

February 12, 2024

Research Policy Brief: School Resource Officers and Prone and Restrictive Restraints

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The Minnesota Legislature is currently considering changes to the law regarding whether police and security personnel can inflict “physical holding that restricts or impairs a pupil's ability to breathe; restricts or impairs a pupil's ability to communicate distress; places pressure or weight on a pupil's head, throat, neck, chest, lungs, sternum, diaphragm, back, or abdomen; or results in straddling a pupil's torso.” This policy brief offers a grounding in the research literature on such restraints, and positions such research literature within the wider context of research on School Resource Officers.

Restrictive or Prone Restraints

The research on the dangers of restrictive or prone restraints is mixed, some studies finding considerable dangers of restrictive or prone restraints and others seeing no particular health risks of such restraints. For instance, Vilke’s (2020) review of twenty experimental studies of prone and restrictive restraints finds “the data are not sufficient to conclude that positional restraint alone is enough to cause ventilatory or cardiac compromise in healthy, adult subjects” (p. 5). Steinberg’s (2021) directly challenges Vilke’s findings in an analysis of eighteen studies and concludes that “Physical restraint has been identified as a powerful contributor to death in subjects who are agitated and in excited states” (p. 9) and that “deaths associated with prone physical restraint are not the direct result of asphyxia but are due to cardiac arrest secondary to metabolic acidosis compounded by inadequate ventilation and reduced CO” (p. 1). An earlier review of the eleven studies from Barnett, Stirling, and Pandyan (2012) offers a more moderated finding that “the restraint position has the ability to impede life-maintaining physiological functions, but that the imposed impediment is not uniform across all restraint positions/techniques” (p. 137).

Notably, none of these studies focus specifically on minors or on the context of police or other personnel using the controversial prone, or otherwise restrictive, restraints in schools. As a result, one must look to the other research on School Resource Officers to understand how such restraints might play into wider trends associated with SROs.

SROs and Criminalization of Students

Research indicates that SROs lead to the recording of considerably more crimes including non-serious crimes such as minor school fights (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Na & Gottfredson, 2011). This is, in part, because non-criminal student misbehavior would often be escalated into arrests, summonses, and criminal charges because of “disorderly conduct” once the police got involved (Nolan, 2011; Owens, 2017; Theriot, 2009). One reason this may be the case is that police authority to arrest and legally sanction students usually supercedes the leadership of a principal who may wish to handle student misbehavior pedagogically rather than legally (Utt, 2018). Further, these rates of arrest and other law enforcement activity are more likely to be recorded by SROs in schools with higher rates of student disadvantage (Lynch, Gainey, & Chappell, 2016).

The question, then, is how these rates of increased criminalization might relate to prone restraint knowing that there is not research to help us connect these dots. When police are empowered to put their hands on or otherwise restrain students who are dysregulated and experiencing emotional or physical agitation but posing no harm to themselves or others, this can result in students more actively resisting or escalating in their behavior. It’s easy to see how likely it is for restraints to lead to more arrests or criminal charges than would otherwise be the case when deescalation tactics are used. Further, interactions with the police are already known to lead to higher rates of stress and PTSD (Hirschtick et al, 2020). Regular interactions with an SRO for populations who are part of overpoliced communities are also likely to lead to escalation when police use force such as the restraints described in the proposed legislation, which can lead to injury or more serious disciplinary or legal consequences.

SROs and School Discipline

Exclusionary discipline refers to school sanctions that result in loss of instructional and learning time in school such as suspension or expulsion. Research finds that the presence of SROs greatly increases the use of exclusionary discipline compared to schools without SROs (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016). Further, while SRO presence greatly increases the likelihood of discipline referrals and suspension for all students, this is especially true for Black and Latinx students (Utt-Schumacher, 2023a; Weisburst, 2019).

The use of physical restraint is unnecessary when no one is in immediate danger, and dangerous when it is likely to escalate the behavior of students. Such escalation in the presence of police not only leads to legal sanction but leaves school personnel with little choice but to employ exclusionary discipline as a consequence. One can understand how police force would result in students missing vital instructional time in school.

SROs and Academic Achievement

Research has also found that SROs have strong negative associations with academic outcomes. Weisburst (2019) found that funding for SROs is associated with considerable declines in graduation rates and college going rates, especially for Black and Latinx students. Further, there is a considerable drop in Math and English test scores for high school students when SROs are present in schools, and this drop is larger for Black and Latinx students than for White students (Utt-Schumacher, 2023b).

While the connection between academic achievement and exclusionary discipline and arrest is obvious, there is likely more at play in understanding the relationship between police in schools and academic achievement. While some students may feel safer in the presence of police, many do not, and the presence of police can lead to the school feeling like a site of sanction, surveillance, and criminalization - especially for populations who are over-policed in the wider society. Thus, simply seeing an armed police officer in school might impact all of the pro-social contributors to academic achievement such as attendance, school connectedness, and concentration on academic endeavors. Seeing police violently restrain peers during a moment of emotional or physical dysregulation likely would have a considerable negative impact on the pro-social contributors to academic achievement.

Summary

There is considerable research to demonstrate the danger of using restrictive or prone restraints on students in schools. Simultaneously, there is reason to believe that the use of such restraints would exacerbate negative outcomes for students, particularly students of Color, associated with the presence of SROs in schools. Such outcomes include increased legal sanction and exclusionary discipline for students, especially students of Color. Further, since police in schools are known to be associated with depressed academic outcomes, one can understand how increased use of such restraints would only worsen academic outcomes for those exposed to these traumatizing events. Thus, to allow police and other security personnel the authority to use controversial restraints against children in schools could lead to considerable harm beyond the dangers these restraints pose to the physical health of Minnesota's young people. If the legislature should choose to reinstate the authority of police to use such restraints against children, the legislature should enact clear safeguards and also establish mechanisms for tracking and collecting data on such uses of force, and the legislature should create protocols for addressing the misuse of these restraints by law enforcement officers in schools.

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