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Statement on the Effects of Law Enforcement in School Settings

Charles Tocci
Loyola University Chicago, ctocci@luc.edu

Sara T. Stacy
University of Cincinnati, sara.stacy@uc.edu

Rachel Siegal
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Jennifer Renick
University of Memphis

Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, Inc.

See next page for additional authors
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Authors

Charles Tocci; Sara T. Stacy; Rachel Siegal; Jennifer Renick; Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, Inc.; Davielle Lakind; Jennifer Gruber; and Benjamin W. Fisher

POLICY PAPER

Statement on the effects of law enforcement in school settings

Charles Tocci[1] | **Sara T. Stacy**[2] | **Rachel Siegal**[3] | **Jennifer Renick**[4] | **Jamie LoCurto**[5] | **Davielle Lakind**[6] | **Jennifer Gruber**[7] | **Benjamin W. Fisher**[8]

[1]School of Education, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

[2]University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

[3]Health Psychology Program, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

[4]Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

[5]Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, Inc., Farmington, Connecticut, USA

[6]Department of Clinical Psychology, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia, USA

[7]Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

[8]Department of Civil Society and Community Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Correspondence

Sara T. Stacy, University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center, Cincinnati, OH, USA.
Email: sara.stacy@uc.edu

Abstract

School-based law enforcement (SBLE) have become increasingly common in U.S. schools over recent decades despite the controversy surrounding their presence and lack of consensus around their associated benefits and harms. Drawing on the history and evidence base regarding SBLE, we advocate for an end to SBLE programs. Grounding our argument in principles of Community Psychology and positive youth development, we outline how the presence and actions of SBLE negatively affect individual students as well as school systems, with particularly harmful outcomes for students with minoritized and marginalized identities. Research on SBLE and school crime does not provide consistent evidence of positive impacts, and many studies find null effects for the relationship between SBLE and school crime or increases in crime and violence in schools. Though funding for SBLE is often prompted by high-profile acts of gun violence in schools, evidence suggests that SBLE neither prevents these incidents, nor lessens the severity when they do occur. Thus, we advocate for removing law enforcement from school settings and redirecting resources into inclusive, evidence-informed responses that are generally safer and more effective than SBLE. We close by outlining the policy landscape governing SBLE programs and ways communities can lobby for change.

KEYWORDS

disparities, police in schools, school-based law enforcement, school resource officers, school safety, students

Highlights
- Youth attending schools with school-based law enforcement (SBLE) experience more negative outcomes.
- Black and Latinx youth experience greater negative effects of SBLE.
- SBLE presence negatively affects school climate.
- There is little evidence that SBLE prevents or limits school shootings.
- Recommendations are provided for school practices, policy changes, and grassroots organizing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School-based law enforcement (SBLE; i.e., sworn police officers assigned to schools on a full- or part-time basis) have become an increasingly common part of U.S. schools over recent decades, despite the controversy surrounding their presence and a lack of consensus around their associated benefits and harms. Drawing on the history and evidence base regarding SBLE, we advocate for an end to SBLE programs. The presence

and actions of SBLE negatively affect individual students and school systems, with particularly harmful outcomes for Black and Latinx students as well as others already marginalized within the United States. Although some individual studies find that SBLE are associated with reduced school crime (Owens, 2017; Sorensen et al., 2021), the body of research as a whole does not provide consistent evidence of positive impacts (Fisher et al., 2023). In fact, many studies find null effects for the relationship between SBLE and school crime, or even increases in crime and violence in schools (Curran, 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). Though funding for SBLE is often prompted by high-profile acts of gun violence in schools, evidence suggests that SBLE neither prevent these incidents from occurring nor lessen the severity when they do occur (Livingston et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2021). Thus, we advocate for removing law enforcement from school settings and redirecting SBLE program resources into inclusive, evidence-informed responses that are generally safer and more effective than punitive measures (McCarter, 2017). Because direct authority over SBLE programs lies with states and local agencies, student- and community-led efforts have demonstrated that they are well-positioned to advocate for SBLE removal and for investment in nonpunitive school safety resources. Community psychologists can engage in values-driven advocacy and research on the effects of SBLE presence as well as advocate for removal for the benefit of diverse students and school communities.

INTRODUCTION

Controversy has long surrounded the presence of police officers in schools (Kautz, 2020; Kunichoff, 2017; Onion, 2020), but questions about school-based law enforcement (SBLE) have taken on new urgency with the upswell of local organizing for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder (Jenkins, 2023) and a growing movement for police abolition (Gomez, M., 2021). In response, governments at all levels and school districts large and small have revisited policies on SBLE with results spanning from removal to defunding to expansion. Between May 2020 and June 2022, at least 50 school districts enrolling over 1.7 million students cut or reduced budgets for SBLE programs; subsequently, at least eight districts reversed this decision (Riser-Kositsky et al., 2022). Illustrative of this tumultuous situation, Denver Public Schools disbanded its school resource officer (SRO) program in 2020 and then reinstated it following a school shooting in 2023 (Asmar, 2023). Notwithstanding the political volatility concerning SBLE, the research evidence demonstrates that SBLE have no statistically significant impact on a variety of measures of school safety, but do substantially increase student punishments (Fisher et al., 2023) with a heavily

disparate effect on racially minoritized youth (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018). In line with this evidence base and in light of the widespread, pressing public debate on the issue, we advocate for the removal of law enforcement from school settings.

SBLE refers to one or more sworn law enforcement officers assigned full- or part-time to a school with the power to arrest and who often carry firearms. The two most common types of SBLE programs in the United States are SRO programs, which entail local law enforcement agencies providing officers to schools, and independent police departments formed by school districts (Stern & Petrosino, 2018). We use the term SBLE to encompass both scenarios and others where law enforcement officers are stationed in schools. Throughout the United States, an estimated 49.20% of public schools utilize approximately 45,200 school-based law enforcement (SBLE) officers (Wang et al., 2022). Most public middle and high schools, as well as schools enrolling more than 500 students, report SBLE presence, with few additional patterns emerging based on school characteristics (e.g., the proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch; see Table 1).

This position statement provides an accessible, multidimensional discussion of the practical, theoretical, and empirical issues concerning SBLE. Our position builds from recently published systematic reviews (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Javdani, 2019) and a meta-analysis (Fisher et al., 2023), which indicate a lack of positive effects and significant racially disparate negative impacts associated with SBLE. It is further guided by several values centered in the Community Psychology field. First, we are informed by commitments to social justice, empowerment, and the promotion of well-being; we believe the goal of schooling is to uplift and position youth to become healthy, engaged citizens, and these efforts are most effective when they are supportive rather than punitive (Rappaport et al., 1984; Society for Community Research and Action, 2021). Second, our perspective is grounded in respect for human diversity; specifically, we consider how the effects of SBLE on youth and families differ by individuals' racialized identity, gender, social class, sexuality, and ability in their myriad combinations. Third, we ascribe to an ecological perspective, which recognizes that schools both influence and are impacted by individual students and other school actors and that schools themselves are embedded within broader hierarchical and interactive social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

We use ecological systems theory to organize this position statement, beginning with the history of school policing (i.e., the chronosystem) and then examining the negative impacts of SBLE on individual students, and school climate and supports (i.e., the microsystem). Within each section, we attend to our values of social justice, empowerment, and respect for human diversity.

TABLE 1 Estimated percentages of public schools reporting presence of full- or part-time school resource officers or other sworn law enforcement officers by school characteristics, 2019–2020 (Wang et al., 2022, p. 18).

	School resource officers	Other law enforcement officers
School Level		
Elementary	39.0%	11.0%
Middle	68.0%	12.2%
High/secondary	67.4%	18.3%
Enrollment		
Less than 300	28.8%	11.0%
300–499	45.1%	13.0%
500–999	54.6%	13.6%
1000 or more	83.0%	14.0%
Percent of racially minoritized students		
Less than 5%	46.9%	15.2%
5% to less than 20%	54.1%	15.3%
20% to less than 50%	52.7%	11.4%
50% or more	45.0%	12.4%
Percent of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch		
0%–25%	49.3%	12.6%
More than 25%–50%	49.3%	10.9%
More than 50%–75%	52.3%	14.3%
75% or more	46.5%	13.7%

We also incorporate a developmental perspective, as school experiences contribute considerably to youth well-being and development over time (Dunn et al., 2015) and school practices may be more likely to lead to negative outcomes if they do not match students' developmental needs and behaviors (Eccles et al., 1993). Taken together, these values frame our interpretation of the empirical literature on SBLE and the alternatives we propose. We emphasize strategies that enhance the core goals of schools to promote academic engagement and student well-being, foster systems of support and inclusion, and strengthen connections between schools and communities.

The first section presents a brief discussion of the historical origins and growth of SBLE in U.S. schools and is followed by an examination of the ineffectiveness and harms associated with SBLE, with evidence drawn from scholarly reviews and empirical studies. The succeeding section includes evidence-based considerations for promoting school safety, followed by a discussion of policy and advocacy. We conclude with a

call for more engaged and value-aligned research to inform community decision-making about school safety and student well-being. Throughout, we use footnotes to detail the significant studies that inform our position while organizing the findings to be useful to the range of stakeholders involved in school safety: students, educators, administrators, counselors, safety personnel, parents, guardians, community members, policymakers, and researchers.

History of school policing

The history of school policing, from its emergence in the mid-20th century as a public relations initiative to its many varied functions in schools today, illustrates how deeply interwoven schooling and policing have become. Schools and law enforcement have long collaborated around issues like truancy and public safety, and some school districts created formal police units, such as Indianapolis in 1939 (Coy, 2004) and Los Angeles in 1948 (Brown, 2006). Flint, Michigan started the first recognized "school resource officer" program in 1953 (Girouard, 2001) with the specific innovation that officers were instructed to engage with youth to improve police-community relations (Kafka, 2011; Weiler & Cray, 2011). This represented the start of a "triad model" where SBLE played three different, interrelated roles: policing, public relations, and education (Gomez, W., 2021). This was formalized into federal policy in 2000, with SROs defined as "law enforcement officer, counselor, teacher, and liaison between law enforcement, schools, families, and the community" (Girouard, 2001, p. 1).

The law enforcement function of SBLE grew rapidly through the 1960s school integration era. The Lyndon B. Johnson administration launched the "War on Poverty" in 1964, which included far-reaching school integration and education reform policies; however, this was followed in 1965 by the "War on Crime" (Hinton, 2015). The "War on Crime" shifted the focus of federal policies addressing urban Black communities to an emphasis on policing and surveillance with "increased police presence on the streets, in the sky, and within schools and housing projects" (Hinton, 2015, p. 108). As part of the "War on Crime," the Johnson Administration created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to distribute funding to state and local law enforcement agencies for education, research, and outreach; while a significant portion was used to equip and train officers, monies were also invested in psychologists and other helping professions (Keys et al., 1978). In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice helped intensify the focus on youth by arguing, "America's best hope for reducing crime is to reduce juvenile delinquency and youth crime" (as quoted in Platt, 1970, p. 17). This ideological position fed the growth of permanent police presence in urban schools,

including Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland (Byers & Criollo, 2020; Gomez, M., 2021; Kautz, 2020; Kunichoff, 2017; Onion, 2020).

During this era, SROs often surveilled students of color and curtailed civil rights organizing by youth (Gomez, W., 2021). In 1966, Chicago Public Schools, at the behest of the Chicago Teachers Union's concern for the safety of White teachers, began to hire off-duty police officers as school security guards in response to Black and Latinx youths' protests aimed at inequities in the school system (Kunichoff, 2017). The same year, Tucson Unified School District adopted an SRO program in response to a Chicano student movement demanding organizational and curricular change (Noble, 2017). Similarly, the Boston School Committee deployed police to predominantly Black schools during the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to student demands for equality, even though student protests remained nonviolent (Kautz, 2020). As Los Angeles Unified School District schools became increasingly desegregated and diverse in this period, White parents began to request that police be stationed in schools to address purported safety concerns. In turn, police presence became a symbol of unsafe schools to many White families fleeing the city for the suburbs (Kafka, 2011).

Dating back to the first SRO program in Flint, a stated purpose for bringing police into schools was to develop more positive relationships between youth and law enforcement (Kafka, 2011; Weiler & Cray, 2011). Programs such as "Officer Friendly" worked towards fostering more constructive relationships between police and racially minoritized communities (Onion, 2020). Later, SBLE served as educators through programs such as "Drug Abuse Resistance Education" (DARE), founded in 1983, and "Gang Resistance Education and Training" (GREAT), founded in 1992. Both efforts leveraged federal funding to incentivize local districts to hire police officers in instructional roles to help prevent youth from illegal or dangerous behaviors through education or intimidation. Research on these programs suggests they were largely ineffective in realizing their goals (Becker et al., 1992; Esbensen et al., 2011; Pan & Bai, 2009; Rosenbaum et al., 1994). They did, however, establish a policy pathway to direct federal funds to school districts that would support an expanded range of SBLE roles (Felker-Kantor, 2022), including security in and around school grounds, partnering with administrators to share information, community relations, teaching classes, coaching sports teams, and more (Higgins et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2016).

SBLE program growth accelerated over the past several decades. In 1975, 1% of schools reported having SBLE stationed on campus (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018); by 2018, that number had grown to 49.2% of public schools (Wang et al., 2022, p. 18). A significant increase in students' exposure to SBLE came in the wake of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, with a jump from 54.1% to 63.8% of students ages 12–18 reporting security guards or assigned police officers in their schools from 1999 to 2001 (see Figure 1). Over the decade following Columbine, the U.S. Department of Justice invested over $750 million in grants to local police departments to hire 6500 new SBLE officers and provided them with training and technical assistance (Merkwae, 2015). By 2009, 68.1% of students ages 12–18 reported security guards or assigned police officers in their schools, and this trend continued through 2019, when 75.4% reported the same (Irwin et al., 2021; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2016, see Figure 1).

In particular, there has been a rapid increase in SBLE presence in elementary schools, rising from about 1% to over 30% between 1990 and 2016 (Heaviside et al., 1998; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Gleit (2022) illustrates that the majority of White schools have seen the biggest increase in SBLE, especially at the elementary level, but students' exposure to SBLE differs along racial lines. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students have more direct exposure to SBLE and experience more punitive discipline in comparison to White students. The exposure White students have to SBLE is more likely to be for educational purposes, not discipline (Hirschfield, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016).

The growth of SBLE to cover nearly half of U.S. public schools has been met with resistance from communities and organizations concerned about the over-policing of Black and Latinx youth (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018). In tandem with recent momentum in the broader movement for police and prison abolition, organizing by students, parents, teachers, and community members has focused attention on fully removing police from schools (American Federation of Teachers, 2020a; Issa, 2021). These activists highlight how SBLE disproportionately harm students of color (e.g., Ortiz et al., 2020), and how funding for SBLE can be redirected towards evidence-based practices with a greater likelihood of enhancing student well-being (e.g., Kamenetz, 2020; Tat, 2021). The responses to local campaigns to remove police from schools have varied (Camera, 2021), with some districts removing SBLE completely (e.g., Minneapolis, San Francisco), some decreasing their number (e.g., Los Angeles, Chicago), some increasing funding (e.g., New York City), and at least one district removing SROs and then, in the wake of a school shooting, reinstating its SRO program (Denver).

Ineffectiveness and harm from school policing practices

Despite the growth in SBLE over the past seven decades, empirical research documents limited benefits to their presence and instead highlights their negative impacts.
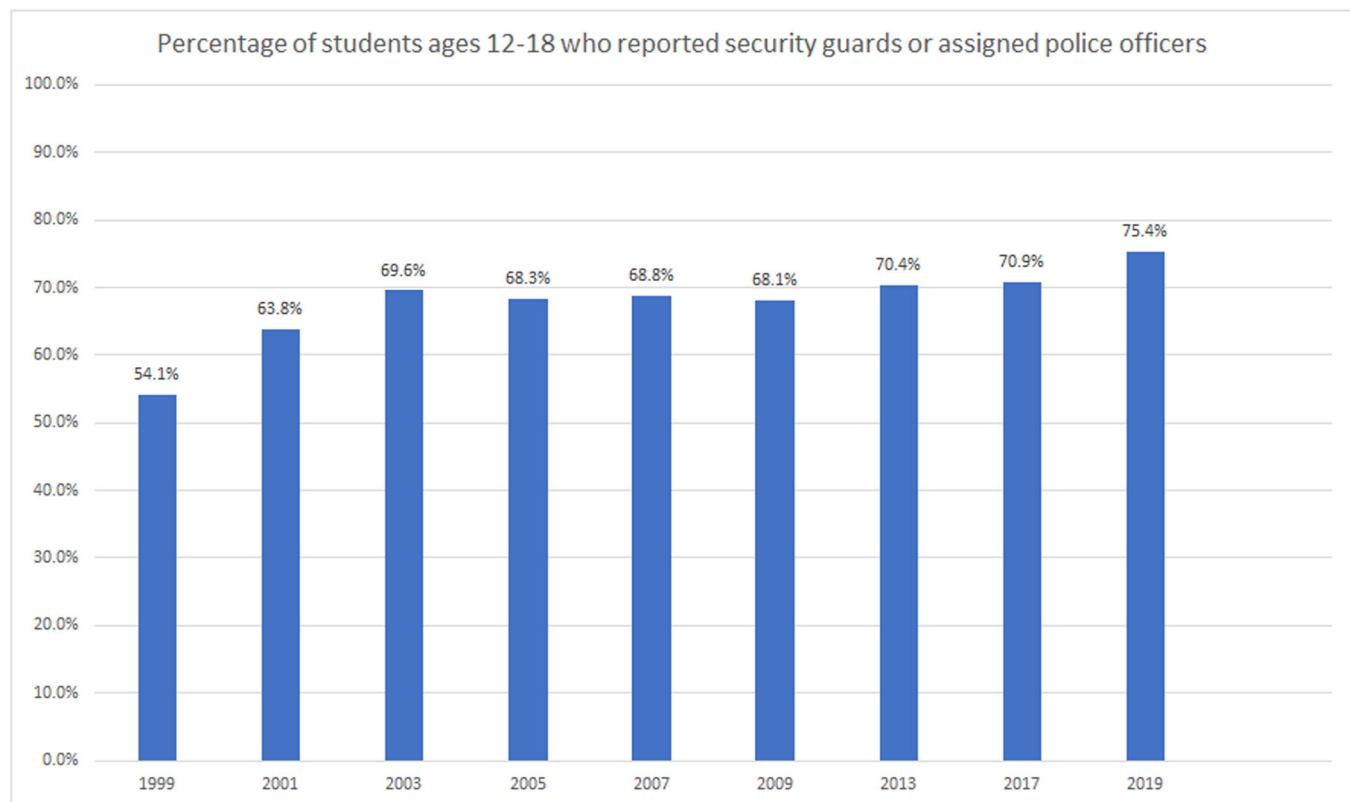
FIGURE 1 Percentage of students ages 12–18 who reported security guards or assigned police officers,[1] 1999–2019 (Irwin et al., 2021; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2016).[2]

While some individual studies find that SBLE can have crime reduction effects (Owens, 2017; Sorensen et al., 2021), the body of research as a whole does not provide consistent evidence of positive impacts (Fisher et al., 2023; Javdani, 2019; Nickerson et al., 2021). In fact, many studies find null effects for the relationship between SBLE and school crime, or even increases in multiple forms of crime and violence in schools (Curran, 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). In a systematic review of 28 studies of SBLE, Javdani (2019) concluded that although some studies provided limited and subjective evidence supporting SBLE presence, "the majority of evidence from the best designed studies suggests that SPO [School Police Officer] presence is associated with greater exclusionary discipline and arrest" (p. 265). In addition to several studies that provided evidence indicating SPO presence

was associated with an increase in crime, exclusionary discipline, and violence (Barnes, 2008; Brady et al., 2007; Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Martinez-Prather et al., 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Swartz et al., 2016; Zhang, 2018), studies included in the review highlighted that in many cases SPOs received neither school-specific training nor clear guidelines regarding their role in the school via a memorandum of understanding (Barnes, 2016; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Lambert & McGinty, 2002; Teske, 2011; Thurau & Wald, 2019). Additionally, in many cases, SPO presence did not increase perceptions of school safety (McKay et al., 2006; Theriot & Orme, 2016), though in some cases some students viewed SPOs favorably (Chrusciel et al., 2015), and other studies found that more interactions with SPOs were related to more positive perceptions (Theriot, 2016); SPOs employed for longer were viewed more favorably (Wolfe et al., 2017); and having positive perceptions of SPOs was positively related to school climate (Zullig et al., 2017).

A recent meta-analysis also summarized this body of literature, including 1002 effect sizes from 32 studies that examined outcomes related to crime and behavior, academic outcomes, and perceptions of safety at school (Fisher et al., 2023). This study found no statistically significant average effect of SBLE on any measure of crime or violent behavior, suggesting SBLE do not make schools safer.

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[1]The question posed to respondents was, "Does your school have: security guards or assigned police officers? 1 Yes/2 No/3 Don't Know" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019, p. 6)

[2]"The sampling frame was restricted to regular public schools, charter schools, and schools with partial or total magnet programs in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. It excluded special education schools, vocational schools, alternative schools, virtual schools, newly closed schools, home schools, ungraded schools, schools with a highest grade of kindergarten or lower, Department of Defense Education Activity schools, and Bureau of Indian Education schools, as well as schools in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Northern Marianas, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands." (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Moreover, this same study found that SBLE were associated with higher rates of school-based punishment such as suspension. These findings were robust across primary studies that used a variety of different designs, including both cross-sectional and longitudinal estimates, controls for potential confounders, and adjusting for lagged measures of the outcome. Although individual studies may have identified beneficial, detrimental, and null effects of SBLE on the outcomes, this meta-analysis highlights that the body of literature as a whole does not find evidence that SBLE reduce crime or violence in schools on average. One complicating factor in this body of research is that a vast majority of these studies rely on administrative records of crime and violence rather than actual observations of behavior. Administrative records are sensitive to changes in detection and reporting, so adding SBLE to schools may simultaneously shift the likelihood that crime and violence are detected and reported, regardless of any actual behavior change.

School shootings represent a particularly horrifying and catastrophic phenomenon with a large influence on policy and practice (Curran et al., 2020; Madfis, 2016), such that funding for SBLE is often prompted by high-profile acts of gun violence in schools. Since the tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999, there has been an accompanying focus on reshaping schools to prevent these incidents, or at least to stop them as soon as possible (Madfis, 2016); however, evidence suggests that SBLE neither prevent these incidents from occurring nor lessen the severity when they do occur (Livingston et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2021).[3] The most comprehensive research on this topic examined the characteristics of every known school shooting incident in recent decades (Peterson et al., 2021). This correlational study found that, after controlling for school characteristics such as socioeconomic status or school level, SBLE presence was associated with a greater loss of life during school-based active shooting events. Related research using a fuzzy regression discontinuity design with longitudinal data from schools across the United States—permitting stronger causal inferences—found that SBLE presence did not reduce reports of school-based firearm-related incidents or school shootings (Sorensen et al., 2023). On the contrary, arming SBLE so they are prepared if a school shooting occurs may contribute to officer-perpetrated shooting deaths. Although this has not been subject to empirical scrutiny yet, incidents such as the case of a Long Beach, California school safety officer who shot and killed an unarmed 18 year-old in 2021 (Queally et al., 2021), as well as the murder of 20 year-old Raheim Brown by an Oakland, California SRO in 2012 (Lee, 2013) highlight the potential fatal consequences of having armed SBLE.

The disconnect between stated purposes for SBLE and actual outcomes suggests that the expansion of these programs may be driven by local political considerations and cultural beliefs (Nolan, 2015; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Viano et al., 2021) and aided by federal funding (Koon, 2020). The overall effect of SBLE extends the reach and influence of law enforcement, with a demonstrably negative and racially disparate impact on youth.

While a bulk of research has focused on SBLE's role, or lack thereof, in the prevention of crime and violence on campuses, another body of research has explored the broader ways in which they impact school environments and students' experiences within them. It is well established that school experiences contribute considerably to youth well-being and development (Dunn et al., 2015) and that school practices may be more likely to lead to negative outcomes if they are misaligned with students' developmental needs and behaviors (Eccles et al., 1993). For example, early adolescence is a time in which autonomy and agency gain importance, while classroom management and discipline often increase in schools (Eccles et al., 1993). Informed by this and guided by ecological systems theory, in the following section, we review literature regarding how the presence of SBLE in schools impacts individual students.

Impact on individual students

The presence of SBLE often contributes to inequitably distributed, inconsistent, and escalated responses to students' behaviors. For example, the presence of SBLE in one district was associated with an increase in student arrests for highly subjective behaviors such as disorderly conduct relative to schools without SBLE (Theriot, 2009). SBLE presence is also associated with an increase in legal and school-based punitive responses, including higher rates of exclusionary discipline, juvenile misdemeanor complaints, and arrests (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Hirschfield, 2008; Homer & Fisher, 2020; Sorensen et al., 2021, 2023; Weisburst, 2019; Whitaker et al., 2019). Aligned with Community Psychology values of social justice and respect for human diversity, and following research demonstrating the negative consequences of exclusionary school punishment (Gerlinger et al., 2021), we argue that the increased punishment of students is a problem. As discussed in the following section, these negative consequences disproportionately affect traditionally marginalized students.

Racially minoritized students

Racially minoritized youth are disproportionately represented in school-based arrests. Black and Latinx youth, for example, represent only 40% of the national public school enrollment, but comprise 58% of school-based arrests (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018). Although Black girls constitute only 17%

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[3]Both Livingston et al. (2019) and Peterson et al. (2021) conducted retrospective analyses of all school shooting incidents they could identify that met their respective inclusion criteria.

of female public school enrollment, they represent 43% of girls arrested at school and are four times more likely to be arrested at school compared to their White peers (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018; Inniss-Thompson, 2017). SBLE play a role in these disparities: arrests are, on average, higher for all students in schools with police, but are particularly high for Black students relative to White and Latinx students (Homer & Fisher, 2020).

The most methodologically rigorous studies[4] on SBLE to date point to a host of disproportionately detrimental consequences for students of color and particularly Black and Latinx students. Although the meta-analysis cited above (Fisher et al., 2023) examined the impacts of SBLE on detrimental outcomes such as exclusionary school discipline, it did not include differences by student subgroup (e.g., race/ethnicity) even though existing theory and research suggest there are disparate impacts. That said, multiple rigorous quasi-experimental studies that permit strong causal inferences have found that SBLE presence coincides with disproportionate punishment of students of color through the use of arrest or suspension. For example, studies have demonstrated that when schools increased their use of or funding for SBLE, suspensions and expulsions increased for Black students relative to their White peers, as did contact with the criminal justice system via arrests and referrals to law enforcement (Crosse et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2021, 2023; Weisburst, 2019).[5] In this vein, other correlational studies have shown that once in contact with SBLE, students of color were more likely to experience excessive force in their interactions with officers, such as the use of restraints, and were overrepresented in police stops in or near schools (Allen et al., 2018; American Federation of Teachers, 2020b; Lawrence, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2020). The result of these interactions disproportionately leads to incarceration or legal system involvement for students of color, and specifically Black students (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Kim et al., 2010; Mallett, 2016; Owens, 2017). Reflecting how students' racialized identities influence SBLE perceptions of them, one study drawing on in-depth interviews with SBLE found that SBLE in a mostly White and wealthy suburban school district were primarily concerned with protecting the students from outside threats, but officers in a more racially diverse urban district perceived the

students themselves as the primary threat to their schools (Fisher et al., 2020).

Students of color are also more vulnerable to vague and subjective policies and charges, such as "disorderly conduct" or "disturbing the peace" (Sussman, 2012), and are often arrested under these subjective categories. For example, Black girls are more likely to receive office discipline referrals for disobedience and defiance than White girls, at which point they are equally likely to be referred to law enforcement (Annamma et al., 2016). Although research on the impact of SBLE on Native American students is less common, correlational research shows that at least in one state—Montana—the presence of SBLE was associated with higher rates of arrest and referrals to law enforcement for Native American youth (Walker et al., 2022).

Research suggests that SBLE may amplify the consequences of these vague policies; a study of arrests in one school district found that schools with SBLE had significantly more arrests for subjective offenses (i.e., disorderly conduct) but not for more objective offenses (i.e., weapon possession), suggesting that SBLE are particularly likely to increase arrests for these subjective offenses that are disproportionately levied against Black students (Theriot, 2009). Other research has shown that Black girls' in- and out-of-school suspension rates were higher in schools with SBLE compared to schools without (Williams et al., 2022). Finally, we note that observational research has examined the link between varying levels of exposure to school policing and discipline and mental health among Black students (Perryman et al., 2022). This study found that greater exposure was associated with more depressive symptoms.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities, for example, those eligible for services through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), are more likely to be referred to law enforcement, overrepresented in police-involved incidents, and disproportionately involved in unsafe interactions with SBLE (e.g., handcuffing, tasering; Mbekeani-Wiley, 2017; Ortiz et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019; Zirkel, 2019). Students with disabilities are also more likely to be arrested than those without disabilities (Whitaker et al., 2019). Sorensen et al.'s (2023) study using regression discontinuity shows that the addition of SBLE contributed to particularly large increases in in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement among students with disabilities relative to their peers. Javdani (2019) notes that less than 40% of SROs receive specific training to work with students in special education, and many officers believe these students are more disruptive than their peers. These disproportionate rates of SBLE involvement are notable given that Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans (i.e., support and accommodation plans put in place for students with

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[4]We define the most methodologically rigorous studies as one that use advanced causal inference techniques such as instrumental variables, propensity scores, regression discontinuity, and comparative interrupted time series. We are not aware of any studies of SBLE that use experimental designs.

[5]Crosse et al. (2022) used a comparative interrupted time series design with 33 schools that added SBLE and 72 schools that did not. Sorensen et al. (2021) used 5 years of longitudinal data from all North Carolina middle schools, applying a difference-in-differences design to examine the impact of adding SBLE. Sorensen et al. (2023) used a fuzzy regression discontinuity design with nationwide data from U.S. schools. Weisburst (2019) took an instrumental variables approach to examine the impact of adding SBLE on individual-level (rather than school-level) outcomes of over 2.5 million students in Texas.

disabilities), are meant to protect students with disabilities from exclusionary discipline and police involvement. Yet these data suggest that students with disabilities are more vulnerable to negative interactions with SBLE.

Students with multiple marginalized identities

Students with multiple marginalized identities are disproportionately affected by SBLE (Annamma & Morrison, 2018); however, there is limited research examining this impact. As one example, schools with SBLE have particularly high rates of suspension and expulsion of racially minoritized students with disabilities (Fisher & Fisher, 2022; Ofer, 2012). Related research using a difference-in-differences design with a two-wave panel of all U.S. public schools found that adding SBLE contributes to disproportionately large increases in criminal justice system contact among Black students with disabilities (Fisher & Fisher, 2023). Citizenship status may also place students at risk of harm from SBLE. For example, in 2011, SBLE in a Colorado school district was found to be collaborating directly with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Indeed, three SBLE officers were specifically cross-designated to serve on ICE task forces, identifying students or family members of students without legal pathways to citizenship, and participating in home raids (ACLU of Colorado, 2011). Even when collaboration is less explicit, noncitizen youth who come into contact with SBLE are at heightened risk for a number of additional long-term consequences. Even if they are never adjudicated or convicted, arrest histories can be considered for discretionary purposes and potentially used to support denials of immigration applications, and adult status convictions may cause individuals to lose legal status and be deported. Fingerprints taken during arrests are entered into databases that ICE can access; ICE can then issue immigration detainers or holds, or local authorities can refer youth to ICE (Marquez & Prandini, 2018). Taken together, limited but compelling existing evidence underscores the need for an intersectional approach to understanding the impact of school policing on students with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Impact on school climate

The presence of police in schools also affects the school community as a whole. Here, we examine how SBLE presence may harm *school climate*, which refers to all features of a school environment that impact student cognitive, behavioral, and psychological development, as well as inform students', parents', and school personnel's experiences of school life (Thapa et al., 2013). While research on the relationship between SBLE and school climate is still emerging, researchers have begun to explore specific aspects of this relationship, including school safety and school connectedness.

The most common element of school climate that has been studied in its connection to SBLE presence is individuals' feelings of school safety. Feeling safe at school is important on its own, but is also linked to improved academic performance (Lacoe, 2020). Some evaluations have investigated the link between SBLE and students' feelings of safety, generally providing some evidence that the presence of SBLE is associated with feeling safer (Katz et al., 2002; McKay et al., 2006; Stokes et al., 1996). Notably, the evidence in this area is fairly weak; these studies rely on observational data and study designs with limited samples that do not permit strong causal inferences. Nevertheless, additional mixed methods research in a single school district provides some insight into this dynamic. Elementary and middle students who interacted more with SBLE (without regard to the content or quality of the interaction) felt no more or less safe at school than students who interacted less with SBLE; however, those with more frequent interactions were more likely to report that the SBLE themselves made the students feel safer (Curran et al., 2021). Accompanying focus group data suggested that SBLE may convey to students a sense of potential danger at school (even in schools that were free of crime and violence), and students then viewed SBLE as a source of protection from that danger. Related research illuminates that SBLE can be a source of both fear and comfort for students depending on their school and neighborhood contexts (Shedd, 2015).

A major gap in this body of research is that few studies have focused on the relationships between SBLE presence and feelings of safety among traditionally marginalized groups, including students of color (Almanza et al., 2022). School climate research has only recently started to account for variability in students' and stakeholders' experiences and perceptions of school climate (Voight et al., 2015), but has not begun to link this variability to SBLE. One recent study, using cross-sectional data, found that Black boys felt less safe in the presence of SBLE as compared to no SBLE presence, and more safe compared to White boys when no SBLE was present (Siegal, 2021). Further, nationwide protests in 2020—accompanied by numerous testimonies at school board and city council meetings (e.g., Stephen, 2020)—provide some degree of evidence that many students of color feel *less* safe at school when SBLE are present. There is a clear need for more research in this area, particularly research that attends to students with marginalized identities.

In addition to examining perceptions of safety, some researchers have begun to explore the link between SBLE and school connectedness, another dimension of school climate. This body of research—which is correlational and does not permit strong causal inferences—has shown that students who interact more with SBLE have reported a diminished sense of connection to their school (Perryman et al., 2022; Theriot, 2016), and that the

presence of security personnel (including but not limited to SBLE) is associated with weaker student–teacher relationships (Devine, 1996; Fisher et al., 2019). Students have also reported feeling uncomfortable, surveilled, and harassed when SBLE officers are present (Byers et al., 2013). Further, inconsistencies in SBLE officers' application of disciplinary policies and their tendency to use harsher responses to behavioral concerns (Gottfredson et al., 2020) likely undermine the implementation of clear, fair, and consistent disciplinary practices in a school (Kupchik, 2010). In other words, the presence of SBLE likely contributes to decreased school connectedness.

Impact on school resources and supports

Given that SBLE require funding, another adverse impact of school policing is that it may divert resources from other vital student supports. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) documented that 1.7 million students attend schools in which there are police but no counselors; 3 million students attend schools with police but no nurses; six million with police but no school psychologists; and 10 million with police but no social workers (Whitaker et al., 2019). In 2013, the Oakland Unified School district and city hired six times more SBLE officers than school counselors and allocated $5 million to the Oakland School Police Department in comparison to roughly $1.5 million for school counselors and restorative justice programs (Byers et al., 2013). Furthermore, SBLE may further strain limited financial resources because they can accrue additional costs due to charges of misconduct. For instance, between 2012 and 2016, police officers assigned to Chicago Public Schools accrued over $2 million in misconduct settlements from incidents that occurred on and off school grounds (Mbekeani-Wiley, 2017).

Due to this funding and staffing disparity, SBLE are sometimes called upon to occupy counselor or mentor roles (Almanza et al., 2022; Canady, 2018; Javdani, 2019). For instance, one study that relied on qualitative interviews with 18 SBLE officers found that officers reported "wearing many hats" and occupying different roles depending on the school's needs, such as that of a community liaison or mentor, in addition to enforcing the law (Bowers et al., 2022). However, SBLE are not required to receive similar accreditation and training as other school staff (e.g., school social workers, school psychologists, etc.; Javdani, 2019). These roles are indeed in direct contrast to their law enforcement perspective, which may lead SBLE to view students as potential criminals, even when an offense has not yet occurred (Higgins et al., 2022). Although training for SBLE is often offered as a solution, the very limited research on SBLE training has found additional training to be ineffective; Bolger et al. (2019) found that when

presented with a series of vignettes of children displaying disruptive behavior, law enforcement officers formally trained by the National Association of SROs were no more likely to use diversion or conflict resolution techniques than officers who were not formally trained. The solution we recommend, then, is not to continue to invest money into SBLE—who are not in positions designed to support students' social and emotional well-being—but rather to invest in resources that holistically support educational contexts in ways that attend to safety, wellbeing, development, and climate, such as mental and physical health supports (e.g., Dunn et al., 2015; Eccles & Roeser, 1999).

Impacts on socialization

Even in cases where SBLE do not have a direct impact on schools or students in terms of contributing to school punishment or shifting school climate, they likely contribute to harmful socialization of young people. Schools are a key site of socialization for children and youth (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). A constant police presence in school may socialize people to accept police surveillance as normal. This may have implications for students' willingness to engage in activism critical of policing, the government more broadly, or other topics that may not align with their expectations of what the police would condone. In this vein, prior research has linked greater punishment in school to lower rates of civic engagement in adulthood (Kupchik, 2016); we suggest that persistent exposure to SBLE may have similar consequences for the socialization, personal development, and empowerment of youth.

Additionally, a major goal of SBLE is to improve perceptions of law enforcement, particularly among young children who do not yet have firm opinions on the subject (Kupchik et al., 2020). Recent scholarship points to SBLE as a key mechanism for shaping how young people come to understand policing and the law more generally. For instance, one study found students who perceived that SBLE treat students with dignity and respect were more willing to comply with community police officer orders, even if they disagree (Granot et al., 2021). SBLE report some of their key roles—in addition to promoting safety—to be building trusting relationships with students and addressing antipolice bias, particularly among youth who may have had prior negative interactions with police (Almanza et al., 2022; Kupchik et al., 2020). This messaging in school may contradict the lived experiences of communities that have been subject to over-surveillance and even violence from police. As such, some students may be burdened with disentangling the public relations work of SBLE from the implicit and explicit messages they receive at home and/or in their communities about the police as potential threats to their safety. This is likely especially true for

students of color given the long history of racialized policing practices in the United States (Braga et al., 2019), potentially even putting students at increased risk of police violence outside the school context.

Promoting school safety

The primary responsibility of SBLE is ostensibly to make schools safer. As described above, however, there is a lack of evidence that SBLE presence is associated with school safety, and some evidence suggests the opposite (Fisher et al., 2023; Javdani, 2019; Nickerson et al., 2021). Thus, schools need not and should not maintain an SBLE presence to maintain safety. This does not mean that SBLE should be removed from schools rashly and without thought. Indeed, recent work has shown that while adding SLBE is associated with increases in Black-and-White racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions, removing SBLE is, as well (Fisher & Devlin, 2023). Although the mechanisms behind this are unclear—perhaps, teachers and staff compensate for the loss of SBLE by increasing their informal policing of students—it points to the need to provide schools with resources and support as they divest from SBLE. Utilizing frameworks of thoughtful de-implementation may be a useful direction, which can guide the discontinuation of harmful or suboptimal practices and the transition to new practices as part of a well-considered suite of changes (Walsh-Bailey et al., 2021). As schools explore removing law enforcement, they should instead employ evidence-informed promotional approaches to maintain school safety within a wider framework of policies that promote well-being; less school policing should be replaced with other harmful practices.

Preventing and responding to challenging student behaviors is a key area of school safety policy, and a plethora of potential approaches have been developed to understand and address student behaviors. We provide a broad outline of several complementary approaches aligned with principles of Community Psychology and positive youth development that schools and communities may choose to apply to promote school safety once SBLE are removed. Broadly, schools that use inclusive, evidence-informed responses to behavior are generally safer than schools characterized by excessive punitive strategies (McCarter, 2017). Schools and communities can choose to adopt practices from a long and varied menu of evidence-informed strategies to meet student's developmental needs and promote school safety; these choices can reflect the specific strengths, needs, and preferences of each school and community, and are best made with input from a variety of stakeholders within the school and from the wider community.

Consistent with an ecological perspective, systems-focused, holistic (i.e., academic, social-emotional, and behavioral) interventions may provide a promising avenue for promoting safety for the full school community, while also connecting students with additional support as needed. One framework, which applies a public health model to educational settings, is the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework. MTSS is intended to provide a coordinated structure of supportive practices and intervention approaches that vary in intensity and the number of students involved, and span different school settings. These include "universal" supports that all students receive through the integration of supports into classroom instruction or schoolwide implementation; "targeted" one-on-one or small group interventions for a smaller number of students demonstrating heightened risk or early signs of behavioral, social, emotional, or academic challenges; and "intensive" interventions for an even smaller number of students with more significant challenges or needs.

Integrated student supports that span the continuum from promotion and prevention to intervention can, if implemented with such intentions, address the underlying contributors to youth behaviors that sometimes attract SBLE involvement (e.g., adverse childhood experiences). Culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches to supporting students can be integrated into all levels of support to disrupt the escalation of challenging behaviors into highly unsafe behaviors or violence (Chafouleas et al., 2016). Universally implemented practices can help all students feel safe and supported regardless of the behavior they exhibit (Herrenkohl et al., 2019); psychoeducation and training in trauma-informed practices can help school staff avoid punitive responses to certain children's behavior that may perpetuate a cycle of challenging behavior, negative consequences, and re-traumatization (Capatosto, 2015); and screening can identify youth who could benefit from targeted or intensive intervention, which can help prevent the development of more serious problems (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Ko et al., 2008). Trauma-informed practices in schools align with a paradigm shift from the punitive disciplinary logic that often justifies policing as an appropriate response to challenging behaviors to one that recognizes challenging behaviors as expressions of distress and unmet need. Trauma-informed practices prioritize responses that instead, aim to meet those needs.

Evidence related to the implementation of specific MTSS models is mixed. For example, while such models have been found in some cases to contribute to improvements in perceptions of school safety (Horner et al., 2009) and reduced student behavior problems (Bradshaw et al., 2012), other research highlights that racialized disparities in school discipline can persist under such approaches (Cruz et al., 2021). Indeed, one randomized controlled trial of a multi-tiered emotional and behavioral health crisis intervention found both to be true at once: the intervention had a significant positive effect on secondary school suspensions, office discipline

referrals, and juvenile justice referrals, but did not resolve racial/ethnic disproportionality rates (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021). To be clear, we are not advocating for schools to adopt a specific model or program; rather, we advocate broadly for schools to consider frameworks to guide how they might build an alternative, nonpunitive infrastructure that coordinates efforts to support students and respond to their needs. We suggest students may be well-served by supports offered across school settings that vary by individual needs and reflect a holistic and coordinated commitment to promoting student safety and wellbeing.

Establishing school-community partnerships offers additional opportunities to integrate support for students, families, and staff through the development and sustainment of relationships between community leaders, agencies, organizations, and schools (Valli et al., 2016; Warren, 2005). School-community partnerships aim to integrate the community into the life and work of the school and empower students and their families to use their voices to advocate for meaningful change (Stefanski et al., 2016). For instance, schools can establish partnerships with agencies or community-based organizations that address basic needs such as food access, housing, and health services to help meet the needs of students and families (Hands, 2010). Schools can work within communities to leverage cultural, social, and human resources and build on these collective strengths, with respect for human diversity (e.g., McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). Stronger relationships between the school and community can also help to broaden youths' concept of social networks of support (Maier et al., 2017).

School, district, and state leaders can collaboratively consider approaches to maintaining school safety without SBLE. These can be implemented by schools and through partnerships to identify what is most appropriate for local context and community needs. One challenge is that needs shift over time and vary across stakeholders. SBLE removal is not an event but one step in the continual process of ensuring student safety and well-being.

Many schools and districts already implement such practices, and these recommendations can align with and support existing efforts. Students, families, and community members can also be given opportunities to shape decision-making (Bartz et al., 2018). For instance, school districts can empower students by creating structures to include them in decision-making that impacts educational policies (Cohen et al., 2020), such as those related to school safety. Further, school leaders can incorporate equity and empowerment frameworks to understand who is included in decision-making, who is given the power to make decisions, and how new and existing approaches to safe schools may differentially impact different students, staff, and families.

Limitations to schools' capacities to address social problems

Retaining SBLE to help address systemic problems represents a narrow and ineffective solution to mitigate societal problems, given the complex and intransigent social problems that manifest in school violence. Structural racism, poverty and widening economic inequality, and related stressors represent examples of extremely complex social conditions that exceed schools' capacity to meaningfully counteract. Schools frequently become the spaces where the social, emotional, and/or behavioral effects of these social problems are expressed by young people or their families, but neither well-implemented school programming nor placement of police in schools can fully address these problems.

The most pressing example of this remains school shootings, which have increased in frequency even while other forms of school violence have declined over the past decades (Irwin et al., 2021). This underscores that school shootings are embedded partially in a U.S. culture that celebrates and eases access to guns. To address acts of gun violence in schools, we must consider the complex set of causal factors—traceable to all levels of one's social ecology—that may lead an individual to engage in such an act (Henry, 2009).

Policy and advocacy

SBLE programs are shaped by policies across all levels of government. At the federal level, the Departments of Justice and Education jointly published a rubric to guide local SBLE programs, "Safe School-based Enforcement through Collaboration, Understanding, and Respect" (United States Departments of Education and Justice, 2016). The rubric informs decisions made by Department of Justice grant programs such as Community Oriented Policing Services and the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Program, which provide direct and indirect support for SBLE programs.

However, similar to most other domains of education policy, direct authority lies with states and local agencies. Forty-six states and five territories[6] have policies governing school policing.[7] Following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, three states adopted mandatory armed police in school programs—Florida, Maryland, and Massachusetts—with the latter repealing its law in 2020. Within this patchwork of laws and policies, most decision-making power lies with school

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[6]The states without laws governing school policing programs are: Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, and New Mexico. The one territory without such policy is the Northern Mariana Islands.

[7]The US Department of Education Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments maintains a database of state- and territory laws governing SRO programs at https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-laws-regulations-category

districts and municipalities through various funding mechanisms, intergovernmental agreements, ordinances, and memoranda of understanding (Finn, 2006; Weiler & Cray, 2011).

Given that decision-making power largely resides at the local level, communities are well positioned to advocate for increased investment in nonpunitive school safety resources (e.g., mental health counselors, social workers, etc.) from school districts as well as state and municipal policymakers (Krasny, 2020; Peetz, 2021; Reilly, 2020). Student activist groups have argued that funding currently used for SBLE should instead be used to increase the number of counselors and social workers in schools (Dignity In Schools, 2016; Tat, 2021). It is crucial to listen to calls from students at schools with SBLE, as they are the ones most impacted by their presence. In Chicago, student-led groups (e.g., Students Strike Back, @stustrikeback, n.d.) have demanded the removal of SBLE from their schools and collected data and testimonials of student experiences with SBLE to document harm (Parrish, 2020). Due in part to student organizing, Chicago Public Schools funding for SROs has declined from $33 million in 2019–2020 to $11 million in 2021–2022 to $10.2 million in 2022–2023 (Karp, 2021; Peña & Pomeroy, 2022); however, SROs still have a disproportionate presence in Black-majority schools despite decreased overall funding (Karp, 2021; Peña & Pomeroy, 2022). This has been criticized by student organizers, who continue advocating for the full removal of SBLE (Karp, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2021).

Students Deserve, a group of volunteer students, parents, and teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District, organized school walkouts, informational sessions, marches, and media campaigns to defund the district police (#StudentsDeserve, n.d.), resulting in a divestment of $25 million from school police being reinvested into school resources to enhance positive school climate and provide specific supports to Black students (Gomez, M., 2021). Sierra Leone Anderson, a student at GALA High School and member of Students Deserve, said about this work:

> Black students in the LAUSD are consistently the target of mistreatment by school police officers. We have experienced being pepper sprayed, handcuffed, arrested, and racially profiled on our own campuses and as young as 12 years old. Black students and all students deserve healthy and positive school environments. That means abolition of any threat to our lives, futures, or safety. That means fully defunding and abolishing the Los Angeles School Police Department and relocating those funds of up to $50 million into services and supports for Black youth (N. Lippe-Klein, personal communication, May 19, 2021).

Supporting these student- and community-led activists aligns with Community Psychology values (e.g., empowerment, respect for human diversity, and social justice), and is empirically supported by an emerging literature (Fisher et al., 2023; Javdani, 2019).

Conclusion

This position statement advocates for the removal of SBLE in schools and the need to re-focus efforts on implementing nonpunitive interventions and processes that promote staff and student well-being and safety. Our analysis of the societal conditions that fostered the significant expansion of SBLE over the past several decades, interpretation of the research evidence on SBLE, and recommendation to remove them from schools are guided by values associated with Community Psychology, including commitments to social justice, empowerment, and promotion of well-being; respect for human diversity; and a focus on ecological perspectives. This position is also supported by empirical research documenting limited school safety benefits associated with SBLE presence, deleterious outcomes for many students, and disproportionate negative impacts on students with minoritized and marginalized identities (see systematic literature reviews by Fisher & Hennessy, 2016 and Javdani, 2019; and a meta-analysis by Fisher et al., 2023). Given that SBLE requires funding, another adverse impact of school policing is that it may divert resources from other vital student supports (Whitaker et al., 2019). We recognize that removal of SBLE in school settings does not automatically lead to better outcomes for marginalized youth, but posit that a thoughtfully executed de-implementation effort (e.g., see Walsh-Bailey et al., 2021) to remove law enforcement from schools and reinvest SBLE monies into processes and interventions that help other school community members effectively promote school safety, positive school climate, and social-emotional health for staff and students can lead to desired outcomes for the full school community.

Although there are still notable gaps in the evidence related to SBLE presence, we believe the accrual of evidence is sufficient to advocate for their removal rather than for continued research. However, we advocate for empirical scrutiny of the outcomes of SBLE removal. We recognize that SBLE often occupy roles unrelated to student punishment such as counselor or mentor roles (Almanza et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2016), and removing SBLE may leave meaningful vacancies. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research are all necessary to understand the impacts on the day-to-day operations of schools and student outcomes as SBLE are removed. Without this continued research, schools risk entering a new paradigm without guidance or removing police without an accompanying

implementation of new safety and well-being practices. This has been evident in recent years across several schools and districts that removed SBLE and have already reversed course as they struggle with issues of crime and violence (Armus & Natanson, 2021; Geha, 2021). As research continues to guide the use and removal of SBLE, we also encourage scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and community members to be collaborative and transparent about the values that guide their interpretation of empirical evidence as they exercise democratic governance over our school systems. Aligned with the values of Community Psychology, we hope the recommendations outlined in this statement can push us toward a more just society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID
Sara T. Stacy http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4912-0746

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