

School-based law enforcement

Placing police officers in schools to reduce crime and keep pupils and staff safe. This summary is part of the [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#), which presents the best available evidence on what works to reduce crime.

First published
10 July 2025

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
— No overall change	■ ■ ■ □ Strong	■ □ □ □ Low	No information	No information	No information

Focus of the intervention

School-based law enforcement (SBLE) involves placing police officers in schools to reduce crime and misconduct, on a part-time or full-time basis. There is no standard job description for SBLE, or standard training, but the role often includes patrolling schools, referring and investigating crimes, supporting education programmes, and acting as a liaison between police forces and schools.

SBLE interventions can include working arrangements such as:

- contracting officers to schools from a local police force/law enforcement agency
- school district police departments, in which schools or school districts employ their own police officers

What research is this summary based on?

This Crime Reduction Toolkit summary is based on one meta-analytic review covering 32 studies. 28 of the primary studies were based on evidence from the USA, two from the UK and one from Canada. The review focused on crime and behaviour outcomes including criminal justice system contact, violence, weapon-related outcomes and substance-related outcomes. Further non-crime outcomes included school discipline, perceived safety and learning outcomes.

The review performed separate analyses for studies where schools were the unit of analysis, and students. The 32 studies included in the review yielded a combined total of 1002 effect sizes. Of these:

- 520 effect sizes (from 27 studies) related to crime and behaviour outcomes where schools were the unit of analysis
- 349 effect sizes (from four studies) examined crime and behaviour outcomes where students were the unit of analysis

Since the review aggregated both crime and behaviour outcomes (for example, discipline and learning), the overall evidence of this summary is taken from the findings where it is possible to disaggregate the effect of SBLE on crime outcomes.

Effect – how effective is it?

The research suggests that SBLE has not had a statistically significant impact on crime overall. SBLE was not associated with any specific measure of crime when schools or students were the unit of analysis. In relation to contact with the criminal justice system, violence, weapon-related outcomes and substance-related outcomes, the review found that SBLE had no statistically significant effect.

The review found that when schools were the unit of analysis, there was a statistically significant increase in combined crime and behaviour-related outcomes in schools using SBLE, when compared to schools without SBLE. However, when students were the unit of analysis, the review found there was no statistically significant difference in crime and behaviour between students in schools using SBLE, and schools without SBLE.

Non-crime outcomes reported by the review included discipline and perceived safety.

Discipline:

- When schools were the unit of analysis, schools using SBLE had higher rates of discipline than schools without SBLE. This was a statistically significant finding based on 126 effect sizes from 11 studies.
- When students were the unit of analysis, students in schools using SBLE had higher experienced discipline than students in schools without SBLE. This was a statistically significant finding based on 73 effect sizes from two studies.

Perceived safety:

- When schools were the unit of analysis, schools using SBLE had higher perceived safety than schools without SBLE. This was a statistically significant finding based on seven effect sizes from two studies.
- When students were the unit of analysis, no statistically significant difference was found between perceived safety in schools with and without SBLE. This finding was based on 12 effect sizes from two studies.

How robust is the review evidence?

The quality of review methods used to assess the impact of SBLE was strong.

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out. The evidence is taken from one meta-analytic review covering 32 studies, which demonstrated a high-quality design in terms of search strategy, a valid statistical analysis including assessment of effect sizes, consideration of publication bias, as well as consideration of the validity of the way outcomes are measured and/or combined. However, the review did not consider the weighting of variables or provide an overall effect size for the intervention. Furthermore, risk of bias in the primary studies limited the ability of the review authors to infer causal relationships between SBLE and crime and behaviour outcomes.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The quality of review methods used to assess how SBLE works was low.

Following a logic of crime deterrence, SBLE programmes are hypothesised to reduce crime by increasing police surveillance and interactions with students and staff, leading to increased perceptions of the risk of being caught committing criminal offences and anti-social behaviour. In turn, this is anticipated to decrease criminal and anti-social behaviour and increase perceptions of safety, leading to more positive relationships between police and young people and between police and schools. Additionally, it is thought that SBLE may improve student attendance, test scores and perceptions of the school.

However, the review's findings in relation to crime and behaviour (when schools were the unit of analysis) ran counter to this hypothesis. The review noted that SBLE programmes may produce negative consequences by criminalising students, encouraging legal responses, rather than administrative responses handled by the school. SBLE programs may also increase crime and behaviour problems by encouraging greater punishment of students, heightened fear of crime, and increased detection of offending due to the presence of police in schools. It was suggested that schools with SBLE experienced higher rates of crime and behaviour problems than schools without SBLE because of their higher rates of exclusionary discipline.

Although the review identified potential mechanisms, the review did not test whether these mechanisms were responsible for the outcomes observed. As noted, a causal relationship between SBLE and crime and behaviour outcomes could not be inferred.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review provided insufficient information to assess the contexts in which SBLE might work best.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review provided insufficient information to assess how to implement SBLE. The review gave no account of how the intervention was implemented, nor of any implementation challenges encountered by the primary studies.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review provided insufficient information to assess how much SBLE costs. The review did not mention the costs or benefits of SBLE, and no formal economic analysis was provided.

General considerations

- The majority of the evidence is from the USA, so caution should be taken when applying to other geographical contexts, including the UK.
- As no effect sizes are reported from the primary studies used in the meta-analysis, it is not possible to report whether SBLE reduced or increased crime and behaviour problems in individual studies.
- Limitations in the evidence meant that the review could not infer causal relationships between SBLE and crime and behaviour outcomes in schools.
- Future research could focus on exploring how SBLE is implemented and how this affects outcomes, and also differences between types of school and makeup of the school population.

Summary

Research suggests that SBLE has had no effect on crime overall. When schools were the unit of analysis, the review found a statistically significant increase in crime and behaviour-related outcomes in schools using SBLE, when compared to schools without SBLE. However, the review did not find any association between SBLE and any specific measure of crime or violence. When students were the unit of analysis, the effect of SBLE on crime and behaviour outcomes was non-significant.

Since the review did not empirically test the mechanisms by which SBLE may increase or decrease crime and behaviour-related outcomes in schools, the findings should be treated with caution. Additional evidence is needed to identify the mechanisms by which SBLE exerts an effect, the conditions in which SBLE might work best, how to implement SBLE and its economic cost.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

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Fisher WB and others. 2023. ['School-based law enforcement strategies to reduce crime, increase perceptions of safety, and improve learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools: A systematic review'](#). Campbell Systematic Reviews, 19:e1360.

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