

# Police in Schools Research

link to this document: [Summary of Police In Schools Research](#)

(compiled by [Pamela Oliver](#))

## Key Studies

**Owens, Emily G. 2017. "Testing the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 36(1):11–37. doi: [10.1002/pam.21954](https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21954).**

This is the one good study that reports evidence of a **decline** in crime in schools with police. However, it also expresses worry because school police increase the arrests of children under 15 and increase disciplinary actions against students of color. It is a careful and balanced account that uses official data and high-level statistical analysis to compare schools that did and did not add SROs. It uses the fact that schools get federal grants for police in schools as a way to measure the effect of police in schools, comparing schools that got grants for police with those that applied but did not get the grant. It emphasizes that schools with more crime were more likely to get the grants. (This may be why there are commonly higher objective crime rates in schools with police.)

First, it demonstrates that getting the grants increased police in schools. Then it compares the one-year changes in school administrators' reports of crimes at school for schools that did and did not add SROs. Crime reduction occurs in school administrators' reports of crimes, especially thefts. All reported crimes showed reductions but reductions are much smaller and not statistically significant for other crimes.

These administrators' reports of crimes are then compared to official crimes known to the police, which go up. That is, police find out about more crimes and then arrest more children, with the largest difference being for children under age 15 (where the previous response probably would have been some unofficial intervention). There is careful attention to changes in reported crimes at school and away from school.

The one methodological comment/critique about the decline in crime is that school administrators' reports of crimes, especially property crimes, has some measurement error and possible subjectivity. Not every instance of a child taking something that belongs to someone else gets classified as a "theft." Such incidents are often resolved by making the child return the object to its owner. If you are trying to get the grant you may inflate crime reports. There is also the "regression to the mean" phenomenon, which simply means that cases (schools) that are unusually high in one year typically return to average the next year. If reporting high crime made you more likely to get the grant and increase police in schools, regression to the mean might produce the next-year reduction in average crime for schools who got police versus those who did not.

Fisher, Benjamin, Anthony Petrosino, Hannah Persson, Sarah Guckenburg, Trevor Fronius, Ivan Benitez, and Kevin Earl. 2023. *School-Based Law Enforcement Strategies to Reduce Crime, Increase Perceptions of Safety, and Improve Learning Outcomes in Primary and Secondary Schools.Docx*. This draft report was provided to us by Ben Fisher. NEW: [Link to published version](#).

This multi-authored study is a meta-analysis of 32 research reports that used quantitative (numerical) data to assess the effects of police in schools. Meta-analysis is a rigorous approach to overcoming the possible biases and random fluctuations in individual studies. Meta-analysis combines the results from multiple studies on the same subject and takes account of the sample sizes and other statistics about the underlying studies, so it isn't just a matter of adding up how many studies did or did not find a given result. The manuscript lists the citations for all of the studies used but does not summarize them individually. The authors searched widely and reviewed thousands of abstracts of research to find the ones they studied.

The selected studies either involved one group (school or district) with before and after measurements or compared groups that differed on whether they had law enforcement in school. Some studies used schools as the unit of analysis and asked administrators to report on their school. Other studies surveyed students or teachers. They did not include studies where police involvement included other components such as health or social service and did not assess the effect of police training. They also eliminated redundant studies, that is, different publications that were reporting on the same underlying data. However, they kept the many studies that rely on the School Survey on Crime and Safety, a nationally representative biennial survey of US public schools. Different studies using this survey typically analyzed different subsets of the data. Selected studies had to meet minimum standards for providing methodological information about participants, sampling, measurement, modes of analysis.

Some of the studies were based on nationally representative samples, some on representative samples of single states, and others on an ad hoc selection of schools. The report makes no attempt to determine whether there are differences between types of schools that affect whether police improve or harm or have no effect on behavioral issues. The authors note that very few studies provided information about schools' racial composition, and this report does not discuss race. Results:

- (1) **Crime and behavior problems.** There is an overall summary measure and then a breakout by sub-types. (a) At the level of schools, school-based law enforcement was overall associated with schools reporting **more** problems with crime and behavior. There were 27 studies that contributed to this result. There is between-study heterogeneity in this, meaning that some studies found a strong positive effect (i.e. more crime with police), others a weak effect, and others a negative effect (less crime with police). Looking at the sub-types, all studies consistently found **more discipline issues at schools with police**, varying only in how big the difference is. For system contact, violence, substance use, and weapons, the meta-analysis finds no significant difference, with some studies finding negative effects and others positive effects. (b) There were fewer studies that surveyed students as a source of data for behavioral issues. Overall they find no difference. However, the meta-analysis finds significantly more discipline problems

reported by students in schools with police, while for violence, substance use, and weapons, the meta-analysis finds no significant difference with some studies showing lower reported crime and others higher reported crime.

CONCLUSION: There are definitely more reports of "discipline" issues in schools with police, but for the more serious matters of violence, substance use, and weapons, different studies are finding different things (and there are fewer studies of these more serious actions).

- (2) **Subjective perceived safety:** (a) meta-analysis of school-based studies relying on adult school administrator reports finds significantly higher perceived safety with police in schools, but (b) studies based on student surveys find no significant difference and a weak negative relation (less perceived safety with police), with students in some studies feeling less safe with police and in other studies feeling more safe with police.

## Review of Research

Williams, Samantha, Andrew Charroux, Yusuf Mian, and et al. 2022. *School Resource Officers and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Evaluating Responses to School Safety Concerns in an Age of School Shootings and Renewed Calls for Racial Justice*. Institute of Politics Policy Program, Criminal Justice Fall Policy Team.

<https://justicepolicy.org/research/school-resource-officers-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-evaluating-responses-to-school-safety-concerns-in-an-age-of-school-shootings-and-renewed-calls-for-racial-justice/>

Provides a careful summary of prior research on police in schools, including a Congressional Research Office study and others. Attempts to be balanced and fair and to lift up the details of different research projects.

Main points:

- (1) The history of SROs begins in Michigan with racial integration of schools in the 1950s. White parents were afraid of Black children and wanted police in school for safety. Another goal of some programs, e.g., in Los Angeles was promoting positive relations between police and Black children, which was seen as a way to oppose Black Power. There was an increase in SROs after the Columbine shooting in 1999. Even though this was a predominantly White school, SROs were disproportionately added to majority-minority schools.
- (2) Much research definitely shows that SROs **increase** reports of discipline problems and that these referrals disproportionately affect Black children and other children of color. Research often shows that presence of SROs increases referrals of children to the criminal legal system.
- (3) Research shows that **adults** (administrators, teachers, parents) often feel **subjectively** that the school is safer with police present, and the report says these stakeholders' concerns should be taken seriously. However **student** perceptions of safety do not necessarily go up with SROs. Different subgroups of students may have different feelings about school safety with and without police. **Objective measures** of crime, violence, drug use are **not** consistently related to SROs. Schools with police often have higher crime rates than schools without.

- (4) The report discusses cases of advocacy for and against police in schools.

## Other Reports

There are MANY local studies documenting racial disparities in the disciplining of school children, especially Black children. And MANY studies that document that police in schools disproportionately arrest Black children and sometimes other children of color. Many advocates have written reports referencing a wide variety of studies. The pieces below either focus on different issues or provide overviews of all this research from an advocacy point of view.

**Advancement Project, Alliance for Educational Justice, Dignity in Schools Campaign, and NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. 2018. *Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings*. [Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings - Advancement Project](#)**

A summary of research about the harms of police in schools. Argues that police in schools are not addressing the external risk of school shootings but are instead increasing the police surveillance of students. Lots of citations. An advocacy piece by several advocacy groups.

**Losen, Daniel J., and Amir Whitaker. n.d. *11 Million Days Lost: Race, Discipline, And Safety at U.S. Public Schools (Part 1)*.**

[https://www.aclu.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/final\\_11-million-days\\_ucla\\_aclu.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/final_11-million-days_ucla_aclu.pdf)

Documents high levels of loss of instruction due to out of school suspensions, especially for Black and disabled students

**Wettach, Jane, and Jenni Owen. 2015. "Instead of Suspension: Alternative Strategies for Effective School Discipline." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi: [10.2139/ssrn.3652552](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3652552).**

Reviews a wide variety of programs that are positive alternatives to out of school suspension.

**Whittenberg, T., R. Skiba, Beauchesne, and A. Groves. n.d. *#AssaultAtSpringValley: An Analysis of Police Violence against Black and Latine Students in Public Schools*. Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice.**

Analyzes 285 incidents of police assaulting children at school between 2011 and 2021.

**Wettach, Jane, and Jenni Owen. 2015. "Instead of Suspension: Alternative Strategies for Effective School Discipline." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi: [10.2139/ssrn.3652552](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3652552).**

Reviews prior research and documents racial disparities by school police in several California school districts.

**Advancement Project. n.d. *We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools*. <https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html#page=1>**

A report on school issues written by youth. It cites a lot of other research and presents it in an accessible way. Includes footnotes. Generally an advocacy piece, well done.