Literature Review - The Use of School Resource Officers in Secondary Education

The Research & Program Evaluation Office was asked to describe best practices for the implementation of School Resource Officer (SRO, referred to as Educational Resource Officer in MMSD) programs and examine existing literature on the observed impact of SROs on school safety and climate. The articles we include are relevant to MMSD (e.g., directly address SROs in K-12 schools), recent (e.g., post-2000), and cited in many other articles according to Google Scholar (e.g., typically 10 or more sources). This literature review will be delivered for use by the internal ERO Work Group and/or the Board's Ad Hoc Committee on EROs.

Based on our research, we identify these **key findings**:
- Best practices include establishing a detailed memorandum of understanding before an SRO program is implemented, ensuring the memorandum is well-understood and implemented by all parties during the program, and establishing measurable goals for judging the program's effectiveness.
- There is a dearth of recent research analyzing SRO programs' effect on school crime, safety, and climate and the existing literature yields conflicting results.
- Existing research on SROs has largely focused on disparities in enforcement according to zero-tolerance policies. None of the articles examined SROs in the context of restorative practices, even though public policy guidance focuses on promotion of restorative justice as a function of SROs.

This document begins with a short summary of the recommended duties and best practices for SROs, followed by a literature review of academic research concerning the effects of SROs on school crime, safety, and climate.

Background for SRO programs

The Federal Government defines SROs in two pieces of legislation, listing the creation and expansion of community justice initiatives and addressing crime and student behavior issues as roles that define the position. Local school districts and education agencies have separate definitions, but school-police partnership experts cite a list of commonly agreed upon roles and responsibilities for SROs. These roles fall under three categories: safety, problem solver and community resource, and education (Raymond, 2010). The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) define an SRO as a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority who is deployed in community-oriented policing and assigned to work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations to:
- address crime and disorder problems,
- develop crime prevention initiatives,
- expand community justice initiatives,
- train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime prevention,
- assist school administrators with maintaining a safe school environment,
- mentor, counsel, and teach students. (Canady et al.., 2012; Morgan et al.., 2014; James & McCallion, 2013; Raymond, 2010)

There is no central source of data describing the number or types of officers assigned to schools (Morgan et al., 2014). The most recent estimates from government surveys for sworn officers serving at least once a week in a school are 13,056 officers employed by local police departments, 6,032 officers employed by Sheriff's offices (James & McCallion, 2013), and 4,764 employed by local school agencies (Reaves, 2011). During the 2013-14 school year, 48% of high schools reported employing security staff at least once a week, 79.3% of schools with more than 1,000 students, and 35% of schools (irrespective of school level) in cities (Robers et al., 2015). NASRO estimated there were about 10,000 SROs around the country during 2013 (Morgan et al., 2014). It is important to note that SROs are a specific type of officer, serving their community in a manner that is distinct from other sworn and non-sworn security personnel who may work in a school.

Recent Research on SRO programs

Existing research on SROs has largely focused on disparities in enforcement according to zero-tolerance policies. None of the articles examined SROs in the context of restorative practices even though public policy guidance focuses on promotion of restorative justice as a function of SROs. School-police partnership experts recommend implementing restorative practices in schools, listing this as a duty of the SRO, and state that SROs should not enforce school discipline that is not also a violation of the law (Morgan et al., 2014). However, the literature on SROs has yet to evaluate SROs' effectiveness at promoting restorative justice and to what extent SROs enforce school rules that are not also a violation of the law.

Some authors argue that zero-tolerance policies have a differential effect on minority student groups (Dycus & Fellow, 2008). SROs may be involved in student behavior and disciplinary matters that were traditionally undertaken by school teachers and administrators, leading to more students entering the criminal system, rather than handling discipline within the parameters of the school disciplinary system (Brown, 2006; Theriot, 2009; Chongmin & Gottfredson, 2011). While teachers are trained in child psychology and discipline, SROs are typically trained in law enforcement and have limited knowledge of developmental psychology. Authors link the presence of SROs to the increasing number of students entering the criminal justice system for minor offenses (Petteruti, 2011; Dycus & Fellow, 2008). The United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and Black Lives Matter advocate for an end to the presence of police in schools (United Nations, 2016; Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

Other authors cite that zero-tolerance policies are a response to legislation mandating enforcement in response to certain activity, and are therefore independent from an SRO's presence on campus (Canady et al.., 2012). Canady et al.. (2012) also state that victims' rights must be respected and the presence of an SRO can help school administrators better understand their statutory responsibilities to the victims of school based offenses and avoid violating the law through selective enforcement. Authors have noted that studies regularly do not differentiate between SROs and other types of officers, whether the local laws, training, or MOUs affect findings, or account for the effect of off-campus patrol officers responding to a school building with an SRO (Morgan et al., 2014). Policy experts also point out that national offending and arrests rates for juveniles have been declining since the early 1990's, coinciding with the expansion of SRO programs (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Although many authors suggest that criminalization of student behavior will disproportionately impact minorities and students with disabilities, some authors that have tested this hypothesis have failed to find any evidence (Chongmin & Gottfredson, 2011). As previously stated, findings from recent research have had conflicting results and it is unclear what effect SROs have on student arrests, convictions, and levels of crime (Theriot, 2009; James & McCallion, 2013).

There is a dearth of recent research analyzing SRO programs' effect on school crime, safety, and climate and the existing literature yields conflicting results. Researchers conducting a systematic search for studies evaluating the effectiveness of policing strategies and policies in schools found a limited number of experimental studies. A majority of these studies use a pre-post evaluation to measure the effect of SRO programs and found a decrease in school crime and student misbehavior (Petrosino et al., 2012). Some research found that an increased police presence was associated with an increase in the reporting of non-serious violent offenses (fighting, assault without a weapon, threats without a weapon, intimidation) to police (Chongmin & Gottfredson, 2011). However, this studies uses a national survey of schools reporting the presence of sworn officers serving at least once a week in the school and does not specifically address SROs. Theriot (2009) found that the presence of an SRO at a school increased the number of disorderly conduct charges but decreased the number of arrests and assaults and did not affect arrests overall when controlling for the percent of the student population that is low-income.

Research on the effect of SROs on school climate relies heavily on survey data, measuring students' and teachers' perceptions of safety and connectedness (James & McCallion, 2013; Raymond, 2010). Researchers consistently found a strong association between students' and administrators' comfort with the SRO program and their opinions of SROs and the frequency of interaction with SROs. More positive feelings about an SRO were associated with feelings of school safety and more comfort in reporting crimes to an SRO (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). Students who had more interaction with SROs had higher feelings of comfort with officers (Theriot, 2016). This evidence suggests that there is value in SROs establishing a positive relationship with students and staff and interacting in a positive manner as often as possible in order to create a more successful program (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005).

The evidence is less consistent on SROs' effect on feelings of safety and school climate. Principals who had greater contact and communication with their SROs were more likely to evaluate the program as effective in reducing school crime and behavioral issues (Fessel et al., 2004). However, there isn't strong evidence that links students' interactions with SROs and their feelings of safety. Different student demographics also experience a differing severity of feelings of safety – with African American students feeling less safe than white students (Theriot & Orme, 2016). Research also cites the complexity of the relationship between students and SROs. While students with more frequent interaction with SROs have a greater sense of comfort with the officers and the program, students with greater interaction with officers feel a lower sense of connectedness to the school. Theriot (2016) posits that students with more frequent interactions with SROs might witness other students reprimanded for lower level offenses and observes that they are more likely to have an intense experience with school violence. Both of these findings serve as possible explanations for why students feel less connected with their school if they have more frequent interaction with an SRO (Theriot, 2016).

Best practices for implementing SRO programs

Research on best practices revealed several agreed upon recommendations. Most literature on SRO policies provides manuals in the area of policing, rather than evaluating current school policy (Petrosino et al., 2012). There is a general consensus on strategies among school-police partnership experts on related policies and strategies for establishing an effective SRO program. School districts and individual schools should engage police, families, students, and community agencies to develop an effective school safety plan using available data on community crime data and student, staff, and community perceptions of school safety and climate (Morgan et al., 2014). Researchers cite the importance of defining a clear set of SRO standards and responsibilities in the initial memorandum of understanding (Dycus & Fellow, 2008; Department of Education, 2016) and setting clear goals for the evaluation of the program's success (Raymond, 2010; Morgan et al., 2014). Studies and experts suggest that the foundation and the framework for an SRO program are critical before implementing any programming. Successful SRO programs specifically consider school safety priorities at the outset of any programming (Raymond, 2010). Research notes that when SRO programs do not clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SROs, before and during the program, school districts encounter a greater degree of problems with program effectiveness that may last for a long time (Finn et al.., 2005). Similarly, policy experts agree on the importance of establishing a set of clearly defined rights for students and establishing clear guidance concerning the role of the SRO to ensure mutual understanding between school administrators and police (Kim & Geronimo, 2009).

Summary of findings

Research has yet to thoroughly evaluate the effect of current SRO programs on school crime, safety, and climate (Apple & Wakefield, 2016). Most studies concerning police presence in schools have analyzed the effects of officers in general, or officers participating in the DARE, DARE-Plus, and GREAT programs (Petrosino et al., 2012). The few studies that have directly addressed SRO's effect on these measures have had conflicting results (James & McCallion, 2013). Despite the fact that research has yet to thoroughly evaluate the effect of current SRO programs on school crime, safety, and climate, there are extremely strong opinions for and against officers serving in schools (Morgan et al., 2014).

Some articles have found that SRO efforts contribute to a reduction in crime, arrests for violent offenses (serious and non-serious), feelings of safety on campus, comfort with reporting crimes to the SRO and officers in general by students and teachers (Theriot, 2016; Canady et al., 2012; Theriot, 2009; Raymond, 2010). Other articles have suggested that SROs criminalize student behavior by addressing behaviors that would be traditionally handled by teachers with citations and arrests (Brown, 2006; Chongmin & Gottfredson, 2011; Theriot, 2009).

Despite inconsistent findings on the effect of SRO programs, there was general consensus on best practices for forming and implementing successful programs. Policy writers cite the need to establish clear, measurable goals, detailed student rights, and open communication between SROs and school administrators (Dycus & Fellow, 2008; Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Raymond, 2010; Morgan et al., 2014).

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