

Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) partners with the nation's state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) law enforcement agencies to support community policing via award funding, virtual and in-person training, and technical assistance. Through the COPS Hiring Program (CHP) and other competitive grant awards, the office has awarded funding to local law enforcement agencies to hire school resource officers (SRO) nationwide. Currently, for all SROs funded via the CHP program, the COPS Office requires mandatory SRO training, the implementation of memoranda of understanding (MOU) between law enforcement and school districts, and the agreement that SROs will not be involved in school disciplinary matters. The COPS Office also continues to review the latest research on SRO programs in its ongoing effort to promote best practices for the field. This document puts forth a set of guiding principles and considerations based on best practices to govern the COPS Office's work related to SROs and school-based policing.

Keeping students safe is crucial to their development and success in school and a top priority for the DOJ. When students feel safe at school, they have a greater chance of thriving both academically and socially.¹ Ensuring SROs carry out their responsibilities in a fair and impartial manner helps students feel safe at school. Indeed, school districts and the SROs working with them must make sure their programs and activities do not discriminate based on race, color, national origin, limited English proficiency, disability, or sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity) under federal civil rights laws.² The principles in this document are offered as a guide to those jurisdictions that have opted to implement an SRO program to ensure that the presence of law enforcement in schools is as beneficial as possible and to avoid harmful impacts on students and the learning environment. We encourage jurisdictions to implement other evidence-based strategies that promote school safety, and these principles should not limit communities in their consideration of the range of programs and interventions that can help improve safety on school campuses. Implementing an SRO program is a local decision, and communities should consider the range of options available that best fit their needs. Communities are also encouraged to reach out to the COPS Office directly for any additional assistance with operationalizing these guiding principles.

1. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, "Physical Safety," American Institute for Research, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/safety/physical-safety>.

2. Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, title VI, 78 Stat. 241 (1964), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg241.pdf>; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, title II, 104 Stat. 327 (1990), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-104/pdf/STATUTE-104-Pg327.pdf>; Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub. L. No. 93-112, § 504, 87 Stat. 355 (1973), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2010-title29/pdf/USCODE-2010-title29-chap4-sec31.pdf>; Education Amendments Act of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-318, title IX, 86 Stat. 235 (1972), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-86/pdf/STATUTE-86-Pg235.pdf>.

Definitions and Background

School resource officer

According to federal statute, a school resource officer is “a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations—

- A. to address crime and disorder problems, gangs, and drug activities affecting or occurring in or around an elementary or secondary school;
- B. to develop or expand crime prevention efforts for students;
- C. to educate likely school-age victims in crime prevention and safety;
- D. to develop or expand community justice initiatives for students;
- E. to train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime awareness;
- F. to assist in the identification of physical changes in the environment that may reduce crime in or around the school; and
- G. to assist in developing school policy that addresses crime and to recommend procedural changes.”³

In addition to SROs, another model is the school-based law enforcement (SBLE) officer, who serves on a school district’s own police force. The way these different models are implemented can vary considerably across jurisdictions and even among schools in the same district. Security officers, off-duty officers working at school events, and volunteers are not SROs—but they can be important community partners.

3. 34 U.S.C. § 10389(4), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2018-title34/pdf/USCODE-2018-title34-subtitle-chap101-subchapXVI-sec10389.pdf>.

Types of roles and responsibilities for SROs

The COPS Office identifies four potential roles of a school resource officer: (1) crime prevention and safety educator; (2) emergency manager, (3) law enforcement problem solver, and (4) informal counselor (e.g., mentor or role model).⁴ An SRO is a sworn law enforcement officer assigned in a community policing capacity to one or more K–12 schools. Typically, a local police department, sheriff's office, or school system employs SROs who work closely with school administrators to create a safer school environment for all students. SROs have a unique role in school safety, with a primary focus on prevention and proactive engagement in their community of students and school staff. Unlike most front-line officers, SROs typically do not have standard shifts responding to service calls but work in conjunction with the school and law enforcement leadership on a variety of proactive activities to build trust with all students and increase school safety.

Beyond school safety and crime prevention duties, SROs also serve as crime prevention and safety educators as well as emergency managers and informal counselors. They can also be responsible for emergency management on the school campus and serve as liaisons with community services and court pretrial and probation services.

SROs may be assigned to one school campus (normally a middle school or high school) or may be assigned to multiple schools in a district. At times, the law enforcement agency jurisdiction and school district boundaries may not align, and a single law enforcement agency may have oversight in multiple school districts.

SROs have the authority of front-line police officers—to solve problems, respond to calls for service, make arrests, and document incidents that occur in their jurisdiction—and additional responsibilities specific to their job working with K–12 students in a school setting (see SRO definition on page 3 for examples of responsibilities).

The following sections lay out guiding principles that the COPS Office believes are necessary for successful SRO program implementation for those schools and communities that decide to operate SRO programs. These guiding principles should be considered when implementing an SRO program or SBLE model.

4. It is important to note that SROs are not substitutes for highly qualified mental health professionals such as counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. While many adults can serve as mentors and role models in schools, only highly qualified mental health professionals should provide counseling services and mental health treatment to students.

Guiding Principles

1. Local decision-making

Operating an SRO program is a local decision that should be made with significant community input.

When considering whether to implement an SRO program, a community should consider the range of evidence-based options that can help improve school safety and best fit its needs and the needs of its students. In particular, the benefits of an SRO program should be weighed against potential harmful consequences an increased law enforcement presence in a school could have on students and the learning environment.

Properly implemented SRO programs can improve campus safety and help build trusted relationships among law enforcement and students. For example, there are documented cases of SROs interceding to prevent mass shootings on campus and responding to mitigate school violence events.⁵ However, SRO programs also have the potential to result in unintended negative consequences. Although there is a need for more rigorous research evaluating the effects of SROs in schools, some studies have found an increased use of exclusionary student discipline and arrests in schools where SROs are present. Research also suggests that students of color in some schools have greater levels of fear and mistrust of SROs than their White classmates do.⁶ Because of the potential for negative outcomes, including the exacerbation of perceived or actual discrimination by SROs based on race, color, national origin (including English language learners), disability, and sex (including sexual orientation, intersex traits, and gender identity), communities must carefully consider for themselves whether to implement an SRO program. In making this assessment, communities should engage broadly with all stakeholders and ensure that the voices of students and families who may be affected by the presence of SROs are considered. This includes students, their families, teachers, and community members, among others. To further grow the evidence surrounding school safety, including SRO programs, in 2014 the DOJ's National Institute of Justice (NIJ) launched the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI). Since 2014, NIJ

5. "Averted School Violence," National Policing Institute, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.avertedschoolviolence.org/>.

6. Joseph McKenna and Anthony Petrosino, *School Policing Programs: Where We Have Been and Where We Need to Go Next*, report to Congress (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/school-policing-programs-where-we-have-been-and-where-we-need-go-next>.

has initiated a number of studies of SRO programs, and the results of those studies are now coming to completion. As a result, the COPS Office will continue to monitor what those studies reveal about the effectiveness of SRO programs and the impact they have on students and the learning environment as well as what the evidence shows are best practices the field should adopt.

Communities that choose to use SRO programs should ensure that their programs are carefully structured to eliminate practices that may discriminate against students on the basis of protected characteristics. Communities should carefully monitor their SRO programs and take steps to correct any practices that may discriminate against students of color, students with disabilities, and students in underserved populations to ensure compliance with federal nondiscrimination laws. As discussed in this document, this monitoring requires data reporting and tracking systems that make it possible for all segments of the community to evaluate the SRO program. SROs should also actively work with schools to accurately collect and report data on SRO–student interactions including arrests and referrals to law enforcement for the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), a mandatory biennial survey of the nation’s public schools.

Funding, training, and proper staffing are some of the critical issues that communities should consider in SRO program evaluation. As detailed in this document, school districts should ensure they have specific, well-thought-out criteria for hiring SROs to ensure they are hiring individuals who show an understanding of and a commitment to working with children and youth and an understanding of the potential negative impact SRO programs can have on students based on protected characteristics. School districts and law enforcement agencies must have adequate funding to support an SRO program in addition to other community safety priorities. As detailed here, SROs should receive comprehensive training about interacting with youth and the parameters and limitations of the SRO’s role. SRO programs cannot replace proper staffing in K–12 schools; SROs should not fulfill or supplant the role of school nurse or counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other staff but may act as one member of a fully staffed school team.

Because of these concerns, we encourage law enforcement agencies and school districts considering implementing an SRO program to obtain feedback from a broad cross-section of the community prior to implementation. If the decision is made to move forward with an SRO program, the feedback should also inform the structure and accountability systems built into the program to ensure positive outcomes for students and for public safety.

2. Memorandum of understanding (MOU)

Law enforcement agencies should have a fully executed MOU with the school district(s) where SROs are assigned.

At a minimum, a successful MOU

- documents the SRO duties and program mission;
- identifies partner roles and responsibilities;
- prohibits SROs from engaging in school disciplinary incidents or enforcing school codes of conduct or addressing typical student behavior that can be safely and appropriately handled by school officials;
- defines reporting and data collection requirements;
- requires annual assessment of SROs;
- provides for effective training on various school-related topics (see “Specialized training” on page 13), including nondiscrimination and serving diverse students and communities (e.g., diversity based on race, color, national origin, disability, and sex);
- outlines supervision of the SRO(s) named in the MOU.⁷

A well written MOU should include input from a variety of sources including the SRO(s), school officials, law enforcement leadership, community members, school counselors, students, their families, and other stakeholders. The MOU should also include a mechanism for the school district to receive feedback regarding SROs’ activities and actions.

The district should review the MOU on an annual basis for updates and to determine if the SRO program is meeting school and community expectations. To promote transparency, the MOU should be available online via the school district and law enforcement agency websites and accessible to people with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. Other critical components that must be included in the MOU and reiterated to school staff are that SROs are prohibited from engaging in student discipline and from enforcing school codes of conduct.

7. *School Resource Officer Memorandum of Understanding*, fact sheet (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2021), https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/2021AwardDocs/chp/SRO_MOU.pdf.

3. School discipline

SROs should not be involved in school disciplinary incidents that would normally be handled by teachers, administrators, and other school staff.

SROs should not be involved in disciplining students or be directed to resolve student issues that would otherwise be the responsibility of a teacher or school administrator or subject to the school's internal discipline procedures or school code of conduct. SROs should not respond to incidents that do not pose a threat to safety or involve typical student behavior that can be safely and appropriately handled by a school's internal disciplinary procedures. The COPS Office will continue to stress the importance of this prohibition—*any matter that would not require a school to call 911 for service is outside the scope of SROs' law enforcement duties*. The administration of student discipline, including student code of conduct violations and misbehavior (such as profanity or dress code violations) is the responsibility of school administrators and teachers. SROs should therefore not enforce compliance with school rules. The prohibition of SRO involvement in school discipline matters should be discussed by all stakeholders prior to executing the MOU and reiterated to SROs, school staff, and students and families during the school year. If school and district administrators are improperly relying on the SRO to intervene in school discipline incidents, the SRO should report this to their supervisor for immediate resolution.

4. Judicious use of law enforcement powers

SROs should detain, arrest, or use force only as a last resort.

Restraining a student or placing a student in physical custody for any length of time via wrist restraints, frisking, community separation, or other means should only be done to ensure the safety of everyone at the school campus and consistent with applicable laws. SROs should not detain students solely on the direction of a school administrator. Prior to detaining, arresting, or ticketing a student, SROs should use all other appropriate de-escalation techniques and account for the age and size of the student. When interacting with young people with disabilities, SROs must also make reasonable modifications to policies and practices when necessary to avoid disability discrimination. Detaining a student is traumatic and can have serious negative outcomes.

In situations that require immediate action—where a student is at serious risk of harming self or others—the student should be removed from public view prior to being placed in custody, if possible, to avoid the stigma associated with arrest. If transport is necessary, the student should be placed in a police vehicle outside the view of their peers. Detaining a student should never be used as a punitive sanction.

If an SRO detains a student (i.e., makes an arrest or uses restraints) on school grounds, the SRO should document in sufficient detail the basis for the detainment, including any factors that justify detaining the youth at school and factors that support a determination of probable cause. As discussed in “Development of transparent data and tracking system” on page 10, the SRO should provide these data to their partner school district(s) as part of appropriate transparency and accountability and consistent with federal nondiscrimination laws to ensure school districts are able to comply with federally mandated data collections such as the U.S. Department of Education’s CRDC.

5. Specialized hiring processes

Law enforcement agencies should have a collaborative selection process for SROs that includes specialized qualifications and traits.

SROs’ unique and challenging role requires special recruitment and hiring processes. Although SROs are front-line officers, the COPS Office recommends that no officer be eligible for SRO duties prior to a minimum of three years’ experience. SROs should be confident and familiar with front-line officer or deputy responsibilities before adding the unique challenges of working with youth and in a school environment.

Officers considered for the SRO role should be selected from volunteer applicants with a preference for applicants with experience working with children and youth. Officers should come from a diverse applicant pool that reflects the community they serve, and a selection committee should be empaneled to interview and hire the SRO. Agencies should consider including committee members from outside the agency in the SRO selection process, both in making the general assignment and in determining placement in specific schools. Selection committees should include at least one school representative and one agency supervisor, both of whom should be the individuals who will work directly with the SRO. Ideally, other committee members will include a teacher or school representative, community members, guidance counselors or school psychologists, students in the school and their families, other members of a school safety team, community stakeholders, and youth development experts.

The committee should endeavor to hire candidates who (1) have the ability to work effectively with students, parents/guardians, teachers, and school administrators; (2) possess strong interpersonal communication skills; (3) have the ability to competently engage in public speaking; (4) have effective teaching skills; (5) understand the importance of diversion programs and alternatives to arrest for youth; (6) understand developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed practices for interacting with youth; (7) are respectful and responsive to youth and families of all backgrounds, cultures, and abilities; (8) understand the potential negative impact that SRO programs can have on students; (9) have knowledge of the specific needs and local concerns of the community; and (10) have an interest in promoting and enriching the lives of young people.

6. Tailored performance evaluation and supervision

Law enforcement agencies should develop systems of evaluation and supervision for SROs that are tailored to their duties and expectations.

First-line supervisors and law enforcement leadership managing SROs should have a comprehensive understanding of SROs' duties and responsibilities. Law enforcement leadership should have some experience either working as an SRO or working closely with the SRO(s) at their duty assignment to provide support. Leadership should attend training, such as the COPS Training Portal virtual course "An Introduction to SRO Programs" or on-site training with the SRO(s), to gain knowledge about SRO programs. Agencies should develop different performance criteria in SROs' evaluations tailored to the unique role of SROs. For example, reviews should evaluate the SRO's ability to de-escalate and use alternatives to prevent citations, ticketing, and arrests. High numbers of arrests, searches, citations, or seizures should be viewed with caution in SRO performance reviews and should be flagged for further review. Feedback from school staff should also be factored into evaluations and performance ratings. Students, their family members or guardians, teachers, and school administrators should be provided with an opportunity for input into the SRO's performance, either through a survey or other means of data collection. However, SROs should have a clear chain of command in their law enforcement agencies and should not report to a school administrator for leadership and performance reviews.

Supervisors should meet with SROs and school administrators to review incidents in which SROs were involved in the discipline, arrest, or restraint of a student at least twice a year. This review should evaluate the effective use of skills learned through professional development and identify areas for continuous improvement.

7. Development of transparent data and tracking system

Law enforcement agencies should develop systems to track SRO duties and activities that are as transparent to stakeholders as the law allows.

The law enforcement agencies employing SROs should develop reporting and tracking systems in collaboration with the school district so SRO activities and duties can be reported to stakeholders. These reporting systems can be designed around the SRO's duties and should also include mechanisms to work with their partner school district(s) to identify potential disparities in outcomes for students based on race, national origin, sex (including sexual orientation, intersex traits, and gender identity),⁸ and disability. The standard record management system for an agency may not be adequate for recording the scope of duties and tasks completed by SROs while on duty and may have to be modified. For example, the system should track all instances in which an SRO responds to a student incident (whether self-initiated or prompted by school personnel), not just those leading to a student being detained, searched, cited, or arrested. These reports should be shared with both the SROs' law enforcement supervisors and school leadership so they can review the reports to ensure that school personnel are only involving SROs in appropriate circumstances and SROs are only intervening in incidents when appropriate.

Conversely, SROs and law enforcement agencies should be cautious about developing files on specific individuals and must follow student privacy standards outlined by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).⁹ Student files should not be developed, stored, or shared outside of normal agency procedures, policies, or records management systems, and such files (or any information an SRO learns or has access

8. Identification, collection, and reporting of data relating to students' sexual orientation, intersex traits, and gender identity should only be done if students voluntarily provide their information to the agency. Agencies should not take steps to determine this information independently or without students' cooperation.

9. *School Resource Officers, School Law Enforcement Units, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)*, fact sheet (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2019), https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/SRO_FAQs.pdf.

to—including photos or yearbooks—about a student) must not be used to target a student for increased surveillance or other law enforcement activity based on their race, disability, or any other improper criteria. In addition, SROs should have a designated period of time for completing documentation and reports during their duty shift.

Agencies should collect, review, and analyze data on discipline incidents, citations, ticketing, arrests, uses of force, searches, seizures, interrogations, court referrals, calls for SRO involvement, alleged student misconduct leading to SRO involvement, charges brought on school grounds, staff and student perception of school safety and SRO fairness, and feedback on SRO performance.¹⁰ The data should be disaggregated by student's race, ethnicity, age, sex, type of offense, English language learner status, and disability. SROs should also actively work with schools to accurately collect and report data on SRO–student interactions including arrests and referrals to law enforcement for the U.S. Department of Education's CDRC.

In their role as emergency managers, SROs should have a reporting and information system that includes school leadership and all first responders (law enforcement agency, EMS, fire) to ensure a coordinated response in the case of an emergency.

If the school decides to have a threat assessment team, documentation of all interventions and decisions should be recorded for both school and law enforcement leadership in accordance with FERPA standards. The long-term safety of students in crisis is dependent on collaborative support from the school team and community partners.

10. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, "School Climate Measurement," American Institute for Research, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement>.

8. Specialized training

Law enforcement agencies should ensure that SROs receive specialized training that is unique to their role in promoting school safety and distinguishes SRO duties from the duties of general law enforcement officers.

Specialized training is necessary for SROs to successfully work with students and school staff. The COPS Office currently requires all funded SROs—no later than nine months after placement in a school—to complete a basic SRO training course with 40 hours of curriculum on the roles and responsibilities of SROs. In addition to the required basic training on the role of SROs, other recommended training topics include the following:

- Parameters and limitations of the SRO's role, including training on identifying the difference between school disciplinary issues (which should be handled by teachers or school administrators) and threats to school safety or serious school-based criminal conduct that cannot be safely and appropriately handled by a school's internal disciplinary procedures
- Identifying situations in which mental health professionals should be called to handle or assist an SRO in handling a situation involving a mental health crisis and situations where an SRO's involvement is necessary to protect physical safety
- Constitutional and civil rights—including nondiscrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, and disability under title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990—and the requirement that SROs make reasonable modifications when necessary to avoid disability discrimination when interacting with young people with disabilities
- Incident reporting and data collection
- Procedural justice
- Multitiered systems of support (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or other)
- Community policing and SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) problem-solving model

- De-escalation and conflict resolution techniques
- Child and adolescent development, including brain development
- Teen dating violence and sexual assault
- Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
- Working with specific student groups, including youth with disabilities; English language learners; persons with various immigration statuses; and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or intersex
- Bias-free policing, including implicit bias and cultural competence
- Alternatives to arrest, including diversion programs
- Trauma-informed practices
- Bullying prevention
- Drug and alcohol use education
- Social media use
- Emergency management
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)
- School threat assessment
- Active shooter training
- Restorative justice/practices and conflict resolution
- Classroom presentation skills

Agencies should develop a regular schedule of training for their SROs and track training completion. The COPS Office offers free publications and multimedia tools on SRO training topics via the Resource Center (<https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php>) and the COPS Training Portal (<https://copstrainingportal.org/>) that can provide an introduction or supplement structured SRO courses.

School staff should be trained in the operations of SROs and the SRO program.

It is important that school staff have a common understanding of SROs and their duties and expectations. At a minimum, school staff should be trained on the following topics:

- SRO roles: emergency manager, law enforcement problem solver, crime prevention and safety educator, informal counselor (e.g., mentor or role model)
- When school personnel should (and should not) involve the SRO in student incidents and who in the school is authorized to make that decision
- SRO responsibilities and challenges, including identifying the difference between school disciplinary or code of conduct issues that should be handled by teachers or school staff and situations where an SRO's involvement is necessary to protect physical safety
- Civil rights and protected classes, as well as constitutional rights
- Emergency management
- CPTED
- Community policing and the SARA problem-solving model
- SRO data collection and reporting and their internal monitoring responsibilities
- MOUs, FERPA, and state statutes and standards for school-based policing
- Consequences of student involvement in the criminal justice or juvenile justice system

Where appropriate, SROs and school staff should receive joint training.

9. Student and family engagement

Law enforcement agencies and school districts should regularly engage in outreach to students, families, and school staff to solicit feedback and collectively problem-solve to address student or community concerns.

SROs should take proactive steps to engage students and families in school safety. In addition to conducting trainings on school safety topics, SROs should solicit feedback from students and families on ways to increase school safety and meaningfully respond to that feedback.

Agencies and schools should take specific steps to ensure that the community has a common understanding of the SRO's role in the school. Administrators and SROs should work together to ensure there are opportunities to build trusting relationships with students and families through organized and informal meetings. SROs and school administrators should arrange regular training opportunities and provide informational materials to inform students and family members as well as community members and other stakeholders about the SROs' roles and responsibilities. In addition, if desired by parents, students, and the community, SROs can be available for informal discussions with families during arrival and dismissal and with students during class change and lunch periods or during regularly scheduled office hours. In such cases, visibility on campus during and after school can promote communications between SROs and community members. There should be a well-publicized and easy-to-access system for students and family members to provide feedback both positive and negative regarding specific incidents and about the SRO program generally. There should be established procedures for regularly reviewing and adjudicating complaints.

10. Prevention of sexual assault and misconduct

School resource officers should participate in sexual misconduct awareness training and be properly trained in taking reports of sexual assault from students. Law enforcement agencies should have robust policies and procedures to prevent officer perpetrated sexual assault of students.

School resource officers should participate in adult sexual misconduct awareness training along with other adults working in school settings. One resource for such training is a guide developed by the U.S. Department of Education REMS Technical Assistance Center, *A Training Guide for Administrators and Educators on Addressing Adult Sexual Misconduct in the School Setting* (<https://rems.ed.gov/docs/ASMTrainingGuide.pdf>). Because of their trusted positions of authority in a school context, officers should take extra precautions to avoid any appearance of impropriety. Schools and law enforcement agencies should develop clear policies and procedures regarding interpersonal contacts, with special attention to areas such as

- appropriate social media interactions;
- personal cards, notes, and emails;
- contact, touching, and hugging;
- boundaries to use when traveling out of town for sports or other competitions;
- after-school interactions with students.¹¹

Officers, students, and school administrators should be made aware of these expectations.

11. U.S Department of Education, *A Training Guide for Administrators and Educators on Addressing Adult Sexual Misconduct in the School Setting* (Washington, DC: 2017), <https://rems.ed.gov/docs/ASMTrainingGuide.pdf>.

Students should have easy access to report instances of sexual assault by other students, family members, teachers, or other adults. School resource officers may be the first person to whom a student initially reports a sexual assault and should be properly trained and held accountable to follow up on all reports. We encourage agencies to review the promising practices included in the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)'s updated guidance, *Improving Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence by Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias* (<https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/1509451/dl?inline>). All reported instances should be taken seriously and, when possible, referred to other law enforcement professionals who are specially trained in conducting sexual assault investigations. Officers should conduct interviews in a trauma-informed manner—that is, with an understanding of how trauma can affect memory; how victims may behave before, during, and following an assault, including during an interview; and the common ways that victims provide their accounts. For more practical information about meeting with victims and building provable cases in a trauma-informed manner, see the DOJ's May 2024 *Framework for Prosecutors to Strengthen Our National Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Involving Adult Victims* (<https://www.justice.gov/ovw/media/1352371/dl?inline>). Officers should follow well-accepted practices regarding documenting initial allegations of sexual assault to ensure that they do not have a detrimental effect on potential investigations, including the following:

- Not indicating doubt regarding the credibility of victims while meeting with victims, taking statements, or writing reports.
- Writing reports that are a summary of a victim's account, not the officer's conclusion about what took place. Reports should incorporate the victim's words, including spontaneous statements, as well as what the victim recounted about the perpetrator's words and conduct. Officers should take care not to make legal conclusions about consent or credibility.
- Conducting interviews in private areas and not in front of other potential witnesses.
- Ensuring that victims have access to victim advocates when possible and ensuring that they feel at ease during interviews.¹²

12. See Principle 4 (Refer Victims to Appropriate Services) of DOJ, *Improving Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence by Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias* (Washington, DC: 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/1509451/dl?inline> and Principle 2 (Meet with Victims (where they are) and Work with Investigators & Victim Specialists to Do So) of DOJ, *Framework For Prosecutors to Strengthen Our National Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Involving Adult Victims* (Washington, DC: 2024), <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/media/1352371/dl?inline>.

Law enforcement agencies should implement specific policies aimed at preventing officer-perpetrated sexual assault and holding officers who commit these offenses accountable.¹³ Agencies should ensure that there are multiple ways for students to report misconduct on the part of officers. Law enforcement agencies must have processes to fully investigate and follow up on reports of sexual assault and sexual misconduct by officers; these include robust internal affairs processes with separate administrative and criminal investigations. Agencies should also ensure that their organizational culture encourages and empowers officers to actively intervene when needed to prevent colleagues from committing unprofessional, unethical, or criminal conduct. One training on this topic is the *Take Action: Make the R.I.G.H.T. Choice and Intervene* training provided through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center (cops.usdoj.gov/cri-tac).

We also encourage agencies to examine the *Model Policy Resource for the Prevention of Law Enforcement Officer Misconduct* developed by End Violence Against Women International, with funding from and in collaboration with the Justice Department's Office on Violence Against Women (https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024-06_TB-Model-Policy-Resource-LESM-Prevention-and-Accountability.pdf). This document was created to assist law enforcement agencies to work collaboratively with their own personnel, community partners, and legal counsel to develop their own agency-specific policies to address sexual misconduct committed by sworn and civilian personnel.

13. See Principle 7 (Implement Policies to Prevent Officer-perpetrated Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence and Hold Officers Who Commit These Offenses Accountable) of *Improving Law Enforcement Response* (see note 12).

11. Annual program assessment

SRO programs should be reviewed no less than annually to ensure that they are meeting expectations.

Agencies should conduct an annual assessment of their SRO programs and operations to ensure that they are adequately addressing all expectations, successes, and challenges. Though the content of annual assessments will vary based on the expected roles and responsibilities of the SRO, there are some topics all assessments should generally include. The assessment should include review and analysis of relevant disaggregated data (for example: arrest data, citation or other referral data, and court involvement (e.g., court charges or court supervision) to identify disparities in outcomes for students based on race, color, national origin, sex (including sexual orientation, intersex traits, and gender identity)), and disability and ensure nondiscrimination consistent with federal civil rights protections. It should also include an evaluation of incidents involving SROs to determine whether SROs are using their law enforcement powers judiciously, whether they are improperly involved in school discipline (either on their own initiative or at the request of school officials), and whether they are complying with all FERPA requirements (for example: increased student court involvement for misdemeanor level offenses or overlapping school disciplinary issues should be considered a warning sign of potentially negative effects of the SRO presence within a school district and closely monitored as part of the assessment). The assessment should include feedback from law enforcement leadership, school administrators, students, their families, community members, and other identified stakeholders as well as the SRO(s). The annual assessment should also focus on incorporating new statutes and procedures relevant to the SRO program. Leadership should frame the annual assessment as an opportunity to improve campus safety and positive engagements between students and law enforcement and reduce disparities, with a focus on collaboration and problem solving.

If this review identifies concerns, the school should involve students, families, school staff, the community, and other stakeholders to design and implement an action plan to address the concerns. If program strengths are identified, steps should be taken to build upon and continue them.

12. Duty assignments

When possible, SROs should have fixed duty assignments with one or a limited number of schools.

When possible, SROs should only be assigned to one or a limited number of particular campuses. “Floating” SROs have limited time to interact with students at different campuses in the community, and the SRO may only see students who are in crisis at each school rather than getting a more global view and understanding of student bodies. To promote communication and trust, SROs should remain on assignment at a school for at least three school years whenever possible, and annual rotations should be discouraged. Officers should have the opportunity to self-select out of the SRO position if they discover the position is not a good fit. Supervisors and schools should regularly review SRO performance using SRO-specific rating instruments to ensure a good fit between SROs and a particular school.

13. Community of practice and professional support

Law enforcement agencies should provide SROs with opportunities to interact with peers and national networks.

Where possible, agencies should encourage collaboration and engagement among SROs across regions or states. Many SROs are the only officer in their agency assigned to that role and have limited opportunities to share and collaborate with other school-based police. Collaboration and engagement with officers in other agencies can take the form of regular in-person or virtual meetings to address problems, conduct training, and discuss best practices for SROs. Membership in professional organizations such as the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) can provide additional opportunities for collaboration and training on SRO topics.

Conclusion

These guiding principles may change as we increase our understanding of how best to use SROs and other SBLEs to improve school safety and security and avoid any potential harmful effects arising from these roles.

Appendix. Additional Resources

Advocatr. Student self-empowerment tools to build safe schools funded via a schoolwide safety framework called SOARS (Student Ownership, Accountability, and Responsibility for School Safety). Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://advocatr.org/>.

Advancement Project. Proposed Memorandum of Understanding Between School District and Police Department. February 26, 2013. <https://advancementproject.org/resources/sample-agreements-police-schools/>.

Averted School Violence database. Anonymous reporting system for SROs and school professionals to share averted school violence events and lessons learned. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.avertedschoolviolence.org/>.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. Survey of Law Enforcement Personnel in Schools (SLEPS) Overview. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://bjslecs.org/SLEPS2019>.

Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities. December 8, 2017. <https://www.usccr.gov/reports/2019/beyond-suspensions-examining-school-discipline-policies-and-connections-school-prison>.

COPS Office Supporting Safe Schools page. Federal and stakeholder resources for SROs, including the documentary Beyond the Badge. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/supportingsafeschools>.

End Violence Against Women International. *Model Policy Resource: Law Enforcement Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Accountability*. 2024. https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2024-06_TB-Model-Policy-Resource-LESM-Prevention-and-Accountability.pdf.

Executive Order on Guaranteeing an Educational Environment Free from Discrimination on the Basis of Sex, Including Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity. March 8, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/03/08/executive-order-on-guaranteeing-an-educational-environment-free-from-discrimination-on-the-basis-of-sex-including-sexual-orientation-or-gender-identity/>.

FERPA Act FAQs. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/frequently-asked-questions>.

National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). School Resource Officer Program Recommendations. July 2021. https://www.nasro.org/clientuploads/members%20only/Member%20Resources/SRO_Best_Practices_0726.pdf.

National Center for Education Statistics. Primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://nces.ed.gov/>.

The National Center for School Safety. The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is the BJA STOP Program National Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) provider and is a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence. STOP grantees are funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office). Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.nc2s.org/about-us/>.

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Center. Technical assistance hub that provides information, resources, training, and services in the field of school and higher education emergency operations planning. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://rems.ed.gov/>.

School Safety Clearinghouse. Federal Government resources to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/>.

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Last modified January 10, 2020. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/know.html?src=ft>.

U.S. Department of Education Student Privacy Guidance. Student Privacy 101 website. Provides official guidance on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Accessed March 21, 2022. <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/>.

U.S. Department of Education. *A Training Guide for Administrators and Educators on Addressing Adult Sexual Misconduct in the School Setting.* 2017. <https://rems.ed.gov/docs/ASMTrainingGuide.pdf>.

U.S. Department of Justice. *Improving Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence by Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias.* 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/1509451/dl?inline>.

U.S. Department of Justice. *Framework for Prosecutors to Strengthen Our National Response to Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Involving Adult Victims.* 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/media/1352371/dl?inline>.

Youth.gov. Information resources from 19 federal agencies that support programs and services focusing on youth to promote positive healthy outcomes for children and teens. Includes links to federal funding opportunities for youth programs. Accessed March 21, 2022. <http://youth.gov/>.

About the COPS Office

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When law enforcement and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 138,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.

- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- More than 1,000 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than nine million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

Among the tens of thousands of officers hired under grants from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) since its establishment in 1994, local law enforcement agencies across the United States have hired school resource officers (SRO) nationwide to improve and preserve safety in schools. All SROs currently funded through COPS Office programs undergo special training for these positions; this publication presents additional principles and considerations to guide the COPS Office's work relating to SROs and jurisdictions choosing to implement SRO programs.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
145 N Street NE
Washington, DC 20530

To obtain details about COPS Office programs,
call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at **cops.usdoj.gov**.