

Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-Term Education Outcomes (A Sub-project of “Building Pathways to College Access and Beyond”)

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What We Studied

Police officers have become increasingly common in public schools in Texas as well as across the U.S. As police officers have increased their presence in public schools, their role in school discipline has often expanded. Though there is growing public debate about the consequences of police presence in schools, there is scant evidence of the impact of police on student discipline and academic outcomes.

This project provides the first quasi-experimental estimate of funding for school police on student outcomes, leveraging variation in federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants and detailed data on students from the Texas ERC. The rise in discipline is driven by sanctions for low-level offenses or school code of conduct violations.

Exploiting detailed data on over 2.5 million students in Texas, I find that federal grants for police in schools increase middle school discipline rates by 6%, with Black students experiencing the largest increases in discipline. I also find that exposure to a three-year federal grant for school police is associated with a 2.5% decrease in high school graduation rates and a 4% decrease in college enrollment rates.

The widespread use of police officers in public schools is a relatively recent development. While school police programs have gained popularity as a policy to protect students against rare but tragic school shooting events, in practice, these officers are often actively involved in the enforcement of school discipline.

When school police officers, or school resource officers (SROs), are involved in the daily lives of students, they have the capability to alter student behavior, disciplinary consequences, attachment to school, and educational attainment. Though the potential consequences of school police interventions are large, there have been few evaluations of their efficacy.

There is a large qualitative and ethnographic literature that documents the growth of harsh school sanctions policies and their disparate impact on low-income minority students (e.g. Nolan, 2011; Kupchik, 2010; Devine, 1996). This work has found that administrators' and teachers' roles in school discipline and classroom management are increasingly outsourced to SROs, and that SROs not only utilize their ability to arrest students for criminal offenses, but frequently participate in school discipline matters such as code of conduct violations (Kupchik, 2010). A recent paper by Owens (2017) finds that expansions in school police increase property and violent arrests for children younger than high school age on school grounds and increase drug arrests for high school aged juveniles off of school grounds.

How We Analyzed the Data

Studying the impact of school police presence on students has proved difficult for a number of reasons. School districts with higher rates of students in poverty, higher minority populations, higher levels of disciplinary actions, and lower graduation rates typically have a larger police presence (Kupchik & Ward, 2014). Given these selected characteristics, cross-sectional comparisons between school districts that have police and those that do not will be biased. However, even when researchers examine changes in police presence in a particular school district, the timing of investments in police may also be a function of changes in discipline and student behavior (Owens, 2017). If school districts choose to hire police when they experience an increase in negative student behaviors, then not only is discipline a function of policing but policing is also a function of discipline.

I use information on federal COPS grants to fund police in public schools to address these obstacles. The grant application and acceptance data used in this paper was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the COPS DOJ Office. I select grants based on whether the program type was focused on school police or if the applicant had their primary jurisdiction within public schools in Texas (e.g. school district police departments). In the study period of 1999-2008, approximately \$60 million was distributed to hire police officers in Texas public schools through the COPS office, representing about 7% of national funding through this program. I link this information to detailed student-level records that include demographic characteristics, student enrollment, disciplinary actions, high school graduation and college enrollment available through the Texas ERC.

I measure the impact of these grants on a range of student outcomes, using variation across years within school districts, rather than cross-sectional variation across school districts. Within a given district, I compare disciplinary outcomes for students enrolled in years when the district receives federal grant funding to students enrolled in years without this funding. I also adapt this model to consider secondary effects on high school graduation and college enrollment, by examining the impact of differences in exposure to grants across student cohorts within school districts.

I consider grant variables separately depending on whether the student is in middle school (7th and 8th grade) or high school (9th through 12th grade), entering these variables as interactions with grade type. I add this structure because in most districts students are physically separated in different school buildings across these grades and SROs likely have different capabilities for these different grade levels. For the long-term outcome model, the estimation approach considers future outcomes for cohorts of 7th graders. Here, the grant variables are defined in terms of years of exposure, as the number of years within a grant application or acceptance period. Exposure is calculated as a rate within the 6 years an "on-time" student would take to graduate high school between the 7th and 12th grades.

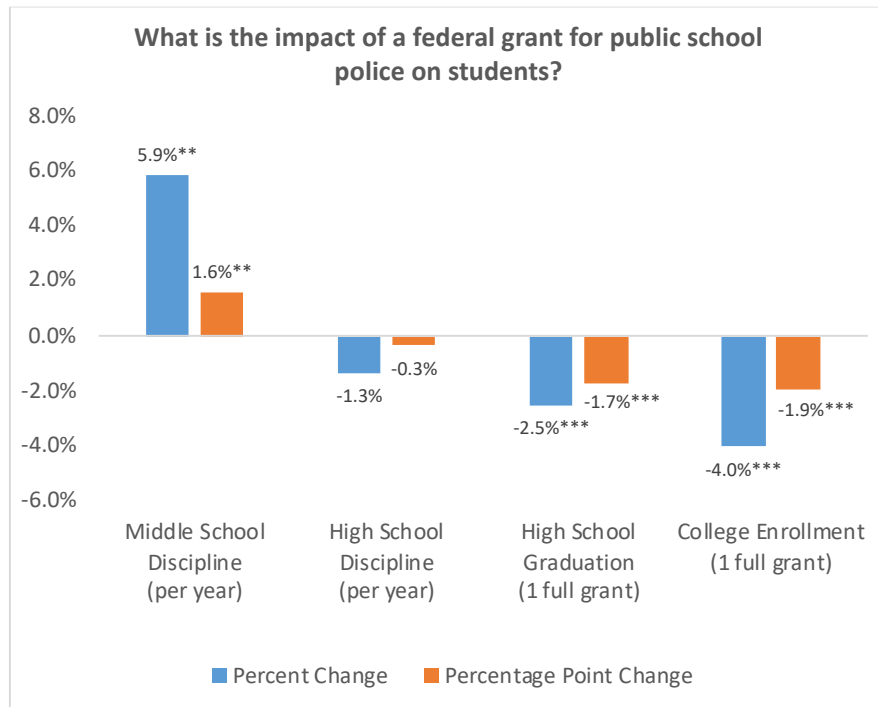
Critically, I also account for non-random school district decisions to seek funding for police in particular years by including grant application timing as a direct control in the model. This strategy complements and builds on Owens (2017), whose paper uses variation in the size of grant awards for school police but does not control for school district grant application decisions.

What We Discovered

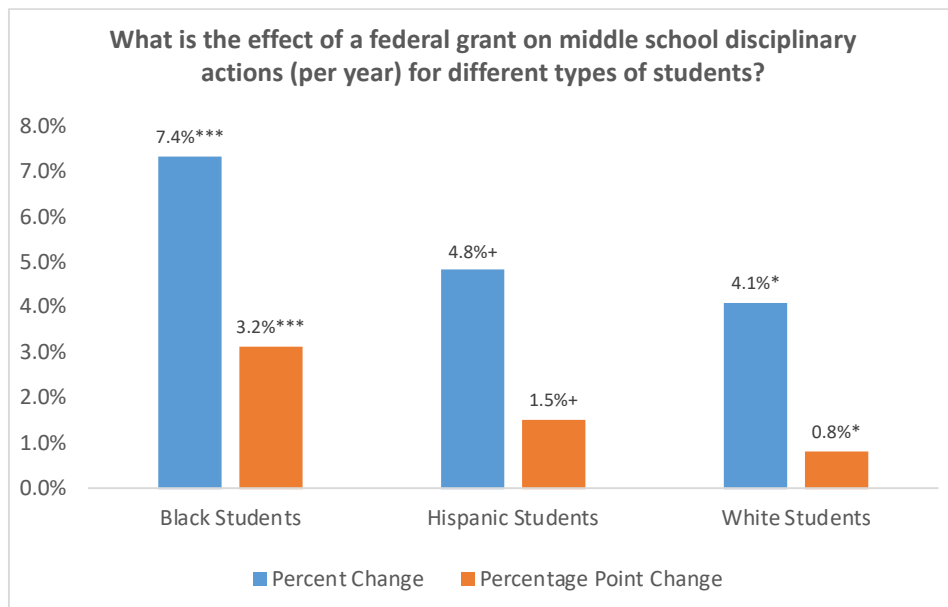
I find that receiving federal funding for school police in Texas increases disciplinary rates for middle school students by 6% but does not change high school disciplinary rates. This increase is driven by a rise in disciplinary actions for low-level offenses or school conduct code violations, rather than serious offenses. I also examine second-order effects on long-term educational outcomes and find suggestive evidence that exposure to a three-year federal grant for school police decreases high school graduation rates by approximately 2.5% and college enrollment rates by 4%.

The middle school discipline effect could be related to expansion of SROs from high schools to middle schools with the assistance of grant funding. Students enrolled in schools with CIS grants also have lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates. Police presence may create an adversarial school culture and alter the experience of

attending school. Likewise, additional disciplinary actions could stigmatize disciplined students and reduce student confidence. Through these channels, school police have the potential to reduce student attachment to school and student educational aspirations. These channels could impact the likelihood of graduating high school or enrolling in college.



I find that the impact of police funding differs across student race. While all student race groups display significant increases in disciplinary actions, the effects are largest for Black students. The effects correspond to a 7% increase in middle school discipline for Black students, and a 5% and 4% increase in middle school discipline for Hispanic and White students, respectively. I also find that the declines in college enrollment are concentrated among low-income students. These results are consistent with work that finds that school disciplinary policies have a disparate impact on poor students and minority students. The results imply that the effects of expansions in school police may be most pronounced for marginalized student groups.



References

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The University of Texas at Austin ERC is a research center and P-20/Workforce Repository site which provides access to longitudinal, student-level data for scientific inquiry and policymaking purposes. Since its inception in 2008, the Texas ERC's goal is to bridge the gap between theory and policy by providing a cooperative research environment for study by both scholars and policy makers. As part of its mission, the ERC works with researchers, practitioners, state and federal agencies, and other policymakers to help inform upon critical issues relating to education today. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to The University of Texas at Austin or any of the funders or supporting organizations mentioned herein including the State of Texas. Any errors are attributable to the authors.
