

Armed security in schools : What the research says

A November 2019 plot to attack the middle school in Albion, a rural district near Rochester, was thwarted after a school resource officer was notified about the threat. Three students were subsequently arrested and charged with planning to attack Albion Middle School using explosives and guns.¹

Albion is one of an increasing number of school districts in New York that utilizes school resource officers (SROs) to protect the health and safety of their students. In 2019, the number of school resource officers across the state doubled, from about 200 to 400.² SROs are sworn law enforcement officers assigned to work in public schools by the police departments for which they work. Numerous other school districts contract with private security firms to place armed security guards in their schools, or hire their own.

New York mirrors a national trend. In 2005-06, about 31% of U.S. schools had security staff who routinely carried a firearm. In 2015-16, 43% of schools had armed security personnel. The presence of armed security was most prevalent in **larger school districts** and **high schools**.³

Armed security in schools has champions and detractors. Proponents argue that it adds an extra layer of protection and safety. They say that armed school security can respond faster to a crisis than first responders and deter acts of violence before they are committed.

Opponents argue that firearms in schools are dangerous and create a fortress-like environment that makes schools less welcoming. They say the presence of firearms can exacerbate a situation if the situation is not handled properly, and guns may be accessed by students even with safeguards in place.

This report examines the existing research on the effectiveness of armed security in schools and factors to consider when determining whether to deploy such resources.



What does the research say?

Despite the increased popularity of school resource officers and other armed school security personnel, research on their effectiveness is limited. According to the Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, research tends to describe the typical duties and traits of school resource officers and the

perceptions and satisfaction levels of those who interact with them rather than their effectiveness.⁴

For example, the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services reviewed a mix of 19 established and relatively new SRO programs. Program participants at large established sites believed the SRO program increased

TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ School resource officers are sworn law enforcement officers assigned to work in public schools by the police departments for which they work.
- ▶ In 2019, the number of school resource officers in New York doubled, from about 200 to 400.
- ▶ Research is inconclusive regarding whether armed school security reduces school violence or deters school shootings.
- ▶ Agreements with outside security agencies should clearly define their roles and responsibilities.

¹ Valdes, A. November 8, 2019. Three students arrested for foiled 'credible' plot to attack Albion Middle School. WHAM-TV. Retrieved from <https://13wham.com/news/local/students-detained-after-foiled-plot-to-attack-albion-middle-school>.

² State of New York Police Juvenile Officers Association Inc.

³ National Center for Education Statistics. 2017. Digest of Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education.

⁴ Raymond, B. 2010. Assigning Police Officers to Schools. Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing. Retrieved from <https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/assigning-police-officers-schools-0>.



trust in the police. However, they were unable to provide empirical evidence of increased trust, only anecdotal evidence. The same was true regarding the question of whether the program reduced fear in the schools: there was a general consensus that the program reduced fear, but concrete evidence of the program's effectiveness was lacking.⁵

Another study found that, compared to schools without SROs, schools with

for economic disadvantage, the presence of an SRO led to a 52.3% decrease in the arrest rate for assaults. There was also a 72.9% decrease in arrests involving possession of a weapon on school property. The report said the reduction in incidents may be due to the SROs' deterrence of delinquent behaviors and because SROs may make students feel safer so they don't feel the need to carry a weapon.⁷

Other studies have analyzed the financial

The CSR said "recent research has attempted to address some of the shortcomings of previous studies on the topic by using broader datasets and statistical techniques that control for possible confounding variables, but they still suffer from some limitations. A study by Tillyer, Fisher, and Wilcox found that students in schools where police were present and/or involved in the school's daily decision making were no less likely than students in schools where the police were not present and/or involved in decision making to report that they were the victims of a serious violent offense, believe they were at risk for being victimized, or were afraid of being victimized. However, this study used data collected mostly from children in rural schools in Kentucky, which could raise questions about whether the results are generalizable to other locales."

Factors to consider

School districts debating whether to deploy armed security in their schools need to consider various factors. Agreements with outside security agencies, whether private or public, should clearly define the nature of the relationship between the educational institution, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the security agency.

The State Education Department has identified a list of **topics** that school districts may consider for inclusion in a memorandum of understanding when considering and contracting for school resource officers. School boards must also ensure their decisions to add armed security are consistent with school policy. School boards should also have any agreements and contracts for services provided by law enforcement agencies or independent security firms thoroughly reviewed by their school attorneys or independent insurance agencies. Appropriate hold-harmless language should also be included that shields the district from liability.

Pros & Cons

Proponents of armed security argue that it adds an extra layer of protection and safety to students. Opponents argue that the presence of firearms in schools is dangerous and makes schools less welcoming.

assigned officers were more likely to have greater involvement with law enforcement. These schools were much more likely to investigate leads about crime from staff and students, conduct safety and security inspections and have patrols of school facilities and grounds. These schools were also more apt to have an emergency plan agreement; create written plans to deal with shootings; and develop written plans for crisis situations because the SRO is a conduit to the police.⁶

Some studies have attempted to gauge whether the presence of armed school security has reduced the instances of crime in schools. A 2011 study examined the extent to which police in schools reduced crime or changed the school's response to crimes. It found schools with SROs had greater incidents of reporting crimes involving weapons and drugs. In addition, they reported a higher percentage of non-serious violent crimes to law enforcement.

A study in one southeastern U.S. school district compared 13 high and middle schools with – and 15 schools without – school resource officers. Data were collected over the three-year period from 2003-04 to 2005-06. When controlling

aspects of school resource officers, who earn an average of \$49,356 per year, according to Zip Recruiter. One recent study analyzed the impact of North Carolina legislation enacted shortly after the 2012 Sandy Hook shootings. The law provided selected school districts with \$2 for every \$1 spent to hire or train SROs in elementary and middle schools. The study reviewed student actions requiring discipline at 460 middle schools over a seven-year period – both before and after the policy was implemented. It found no relationship between additional dollars received and reductions in the 16 disciplinary acts that must be reported to the state, including assault, homicide, bomb threats, possession and use of alcohol and drugs, and possession of weapons.⁸

Despite anecdotal and attitudinal data on school law enforcement, there is a scarcity of studies that indicate whether they reduce school violence. A report by the Congressional Research Service (CSR) said that studies often fail to isolate incidents of crime and violence, making it hard to determine whether the positive results stem from the presence of SROs or are the results of other factors.⁹

⁵ Finn, P. and McDevitt, J. March 2005. National Assessment of School Resource Officer Programs Final Project Report. National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED486268.pdf>.

⁶ Travis, L.F. and Coon, J.K. October 2005. The Role of Law Enforcement in Public School Safety: A National Survey. National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211676.pdf>.

⁷ Anderson, K.A. November 8, 2018. Does more policing make middle schools safer? The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/11/08/does-more-policing-make-middle-schools-safer/>.

⁹ James, N. and McCallion, G. School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools. June 26, 2013. Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>.