

School Resource Officers as Mental Health Supports: Transformational Collaboration or Convenient Solution?

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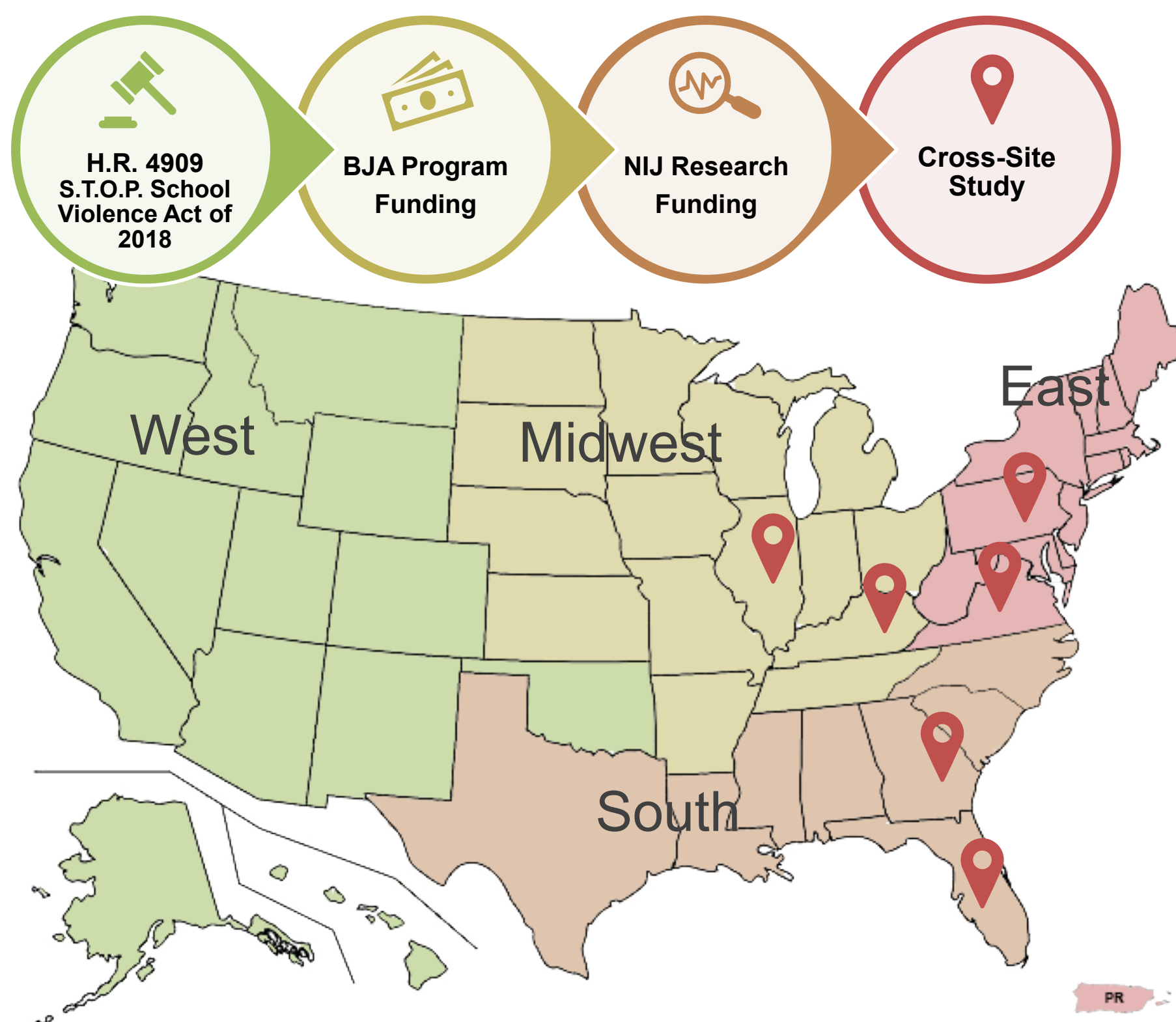
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INTRODUCTION

The School Resource Officers (SRO) role has expanded in recent years to include mental health assessment and intervention. Concerns about SRO involvement in addressing mental health problems include lack of training and awareness, limitations in adequately addressing problems, and the inappropriateness of a “policing” role in mental health issues. However, SROs may be beneficial in this role due to their ability to build strong student relationships, facilitate conflict resolution, and to generally have a pulse on the school environment.

BACKGROUND

In response to the Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Act of 2018 (H.R. 4909), the authors initiated a study funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to examine the implementation of violence prevention and mental health training programs as part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance’s (BJA) STOP School Violence grant program. Several programs involved School Resource Officers (SROs) as part of their strategy (or their main strategy) to address school safety, usually through the development of threat assessment systems. SROs typically worked as part of a larger team that involved school administrators, teachers, counselors, and mental health professionals. This study represents STOP grants that were initiated during the first two years of funding, 2018 and 2019.



FINDINGS

SRO Role

Student Resource Officers (SROs) are law enforcement officers who work in schools. Their roles and responsibilities vary depending on the specific school, district policies, STOP grant, and community needs. SROs can play a variety of different roles to help students, teachers, and administrators:

- ❖ Law Enforcement and Security
- ❖ Safety and Crisis Response
- ❖ Conflict Resolution and Mediation
- ❖ Education and Prevention
- ❖ Relationship Building
- ❖ Resource Referral
- ❖ Training and Professional Development
- ❖ Policy Development and Implementation
- ❖ Community Engagement
- ❖ Support for Teachers and Administrators

FINDINGS 2 (PERCEPTIONS)

THEME	CONTEXT	EVIDENCE
Valuable Partners	There are many positive perceptions of SROs and the role they play in rapport building, threat assessment and monitoring, and violence prevention, which may include ongoing rapport building with students and student and family education.	<p>“I go out of my way to make sure I have a lot of interaction with the students. They see me every day. They know I’m a trusted adult that they can come to and say whatever.” - SRO</p> <p>“I have a vested interest in making sure my students don’t have to wind up in the back of a police car and sitting in front of a judge one day explaining why, you know, when the time came, they needed help, they didn’t get it.” - SRO</p>
Challenges with Fit in Positive School Climate	Several responses highlighted ways that poor perceptions of police in general or traditional police culture may make integration into school safety collaboration difficult.	<p>“So I think that the direction we’re taking starting with [SROs], it’s kind of changed because I don’t think SROs are always trained in promoting a positive school climate.” – Program Administrator</p> <p>“The other thing that I’d say is a goal here is integration. We work really hard to position our SROs as not being solely law enforcement.”- Program Administrator</p> <p>“...obviously I don’t come to the scenario at the same level of education and experience that [educators] have, but I’m one of the few people who can actually take action right now today on something that I hear from somebody...” - SRO</p>
Police Culture Pushback	SROs were sometimes seen as more responsible for making difficult decisions about legal steps that may need to be taken for mental health crises (i.e., involuntary mental health examinations) and some personnel may informally direct situations their way to avoid this responsibility themselves.	<p>“We’ve seen right now pushback from schools where they don’t want law enforcement SROs in schools. I absolutely get that. My hope is that this would change that mindset in officers and the schools would recognize it, that they’re genuinely there to help build up the community and they know how to do it.” – Program Administrator</p> <p>“So there’s racial stuff that comes up. You know, there’s always that divide between the police and the families, and how do we bridge that so everybody feels safe?” “...I’m not staying in my own little police bubble here and I don’t think I run everything, you know? I’m part of the equation, and that’s tough for a lot of police officers to grasp, you know? A lot of us are very alpha, we’re very, you know, me-me, first-first-first, I’m in charge kind of thing. And you need to realize, hey, listen, not for nothing, but you’re a third of the pie, buddy.” - SRO</p>
Mental Health Referees	SROs were sometimes seen as more responsible for making difficult decisions about legal steps that may need to be taken for mental health crises (i.e., involuntary mental health examinations) and some personnel may informally direct situations their way to avoid this responsibility themselves.	<p>“But our sheriff’s department has a policy which is really non-negotiable, that if a student tells them they’re gonna hurt themselves or kill themselves, that the sheriffs are automatically obligated to do a mental health transport and take ‘em to the hospital...some schools know that, so they didn’t wanna deal with going through the actual process with the student...They would just take a student to the SRO and have the student repeat [their story] or whatever to the SRO, and then the SRO is obligated...It’s kind of a pass-off of work from my perspective.” – Program Administrator</p> <p>“I would resign tomorrow if I had information about a child and something drastic happened over there and I didn’t say anything. I would deserve to be fired for it because here’s a tragedy, I could have prevented”. - SRO</p>
Role Complexity	There was some discussion that reflected role complexity or blurring, especially as it relates to mental health support. In some cases, officers discussed having a more therapeutic role as part of their responsibilities, and other administrators expressed challenges in making it clear that officers should not be involved in clinical aspects of mental health support.	<p>“Yeah, it is, it’s walking that fine line between letting them know what they need to—and really how to get students the help and support they might need. They don’t need to diagnose and do all this, but here’s how you’re supportive, here’s where they need to go and how you can help.” – Program Administrator</p> <p>“We try to walk this fine line of providing enough information but knowing that the people we’re training aren’t psychologists; they’re not in [the mental health] industry.” – Training Consultant</p> <p>“I see a lot of clinical side of that and that’s simply just not where our training end up.” – SRO</p> <p>“I’ve been able to sort of listen with a careful ear and I sort of act as an SRO and I sort of act as a sort of friendly ear slash counselor here.” - SRO</p>

METHODS

A cross-site interview study of six grantee agencies across different regions was undertaken to understand contextual factors that affected implementation.

- Participants included representatives of state or local government offices, education departments, school districts, law enforcement agencies, private educational or nonprofit agencies, and individual schools
- 22 interview transcripts were reviewed in depth, followed by inductive analysis to identify SRO roles in STOP programs, and then a paragraph-level key-term search was conducted in ATLAS.ti with all 22 interviews to identify and isolate relevant passages about SROs

CONCLUSIONS

- SROs serve in multiple roles that may be valuable as part of a comprehensive system of support for school safety, with particular importance for safety monitoring and rapport building
- There were concerns about how negative perceptions with police may interfere with effective programming, how police training and culture may conflict with positive school climate, whether SROs’ focus on law enforcement aligned with goals of mental health support, and lack of clarity around how much of a mental health role SROs should have
- Given the difficulties bridging different ideologies and organizational cultures and significant differences in training, further consideration should be given to the extent to which SROs are the most appropriate personnel to act in a mental health support capacity
- Further research should investigate 1) whether some challenges may be mitigated by providing targeted mental health training to SROs, 2) understanding whether additional school personnel (school psychologists, school social workers) can fulfill some of these duties, and 3) perspectives of students, educators, and families on SRO involvement in mental health support

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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