

Blurred and Confused: The Paradox of Police in Schools

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Abstract The get-tough era in juvenile justice ushered in significant changes to how schools respond to delinquency. One of the most visible changes has been the increasing presence of police officers who work in and patrol schools. The purpose of this article is to argue that this practice has blurred the boundaries between schools and police and, in turn, has created confusion about the roles of educators in safety efforts and of officers in education efforts, respectively. We draw on prior literature about school safety, school discipline, and law enforcement officers in school environments to describe this confusion and its consequences. This article contributes to literature aimed at understanding the changing landscape of policing and school safety and the challenges as well as opportunities facing the police and schools in educating youth, responding to misbehaviour, and maintaining safe school environments.

In recent decades, schools have adopted approaches that align with get-tough juvenile justice policies (Na and Gottfredson, 2013; Mears *et al.*, 2019). One of the most prominent examples can be seen in the presence of officers on school grounds, a practice that was relatively uncommon until the 1990s (Kupchik and Ward, 2014). Presently, over half of secondary schools, including middle and high schools as well as all-grade combined schools, are estimated to have officers who patrol their grounds (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018). A central goal of this practice is to keep schools safe (Kupchik and Monahan, 2006; Weiler and Cray, 2011). Whether school police improve safety

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remains unclear (Kupchik, 2010; Owens, 2017), though their presence would seem likely to exert a general deterrent effect. Some scholars, however, have raised the possibility that a police presence may be harmful. For example, research suggests that in some jurisdictions, it has contributed to the criminalization of behaviours, such as dress code violations and school disruptions (e.g. Castle, 2018; Rimer, 2004), that previously would have constituted school discipline issues (Hirschfeld, 2008; Kupchik, 2010). Such occurrences have led to federal intervention in some schools because of concerns about potential overuse of exclusionary discipline (e.g. U.S. Department of Justice, 2013).

Against that backdrop is the understudied issue of the precise role of school police and the implications of confusion about this role in a setting that traditionally was occupied almost solely by educators. School police in fact can occupy multiple roles. They may serve, for example, as counsellors, teachers, and enforcers of the law (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012). In addition to creating potential confusion for educators, parents, and students, these diverse roles raise questions about what can and should happen when student misbehaviour occurs. For example, behaviours that teachers might traditionally have been responsible for addressing may instead be managed by officers. It is also possible that some teachers will expect officers to use a law enforcement approach to handle classroom misconduct. In such cases, teachers' roles change—they act not only as educators but also as extensions of police agencies.

The goal of this article is to argue that policies that place police officers on school campuses blur the boundaries between education and law enforcement and, in turn, that these blurred boundaries can be confusing for school stakeholders, including the police officers, in ways that can change the nature of education and punishment on school grounds. To be clear, police can play many positive roles on campus and may act as counsellors and teachers in addition to school

safety officers (Saul et al., 2018). In arguing that their presence nonetheless can have unintended consequences for broader school practices, we highlight the need for school districts and law enforcement agencies to carefully consider the purpose and roles of school police officers and how they manage these roles in educational settings.

To advance this argument, we first describe the shift towards and reasons for placing officers in schools. We then highlight research on the impacts of school police, as well as terminological issues that arise in discussing school police and the powers they have. After identifying concerns that have been raised about the placement of officers in schools, we discuss the confusion that can arise from this practice for students and parents, teachers, school administrators, officers, and school districts. This account provides the foundation for identifying implications that arise for each group and, more broadly, for education and school safety. We close by highlighting several overarching research and policy implications of this work.

The new normal: police in schools

Police in schools

The presence of police on school campuses goes back many decades (Brown, 2006; Weiler and Cray, 2011). For example, in 1948, the Los Angeles School District established a security section that grew to become what is now the Los Angeles School Police Department (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2018), and during the 1950s, in Flint, Michigan 'officers visited schools on a part-time basis' (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2006, p. 11).

Notwithstanding this history, police in schools were rare until the 1990s (Beger, 2002; Brown, 2006). In 1997, there were an estimated 3,700 school resource officers (SROs) (Reaves, 2007). By 2007, that number had increased to 13,056

(Reaves, 2007). This use of SROs continues to grow. In 2016, the US Office of Community Oriented Policing reported that since 1996 their office alone had provided funding for more than 7,000 SROs (US Department of Justice, 2016). These numbers, though, provide a conservative estimate of the number of school police across the USA. They do not, for example, account for school police who work with schools but who are not classified as SROs.

School police—terminology and powers

There exist many types of school-based officers. Each receives different types of training, has different work experiences from which to draw, and has varying amounts of legal authority. They all have different powers and responsibilities when compared to traditional police officers. As we discuss below, the different types include security officers and three categories of sworn law enforcement officers. In each instance, the roles and expectations vary in ways that may contribute to confusion among school stakeholders about what to expect from police officers.

Security officers aim to protect schools but are not sworn police officers. In the 2015–16 school year, 20% of public schools reported having security officers (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018). The role they play in schools is not fully clear. They may patrol school grounds and respond to school-based crime. In addition, some security officers have been tasked with patrolling a campus with a firearm in an effort to prevent deadly attacks (Dunkelberger, 2018). However, security officers do not have arrest or citation powers. Accordingly, their response to crime requires the involvement of school administrators or local police.

A report by the US Department of Education (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018) suggests that it is more common for schools to have sworn law enforcement officers, of which there are three common types: school police, SROs, and part-time school police officers. The duties and responsibilities of

these different officers overlap. However, their direct employer, as well as how much time they spend working with schools, can differ.

First, *school police* are employed by the school district's police department. These departments function like any other police department—they have a chain of command and their officers are sworn police who can detain and arrest individuals. The primary difference between these departments and others is that the community they serve is a school district rather than a town, city, or county. These departments undertake several activities. For example, the *School District of Palm Beach County School Police* (2018) describes their officers as follows:

responsible for campus patrol, initial case investigations, subsequent follow-up, and, when necessary, making arrests. Additionally, the officers provide classroom presentations, counsel students and parents, engage students through mentoring, and serve as positive role models to help promote healthy relationships between youth and law enforcement.

Secondly, *SROs* are employed by a local or school police department or sheriff's office and are assigned at least part of the time to a school 'beat'. Approximately 42% of public schools have a SRO (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018). These individuals are sworn police and can detain and arrest individuals; they also serve as counsellors and teachers. In a single day, a SRO might cite a student for delinquent behaviour, teach a Drug Abuse Resistance Education class, and counsel a student who is having trouble at home. Their responsibilities, in short, are far-ranging. As one account highlighted, 'School officers around the country spoke of performing multiple adult roles, having to alternate between nurturing and authoritative, with a guiding philosophy known in the field as 'the triad'—counselor, teacher, law enforcement officer' (Saul *et al.*, 2018, p. A1).

Thirdly, a variant of the SRO group exists—*part-time school police officers*. These officers are assigned to work at least part-time on a school campus or to be a conduit between their police department and the school. When on school grounds, they have a role that is largely similar to that of SROs. They employ efforts that aim to improve school safety and prevent crime, mentor students, and might teach courses related to the law or crime prevention (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018). Approximately 11% of public schools have a sworn officer who is not a SRO or part of a school police department (Musu-Gillette *et al.*, 2018).

Officers' roles and legal powers are also defined by multiple types of policies and agreements; Table 1 provides illustrations of four types. First, some states have adopted legal statutes that detail the state's expectations for school police officers. For example, in Kansas (Kansas Legislature, 2019) and Indiana (Indiana General Assembly, 2019), school police are tasked with enforcing both criminal law and school rules. Second, some police departments and organizations have missions and policies that guide the work of their officers. The National Association of School Resource Officers (2012), along with other organizations, such as the Maryland Association of School Resource Officers (2016), expect officers to serve as law enforcers, mentors, and educators. Third, state and federal courts have issued several rulings that guide the work of school police. The US Supreme Court, for example, ruled in *New Jersey v. T.L.O.* (1985) that school officials need only have reasonable suspicion, rather than the typical probable cause, to search a student's belongings. State courts have used this precedent to rule on cases that contest the involvement of police in searches of students and their belongings (Price, 2009). These search powers, though, have limits (see Safford Unified School District v. Redding, 556 US 1163, 2019). Finally, police departments and schools execute memorandums of understanding (MOU) that detail the roles, responsibilities, and legal powers of

school police officers. Some scholars argue that a comprehensive and clear MOU that details officers' roles and responsibilities, as well as those of school administrators and staff, may be the best approach for maximizing officers' abilities to contribute to a safe learning environment (Javdani, 2019).

Research on the impacts of police in schools

The primary goal of placing officers in schools is to prevent crime and maintain a safe learning environment (Kupchik and Monahan, 2006; Weiler and Gray, 2011; Community Oriented Policing Services, 2018). This practice, proponents contend, has several potential benefits. The presence of officers may improve perceptions of school safety (Raymond, 2010), and when police build positive relationships with students, it may improve police–community relations (Raymond, 2010; Garabrant, 2017). Officers also can provide mentoring and law-related classes to students (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012). Not least, school administrators may use officers in ways that reduce the duties of teachers, allowing teachers to spend more time teaching (Raymond, 2010).

Some research lends support to these claims. Principals in Kentucky, for example, perceived there to be fewer fights after a SRO started working on campus (May *et al.*, 2004). Another study reported that 'the presence and number of SROs was negatively and significantly associated with serious school violence' (Jennings *et al.*, 2011, p. 120–121). A third study found that SROs did not greatly increase the number of youth referred to the juvenile court for minor forms of delinquency (May *et al.*, 2018). In addition, research has found that at least some students view school police as a valuable on-campus resource (Bracy, 2011).

Other research paints a more complicated picture. One study found that while police presence reduced arrests for assault and weapons-related crimes, it increased arrests for disorderly conduct

Table 1: Illustrations of the diversity of school police officer roles and responsibilities

Guiding Source	Policy, guideline, or expectation ^a
Delaware Department of Education (2019)	'[School resource officers are required to] follow all legal and policy requirements regarding juvenile investigation, detention, and arrest. Assist in developing and updating school Emergency Preparedness Plans. Maintain a safe and secure school environment by keeping abreast of elements and incidents that may threaten the safety of the students, teachers, and staff. Develop crime prevention programs with school staff and provide education on crime prevention to the school community, including current topics such as bullying. Be a positive role model and mentor to the school community and present a positive image to better enhance communication with students, staff, and parents. Receive information from Principal/Designee and conduct an investigation to determine if incident requires mandated reporting. Maintain logs of participation in school activities and of criminal investigations conducted' (p. 3).
District of Columbia's Metropolitan Police Department (2019)	'While the SROs do make arrests when necessary, they work with schools, other District agencies, and community groups to pursue alternative methods for addressing disorder and conflict. In addition, SROs: Coordinate mediations and response to conflicts... coordinate MPD's Safe Passage Program... provide mentoring and outreach programs... conduct school security assessments focused on crime prevention through environmental design, and participate in safety meetings with the school administration, provide support to at-risk youth by conducting home visits to chronic truants or suspended students, and seminars to designated youth, and visit and work with the schools that feed into middle and high schools' (p. 1–2).
Indiana General Assembly (2019)	'In addition to any other powers or duties, such police officers shall enforce and assist the educators and administrators of their school corporation in the enforcement of the rules and regulations of the school corporation, and assist and cooperate with other law enforcement agencies and officers'.
Kansas Legislature (2019)	'In addition to enforcement of state law, county resolutions and city ordinances, campus police officers shall enforce rules and regulations and rules and policies of the board of trustees or school board, whether or not violation thereof constitutes a criminal offense'.
Maryland Association of School Resource Officers (2016)	'SRO's serve three major roles in Maryland Schools: As a Law Enforcement Officers within the school and surrounding community. As instructors who teach law related topics in the classroom. As student mentor/advisers to help resolve conflicts without violence'.
National Association of School Resource Officers (2012)	'SROs contribute to the safe-schools team by ensuring a safe and secure campus, educating students about law-related topics, and mentoring students as counselors and role models. This is the Triad Model of SRO responsibility: educator, informal counselor, and law enforcer' (p. 21).
New Jersey v. T.L.O., 469 U.S. 325 (1985)	'... a school official may properly conduct a search of a student's person if the official has a reasonable suspicion that a crime has been or is in the process of being committed, or reasonable cause to believe that the search is necessary to maintain school discipline or enforce school policies'.
Omaha Police Department (2020)	'We offer a set of core classes that have been planned, tested and proven to be relevant to the needs of our youth. Through the cooperative efforts of SROs and educators, our program complements the school's curriculum'. 'A SRO works with school administrators, teachers, parents, and students to establish and maintain security procedures that emphasize safety and crime prevention'. 'SROs interact and work with students, parents, teachers, and administrators during the school day, and may participate in school-related extra-curricular activities'.

Continued

Table 1: Continued

Guiding Source	Policy, guideline, or expectation ^a
<i>Safford Unified School District v. Redding</i> , 556 U.S. 1163 (2009)	A search of a student is permitted with reasonable suspicion of wrongdoing 'when the measures adopted are reasonably related to the objectives of the search and not excessively intrusive in light of the age and sex of the student and the nature of the infraction'.
Salt Lake City School District (2019)	'The mission of the SRO is to provide for and maintain a safe, healthy and productive learning environment while acting as a positive role model for students in the School District by working in a cooperative, proactive, problem-solving partnership between the Police Department and the School District' (p. 4).
School District of Palm Beach County School Police (2018)	'[School officers are] responsible for campus patrol, initial case investigations, subsequent follow-up, and, when necessary, making arrests. Additionally, the officers provide classroom presentations, counsel students and parents, engage students through mentoring, and serve as positive role models to help promote healthy relationships between youth and law enforcement'.
Texas Association of School Resource Officers (2020)	'As such, the SRO fulfills three roles by using a triad approach. The officer acts as a law enforcement officer, an informal counselor, and a law-related presenter. As a law enforcement officer, the primary purpose is to "keep the peace." As an informal counselor, the officer provides resource guidance to students, parents, teachers, staff, and act as a link to support services both inside and outside the school. As a law-related presenter, the officer will share special law enforcement expertise by presentations in the classroom to promote a better understanding of our laws. Furthermore, the SRO also serves as positive role model for the students on campus during school hours and off campus at extra-curricular activities'.

^aPage numbers are not available for online sources.

(Theriot, 2009). Another study found that schools have led scholars to argue that the effects of using school police depend on a range of factors (Crawford and Burns, 2015).

Despite progress in understanding the uses and impacts of police in schools, substantial gaps in empirical knowledge remain (see generally, Bracy, 2010; Jennings *et al.*, 2011; Kupchik and Ward, 2014; Gottfredson, 2017). For example, there is a need to understand whether the presence of school police has adverse impacts on marginalized groups of students (Javdani, 2019). There also is a need to understand how officers and schools balance their distinct missions of enforcing the law and educating youth (Collier *et al.*, 2019). One prominent gap, and the one that is the focus of this article, is the confusion that can arise for school stakeholders about the roles of school police, as well as the implications of that confusion.

Concerns about police and their roles in schools

Scholars have argued that the shift towards placing officers on school grounds has resulted in the criminalization of normal youth behaviours that historically would have been treated as school misconduct (Hirschi, 2008; Kupchik and Ward, 2014). Such concerns are longstanding. In 1957, in Brooklyn, a grand jury recommended that the city place an officer at every school. The superintendent of schools argued that adopting such an approach was 'unthinkable' and that many campus-based arrests were unnecessary (Fellows, 1957, p. 1).

In contemporary society, critics express concern that having school-based officers fuels the school-to-prison pipeline (Nance, 2016). In at least some schools, the practice does appear to contribute to increases in the number of youth arrested or referred to the juvenile court (Na and Gottfredson, 2013). Critics also point to the potential disparate impacts of this practice on youth who are racial or ethnic minorities. For example, some school police have partnered with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, which may lead to the targeting of immigrant students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2011). In addition, youth who are racial or ethnic minorities and youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be more likely to attend schools that have officers (US Department of Education, 2016), which may contribute to disparities in the school-to-prison pipeline. Estimates suggest that minority students are more likely than white students to have police contact for relatively minor forms of delinquency (US Department of Education, 2016).

Concerns have also been raised about students' legal rights. Price (2009) highlighted how the presence of school police prompts legal questions about students' Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights. He also observed that questions exist about whether students need to be read their Miranda Rights when a principal gathers information about

a delinquent act and then shares that information with a school police officer. Scholars have raised questions, too, about when a school police officer needs probable cause—the typical threshold required for police searches—to search students' belongings and when, if ever, they only need reasonable suspicion, the bar traditionally used for searches by school staff (Beger, 2002; Price, 2009; Bracy, 2010).

Assessments of law enforcement officers in general have recognized the wide-ranging, and sometimes conflicting or ambiguous, expectations society has for police officers (see generally, Hunt *et al.*, 1983; Pugh, 1986; Cooper, 2012). Law enforcement officers may take on both 'crime fighter' roles and 'service-oriented' roles (Hunt *et al.*, 1983). Hunt *et al.* (1983) found that there can be conflict between these roles, especially from outside parties (e.g. citizens, communities) who have varying expectations of the police. Even so, when individuals interact with police in the community, they operate with a more or less clear understanding that those police officers are the only parties that can legally enforce the law and that the primary mandate of law enforcement is public safety. The primary mandate of schools, however, is to educate youth. In addition, schools are governed by principals who, like police, have the authority to intervene when student misbehaviour occurs.

In what follows, we argue that employing school police blurs the boundaries of what officers traditionally have been called to do and can create confusion for school stakeholders about how to handle different situations that previously would have been handled 'in-house' by the school or through calls for police assistance. This confusion can have direct implications for education and public safety. Indeed, we argue that a comprehensive assessment of school police should consider the potential confusion and challenges that school stakeholders might confront when police officers are placed on school campuses, and that doing so is necessary both to ensure the probability of greater safety and improved education and to avoid potential harms.

Confusion about police in schools

School police frequently are tasked with taking on a wide range of roles (Rhodes, 2019). Officers are expected to serve as law enforcement officers, counsellors, and teachers (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012). At the same time, school stakeholders may have divergent expectations for which role officers should prioritize and when. In addition, the guidance, in practice and research, for when each role should be prioritized is inconsistent. The presence of officers on school campuses thus comes with ambiguity about their role. As prior research has argued (McKenna and White, 2018), this ambiguity can influence outcomes for students and schools. It can also create ambiguity about school stakeholders' roles in educating youth and keeping schools safe. In what follows, we describe the confusion that may arise for each stakeholder group, including students and parents, teachers, school administrators, officers, and school board and district administrators. We then discuss the implications of this confusion.

Stakeholder 1: Students and parents

Concerns about the ability of adolescents to understand their rights and appreciate the consequences of their decisions loom large over all of juvenile justice (Feld and Bishop, 2012; Cauffman *et al.*, 2018; Feld, 2018). They are arguably even larger in school settings because schools constitute arenas in which, from an early age, students are taught to trust adults and to understand that education, not punishment, is the primary goal. Concerns about parents understanding their children's legal rights carry over into school settings as well. Parents may not appreciate the range of school police officers' roles (Cleary and Warner, 2017) and thus may be unprepared to guide their children's behaviour in school settings where police are present.

The potential for students to be confused about their rights on school grounds is evident in many accounts of school police. Consider SROs who

operate under the triad model—that is, acting simultaneously as a counsellor, teacher, and officer. In some instances, they may present themselves to students as a 'counsellor'. Yet, they are also charged with enforcing the law. Students may admit to the 'counsellor' their participation in illegal behaviour without fully realizing that they have shared incriminating evidence with someone who can use it against them in a legal proceeding. Similarly, there may be confusion associated with determining what an officer's precise role in school entails. For example, in addition to the roles identified in the triad model, there are other roles that school police can and do adopt, including that of social worker and of surrogate parent (Martinez-Prather *et al.*, 2016).

Even when students understand the role of school police, there still can be confusion about what rights they have when interacting with them. In a community setting, for example, officers need a probable cause to search an individual's belongings. In a school setting, though, an officer may only need reasonable suspicion (Beger, 2002; Price, 2009; Bracy, 2010). This difference may not be understood by students. They also may not understand that it remains undetermined whether school police are required to read them their Miranda Rights (Price, 2009).

This confusion can extend to parents, many of whom may not understand their child's legal rights or the legal limits of a school police officer's authority. Research on juvenile justice proceedings establishes that parents may not know or appreciate the rights of their children (Cavanagh and Cauffman, 2017; Cleary and Warner, 2017; Feld, 2018). To illustrate, in two studies in which parents were asked about whether the police can lie when questioning suspects, only about half of parents in one study (Woolard *et al.*, 2008) and about one-fourth in the other (Cleary and Warner, 2017) knew that the police can do so. This lack of understanding can reasonably be assumed to extend to school settings and to interactions with school police.

Stakeholder 2: Teachers

Like school police, teachers are tasked with multiple goals, including classroom management, educating youth, informally assessing the health and social welfare of students, and maintaining a safe environment. These conflicting goals, and the resulting confusion about how to implement one's duties, might be amplified by the presence of a school police officer.

Research suggests that although teachers have always been a part of addressing student misbehaviour, the presence of officers on school grounds has created ambiguity about how teachers should proceed when they encounter misconduct. Behaviours that at one time may have been viewed as a discipline issue now may be treated as delinquency when school administrators and staff call on their school police officer to handle relatively minor disturbances. In one Louisiana school district, a federal complaint noted that 'students are often arrested for minor school rule violations, including skipping school, using a cell phone, and being in the hall with a teacher's permission but without a hall pass' (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). Such responses, scholars argue, have contributed to the 'criminalization' of school misconduct (Mukherjee, 2007; Kupchik, 2010; Na and Gottfredson, 2013).

The mere presence of officers can create confusion about when teacher responsibility for addressing student behaviour ends and police responsibility for it begins. For example, in jurisdictions where it is a misdemeanor offence to disturb an educational environment (see Mears *et al.*, 2016), teachers may not know whether to give a student who has cursed at them detention or to ask an officer to intervene. Absent a school police officer, it is unlikely that teachers would call the police in such situations. There also may be cases where teachers and officers disagree about a course of action, which can create confusion about how to respond and thus inconsistent responses to student misbehaviour.

Stakeholder 3: School administrators

School administrators oversee school operations and set the tone for the school's culture. They therefore are in the unique position of establishing rules and of working alongside staff to interpret and implement those rules. Their relationship and oversight with school police, though, might be different than the relationship they have with other school staff. The officer will have a supervisor—a sheriff or police chief or a security officer director—who has ultimate authority over their work. School administrators may defer to that supervisor and not seek to direct an officer's activities. Officers, then, can operate with considerable autonomy even though they work in a setting where, traditionally, the principal has authority over what occurs.

Such confusion can be amplified by regulations that, in protecting students' privacy, inhibit schools from sharing information with officers. For instance, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) does not give officers the automatic right to access student records (Daggett, 2013). Although there do exist conditions under which officers might be considered 'school officials' and therefore granted access to student information, it is not always clear when those conditions are met (Department of Education, 2018). It is possible, then, that there are instances when schools want to involve officers in decision-making about how to intervene with a student, but they may not know whether they are limited by FERPA in doing so.

Other types of conflict can arise that stem from role confusion. School administrators may approach school order and safety in a way that differs from that of the officer (Mears *et al.*, 2019; Brown *et al.*, 2020). In such cases, it is unclear whose view should or does prevail. The potential for such conflict is not hypothetical. In Louisiana, an officer received approval from his police supervisor to arrest a student. The principal disagreed with this decision and attempted to physically interfere with

the arrest (Finn *et al.*, 2015). Such conflict can be confusing not just for administrators and officers, but also for the student being arrested and for student observers.

Stakeholder 4: School police officers

Officers are trained to maintain community safety and to prevent community-based crime. When placed on a school campus, they may undergo additional training. For example, the National Association of School Resource Officers offers several trainings, such as a Basic and an Advanced SRO Course and an Adolescent Mental Health Training (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2020). These trainings, though, are not required, and many officers receive relatively little training that focuses on working with at-risk youth or balancing the educational and safety missions of schools (Mukherjee, 2007). At the national level, there does not exist a required, uniform training for school police (Strategies for Youth, 2019). A recent report by *Strategies for Youth* (2019) found that only 24 states require officers to undergo specific training when they are placed on school campuses. These requirements are unique to each state. In Delaware, for example, officers are required to complete 'awareness training' about, among other topics, de-escalation, individualized education programmes, and working with students with disabilities (State of Delaware, 2020). Utah takes a different approach and suggests training topics, such as childhood development and restorative justice (State of Utah, 2020).

When police officers do not receive targeted training, it may make it difficult for them to know how to respond to the range of issues that arise on school campuses. Any shortfalls in training can be compounded by role conflict. School-based officers are expected to balance the mission of law enforcement with the mission of education. However, they may face confusion about how to weigh the two and when one should outweigh the other (Brown *et al.*, 2020). Not least, officers may

face confusion about whose instructions—their formal supervisor's (e.g. police chief, sheriff, security director) or their informal supervisor's (e.g. school principal)—to prioritize. They face the dilemma of working under different leaders and therefore of potentially receiving conflicting directives about how to respond to misbehaviour and threats to school safety.

Such challenges may be compounded by the fact that most misconduct in schools is likely to be minor and yet also can be defined as delinquency. Officers could arrest students in at least some such cases. In a school setting, though, officers also have the option of turning youth over to a school administrator. Which course of action is taken likely varies depending on the officer and circumstances. Consider one Illinois school: an officer arrested a student for having a pocketknife on campus. It was not illegal for the student to have the knife. However, the arrest was made because other students knew about the knife and the officer and assistant principal deemed it to be disruptive to the school environment (Finn *et al.*, 2015). What would have happened at other schools in the same district, much less at other schools nationally, is unclear. What is clear is that officer and school administrator relationships, and perceptions about what constitutes a serious threat or appropriate response, can and do vary.

Stakeholder 5: School boards and district administrators

The practice of placing police in schools may entail a school district policy or a school board action. Here, there is a different type of confusion that exists. School districts want to protect students and staff from violence, especially school shootings. Relying on the intervention of school police seems to be, at face value, a logical choice. Once again, though, confusion arises when the worlds of education and law enforcement interact.

One area of confusion lies in understanding the scope of violence in schools and how best to address it. It is logical to expect that in many

jurisdictions, school board members may turn to the police for guidance, under the assumptions that school safety is best addressed by relying on law enforcement. However, the police cannot know the prevalence or causes of school crime without credible empirical studies that focus on the particular school and its specific student population. A reliance on the police does not substitute for such studies, and it may lead schools to rely on arrest information rather than more objective measures of offending and to neglect undertaking studies of the causes of crime specific to their location. Not least, there is the fact that research has found that police officer presence may not appreciably reduce the number of violent or property crimes at schools (Na and Gottfredson, 2013).

Another area of confusion is the lack of understanding of the role of the officers. When school districts advocate for placing officers in schools, they may imagine that officers will have clear calls to make. For example, if a school shooting occurs, responding as a police officer would clearly be expected. In other instances, though, there will be minor problem behaviours that officers could readily address under the guise of serving more as an educator or counsellor. In practice, though, how officers respond, especially in the latter instance, may depart from what school districts and their school boards originally envisioned.

Implications of confusion about police in schools

We turn now to potential implications of role confusion for each of the respective stakeholder groups. In so doing, we seek to highlight not whether placement of police in schools is appropriate but rather what the consequences of their placement may be.

Stakeholder 1: Students and parents

For students, the main implication may be a lack of awareness of behaviours, including seemingly minor misconduct, that can be construed as

arrestable offences. Students who disrupt class may believe that they are doing so at the risk of detention or suspension when in reality they may be exposing themselves to the risk of citation, arrest, or referral to juvenile court (e.g. Hopper, 2011). Similarly, students may make statements to officers with the belief that officers are acting as counsellors when, in fact, the officers may be acting in a law enforcement capacity. As a result, students may risk legal sanctions in situations where—with-out officers on campus or without confusion about their role—there would be little risk of juvenile justice involvement.

Additional implications arise from this blurring of boundaries. For example, students and parents who believe that the officer's focus is on mentoring and teaching may not inform that officer of potential dangers at school. To our knowledge, no empirical research exists that identifies the prevalence of this type of situation. However, researchers have found that school police may embrace a more support-oriented approach to addressing student misbehaviour in lieu of typical law enforcement responses (Brown *et al.*, 2020). There is the related risk that youth will perceive officers primarily as interested in punishing students (Collier *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, students may refrain from informing officers about illegal activities, especially if they feel that officers will react in a manner that subjects their peers to severe punishments.

Not least, students and parents may infer, potentially incorrectly, that the presence of officers indicates that a crime or safety issue exists. Some school administrators in fact have expressed concern that the presence of officers signals that their school is unsafe (Finn *et al.*, 2005).

Stakeholder 2: Teachers

The presence of school police holds the potential for creating questions about whether teachers are conduits for efforts to enforce the law. Viewed from this vantage point, a number of insights about and implications of officers in schools can be observed.

First, police officers may constitute the equivalent of a tool that teachers use to manage classrooms and to achieve academic performance outcomes. To illustrate, teachers are inundated with a diverse range of tasks, which may create organizational pressures for teachers to rely on officers to remove disruptive or problematic students from the classroom.

Second, there is potential for conflict to arise between teachers and officers. For example, the two may disagree about a proper course of action with a student. Officers may intervene when teachers would prefer they did not. Alternatively, officers may be called to intervene on behalf of a teacher even when the officer believes that a particular situation is not under their purview. In the former situation, a teacher's authority over students might be undermined. Situations like the latter could decrease students' trust of the teacher and the police officer.

Third, when one teacher demands officer involvement and frequently calls an officer's attention to student misbehaviour, that teacher's students may face an increased likelihood of arrest. Another teacher, though, may resist officer involvement, which may make their students less likely to be cited or arrested. We suspect that these distinct approaches by teachers may create differences across schools, classrooms, and students in how delinquency and misbehaviour are handled. Indeed, scholarship on the determinants of arrest suggests that a victim's preference about whether an arrest should occur may influence the arrest decision (Buzawa and Austin, 1993; Brown, 2005; Brown and Frank, 2006). This same dynamic or decision-making process may occur when school administrators or staff advocate for or against officer intervention.

Stakeholder 3: School administrators

The presence of police can create confusion for school administrators about how to respond to delinquency and school safety. One result is that

students may become mistrustful of school administrators if they believe that they are going to call officers to respond to every minor act of misbehaviour. Students also may be less likely to share information about potential delinquency by a peer if they believe their peer will be arrested. Put differently, students may not know when to view administrators as educators and when to view them as extensions of law enforcement.

Confusion about the role of officers may alter how schools approach misconduct and safety concerns. They might rely on officers to handle issues that, absent the presence of officers, would have been handled as school discipline issues. They also might encourage teachers to do the same. In so doing, they could contribute to more students having police contact and, in some cases, students being arrested or cited when they previously would have been given a detention or suspension. Such a situation may be especially likely to occur when administrators and officers both subscribe to a get-tough response to misbehaviour (Brown *et al.*, 2020). In one school, a school-based truancy court that was developed to provide accessible services to students 'came to be used as a disciplinary device, subjecting students and families to justice system scrutiny and threats of fines and imprisonment for minor issues such as failure to complete homework or acting disrespectfully' (French-Marcelin and Hinger, 2017, p. 30).

Finally, the authority and influence of school administrators may be undermined when officers act in ways that do not accord with the culture and environment the administrators have cultivated. A principal who says the school aims to provide at-risk students with needed support and to assist them in staying out of the juvenile justice system may be taken less seriously or felt to be less believable when school police arrest students for minor infractions. Alternatively, the efforts of a principal who favours a punishment-oriented approach to misbehaviour may be hindered when the school police officer acts primarily as a mentor or counsellor to students.

Stakeholder 4: School police officers

Confusion can arise for officers themselves. If officers are given discretion and autonomy and do not have clarity about how to respond, there may be inconsistencies in how misbehaviour and safety issues are handled (Collier *et al.*, 2019). That amounts to an inconsistency in the administration of justice. For example, one officer may arrest a student for marijuana possession, whereas another officer may refer the student to school administrators.

School policing also might contribute to net-widening. Students who historically would have been given a school-based sanction become caught up in the juvenile justice system. Youth can legally be arrested for a wide range of behaviours, many of which are viewed as relatively harmless or as behaviour that is somewhat expected of youth (see, Mears *et al.*, 2016). Such offences, when occurring on school campuses, historically have been treated as a school discipline issue. Officers, though, may be charged with enforcing the law and so, when observing any kind of law-breaking behaviour, may arrest or cite students.

At the same time, some officers may prioritize their role as an informal counsellor. However, they may not have the training or skills necessary to counsel students. For example, in one school, a principal expressed concern that the officer would advise and guide students—some of whom had a clear need for intervention by a trained mental health professional (e.g. students having suicidal thoughts)—when the officer was not a trained counsellor (Finn *et al.*, 2005). Administrators at another school wanted officers to focus on patrolling parking lots and monitoring students. Officers, though, wanted to educate students about their role and shine a positive light on law enforcement.

Ambiguity around an officer's role also has the potential of creating tension between officers and school administrators. For example, an officer may believe an issue does not warrant law enforcement

attention even when school administrators want the officer to intervene. In one district, an administrator wanted officers to arrest students from whom the administrator confiscated alcohol. The officer, though, would not arrest the students (Finn *et al.*, 2005). Alternatively, officers may intervene in situations that administrators might prefer the school handle. At another school, an officer arrested students who put graffiti on bathroom stalls even though the principal objected to the arrests (Finn *et al.*, 2005).

Stakeholder 5: School boards and district administrators

Finally, the presence of school police can create quandaries for school districts and systems about how best to prevent and respond to delinquency and school safety issues. One implication is that school districts that rely on police officers may not invest in other forms of violence prevention. They may believe that the presence of an armed officer is 'enough' to deter or stop violence, and they might give little attention and resources to other school safety approaches. In these districts, the reliance on police may result in less, rather than more, safety on campus, especially given that school crime may stem from a variety of causes and so require a multifaceted policy response (see generally, Gottfredson, 2017; Kupchik, 2010). Indeed, the simple presence of a police officer has not always prevented school shootings (e.g. Mazzei, 2018).

Conclusion

The presence of police in schools is largely a contemporary phenomenon with documented variable impacts. One reason to anticipate that the impacts may vary stems from the blurring of boundaries between schools and law enforcement. These blurred boundaries can contribute to ambiguity about the role of school police and, more specifically, about how officers might respond to

student misconduct and safety issues. When should officers intervene with students who misbehave? How should they respond to teachers' and administrators' calls to act in a more traditional law enforcement role when their mandate is to act in accordance with the triad model? How should they interact with students and parents when policing school campuses? In short, the placing of police in schools seems, at first blush, a straightforward undertaking—it should create safer schools. However, as we have shown, there are theoretical and empirical grounds for questioning whether that occurs. This argument does not necessarily imply that positive outcomes do not occur or that schools should stop using police officers. It does, though, highlight the need to further define the role of school police and understand their impacts on students and schools. This information would better defend arguments for or against school police. Accordingly, the takeaway messages are a set of research and practice needs.

First, data are needed on the prevalence of school police, as well as other types of school officers, and their role in schools. Some descriptive reports about the prevalence of school-based officers exist (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). However, broader data collection efforts are needed. These data should detail information such as the types of schools that have police, how frequently the officer is on campus, and the background and training of school police. It also should include information about the role of school police. What are their responsibilities? Do they work with any student groups? Do they respond to student misbehaviour that is not illegal? How often, and for what reasons, do they counsel rather than police delinquent behaviour? Do they assist with outlining school safety plans? How do they balance their diverse roles?

Second, we need research that documents, nationally, the different approaches to and impacts of school policing. Although there are several descriptions and reports detailing approaches to school policing (e.g. National Association of School

Resource Officers, 2012; Police Foundation, 2016; School District of Palm Beach County School Police, 2018), much of this work focuses on a single jurisdiction or organization. Though these reports are helpful for understanding local efforts, there remains a need for systematic documentation and assessment of the many varied school policing efforts and their implementation. This type of data collection would help to shed light on how different schools, police departments, and jurisdictions use school police and, in turn, what types of approaches are most effective. There is, in fact, nothing straightforward about the presence of police in schools. A focus on all officers who adopt the triad approach would likely find that some officers emphasize their role as a law enforcer, while others emphasize their role as a mentor and still others emphasize their role as an educator. More attention should be given to documenting the diversity of approaches adopted by school police, the extent to which officers experience role ambiguity, how this ambiguity influences officer decision-making, and the effectiveness of each approach. Not least, research is needed about the conditions that give rise to more effective school policing.

Third, we need more research on how school stakeholders perceive and interact with school police officers. Empirical research has examined perceptions of officers (e.g. Theriot, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2017). Such work should extend to all school stakeholders and should focus on a broader range of outcomes rather than focusing solely on perceptions of safety. Just as important, for example, is how teachers perceive the role of school police. This work should also examine how these perceptions influence stakeholders' interactions with school police. For example, how do teachers' perceptions of school-based police influence their disciplinary actions when officers are present? Such studies can shed light on how, if at all, students' rights and likelihood of experiencing police intervention are affected by the presence of school-based officers.

Fourth, greater attention should be given to defining the roles of and expectations for school police. There does not exist clear guidance about how or when officers should prioritize the various roles they are expected to fill. Given this ambiguity, it is likely that officers implement their role differently, including how they respond to student misbehaviour or threats to school safety. Efforts to better define the roles and expectations of school police may in turn help to clarify the boundaries between schools and law enforcement agencies. On a research front, such efforts include undertaking work that identifies variation in school officers' roles, including how those roles vary for the different types of officers (e.g. security officers as compared to SROs). This work also should assess instances when confusion about the role of school police occurs and how the confusion is addressed or resolved. For example, researchers might identify times when stakeholders have divergent expectations of school police and then examine how officers respond to these differing views. On a policy front, it entails detailing expectations for school police through the execution of comprehensive MOUs. As described by other researchers (e.g. Javdani, 2019; Gray and Weiler, 2011), MOUs should clearly state the expectations for the officer. They also should detail the types of situations in which officers should intervene.

Fifth, police departments and school districts should consider how to identify, recruit, and train officers best suited to work on school campuses. A precursor to this recruitment is research that identifies what characteristics are important if someone is to be an effective school police officer. For example, research may find that officers who have little experience working with youth are not a good fit for a SRO position, or perhaps training that focuses on interacting with youth can overcome a lack of prior experience. Such assertions, though, are speculative. Empirical research should consider how police departments might identify the best candidates for these jobs. As with community policing, serving as an officer in schools

requires a departure from traditional policing. Accordingly, careful attention to selecting and training officers is needed (Rhodes, 2019). Trainings should align with the diverse requirements of working in a school environment and with students. Many jurisdictions have recognized this need and have focused training requirements on how officers interact with youth (*Strategies for Youth, 2019*).

Sixth, future research should consider how a police department's culture influences the selection and work of school police and the impacts of having police on school campuses. The role of police culture in police work has been highlighted by policymakers and researchers. Scholars have found, for example, that officers who adhered to traditional police culture were more likely to search a car during a traffic stop (Paoline and Terrill, 2005). Whether a similar pattern would occur with school police is uncertain. It was, however, recommended by President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) that police departments develop a culture that increases officers' positive and non-law enforcement interactions with youth while also limiting police involvement in school discipline. In research, the impact of police culture on the work of school police officers remains understudied. Researchers should partner with police agencies to investigate how culture influences the work of school police. They also should examine how police culture influences the selection of officers who are placed on campuses.

Finally, schools may want to consider examining school police officer actions and the experiences that students, parents, teachers, and school administrators have with them. Absent such information, it is not possible to state with confidence how school police go about their work or what effect they have on different stakeholder groups and, more broadly, education and school safety. Given that practice of placing police on school campuses appears likely to continue, there is a need for research that monitors the implementation and impacts of these officers. Such research can be

used to identify ways to improve the effectiveness of school policing. Even modest steps in the direction of systematically evaluating school policing efforts may garner significant returns.

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