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Deconstructing Arguments Against the Removal of SROs in Schools: A Literature Review

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School resource officers (SROs) are law enforcement officers who are specifically selected to maintain safety within the school system (Rosiak, 2015). SROs have a variety of duties, including, but not limited to, patrolling school grounds, assisting with discipline, investigating delinquency, mentoring students, and educating about safety, and are encouraged to have training in many school-based topics such as adolescent development or crisis management. However, there is no standard and consistent training requirement for SROs (Kim & Geronimo, 2010). The use of SROs has grown drastically in recent years, with the U.S. Department of Justice reporting a 38% increase in the number of SROs between 1997 and 2007 (Swartz et al., 2016). More disturbingly, the results of this study show that the presence of SROs is associated with an increase in the reporting of both non-serious and serious violent crimes, as well as crimes involving guns and drugs. This analysis of existing literature examines the many arguments that have been raised against divesting from police services in schools, specifically SROs, and investing in mental health resources and offers evidence that refutes these claims.

Feeling of Safety. A review of 40 years of school policing evaluations showed that there was no positive impact on school safety outcomes (Stern & Petrosino, 2019). Students actually feel less safe and more fearful at schools policed by SROs and the research conducted by Bachman, Randolph, & Brown (2011), Perumean-Chaney & Sutton (2013), and Mowen & Freng (2019) shows that SROs generally increase students' levels of fear and they negatively impact students' perceptions of safety. While there have been many counterarguments to the removal of SROs from schools, empirical evidence suggests that the presence of SROs are ineffective in reducing crime in schools, actually lead to an increase in violence, and have dramatically increased arrests even when crime-rates are decreasing (Schwartz et. al., 2016). Given that

research indicates SROs are not effective in lowering the probability of mass shootings and essentially contribute to less inclusive school climates (Whitaker et.al., 2017), it is inadequate to say implementing SROs is an effective way to handle school incidents.

Systemic Racism. In all these movements to remove SROs from schools, youth are the ones that are taking charge in calling out to the community and having dialogue with those in power. The CHANGE fellows at BRIDGES are no exception. According to the Census, Memphis is 64.2% Black or African American and only 29.1% White, and so the safety of Black and Brown students is of greater concern. Black and Brown students have been shown to experience disproportionate levels of trauma, harm, fear and anxiety due to SROs being present in their schools (Nayeb & Meek, 2020). Legewie and Fagan (2019) found that "young men of color experience higher anxiety with frequent police contacts, with anxiety symptoms significantly related to the number of times they were stopped and to how they perceived the encounter was conducted" and Sewell and Jefferson (2016) found that for "youth who live in neighborhoods with a higher rate of invasive police stops, seeing police officers may trigger general anxiety and fear" all of which contributes to greater fear and anxiety when SROs are present in their schools. For example, in Chicago from 2017-2019 there have been over 3,000 arrests made in the Chicago public school system with approximately 80% of them being black students when black students only make up about 40% of the student body (Stelloh, NBC news, 2020). Individuals, especially young men, who feel like a police officer may be targeting them due to their race or ethnicity can also experience symptoms of trauma and anxiety related to the stress of perceived or anticipated racism (Geller et. al., 2014).

School-to-Prison Pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is defined as the intersection of K-12 and law enforcement as well as the trend of referring students directly to law enforcement for school offences, which increases the likelihood these students will eventually be incarcerated (Nance, 2016). Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it has been argued that SROs divert youth from the court systems and, thus, work against the creation of the school-to-prison pipeline (Rosiak, 2015). This claim has no empirical support, and many studies claim the opposite is true. The increased presence of SROs across the U.S. has led to a drastic rise in the rate of arrests in schools, placing these youth in direct contact with the criminal justice system.

This system disproportionately affects youth of color, despite the severity of the behavioral issue, a blatant example of systemic racism in both the justice and educational systems (Swartz et al., 2016).

SRO's are deciding the fate of these students before they are even given the opportunity to learn and grow from their mistakes. For example in 2014, at a Kentucky elementary school an SRO handcuffed a third grader for 15 minutes for a temper tantrum even though the child had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It can be heard in the video the SRO stating to the child "you can either behave the way you know you're supposed to or you suffer the consequences" (Shaver & Decker, 2017). This is not an isolated occurrence, there have been several cases of excessive force being used against children for minor behavioral problems. Power dynamics between officers and students can help with the understanding of why the intended outcome of SROs is not the outcome concluded in these findings.

When schools put emphasis on and focus on the social and emotional development of their students, arrest rates decline and overall students improve. A February 2020 study of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) found high schools that focused on enhancing social well-being and promoting hard work enhanced students' self-reported social-emotional development, resulting in fewer school-based arrests and better long-run educational attainment for students from those schools" (Jackson et al., 2020). Therefore, promoting student well-being and emotional health has better outcomes than having SROs in schools.

Mental Health Services. The federal government has identified schools as the best location to provide mental health services due to the large number of children and adolescents who can be reached (Cammack et al., 2013). Research on schools with policies that provide mental health resources to students has shown that students in these schools have higher educational and mental health outcomes than schools without these programs (Cammack et al., 2013). Paolini (2015) found that 75% of students who are struggling with mental illnesses have

not received any mental health services. Additionally, Counts et al. (2018) found that of the students who were involved in school-related arrests, 28% were students with disabilities. A study of violence in schools found that, despite 78% of students involved in school shootings having a history of suicide attempts or suicidal ideations prior to their attack, only one-third of attackers had ever received a mental health evaluation, and less than one-fifth had been diagnosed with a mental disorder (Paolini, 2015).

An empirical study found that talking with mental health advisors, even in group therapy, was beneficial in helping Hispanic women cope with social conditions in a male dominated culture (Olarte & Masnik, 2006). If students are able to begin feeling comfortable talking about the context of their lives it can lead to improved coping mechanisms and self-awareness. One in ten youth have mental health challenges that impair their functions at home, school and within their community (Association for Children's Mental Health, 2019).

Budget. Lastly, many argue hiring mental health counselors is not worth the investment of money or may cost too much which literature adequately disproves. According to Petteruti, 2011, the typical salary for a school resource officer is $63,294, a salary nearly equal to that of a typical school counselor ($66,810) and significantly greater than that of a typical teacher ($52,471). The removal of SROs would allow for schools to hire more counselors and to provide more mental health resources to students. In the 2019-2020 school year alone, Shelby County Schools spent $2.2 million on salaries for hiring an additional 30 SROs. This cost is equivalent to one-fourth of their entire mental health services budget (Shelby County Schools Finance Department, 2020). In contrast, Dorchester County in South Carolina spent $2.2 million to hire 90 mental health counselors for their public-school system (Balchunas, 2019).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed above effectively dismantles many of the counter-arguments made against divesting from police in schools and investing in mental health resources. Overall, while many believe and argue that school resource officers provide resources and support and

should be present in schools, there are many more negative outcomes to their presence than there are positive outcomes. SROs are associated with increased violence and arrest rates (Swartz et al., 2016). SROs make students feel less safe and more fearful and negatively impact the levels of safety experienced by students (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013; Mowen & Freng, 2019). That being said, those who make decisions and present literature that directly impact youth in schools are not the members in the community in direct contact with youth. It takes the full community inside and outside of schools to meet the full mental health needs of the youth (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). Instead of combatting the issues after they occur, schools should be providing resources to try to limit these behaviors from occurring in the first place.

Counterarguments	Refutations
SROs "deter on-campus violence and criminality" (Rosiak, 2015)	Empirical literature shows that SROs are ineffective in deterring school-based violence (Swartz et al., 2016) • Associated with higher violence • Dramatic increase in arrests even when crime rate is decreasing
SROs increase students' feeling of safety in schools	It has been found that increased security measures, including SROs, in schools decrease students' and parents' perceptions of school safety, even when controlling for elements that would typically diminish feelings of safety, such as neighborhood crime rates and victimization (Mowen & Freng, 2019).
SROs "divert youth from juvenile court" by stopping crimes in schools (Rosiak, 2015)	The presence of SROs has led to a notable rise in the rate of arrests in schools, which has, in turn, led to an increase in students coming into contact with the criminal justice system [(Swartz et al., 2016) (Petteruti, 2011)]
Mental health services in schools are not worth funding	75% of students struggling with mental illnesses do not receive mental health services (Paolini, 2015), and 28% of students involved in school-related arrests were students with disabilities (Counts et al., 2018).
There is not enough funding for mental health services in schools (Cammack et al., 2013)	Shelby County Schools spent $2.2 million in 2019-20 hiring an additional 30 SROs. In Dorchester County S.C., they have allocated $2.2 million to hire 90 mental health counselors for the public-school system (Balchunas, ABC news, 2019).
Improve the relationships between law enforcement and youth (Rosiak, 2015)	The presence of SROs for typically marginalized youth can lead to an increase in stress and anxiety. In addition, the stress of perceived or anticipated racism from police toward youth, especially men, can lead to symptoms of trauma and anxiety. (Geller et.al., 2014)
Increase likelihood of reporting a crime (Rosiak, 2015)	Students are being referred to the justice system for minor offenses such as disorderly conduct (Petteruti, 2011)
SROs can help incase of school shooting incidents	During the parkland shooting in 2018, the SRO Scott Peterson did not reenter the building to confront the gunman. While SROs can potentially be beneficial in shooting scenarios it cannot be the only reason to keep them in schools (Stelloh, NBC news, 2020).

THE SALARY

of a Counselor in Tennessee is

$78,000-$85,000

THE SALARY

of a Counselor in Memphis is

~$37,700

which is roughly half of the salary of an SRO, who make an average of

~$73,333

THE SAFE SCHOOLS GRANT

can be used to fund "violence prevention and behavioral health" and could be used to fund Counselors rather than SROs.

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