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Opposing Viewpoints:
**School Resource Officers: Do the Benefits to Student Safety Outweigh
Their Negative Impacts?**

*Madeleine Morris**

I. INTRODUCTION

Schools have always been a place where parents expect their children to be safe and protected. Student resource officer (SRO) programs were created to protect students from violence, but in practice, the safety benefits are often outweighed by their negative effects, such as higher juvenile incarceration rates through the school-to-prison pipeline and a greater overall student disconnection to school. To preserve their role in safeguarding schools but decrease risks for students, SROs should undergo specific training, especially regarding properly handling the behavior of students with disabilities and regarding implicit bias against students of color, and they should use alternate methods of discipline that do not involve arrests and the juvenile court system. This article will provide an overview of SRO training and duties, and then compare the benefits and drawbacks of SRO presence in schools. It will conclude with recommendations for limiting the negative impacts of SROs.

II. SRO DUTIES AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

An SRO is a law enforcement officer who is assigned to work at a school. This practice grew exponentially in the past twenty years, sparked by a number of school shootings. Parents in predominantly white suburban and rural areas pushed for stronger school safety regulations, causing SROs to be the fastest growing arm of law enforcement today.

SRO training and duties vary across school districts. In general, SROs must enforce school rules and the law, as well as be visible authority figures in schools. They can also participate in mentorship programs, provide students with training on safety and violence, and promote a positive school environment. SROs usually patrol school halls to discourage students from misbehaving, and when a student is caught breaking a school rule or the law, SROs step in to investigate and assist with student discipline. Certain school districts require SROs to follow zero tolerance policies when students are caught with drugs, meaning the SRO has zero discretion in how to respond. Other schools allow SROs to use discretion to decide a disciplinary course of action.

SROs are required to receive training, but requirements differ from state to state. Only twenty-three states require SROs to be trained or certified; however, many do not

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specify what the SRO training must cover. For example, many states are not transparent concerning whether training is required for SROs on the proper handling of discipline for students with disabilities.

In Illinois, an SRO is “a law enforcement officer who has been primarily assigned to a school or school district under an agreement with a local law enforcement agency.” Illinois state law requires SROs to complete training within one year of assignment. This training must cover juvenile developmental issues, youth mental health, how to prevent child abuse and exploitation, and various educational administrative issues. Illinois does not explicitly require implicit bias or disability training.

III. BENEFITS OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

School resource officers can provide a variety of benefits not only to schools, but to individual students and local police departments. These benefits as analyzed below include promoting school safety, addressing the root causes of student misbehavior, and decreasing juvenile delinquency petitions where SROs are properly utilized. Further, SROs can improve relationships between students and law enforcement, serve as protectors for victimized students, and reduce the burden on local law enforcement.

Although there has been little direct research, it is theorized that SROs can promote safety in schools by deterring criminal activity at schools, specifically more serious crimes including possession of a weapon and assault. SROs can also aid in reducing the amount of fighting and bullying on campus through hallway patrols, which can allow SROs to intervene rather quickly when there is a fight. Students may be less likely to break the rules or pick a fight when SROs are patrolling school grounds because of the increased probability of being caught.

Some districts have found that SROs can use their positions to identify the root cause of school misbehavior and help students address it. For example, Brady Wood, a fourteen-year-old Franklin County high school student, was caught stealing food from the cafeteria. The SRO assigned to the case was ready to issue Brady a citation for larceny until he went to Brady's home to speak to his parents. There, he learned that Brady's parents were spending their income on drugs and alcohol and refused to sign a form that would allow Brady to receive free school meals. The SRO realized that Brady stole food because he needed it to survive. Instead of writing Brady a citation, the SRO reported the issue to the Department of Children and Families, which then was able to find a safe home for Brady with his aunt down the street. This story illustrates how SROs can assist vulnerable students in different ways than teachers—they have the time to dig deeper and their reach extends into the community.

Further, when SROs are properly utilized, they can actually help offset the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, SROs in Franklin County, Virginia, often impose alternative methods of punishment to delinquency petitions, such as community service, school service, or mediation. Once a student has completed his act of service, he is often encouraged to participate in afterschool extracurricular activities in order to create structure and prevent a second offense. In Franklin County, SROs only send a request for a delinquency petition to the state's attorney after all other avenues have been explored. A

study of schools in this county that utilize this approach found a 64% decrease in potential delinquency petitions.

Research also reveals that SRO programs can improve relationships and build trust between students and law enforcement. A 2016 study that surveyed students from various schools in one southeastern U.S. school district analyzed how students' attitudes towards SROs change with increased interaction. Overall, more student-SRO interactions were positively correlated with favorable feelings towards SROs. Other research shows that this improved trust can later help uncover previously unknown issues of abuse and neglect, because victims may feel more comfortable reporting the issue to law enforcement.

Additionally, SROs can sometimes serve as protectors for students, which can make students feel more comfortable asking for help. This is especially true for students who are victims of various crimes, abuse, and bullying, and who may feel safer attending school knowing an SRO is available to protect them. SROs have the unique ability to immediately intervene if a juvenile offender violates any court ordered condition, thereby increasing a victim's sense of safety at school.

Finally, SROs can reduce the burden on law enforcement outside of the school. When officers are stationed at schools, the school often no longer needs to call 911 when a dangerous situation arises because it simply informs the SRO. This gives the school a quick response time while allowing patrol officers to focus on issues outside of schools.

In summary, SROs can help schools and their students in various ways, from discouraging bullying to providing a quick law enforcement response. However, as the next section explores, SROs can also have negative impacts on students.

IV. HARMFUL EFFECTS OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

Although SROs can make some students feel safer, the presence of these officers can also come with harsh consequences. SROs can negatively affect students by referring students, especially students of color, to law enforcement instead of using in-school disciplinary procedures. This bolsters the school-to-prison pipeline and decreases student connectivity. These negative consequences not only harm the students who are disciplined, but also can harm the entire student body by causing students to fear that they will be arrested for minor misconduct. SROs can also be harmful to students with disabilities, largely by responding inappropriately to outbursts common to students with certain behavioral disabilities. Further, the negative consequences of SRO programs are disproportionately borne by students of color due to implicit biases.

Many counties have seen increases in referrals to the juvenile justice system as a result of SROs, which fosters the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a phrase that describes the process by which students, who are disproportionately students of color, are removed from the classroom, arrested, and funneled into the juvenile justice system, and often the prison system as adults. When SROs are present, minor offenses such as fighting or making threats often result in arrests rather than detention, suspension, or another form of school discipline. In fact, one in six juvenile arrests stems from misbehavior at school. The school-to-prison pipeline is a systemic problem that follows a child for the rest of his or her life, with collateral consequences such as increased

risk that the child will be arrested as an adult, abuse drugs or alcohol, face difficulties with employment, and struggle with homelessness.

When SROs refer students to law enforcement, it also creates negative educational consequences. A student arrest nearly doubles a student's likelihood of dropping out of school. This likelihood quadruples if the student is required to appear in court. For example, Chicago public schools' low-income students and students of color who were arrested in ninth or tenth grade had school dropout rates six to eight times higher than students who were never arrested. This impact on arrested students is especially concerning given that there is no evidence that removing a student who exhibits such unlawful behavior improves the education of the remaining students.

Further, the SRO link to the school-to-prison pipeline has a disproportionate impact on students of color and students with disabilities, who are twice as likely to be suspended or referred to law enforcement. Students of color already have suspension rates that are three times higher than white students and are significantly overrepresented in expulsion. Expanded SRO presence has led to increased officer referrals and corporal punishment for students of color. There are also concerns that SROs respond more harshly to students of color, sometimes even physically harming them. For example, in Osceola County, Florida, an SRO slammed a Black high school student into the ground while attempting to break up an altercation. The SRO knocked the student unconscious before placing her in handcuffs. While SROs may improve the safety of some students, they often have the opposite effect on students of color.

Students with disabilities are sometimes subject to physical harm because SROs often lack the proper training to de-escalate behavioral outbursts. For example, in Kenton County, Kentucky, a third grader with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was arrested by an SRO after having a severe temper tantrum. When he refused to follow the SRO's order to sit down, he was handcuffed for fifteen minutes. The handcuffs were placed around his elbows, pinning his arms behind his back even though the boy cried out in pain. Students with disabilities often have Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), a written plan that describes ways to intervene when a child is displaying undesired behavior. When these plans are not followed, the situation can escalate leading to traumatic interactions and sometimes even an unnecessary arrest, both of which can follow the child for the rest of his life.

Additionally, SROs often contribute to the lists and databases that feed the school-to-prison pipeline. In Pasco County, Florida, the Sheriff's Office has created a secret list of students it believes might "fall into a life of crime." A student can be placed on the list for a multitude of reasons: prior abuse, missing too many classes, being sent to the office for discipline, receiving poor grades, or witnessing or experiencing household violence. However, placement on this list is discretionary, which means it is open to bias and likely disproportionately affects students of color. In total, there are 402 kids on the list. The Sheriff's Office claims the list is used to assign mentorship and resources to students who need them the most, but the Sheriff's Office Manual refers to it as a way to "pinpoint kids who are likely to become criminals" in five separate instances. SROs pay special attention to the students on the list, increasing the likelihood they will be arrested for a minor

infraction, which in turn leads to a higher chance of dropping out of school and turning to crime.

Although SROs can sometimes promote a better relationship between law enforcement and students, research also reveals that SROs can create less “school connectedness,” especially for students who have more interactions with SROs. School connectedness is a student’s bond with their school, including whether the student has an attachment to the school or feels that they belongs with classmates. School connectedness is important because it can serve as a protective factor against violence, delinquent behavior, truancy, substance abuse, and risky sexual activity. SROs can decrease school connectedness in various ways. When a student sees a fellow student arrested for disorderly conduct or other less serious offenses at school, the observing student can become fearful that they might be the next person arrested for a minor disturbance. This fear grows upon witnessing fellow students being either unfairly targeted and arrested by SROs or receiving disproportionately harsh punishments because of their skin color. Seeing an SRO at school can also draw attention to school crime and create a fear of violence within the student body, fostering feelings of distrust. SROs, in addition to security measures like metal detectors and locker searches, can create a jail-like setting, which is not conducive to learning and further harms school connectedness. This reduction in school connectedness, and the various other ways SROs foster the school-to-prison pipeline, harms students, especially students of color and students with disabilities.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS TO DECREASE THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF SROS

Despite the harmful impacts of SROs, especially for students of color and students with disabilities, SRO programs can foster safer school environments if implemented correctly. SRO presence can help deter some serious crimes and fights at school and can help make victims feel safer attending school. SROs may also be able to address the root causes of misbehavior, thereby preventing future misconduct or crime. However, SROs continue to disproportionately arrest students of color and students with disabilities for minor offenses, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline. To address the harmful impacts of SROs but retain the benefits, school districts should consider the following three recommendations: 1) make issuing a citation or arresting a student a last resort; 2) focus on making schools less like prison environments; and 3) increase training requirements for SROs, with a special focus on handling students with disabilities and recognizing implicit bias.

First, school districts should follow the model adopted in Franklin County, where arresting a student or issuing a citation is a last resort for SROs. School districts should abolish zero tolerance policies and should employ in-school disciplinary actions, such as detention or probation from sports. They should also consider restorative justice, community service, or peer courts if an issue calls for additional disciplinary action. If more school districts used in-school discipline or community service as punishments, less students would be arrested, decreasing the fuel for the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, SROs should first take ample time to investigate any behavioral outburst, understand the

situation, and do what is in the student's best interests rather than jump to issuing a citation or making an arrest.

Second, states can decrease SROs' contribution to the prisonization of schools by requiring them to use in-school discipline and restorative practices and barring them from using handcuffs on students. This change in tactics will minimize the prison-like environment by both reducing students' fear of arrest and avoiding the trauma of being handcuffed. Districts can also decrease the prisonization of schools by limiting locker searches and removing metal detectors. These steps should help foster a greater sense of school connectedness, which protects students from violent acts committed by other students because students who feel a sense of belonging are less likely to hurt members of their community.

Lastly and importantly, SROs need more training, especially implicit bias training and disability training around BIPs and how to implement them. Implicit bias training should teach SROs how to recognize their bias and provide tools and strategies to combat the influence of implicit bias. Disability training should cover how different disabilities cause students to act out, understanding BIPs, and the safest ways to deescalate these situations. States should follow Illinois' lead and designate specific SRO required training topics. However, Illinois and other states should ensure that specific training on implicit bias and students with disabilities is included in the designated list of training topics. Students with disabilities should never be arrested or placed into the juvenile justice system because they are unable to control themselves or calm down. Better training would protect disabled students and students of color.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although SROs can provide important safety services for schools, they can also make schools dangerous for students of color and students with disabilities through disproportionate and unnecessary arrests, which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. However, as Franklin County has illustrated, properly utilized SROs can actually help decrease juvenile justice involvement. States should learn from this example, as well as decrease school prisonization and implement stronger training, to counteract the harm SROs can cause while preserving their role in schools.

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