School Social Work Association of America
Position Paper

SSWAA Responds to the Role of Law Enforcement in Schools

from a Racial Justice Lens

The recent and repeated incidents of police brutality in the United States is a major public health problem which is shedding light on the longstanding impact of systemic oppression and racial injustices that are pervasive in our society. Given the immense harm inflicted on individuals and groups of color via prejudice, discrimination and oppression, our nation is at a turning point where individuals are called to evaluate the systems, practices and policies that perpetuate racial trauma and suffering, as well as engage in efforts to disrupt and dismantle systemic oppression. As individuals, organizations and communities critically explore the role of racism in their structures and practices, there are calls to defund police departments, and several large school districts across the country have responded by re-evaluating or discontinuing the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) (Blad & Sawchuck, 2020; Villarreal Sosa, in press).

Our national school social work practice model identifies the role of school social workers in promoting effective school policies and administrative procedures in service of promoting a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence (Frey et al., 2013). Furthermore, our ethical responsibility as social work professionals demands that we as individuals and as an organization are committed to equity and social justice, and challenge programs and services that may create inequities within the educational systems we serve. Therefore, SSWAA supports advocacy efforts at all levels that prioritize funding for evidence based initiatives that improve school climate and safety. There is little research regarding the effectiveness of law enforcement in schools or SROs and the results have been "mixed at best with strong evidence of unintended harmful consequences" (Kupchik, 2020, p.2). While there is no empirical evidence that SROs improve school safety, and there is evidence that their presence has resulted in a negative school climate for students of color (Villarreal Sosa, in press; Kupchik, 2020; Layton & Shaler, 2019), quality improvement recommendations are outlined for those situations in which SROs are mandated.

The Evolution of Law Enforcement and SROs in Schools

Research shows a direct correlation with academic success to feelings of acceptance, belonging and safety (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Ensuring a school climate where every student feels safe, valued and respected for who they are, and has equitable access to support and resources is one

of the fundamental roles of school social work (Frey et al., 2013). This requires us to continually examine existing policies and practices that may contribute to educational disparities and inequities that impede academic success and impair the overall health and well-being of students. With its links to school climate, school safety has long been a fundamental consideration within the ecological systems model practiced by school social workers. However, public perception about school safety has largely been viewed through the lens of yet another major public health problem in the United States, gun violence (Gifford Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2018).

High profile school shootings, such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland, continue to dominate the school safety narrative, despite their low rate of incidence (Everytown for Gun Safety, AFT & NEA, 2020). As a result, school-based law enforcement or school resource officers (SROs), have become a common and growing presence in schools across the nation. The first law enforcement program in schools, the "Police School Liaison Program," began in the 1950's in Flint, Michigan to prevent crime on "school grounds" (Texas State, 2016, pg 1). In the midst of school desegregation in the 1950s, policing of Latinx and Black children was part of the economic and social control aimed at undermining the promise of civil rights (ACLU, 2017). As this practice of instituting law enforcement or school security personnel in schools evolved, the roles and responsibilities have differed based on the expectations of the school community (Lee & Cuellar, 2019).

Different types of school security and safety personnel exist in schools such as School Resource Officers, School-Based Law Enforcement (sworn and non-sworn), and School Security Personnel (Lee & Cuellar, 2019). According to the National Association of School Resources Officers, "a SRO is a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority who is deployed by an employing police department or agency in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools" (NASRO, n.d, paragraph 1). A School-Based Law Enforcement Officer (SBLE) may have similar roles and duties as an SRO "...in that they aim to maintain safety while promoting a secure environment conducive to learning," but the distinction between an SRO and SBLE is that SBLE are employed by a school district" (Lee & Cuellar, 2019, p. 3). "SBLEs typically represent a school-based and internal school police department and are not affiliated with an external local or county law enforcement agency" (Lee & Cuellar, 2019, p. 3). Schools may also have School Security Personnel who have been assigned tasks to promote school safety but due to funding and needs of the school, their roles vary widely and they do not fall into the category of an SRO or SBLE. For the purposes of this statement, SSWAA's focus is on the use of SROs and SBLEs, herein which may be referred to as law enforcement in schools.

Law enforcement programs became more widespread across the nation during the last decade of the 20th century due to perceived increases in juvenile crime, including high profile school shootings which dominated the media and shaped public perceptions (McKenna, Martinez-Prather, & Bowman, 2014). When placed in "a school with risks of high profile incidence, SROs...will take a primary role as a disciplinarian to protect students' safety, often used by zero-

tolerance" (Lee & Cuellar, 2019, p. 3). A review of research in a 2019 report on school policing found that although the use of SROs has become common, "there is no centralized or continuous tracking of how many schools use SROs, no national governance of SROs' roles and training requirements, and only ad hoc evaluation of their effectiveness in improving school safety" (Layton et al., 2019, p. 7).

Uneven Patchwork of Training Requirements for Law Enforcement in Schools

Although the Community Oriented Policies Services (COPS) Office at The U.S. Department of Justice requires training by NASRO (National Association of School Resource Officers), many states do not require training specific to working with youth or in a school system or allow discretionary waivers to bypass training requirements (Morris, Epstein & Yusef, 2018; 105 ILCS 5/10-20.68, 2019). There are some indications that appropriately trained and utilized SROs and SBLEs can make positive contributions to the school community and help foster trusting relationships between youth and the community. For example, professional development related to complex trauma and historical trauma is a vital component in cultivating culturally responsive and positive relationships with diverse populations in the educational environment. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, 2008) explains, "when police officers acquire a trauma perspective and work in concert with mental health providers and the community, families and children see them not simply as forces of order charged with enforcing the law, but as trusted advocates concerned about their safety" (p. 2).

Impact of Law Enforcement Presence in Schools

Despite the intent of having a law enforcement presence in schools to increase school safety, there is little empirical evidence regarding the outcomes of law enforcement in schools and SROs (Livingston, Rossheim, & Stidham Hall, 2019). The deployment of law enforcement in schools along with the emphasis on zero tolerance policies has resulted in the marginalization of various student groups. The iatrogenic intervention of SROs in schools has "produced undesirable consequences of increased surveillance and criminalization of students especially students of color (specifically Black, Native American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Latinx students) and students with disabilities'' (Morris, Epstein, & Yusef, 2018; Whitacker et al., 2019, pg. 5). Furthermore, racial injustices have persisted between communities of color and law enforcement, both within the community and school environment, which currently impacts the perception and role of SROs. The presence of "police in schools with predominantly students of color are more likely to be focused on discipline while police in schools with predominantly white students are more likely to be a part of emergency response teams collaborating in moments of crisis" (Villarreal Sosa, in press, para. 9). Data also shows significant rates of disproportionality in regards to police referrals by school staff, arrests, higher rates of out of school suspensions and other forms of contact with the criminal justice system for students of color compared to their white peers due to the presence of an SRO in their school, causing psychological harm, negative impact on academic attainment, increased drop out rates and impairing the overall school

climate. For example, approximately 70% of student arrests or students referred to law enforcement are Black or Latinx (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). As a result, this "marginalization and policing of vulnerable students has become prevalent and systemic and have led to what is called the School-to-Prison Pipeline" (APA, 2020, p.1). While unintended, these negative repercussions must be recognized and addressed with advocacy and input from school social workers as follows:

1. Local education agencies (LEAs) should prioritize the limited funding streams available for proven school climate, safety staffing and mental health initiatives over SROs. This includes fully funding specialized instructional support personnel, such as school social workers.
2. LEAs that elect or employ SROs should ensure SROs demonstrate cultural sensitivity, humility, and understanding specifically surrounding the dynamics of power and privilege their position carries.
3. When LEAs are bound by requirements for SROs, the recommendations outlined below should be given serious consideration.

Recommendations for School Social Workers

According to the [National School Social Work Model](#), school social workers promote a psycho-social environment that fosters academic engagement and achievement. Environments are conducive to learning and teaching when they have: (1) policies and procedures that produce safe and orderly environments; (2) capacity-building efforts to promote effective practices; (3) addressed the underlying issues that perpetuate systemic racism and bias, and (4) supportive relationships within and between students, families, school staff, and community partners. To address the negative consequences of placing law enforcement and SROs in a school setting, school social workers should advocate for:

- Effective discipline policies and practices that address racial injustices, teach and reinforce prosocial behaviors, and reduce the overreliance of punitive and harmful discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, and excluding SROs from the process.
- Provision of professional development and support for teachers and school staff to instill trauma-informed, restorative approaches to manage classroom behavior.
- Cultural sensitivity training for all staff, and for LEAs that elect or are mandated to employ SROs, ensure SROs demonstrate cultural sensitivity, humility, and understanding specifically surrounding the dynamics of power and privilege their position carries.
- Effective avenues for communication and collaboration with SROs, school staff, parents, and students to promote a safe school culture and climate, parents, and students (as appropriate).
- An ongoing evaluation of the school climate and culture that involves students, parents, and school personnel, including SROs, and a plan to address any deficiencies.

SSWAA Board members and SSWAA Delegate Assembly representatives had the privilege of contributing to the recommendations made on a recent joint statement by NASP, ASCA, NASSP, NAESP and NASRO (2020). While SSWAA declined to sign-on to the preamble of the statement, SSWAA supports the following recommendations outlined in that joint statement for LEAs that elect to or are mandated to employ SROs.

According to the NASP, ASCA, NASSP, NAESP, and NASRO (2020) position statement,

> *...we believe that the decision to have an SRO must be a local and collaborative one, with input from families, students, and educators, based on the unique needs of the school community and weighing the risk of harm with potential benefits. At a minimum, there should be a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the SRO program, that are rooted in school-wide and community data. These goals must be independent of school disciplinary practices.*

> *If a school community with stakeholder input determines the need for or if a school is required by statute to utilize SROs, we offer the following recommendations:*

> ### *Standards and Training*

> - *Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly defines the role of SROs, necessary training, proper accountability, and protection of student rights. The MOU should clearly dictate that school discipline situations are the responsibility of administrators and that an SRO should not be involved in classroom management issues or school discipline of any kind from a law enforcement perspective. The MOU must also include an annual evaluation of the effectiveness of the SRO program by collecting and reviewing data that can be disaggregated by race and gender to address disproportionate rates in contact.*
> - *Ensure that principals are directly involved in the interview, hiring, and ongoing professional evaluation process for SROs and have the opportunity for meaningful input about candidates for open positions to ensure that they are a good fit for the school's culture and climate.*
> - *Ensure that school resource officers are carefully selected and specially trained in accordance with NASRO standards. SROs should be knowledgeable about child development, including development of students with disabilities, positive discipline, trauma-informed practices, implicit bias, intersectionality, and culturally responsive education. They should have skills in evidence-based intervention strategies, including restorative practices, youth mental health first aid, Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training, and conflict de-escalation.*

School Administration, Teachers, and Staff

- *Adopt effective discipline policies and practices (e.g., positive behavior interventions and supports, restorative practices) that teach and reinforce prosocial behaviors and reduce the overreliance of punitive and harmful discipline such as suspension and expulsion. SROs can play a positive role in supporting student behavior, but they should not be involved in application of discipline.*
- *Educate and empower teachers and school staff by providing strategies to build their skills to effectively manage classroom behaviors. Specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) have the skills to provide the necessary professional development and support for teachers and school staff to instill trauma-informed, restorative approaches to manage classroom behavior.*
- *Educate teachers and other staff about when it is appropriate, and when it is not appropriate, to request assistance from the SRO. Include education about the role of implicit bias when teachers choose to give students "benefit of the doubt" and when they choose to call for law enforcement assistance. Provide additional training as needed for staff who attempt to engage SROs in routine discipline. Consideration should be given to providing joint training among SROs, educators, and SISP to develop relationships and shared understandings of each other's roles and strengths.*

Collaboration

- *Ensure SROs regularly communicate and collaborate with members of the school climate/school safety team—including school administrators, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers), parents, and students (as appropriate).*
- *Maintain ongoing professional development for all staff, including SROs, regarding cultural and gender-responsive communication, school safety, bullying, student mental health, effects of historical trauma, cognitive development, and other issues impacting the school community.*
- *Provide training to school leaders that outlines their discipline management responsibility versus the law enforcement responsibilities of an SRO, as well as the legal boundaries for SRO action and investigation in schools.*
- *Partner with all stakeholders to ensure transparency and responsible dissemination of information regarding school safety, and the role of the SRO in the building, and the impact of the SRO program on students' physical and psychological safety.*

Addressing Disproportionality and Equity

- *Routinely assess the needs of the school community and invest in programs, initiatives, and staff to address those identified needs.*

- *Increase funding for school-based mental health teams to work collaboratively with SROs, and for administrators to meet the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of students.*
- *Maintain data collection systems that allow for the review of disciplinary data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and disability status.*
- *Regularly review the district's code of conduct, in conjunction with district-wide discipline data, to determine if certain offenses disproportionately impact specific student groups (e.g., disrespect, insubordination, dress codes) and if exclusionary discipline is applied at disparate rates. Create a plan to immediately examine and remedy any disparities.*

Evaluation

- *Regularly administer school-wide culture or climate surveys to students, parents, and school personnel, including SROs. The climate survey should measure the degree to which the well-being and safety of everyone in the learning community is intentionally fostered and nurtured, including relationships, collaborative leadership, ethics, equity, wellness, and communication.*
- *Annually evaluate the impact of the SRO program on the educational community to include assessment of overall feelings of safety, equitable treatment of students in relation to interactions with SRO on campus, and other key metrics necessary to promote a safe and supportive school environment. If the SRO program is not contributing to a safe school environment, or if the presence of an SRO is viewed as harmful by staff, students, or families, then schools must work to address these issues.(paras 3-8).*

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