BRINGING EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING TO SCHOOL SAFETY

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Brief No. 11

This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. Click here to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can schools create contexts that foster safety and prosocial behaviors in the wake of COVID-19 and the ongoing state of increased unrest over racial justice?

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- We can expect an increase of students, particularly Black students, experiencing and displaying behavioral dysregulation at school, as well as students whose behavioral challenges signal a need for support rather than disciplinary sanctions and policing.
- Over the past 30 years there has been a dramatic rise in the prevalence of police officers stationed in school buildings; the overwhelming majority of officers have minimal training on practices that meet the developmental needs of children and youth.
- Increased police presence in schools is associated with increased "detection" of security incidents, but there is no evidence that police in schools have increased student safety or improved school climates.
- There are large racial and ethnic disproportionalities in exposure to police officers in schools and in the negative effects of increased police presence in schools.

Strategies to Consider

- Research consistently places practices to improve mental health as well as social and emotional skills at the center of evidence-based school safety interventions.
- Strong information-gathering and information-sharing protocols, coupled with a culture of caring, are necessary for proactively monitoring the school climate and identifying students who need targeted mental health supports.
- Information-gathering and information-sharing protocols will improve school safety only if schools also have a plan for delivery of school-based mental health services, as well as robust referrals and follow-through for nonschool mental health services.
- School climate interventions are an effective way of proactively providing social and emotional supports that have been shown to improve school safety.

Strategies to Avoid

- Efforts to shift to the use of social and emotional strategies will likely be unsuccessful at advancing safety if schools are not allowed to preserve funding that had been allocated for police officers.
- Strategies that emphasize the maintenance of police presence by focusing on increasing funding for specialized training have shown little usefulness in reducing the criminalization of student behaviors.

Although there is substantial evidence that police officers in schools, also known as school resource officers (SROs), do not advance safety in schools, their presence in schools has increased dramatically over the past 30 years. It is estimated that only 8% of the violence-prevention programs implemented in U.S. schools meet a research-based standard, and only 44% of those few programs meet a standard of effective implementation. Therefore, the evidence reviewed in this brief covers a broad range of studies of the effects of police presence in schools and the racial disproportionality of those effects, and of studies that provide guidance for identifying evidence-based school safety strategies.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

We can expect an increase of students, particularly Black students, experiencing and displaying behavioral dysregulation at school, as well as students whose behavioral challenges signal a need for support rather than disciplinary sanctions and policing.

- **There is conclusive evidence of racially disproportionate health and socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; these effects are predicted to lead to disproportionate behavioral health effects.**
  - The National Association of School Psychologists estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in an overall doubling or tripling of students who exhibit social, emotional, and behavioral challenges at school.
  - Based on research from Hurricane Katrina and other disasters, we can expect that the number of mental health challenges will be higher among racial and ethnic minority children and youth because their families are the most impacted and have lower levels of access to coping supports.
  - There is also strong evidence of racial disproportionality in the likelihood that remote learning is associated with increased exposure to adverse home and community contexts that increase psychological, emotional, and behavioral dysregulation.
- **Exposure to continuing racial and ethnic police brutality, discrimination, and other forms of racial injustice is associated with mental health challenges, including PTSD symptoms and depressive symptoms.**
  - Civil unrest aimed at advancing racial justice can also increase stress and take a deleterious toll on mental health.
- **Due to capacity limitations and access barriers, national studies estimate that less than one quarter of children and adolescents identified as in need of mental health treatment receive services.**
  - The majority of children who do receive services receive it through their school: more than 70% of children who receive mental health services receive it in a school setting.

Over the past 30 years there has been a dramatic rise in the prevalence of police officers stationed in school buildings; the overwhelming majority of these officers have minimal training on practices that meet the developmental needs of children and youth.

- **Since the 1990s there has been a dramatic rise in several aspects of police presence in schools: federal, state, and local dollars spent on police officers; number of schools with officers and number of officers in schools; and number of arrests at school.**
  - The SRO profession has grown exponentially such that there is a national organization representing safety personnel placed in schools with the authority to arrest children and youth.
- **Most SROs receive little school-specific training focused on handling student needs.**

- A review of the 40-hour non-mandatory professional training for police officers to be placed in schools illustrates that officers are entering schools with minimal training that would enable them to meet the developmental needs of students in distress. Research suggests that less than half of officers in schools receive any additional training, even when their schools offer such training.

- **Disciplinary offenses in schools are increasingly handled by police officers rather than by educators.**
  - Although police are stationed in schools to address physical threats to school safety, they have become increasingly involved in enforcing school rules and managing noncriminal behavioral challenges, including behavioral challenges exhibited by students in special education programs.
  - Nine studies found that the presence of police officers in high schools is related to higher rates of exclusionary discipline in schools over time.
  - Three smaller comparison group studies together support a nonsignificant effect of SROs on school discipline.

Increased police presence in schools is associated with increased "detection" of security incidents, but there is no evidence that it has increased student safety or improved school climates.

- **The growth of the school police officer workforce has coincided with a growth in criminalizing student behavior, as indicated by referrals of students to law enforcement for low-level offenses.**
  - This study of 580 schools over 12 years found that an increase in SROs is associated with increases in reporting of crimes, higher likelihood of harsher punishments for students, and higher rates of weapon and drug crimes, compared to schools without a police officer.
  - SROs differ from other police officers because they have the authority to enforce school rules such as rules about possession of cell phones and dress codes that would not be enforceable outside of the school setting. This authority opens the door to arrests in response to violations of school discipline codes even if these violations do not constitute criminal acts.
  - SROs can also engage in warrantless searches of students and their possessions and can enforce arrest or remove students from school property without parental consent.

- **Increased police presence in schools is not associated with reductions in school violence.**
  - No published research study that compares changes in a school over time or that conducts a cross-sectional comparison of matched schools has found that SROs reduce incidents of violence.
  - A nationwide longitudinal study of 470 schools, from 2003 to 2008, during which police officers were added to some schools but not others, found that there was no crime type for which an increase in the presence of police significantly related to decreased crime rates.
  - Studies do show that schools with police officers are more likely to detect serious incidents of violence but are not more likely to create safer school climates, and are not more likely to increase the number of students exhibiting prosocial behaviors.

- **Studies examining the association between police presence and school climate (including perceptions of safety) find that SROs either have no association with or are associated with worsening school climate and academic achievement.**
  - A 2019 quasi-experimental study that examined data on more than 2.5 million students in Texas schools found that grants that increased SROs resulted in an overall increase in middle-school students receiving sanctions for low-level offenses or violations of their school code of conduct. Over time, additional SROs were associated with small but significant declines in high school graduation rates and college enrollment; effects on discipline were significantly larger for Black students than other students.

- A 2016 quasi-experimental study using a comparison design with multiple stakeholders and students suggests that SROs are unrelated to perceptions of student safety or positive social behaviors. This finding is supported by a 2014 correlational study.

There are large racial and ethnic disproportionalities in exposure to police officers in schools and in the negative effects of increased police presence in schools.

- **Black students are placed at the highest risk for the negative effects of police presence because police are significantly more likely to be placed in schools that enroll larger percentages of students of color, especially Black students.**
- **The increasing criminalization of many aspects of school discipline has disproportionately affected Black children.**
  - The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights reported that, during the 2015–16 academic year, Black children made up 15% of public school students but were 31% of the students arrested or referred to law enforcement through their schools. In sharp contrast, white children made up 49% of public school students but only 36% of the students arrested or referred to law enforcement.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Research consistently places practices to improve mental health as well as social and emotional skills at the center of evidence-based school safety interventions.

- **A meta-analysis of 213 school-wide social and emotional learning intervention studies and studies of school-wide mental health trauma programs show that they are protective factors for students placed at risk due to exposure to high levels of stress and trauma, by improving their mental health and reducing emotional and behavioral problems, while also increasing their likelihood of academic success.**
  - Effective school-wide mental health is built around a tiered system of interventions, usually as part of a multitiered system of support (MTSS). At Tier 1—the whole school level—the focus is on creating the context and providing lessons that promote well-being. At Tier 2, students who display signs of distress or are identified via mental health screenings receive group counseling. When Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are strong, schools are much more able to support the limited number of students who need individualized clinical support at Tier 3.

Strong information-gathering and information-sharing protocols, coupled with a culture of caring, are necessary for proactively monitoring the school climate and identifying students who need targeted mental health supports.

- **Comprehensive school climate data provide information on individual students, and, when disaggregated, provide insight into how different subgroups of students (grade level; and racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status) experience the climate of the school.**
  - National recommendations include training school staff to (1) identify concerning behaviors and provide a supportive response, while also avoiding false cues that stereotype specific students; (2) use validated and reliable screening and assessment tools; and (3) use reliable systems to track mental health and behavioral improvement and determine if more-intensive supports are needed.
  - The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments provides a series of research-based measurement tools and guides for improving school climate.

- **Several retrospective studies of school violence find that students who become safety risks often exhibited early and immediate behavioral and emotional warning signs, such as school disengagement, isolation from peers, and dysregulated behaviors at school.**
  - Most schools currently lack reliable and valid climate data to evaluate school safety concerns, such as bullying problems, and mental and behavioral health needs.
- **Research shows that there are substantial subgroup variations in students' perceptions of the climate of the school. Disaggregating climate information by subgroup enables administrators to be proactive and intentional about deploying interventions.**
  - Some research indicates that misunderstanding about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts information sharing in ways that prevents administrators, teachers, counselors, and security staff from developing a collaborative and comprehensive understanding of students' needs.

Information-gathering and information-sharing protocols will improve school safety only if schools also have a plan for delivery of school-based mental health services, as well as robust referrals and follow-through for nonschool mental health services.

- **The School Mental Health Capacity Instrument can be adapted to locate where a school is along a continuum from reactive to proactive in its approach to mental health, and can identify targets for change.**
  - Mental health resource mapping is an essential first step in creating a robust referral system. Mapping supports and resources helps schools and school districts identify exactly what is available to students and families and how these supports can be accessed.
- **Current capacity limitations will only be overcome by training educators to recognize and manage adolescent mental health difficulties and connecting their work with that of school and community mental health professionals to leverage each group's respective knowledge, skills, and resources to implement evidence-based mental health interventions. These interventions include the Support for Students Exposed to Trauma program that can be delivered by classroom teachers, and the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools program that is delivered only by trained counselors.**

School climate interventions are an effective way of proactively providing social and emotional supports that have been shown to improve school safety.

- **A systematic review of interventions aimed at improving school climate provides the latest guidance for schools on creating a safe and supportive school climate.**
  - For the school safety dimension, the review details the findings from six studies that provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of specific violence-prevention and social development curricula shown to improve school safety.
  - The review also details findings from 26 studies that provide moderate evidence for practices and programs that were correlated with students' perceived safety at school.
  - The interventions reviewed had the following common elements: social and emotional learning lessons incorporated into academic classes, taught as a unit in a health class or offered as a separate elective class; support for teachers to develop caring and effective classroom management practices; manualized small-group counseling sessions for students with behavioral challenges; additional support for students who need regular, brief, individual one-on-one check-ins to discuss behavioral expectations and to experience positive interactions with an adult; and mechanisms and opportunities for students to provide input on school rules and classroom processes and to express themselves appropriately during classes.

- **The extent to which students experience aspects of safety at school is often unequal across subgroups of students. A study of more than 400 middle schools in California found that Black and Hispanic students have less-favorable experiences of safety, connectedness, relationships with adults, and opportunities for participation compared to White students.**
  - The safety components of school climate includes physical safety (actual bodily harm and threats of bodily harm) as well as psychological and emotional safety (interpersonal relationships, a sense of social identity belonging, and a sense of academic identity belonging).
- **School personnel face a particular obligation during this moment of civil unrest to explicitly recognize and mitigate the trauma that Black students are facing.**
  - Evidence suggests that educators can play a crucial role in helping students cope with trauma. This brief on how educators can identify and support student needs offers an evidence-based framework and resources for launching this work.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Efforts to shift to the use of social and emotional strategies will likely be unsuccessful at advancing safety if schools are not allowed to preserve funding that had been allocated for police officers.

- **Preservation of funding is a critical component of the divest-invest framework for reforming public safety, including school safety. Without preservation of funding, schools will not be able to replace SROs with staff who can support social, emotional, and mental health, and who have the dedicated role of implementing evidence-based school safety interventions.**
  - It is estimated that U.S. schools spend $14 billion a year for school safety personnel and practice. The need for preservation of funding is evident in the finding that there are many schools where there is a police officer but no counselor or social worker.
  - The risk for lack of preservation of funding is illustrated in Chicago Public Schools where recent efforts to remove police from schools have led to a reduction in resources dedicated to school safety; schools that voted to remove police were barred from keeping the funding and allocating it to evidence-based safety strategies.

Strategies that emphasize the maintenance of police presence by focusing on increasing funding for specialized training have shown little usefulness in reducing the criminalization of student behaviors.

- **Research shows that attempts to reform officers by requiring mandatory participation in the specialized trainings offered by the National Association of School Resource Officers do not solve the underlying problem of increasing criminalization of the school context.**
  - SRO training may leave officers with less discretion and therefore increase the criminalization of challenging student behaviors at school. One study found that officers who received additional school-focused training were more likely to prefer a formal resolution (suspension or referral to juvenile authorities) and not an informal resolution (diversion or warn and release).
  - Regardless of training, officers would still maintain a primarily punitive role in students' emotional and behavioral dysregulation. Of their three primary functions—law enforcer, informal counselor/mentor, and educator/teacher—officers report spending the most time on law enforcement and the least on teaching.

- SROs experience substantial role conflict between competing demands to enforce the law versus counseling in response to challenging behaviors. One study found that SROs who engage in educator or counselor roles function to uncover and report more student crimes than those engaging only in law enforcement roles. One example of this conflict is when students seeking help with a drug problem may be arrested rather than receiving counseling.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the EdResearch for Recovery website. To receive updates and the latest briefs, sign up here.

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

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