

Study: Increased presence of law enforcement officers in schools does not improve safety

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Concern over the safety of students, teachers, and administrators in U.S. schools continues to grow, in part as a result of school shootings. In

response, partnerships between schools and law enforcement agencies have increasingly placed school resource officers (SROs) in schools to boost security. Amid controversy over this practice, a new longitudinal study sought to learn more about the impact of SROs. The study found that schools that increased staffing levels of SROs were more likely to record increases in crimes and to exclude students from school in response to those crimes than schools without increases in SRO staffing levels; moreover, the increases in crimes and exclusions recorded persisted for up to 20 months.

The study, by researchers at the University of Maryland and Westat, appears in *Criminology & Public Policy*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

"Our findings suggest that increasing SRO staffing in schools does not improve school safety and that increasing exclusionary responses to school discipline incidents increases the criminalization of school discipline," according to Denise C. Gottfredson, professor emerita at the University of Maryland Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, who led the study with Scott Crosse, former associate area director at Westat. "We recommend that educational decision makers seeking to enhance school safety consider alternatives to programs that require regular police presence in schools."

The study examined the effects over time of an increase in SRO staffing on 33 public middle and high schools in California; the schools enhanced SRO staffing through funding in 2013 or 2014 from the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services Hiring Program. Looking at disciplinary offenses and actions, the study compared these 33 schools with 72 schools that were similar in terms of prior disciplinary actions and demographic characteristics but did not increase SRO staffing during the same period. Short-term effects were measured two and three months after staffing rose, and long-term effects

were calculated 11 and 20 months after the staffing increase. Data came from schools' [administrative records](#), surveys of school administrators, and interviews with law enforcement officers, including SROs.

The study found that when schools increased SRO staffing, drug- and weapons-related offenses increased immediately, and that this rise persisted for 20 months. The number of exclusionary disciplinary actions taken against students also increased immediately after the rise in SRO staffing, and this increase persisted for 11 months. The findings were significant for students without special needs but not for students with special needs, the study found.

Based on the study's surveys and interviews, the authors suggest that increases in school disciplinary offenses due to increased SRO staffing levels may be the result, at least in part, of increased surveillance. But their concern is that these increases in offenses did not level off after the initial rise in SRO staffing, but rather persisted for months.

Among the study's limitations, the authors acknowledge that the outcome measures used might have been influenced by the increase in SRO staffing levels. While this creates ambiguity around the interpretation of how having more SROs increases recorded crime, it does not question the finding that the presence of SROs boosts the number of recorded crimes and exclusionary responses to these crimes. Furthermore, because the study looked only at schools in California, its findings are not generalizable to schools in other states. Finally, data on students without special needs included only infractions that resulted in removing a [student](#) from school for one or more days, which likely omitted many lower-level offenses and therefore reduced variability in several outcomes.

"Our study demonstrates that increasing SRO staffing in schools boosts the number of exclusionary responses to disciplinary infractions, which

can have serious consequences for students," notes Crosse. "These include contributing to a [school](#)-to-prison pipeline by increasing formal responses to behaviors that otherwise would have been undetected or handled informally."

More information: Denise C. Gottfredson et al, Effects of school resource officers on school crime and responses to school crime, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12512](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12512)

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