The Changing Role of Law Enforcement in Schools

F. Chris Curran, PhD
University of Florida
Introduction

• A number of organizations have supported my work on school safety, discipline, and SROs. Results and findings presented here are my own and do not represent the position of funders.
Who are SROs

• School resource officers (SROs) are sworn law enforcement whose primary assignment is in schools.

• Work conceptualized on a “Triad Model” (Canady et al., 2012)

(Kurtz et al., 2018)
Increasing Presence of SROs

• Latest data suggests about 48% of schools nationwide have law enforcement

• As common in non-urban as urban schools

• As common in schools serving more minority students as those with fewer

(Curran, 2020; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018)
Impacts of SROs

- Some studies have found SROs
  - increase perceptions of safety for some subgroups (Theriot & Orme, 2016)
  - And, decrease reports of certain misbehavior and crime (Owens, 2017); though other studies find this not to be the case (Gottfredson et al., 2020)

(Curran et al., 2020)
Unintended Consequences of SROs

• But, research also suggests that SRO presence can
  • Increase arrest rates
  • Increase use of exclusionary discipline
  • Disproportionately impact minority students
  • Fail to reduce the likelihood of or casualties in cases of school shootings
  • Increase sense of risk

(Curran, et al., 2021; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Livingston et al., 2019; Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Owens, 2017; Sorenson et al., 2021; Weisburst, 2019).
Trauma and Mental Health

• In 2019, 1 in 3 high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness; 1 in 6 reported making a suicide plan (CDC, 2019)

• For many students, mental health issues may be a manifestation of trauma

More than TWO THIRDS OF CHILDREN reported at least 1 traumatic event by age 16. Potentially traumatic events include:

- Psychological, physical, or sexual abuse
- Community or school violence
- Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence
- Natural disasters or terrorism
- Commercial sexual exploitation
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- Refugee or war experiences
- Military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury)
- Physical or sexual assault
- Neglect
- Serious accidents or life-threatening illness

(SMHSA, 2015)
How do SROs Fit with Efforts to Address Mental Health and Trauma?

1. In some cases, SROs may be a source of trauma and should not be seen as necessary in all schools
2. More training on trauma informed practices is needed for SROs
3. Integrating SROs as members of teams that include professionals with mental health training is preferable to relying on SROs to fulfill these roles alone
4. SRO roles should be clearly defined in memorandums of understanding
SROs and Trauma
Overlapping Pandemics

• Alongside a global health pandemic, the country has also grappled with the historical legacies of racism and ongoing systemic discrimination

• Patterns of over-policing of communities of color and the racially disproportionate nature our justice system are well documented (Alexander, 2010).
SROs and Trauma

- SROs are potentially a mechanism for addressing this trauma and fragmented community relations with police.

- Yet, they are also potentially a reminder and symbol of negative experiences for students.

“Well it definitely changes my way of thinking about police officers because I always see on the news police officers doing everything to hold people down and stuff and I’m like nope, don’t want to run into them. (laughs ... collective laughter from other children)...Uh, and since I was with Officer [xxxx], uh, it makes me think about them, they are doing the right thing, they like, sometimes it doesn’t say the whole story about it ...”

“like the bad part to me is what kind of police officer you get, because like some officers can be really really really really mean to you and like hurt your body and stuff, but some of them can be really really really nice.”

Student Interviewees (Kupchik et al., 2020)
Training
Training

• SRO training has focused on priorities of physical safety and preventing school violence

• Three quarters do receive training on mental health but only one third do on child trauma

(Kurtz et al., 2018)
Trauma Informed Training

- UF’s Lastinger Center has a comprehensive online training platform for SROs and school security focused on trauma informed response
  
- Development led by Dr. Dorothy Espelage (UNC-CH)
Collaborations
Collaborations

• “The most important part of the training is that officers learn about the resources they can call upon. This helps them to come up with a plan for the student and family to work with mental health providers, thereby providing an alternative to incarceration.”
  - Lieutenant Cindy Wood of the Henrico County (Virginia) Police Department (Rosiak, 2016)

(Mann et al., 2019)
Collaborations

• Threat assessment and crisis intervention teams
  • Partners SROs with other professionals in the school including teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and others.

• Prior work on threat assessment shows that these partnerships can
  • Reduce exclusionary discipline
  • Increase counseling
  • May reduce racial disparities in outcomes
  • (Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012; Cornell et al., 2018)
Defining SRO Roles
Defining SRO Roles

• While SRO training on trauma and mental health is important, this is still not SROs’ primary area of expertise, and SROs should not be the primary respondent or provider to address these issues.

• Research suggests that SROs’ impacts vary systematically based on their role/approach to the job (Fisher & Devlin, 2020).

• And that the types of roles they take on can be shaped by the policies and expectations of the school environment (Benitez et al., 2021; Curran et al., 2019).
Defining SRO Roles

- Only two thirds of schools with SROs nationally report having a policy outlining SRO responsibilities (US DOE, 2020)
Defining SRO Roles

• MOUs can help ensure SROs are aware of mental health resources

• While also making clear roles they should not play (e.g. disciplinarian)

4. The SRD shall become familiar with all community agencies that offer assistance to youths and their families such as mental health clinics, drug treatment centers, and community-based programs. School officials shall immediately notify the SRD of any mental health concerns that arise with a student and the SRD shall make referrals to these agencies when appropriate.

5. The goal of the SRD is to respond to matters pertaining to school safety, not to enforce school discipline or punish students. In the event a student misbehaves, the school principal and their designees will be the primary source of intervention and disciplinary consequences. In addition, school officials should make every effort to connect students to school and/or community-based support services, such as counseling, mentoring, or extracurricular activities. All parties involved in school discipline shall consider the totality of the circumstances including the age, behavioral and/or criminal history, disability or special education status, the degree of harm caused, and the potential threat to safety of the school, its staff and students.

18. The SRD will develop a working knowledge of students that may have behavioral/mental health issues and assist school staff and parents in developing non-criminal justice responses to behavioral/mental health issues.

(ACPS MOU, 2019)
Takeaways
Implications

• SROs in schools should not be a given
  • States and districts are using and experimenting with alternative models
  • Maryland requires “adequate law enforcement coverage”
  • Some locales use designated officers to respond to calls involving juveniles

• There are trained professionals who are better situated to address student trauma (i.e. counselors, psychologists)
Implications

• Where SROs are utilized:
  • Recognition that SROs themselves can be a source of or reminder of trauma
  • Need for training on trauma-informed responses, working with students with mental health issues and those in special education
  • Teaming with other school personnel who have more training and expertise in addressing students’ mental health needs
  • Ensure SRO roles are clearly defined and adhered to
Thanks!

chriscurran@coe.ufl.edu

@fchriscurran
References