

The Vexing Disconnect Between Research and Recommendations on School Police



It's a pendulum, swinging back and forth.

First, high-profile acts of violence in schools often [lead](#) to calls for more police officers in schools, generally known as school resource officers (SROs).

Then, high-profile acts of violence by police, coupled with ongoing concerns about the "[school to prison pipeline](#)," often [lead](#) to calls to reduce or eliminate the presence of SROs in our nation's schools.

Watching this pendulum, educators and policymakers may find themselves wondering what research can tell them about keeping schools and students safe. Do research-based recommendations favor particular positions? Should SRO programs be reformed? Or should they be replaced with an alternative?

In a [new study](#) published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, [Christine Zabala-Eisshofer](#) of the University of Iowa, [Kate Somerville](#) of the University of Colorado Boulder, and NEPC Fellow [Kathryn Wiley](#) of Howard University conclude that researchers' recommendations do in fact favor particular positions. Specifically, they found that the majority of research recommendations advocate for relatively modest reform of SRO programs. But they also found a disconnect between this recommendation

and the studies' own analyses and conclusions showing overall adverse effects of SRO programs.

The authors analyzed the recommendations associated with 100 peer-reviewed journal articles on SROs. They found that current research recommendations tend to focus on reforming rather than abolishing SRO programs, even when evidence supports the latter. Most research recommendations advocate maintaining or expanding SRO programs, modifying agreements between schools and law enforcement, and investing in additional school-hardening measures.

The new article identifies embedded assumptions that may influence policy discussions on reformist and abolitionist approaches to the topic. Reliance on SROs has increased dramatically over the last several decades. In the 1970s, only one percent of schools had SROs, according to the [Education Civil Rights Alliance](#). Fast forward to 2020, and SROs were stationed in 65% of public schools nationwide, with their presence extending to every state. Millennials, now employed throughout the education and justice systems, can scarcely recall a time before SROs were part of the landscape of American education.

One result may be that research recommendations today are more likely to encourage decision-makers to maintain, improve, or reform SRO programs than to replace them with a different approach, even when attached to studies that find adverse and harmful impacts of SRO programs on students, particularly students of color and students with disabilities.

The authors stress that their article is not intended to determine the effectiveness of SRO programs as [others have already done](#). Instead, its primary goal is to offer a critical perspective on the research landscape itself by identifying prevailing narratives and divergent viewpoints within research recommendations.

Ultimately, the study questions whether ideological stances on SROs may influence the formulation of research recommendations, such that, consciously or not, researchers may bypass the evidence to recommend reforms over abolition. The study's authors encourage future inquiries into the processes by which research recommendations are generated and the influence of publication standards, journal reviewers, and editors on their development.

NEPC Resources on Research Issues

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