrests that unfolded in Orlando.

A growing presence

School resource officers, who are sworn officers with full arrest powers, are increasingly common in primary schools. Between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of primary schools with school resource officers [increased 64%](#). Now, nearly one in three elementary schools has one of these officers at least part-time.

This trend is set to continue as states like [Florida](#) and [Maryland](#) passed legislation in 2018 to increase the presence of [police](#) in schools.

Response to student behavior

Certainly, elementary schools must occasionally deal with violent behavior. In fact, my colleagues and I have found that as many as 12% of teachers [experience threats of or actual physical attacks from students](#) each year. Indeed, in the case in Orlando, one of the six-year-olds was arrested in part for [kicking a staff member during an outburst](#).

What's increasingly changing, however, is how schools respond to these violent incidents. The presence of police in schools has been shown to [increase the likelihood that students are arrested](#) for school misconduct. For example, prior research has found that police agencies that get funding for school police [increase arrests](#) of youth under age 15 by as much as 21%.

This may be because the presence of police can [shift the mindset of schools](#) to one that is more about punishment than it is about teaching students why their behavior is wrong and what they can do to make amends.

It may also be that the presence of a police officer in schools shifts educators' perspectives on who is responsible for student behavior. As seen in the body camera footage, school personnel appear uncomfortable

with the arrest of the student. Yet, they also defer to the decision of the police officer to arrest the student. In other words, they have yielded responsibility for responding to a 6-year-old student's behavior to law enforcement rather than viewing this responsibility as their own.

In work my colleagues and I have done, we have found that even when school district policy specifies that school resource officers should not be involved in discipline, many of the officers interpret this policy differently. For example, school resource officers may use their proximity to deter misbehavior, may pull misbehaving students aside to talk or may be present while school personnel interrogate or search students.

School officials have a [lower standard to justify a search](#) than law enforcement. Similarly, school officials can interrogate students without providing a [Miranda warning](#) – the legally required notice of the right to remain silent or have legal counsel that police must give when they have someone in custody. So, if officers are present during interrogations or searches in schools, it could enable them to bypass legal protections that exist outside of schools.

School resource officers are trained primarily as law enforcement agents. It should, therefore, be little surprise that they sometimes [default to responses like arrest](#).

Keeping school police in check

Florida State Attorney Aramis Ayala [declined to prosecute](#) the students arrested in Orlando. She said she refuses to "knowingly play any role in the school-to-prison pipeline."

The local police agency has [fired the officer](#) involved, citing violation of their policy requiring supervisor approval of arrests of children below 12

years of age. As it turns out, of the two arrests that day, only one was phoned into a superior, and this superior has [admitted being unaware of the requirement that he forward it to his supervisors](#).

While these actions demonstrate a commitment by state and local leaders to avoid repeats of this incident, there are other ways that schools can prevent student misconduct from ever reaching the point of an [arrest](#).

The work my colleagues and I have done suggests that schools and law enforcement agencies should have clear, mutually agreed upon guidelines for when school resource officers become involved in student misbehavior.

In interviews with school resource officers, we find that many are responsive to district policy that prohibits involvement in discipline. Yet, nationally, around [half of schools](#) with school resource officers do not include language around school discipline or arrests in formal agreements with law enforcement. Based on our research, we conclude that school resource officers should only get involved in cases of very serious legal violations such as a weapon or acts or threats of violence and should take into consideration the age of students involved and circumstances of the situation.

Educators need training

We have found that many times, a school resource officer's involvement in student discipline comes as a result of pressure from teachers and administrators to be involved. For example, in our ongoing interviews with school resource officers and school personnel, we encounter a number of principals and teachers who specifically ask the school resource officer to lecture students on misconduct, be present for disciplinary hearings, and, in some cases, go to a classroom to handle a defiant student instead of leaving that work to the principal.

Instead of asking school resource officers to help out with matters of discipline, in my view, teachers and school administrators should be given training and resources that equip them to respond to student misconduct without relying on school police. In a [recent national report](#), almost 50% of teachers reported having to put up with misbehavior due to a lack of administrative support. Only 6% of teachers thought schools should hire additional police to help with student behavior. Instead, they preferred that resources be put to additional mental health professionals, teaching assistants and social workers.

Similarly, school resource officers should be given training that emphasizes the developmental stages of students and how to respond to student misconduct. As others have noted, training for school resource officers is often limited and varies in length and quality across districts. Nationally, 93% of school resource officers [report](#) training for active shooters. However, only about one third report training in child trauma or the teenage brain.

It is critical to keep students safe in school. That said, districts should carefully consider whether police should be in schools and, if present, what role they should play in student misconduct.

More information: This is an updated version of an article originally published on September 27, 2019. [theconversation.com/arrests-of ... imary-schools-124229](https://theconversation.com/arrests-of-...-inary-schools-124229)

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