



## An evaluation of police officers in schools as a bullying intervention

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### ABSTRACT

Despite existing efforts to prevent bullying, research suggests that bullying remains a serious and common problem across the United States. Therefore, researchers should continuously propose and evaluate alternative policies that may mitigate bullying as a social issue. One such strategy that has been proposed is the use of police officers in schools, best known as School Resource Officers (SROs). The current study evaluated the efficacy of SROs as an intervention against bullying in schools in the United States. Using a longitudinal sample consisting of three years of data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (n = 480), schools that initiated, discontinued, and continued their use of SROs from one time point to another were compared to a control group of schools. The findings indicate that SROs do not have an effect on bullying in schools. Policy implications of these findings suggest that programs that focus on components such as teaching social and emotional competency skills, improving relationships between students and adults, and creating a positive school environment may be more effective in reducing bullying than a security procedure such as the use of SROs. Alternative programs should be explored to mitigate bullying and improve the well-being of students.

### 1. Introduction

Bullying is a prominent concern among school administrators, parents, and policy makers. The definition of bullying includes aggressive and negative behavior occurring repeatedly in relationships with an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). This problem behavior includes overt behaviors such as physical contact or physical aggression, known as direct bullying, as well as social isolation and exclusion, known as indirect bullying (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). If adequately addressed, incidents of bullying occurring in schools can be effectively prevented (Limber & Small, 2003).

Despite the recognition of bullying as a serious social issue, and despite increasing efforts to mitigate it, bullying remains a very common problem behavior in schools. According to data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) School Crime Supplement, in 2013, approximately 22% of students between the ages of 12–18 indicated that they were victims of bullying during the academic year (Morgan, Musu-Gillette, Robers, & Zhang, 2015). Of these students who reported bullying victimization, 14% were made fun of, called names, or insulted, 13% were the subjects of rumors, and 6% were pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on (Morgan et al., 2015). Further, of the youth who reported physical bullying, 21% reported injury as a result (Morgan et al., 2015).

Several cross-sectional studies show that there are many

correlations between bullying and other problems such as crime victimization (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013; Whitted & Dupper, 2005), self-protective measures like weapon carrying (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003), and emotional and social problems such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Nansel et al., 2001; Sourander et al., 2007; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). In addition, more rigorous longitudinal studies that are able to account for pre-existing differences between victims and non-victims demonstrate that bullying results in many adverse effects, including emotional, social, and/or mental health problems including depression and poor cognitive functioning (Arseneault et al., 2006; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Farrington, Lösel, Ttofi, & Theodorakis, 2012; Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006; Gibb, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2011; Kim, Leventhal, Koh, Hubbard, & Boyce, 2006; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014).

Therefore, previous literature has clearly demonstrated that bullying can be extremely detrimental for youth. In order to mitigate this problem behavior, several efforts have been pursued to prevent and reduce bullying. Existing prevention programs often focus on changing norms regarding bullying, improving peer relations, and providing positive role models for youth that can divert them from engaging in bullying (e.g. Kärnä et al., 2011; Olweus & Alsaker, 1991). Although some of these interventions are promising, they have been insufficient in addressing bullying, as it is still a common issue in schools across the

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United States (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary that additional approaches are investigated that have the potential to further diminish bullying and its potential consequences. In this study, we consider and estimate the impact of School Resource Officers (SROs) on bullying in schools.

The purpose of deploying SROs in schools is to prevent crime and improve school safety. In order to achieve these goals, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) has designed a triad model in which SROs may perform many functions under three broad roles including law enforcement, teaching, and mentoring (Brown, 2006). The implementation of SROs may affect bullying in schools through several mechanisms. Specifically, SROs may decrease incidents of bullying in schools through a deterrence mechanism as officers engage in surveillance procedures and patrol school grounds. On the contrary, SROs may increase incidents of bullying in schools by weakening social cohesion if their law enforcement presence creates a fearful environment for students. Additionally, these officers could increase or decrease bullying as a result of their impact on the clarity and consistency of rule enforcement in schools. For example, SROs may decrease bullying in schools by making anti-bullying rules clearer and enforcing them consistently. In contrast, SROs may also reduce the consistency of rule enforcement if they respond to incidents differently than school administrators. Further, SROs could influence the number of bullying incidents brought to the attention of school administration without increasing the actual number of bullying incidents through a detection mechanism. For example, SROs may detect more incidents of bullying if they develop trusting relationships with students which may then result in an increased likelihood of students reporting bullying than prior to the deployment of the SRO. To date, little research has explored the effects of SROs on bullying.

The current study addresses this gap in the literature by generating an estimate of the impact of the implementation of SROs on bullying, using a large sample of 480 schools, and a differences-in-differences estimation strategy that allows for a clear estimation of this effect. Given that a randomized experiment was not possible for the current study, the differences-in-differences estimation strategy is a strong alternative method. This study assessed changes in bullying between schools that implemented, continued to use, discontinued, or refrained from implementing SROs over a period of four years.

## 2. Existing efforts at preventing bullying

Currently, there are various programs and practices designed to prevent and reduce bullying in schools. Most of these efforts center on changing norms regarding bullying, establishing clear and consistent sanctions in response to bullying, and creating a safe school environment (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Several bullying prevention programs have been tested and the results demonstrate a reduction in bullying (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Examples of these programs include Olweus' Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) (Olweus, 1993) and KiVa (Kärnä et al., 2011). Olweus designed a school based program with the goals of reducing bullying and establishing better peer relations among students (Olweus & Alsaker, 1991; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Olweus, 1993). OBPP includes strategies to encourage adults to show warm and positive attitudes, clearly establish rules, consistently enforce the rules in a non-aggressive way, and serve as positive role models to the students (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Several studies evaluating this program find reductions in self-reported bullying and victimization, but most of these studies employ a "cohort sequential" design that may not adequately rule out alternative explanations for these positive effects.

KiVa is a school-based program that includes both universal and indicated program components with lessons covering topics such as enhancing empathy and supporting victims (Kärnä et al., 2011). A randomized controlled trial of 78 schools demonstrated that the program is effective, with decreases in self-reported victimization and

bullying (Kärnä et al., 2011). However, this study is limited in terms of generalizability because it assesses only Finnish schools.

These existing prevention efforts targeted at reducing bullying have demonstrated positive effects, but bullying still remains a prevalent issue in the United States. Alternative strategies should be examined that may serve as effective interventions in mitigating the bullying problem in schools. Demands for improvements in school safety have resulted in the increased hiring of SROs in schools (James & McCallion, 2013), and as a result, these officers may serve as a promising option to decrease bullying incidents in schools. The following sections discuss the potential of SROs as an effective means for reducing bullying.

## 3. SROs in schools: an alternative strategy to prevent/reduce bullying

The rise in juvenile crime in the 1980s and early 1990s sparked concern for school safety (Addington, 2009). Coinciding with this concern, schools began to implement a wide array of security practices and procedures. In 2013, 99.6% of all students ages 12–18 reported that at least one security procedure was used in their school. These security procedures include security cameras, locked entrances, metal detectors or locker checks (Morgan et al., 2015). Studies that examine the effectiveness of school based security practices do not consistently show improved school safety (Gerlinger & Wo, 2014; Fisher et al., 2016), with mixed evidence on the effectiveness of security personnel such as SROs (Jennings, Khey, Maskaly, & Donner, 2011; Johnson, 1999; Na & Gottfredson, 2011), metal detectors (Hankin, Hertz, & Simon, 2011), and surveillance cameras (Schrek, Miller, & Gibson, 2003; Fisher et al., 2016).

Although school security and surveillance procedures are very common in schools, little is known about the effectiveness of these policies in general or for reducing bullying. It is especially interesting to hone in on SROs because there is much controversy over whether these officers should be deployed in schools. The use of police in schools largely stems from a rising fear and perception of school violence in the 1990s (Addington, 2009; Beger, 2002). Aided by increases in federal funding, the number of police in schools grew exponentially from the late 1990s through the 2000s (Beger, 2002; James & McCallion, 2013; Theriot & Orme, 2014). For example, 70% of students ages 12–18 reported the use of police or security in their schools in 2011 compared to 54% in 1999 (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009; Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). The increased use of SROs has also been documented in more recent years as reported by school district representatives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, 2016). Specifically, data from the School Health Policies and Practices study demonstrate that, in 2012, the percentage of school districts requiring police officers, SROs or security guards for elementary, middle and secondary schools was 26.7%, 38.8% and 48.6% respectively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). In 2016, those same percentages had risen to 35.4%, 42.7% and 54.1% respectively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). As SRO use becomes a common intervention in many schools across the country, it is important to investigate the effects of this strategy on problem behaviors such as bullying.

To date, limited research has examined the impacts of SROs on bullying (Gerlinger & Wo, 2014; Kupchik & Farina, 2016). While examining the effects of school security measures on bullying victimization, Gerlinger and Wo (2014) developed an index that included security guards or police officers, metal detectors, locked entrances and exits, and locker checks. The results indicated that the security measures were not significantly related to physical and verbal bullying victimization (Gerlinger & Wo, 2014). However, the authors did not provide estimates for the independent effect of each individual security measure on bullying victimization, focusing instead on their aggregated index. In another study, Kupchik and Farina (2016) sought to examine school safety measures and perceptions of school rules on bullying victimization using cross-sectional data from the 2009 School Crime

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