School Safety: The Use of School Resource Officers

Joseph B. Ryan, Ph.D.
Clemson University

Recent Misuse of SROs

- Kenton County, KY
  - SRO handcuffed 8 & 9 year old elementary students above the elbows on multiple occasions for noncompliance (S.R. & L.G. *v.* Kenton County Sherriff's Office, 2015)

- Richland County, SC
  - High school girl seated in her desk was physically assaulted by SRO for being noncompliant, and refusing to give up her cell phone (Ford, Bothelo, & Conlon, 2015).

Roles & Responsibilities of SROs
(National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012)

1. Law enforcement (Enforcing Laws & Ordinances)

2. Teaching (e.g., Drug & Gang Awareness Classes)

3. Mentoring (e.g., Advising Staff)

History & Purpose of SROs

- Permanent placement of law enforcement within schools originated during 1950's in Flint, Michigan to decrease school violence, particularly gun-related incidences (Johnson, 1999; James & McCallion, 2013).

- Changing mission of SROs is often reactionary to public outcry of a perceived threat to our nation's youth.
  - 1960's- 70's, SROs placed in schools in Southern states to address safety issues related to racial tensions (Coon & Travis, 2012).
  - 1980s SROs tasked with deterring drug related problems across the nation (Price, 2009).
  - Recent surge in SROs due to school shootings (e.g., Columbine, Sandy Hook) (Samah, 2015; Toppo, 2013).

- Recent expansion of SRO roles/responsibilities due in part to a lack of clear policy guidelines defining their roles (Na & Gottfreyson, 2011).

SROs one of Fastest Growing Areas of Law Enforcement
(National Association of School Resource Officers , 2012)

- **Approximately 19,000 SROs working in schools across the country** (U.S. Department of Justice Statement of Interest, 2015).

- **Nearly half of public schools now have a police presence** (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2010).

Critical Issues regarding SROs Today

1. SROs used to manage student misbehavior,
2. SROs inadvertently promoting the school to prison pipeline
3. SROs lack of training
4. Lack of policies regulating SRO roles and responsibilities, as well as recommendations for best practices.

Issue 1: SROs Being Used to Manage Student Misbehavior

- 41% of public school teachers claimed student misbehavior interfered with their teaching (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014)

- Not surprising given 43% of schools reported inadequate levels of teacher training in behavior management (NCES, 2014).

- Increased levels of misbehavior, coupled with a lack teacher training in positive behavioral interventions, have resulted in schools being overly reliant upon increasingly harsh / aversive behavioral interventions (suspension, seclusion, restraint) (National Disabilities Rights Network, 2009)

- Punitive approaches are often ineffective for addressing problem behaviors because they
  - are reactive in nature and only implemented after the behavior occurs,
  - fail to teach appropriate alternative behaviors to students
  - may inadvertently reinforce a problem behavior
  - often remove students from the educational learning environment
      (George, 2012; Ryan, Sanders, Katsiyannis & Yell, 2007).

Issue 2: SROs Inadvertently promoting school to prison pipeline

- Tasking SROs to deal with student misbehavior has increasingly criminalized traditional school disciplinary issues, exacerbating the school to prison pipeline (Bracy, 2010; Mukherjee, 2007).

- Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 2014) found over the course of a recent academic school year
  - 260,000 students were referred to law enforcement
  - 92,000 students were arrested
  - 70,000 were physically restrained
  - 37,000 students were placed in seclusion

- Schools with SROs have 5 times as many arrests for disorderly conduct as schools without SROs (Justice Policy Institute, 2011)

Disciplinary Measures Disproportionately Impacts Minorities & Students with Disabilities

- Public order offenses (e.g., disorderly conduct, obstruction of justice) have increased by 108% from 1985-2009 (Strategies for Youth, 2013)

- Populations most adversely affected by this trend are students of color and those with disabilities (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014).

- Nearly half of students with emotional disturbance and 24% of students with learning disabilities had contact with the juvenile justice system in comparison to 13% of non-identified students (Fabelo et al., 2011)

- While black students make up only 16% of the overall population, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement, and 31% of students arrested at school (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Leiber, 2002; Mallet, 2014).

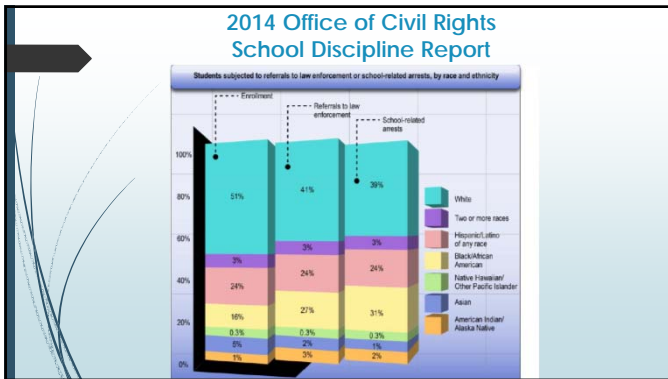## 2014 Office of Civil Rights
School Discipline Report

Issue 3: SROs lack of training

- Currently, there are no national standards outlining training requirements for SROs.

- Only 11 states (AR, CA, CO, IN, MD, MS, MO, NJ, SC, TN, TX) have established specific training/certification requirements for SROs (U.S. Dept of Education, 2015).

- 76% of states do not mandate juvenile justice training for law enforcement beyond the basic training received at the police academy (IACP, 2011).
  - Unfortunately, state police academies spend <1% of total training on juvenile justice issues (Strategies for Youth Survey, 2013).

Issue 4: Lack of Policies regulating SRO roles and responsibilities

- Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) encourages law enforcement agencies and schools to adopt a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to clearly document the roles, expectations, and responsibilities of SROs (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013).

MOU Guidance   World Wide Web Link_____

Advancement Project http://b.3cdn.net/advancement/cf357b9f96d8c55ff8_rdm6ib9js.pdf

NASRO sample MOUs https://nasro.org/?s=memorandum+of+understanding

U.S. Department of Justice http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/2013_MOU-FactSheet_v2_091613.pdf

Recommendations for Schools
(Ryan, Katsiyannis, Counts & Shelnut, in press)

1. Schools should not use SROs to manage student misbehavior unless criminal in nature

2. Increase SRO training to include behavior management, child development, communication techniques, and disability awareness;

3. Establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish specific roles and responsibilities for SROs

4. Include SRO as a team member of the school wide positive behavioral support (SWPBS) team to enhance safe school planning efforts.

5. School Administrators Should Understand Level of Permissible Force (3 Prong Test)

6. Increase Levels of Crisis De-escalation Training for Staff & SROs

Level of Permissible Force by SROs

- Level of permissible force that can be used was established through the Supreme Court ruling *Graham v. Connor* (1989).

- Graham case established a 3-prong test which mandates law enforcement officers take into account the:
  1. Severity of Crime Committed,
  2. Level of Threat to the Safety of the Public or Officer, and
  3. Level of Resistance.

References

Bracy, N. L. (2010). Circumventing the law: Students' rights in schools with police. Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 26(3), 294-315.

Ford, D., Botheio, G. & Conlon, K. (2015). Spring Valley high school officer suspended after violent classroom arrest. *Cable News Network*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/27/us/south-carolina-school-arrest-video/

Graham v. Connor, 490 U.S. 386 (1989)

International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2011). *Juvenile justice training needs assessment: A survey of law enforcement.* Retrieved from http://www.theiacp.org/juvenilejustice/2011NeedsAssessment

James, N., & McCallion, G. (2013). School resource officers: Law enforcement officers in schools. Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf

Johnson, I. (1999). School violence: The effectiveness of a school resource officer program in a Southern city. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 27*(2), 173-192.

Justice Policy Institute. (2011). *Education under arrest: The case against police in schools.* Retrieved from http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/3177

Mukherjee, E. (2007). *Criminalizing the classroom: The over-policing of New York City schools.* New York: New York Civil Liberties Union.

Saman, A. (2015, October 31). Black and Latino students say they see harsh treatment from school officers, who are growing in number. *Buzzfeed.* Retrieved from http://www.buzzfeed.com/albertsamaha/black-and-latino-students-say-they-see-harsh-treatment-fromS. R. & L. G. v. Kenton County Sheriff's Office,

Korzenborn, C. & Sumner, K. (2015). Complaint for Damages and Declaratory and Injunctive Relief and Jury Demand. U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky Northern Division at Covington.

Ryan, J.B., Katsiyannis, A., Counts, J. & Shelnut, J. (in press). The Growing Concerns Regarding School Resource Officers. *Intervention in School and Clinic,*

Strategies for Youth. (2013). *If not now, when? A survey of juvenile just training in Americas police academies.* Retrieved from http://www.strategiesforyouth.org.

United States. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014, March). *Civil rights data collection data snapshot: School discipline* (Issue Brief No. 1). Washington DC: Author

United States Department of Justice. (2013). COPS Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding for FY 2013 School-Based Partnerships. Retrieved from http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/2013_MOU-FactSheet_v2_091613.pdf