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# The Prevalence of School Resource Officers in North Carolina's Public Schools

MASTER'S PROJECT

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# Table of Contents

- Executive Summary** ..... 2
- Question** ..... 3
- Background** ..... 4
- Landscape Analysis** ..... 5
- Literature Review** ..... 7
- Methodology** ..... 9
- Results** ..... 12
  - **Table 1: Prevalence of SROs in responsive LEAs** ..... 12
  - **Map 1: Percentage of schools with SROs, by LEA** ..... 13
  - **Map 2: Percentage of students attending schools with SROs, by LEA** ..... 13
  - **Table 2: Prevalence of SROs by school characteristic** ..... 15
  - **Chart 1: Percentage of N.C. public schools with and without SROs** ..... 17
  - **Chart 2: Percentage of N.C. public schools (multi-level) with and without SROs** ..... 17
- Discussion** ..... 18
- Conclusion** ..... 21
- Acknowledgments** ..... 21

## Executive Summary

No one knows how many of North Carolina's public schools have school resource officers (SROs) assigned to them or the impact their presence has on students. For the last decade, policymakers have expanded funding and support for increasing the presence of SROs statewide, yet the state's Department of Public Instruction does not collect information about SRO assignment from school districts. To address this crucial data need, this report assesses the prevalence of SROs in North Carolina and analyzes it based on school characteristics.

To determine which schools had SROs assigned on a full-time, part-time, or rotating basis, I contacted every school district in the state. With 95 of 115 districts responding, I estimated the percentage of schools with SROs and the percentage of the state's students attending those schools. I also estimated the prevalence of SROs based on schools' racial demographics, rates of economic disadvantage and chronic absenteeism, and school level (elementary, middle, high).

Approximately 79 percent of schools — serving 84 percent of North Carolina's students — have SROs assigned on at least a rotating basis. It can be said with certainty that between 62 and 84 percent schools — serving between 66 and 87 percent of students — have SROs. Almost all middle and high schools have SROs assigned, along with two-thirds of elementary schools. SROs appear to be more prevalent at majority white schools and schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism than at majority non-white schools and schools with low chronic absenteeism. SRO prevalence is similar at schools with high and low rates of economic disadvantage.

Determining the prevalence of SROs statewide is the first step in determining the impact of their presence on students. Existing empirical evidence suggests the presence of SROs does not improve middle school safety and increases the criminalization of student behavior, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. Stakeholders should use this report as a starting point to evaluate whether this holds true for all of North Carolina's students, informing decisions about whether to add or remove SROs from the state's public schools.

## Question

### *How many of North Carolina's public schools have school resource officers assigned to them?*

Early in 2020, William Lassiter, Deputy Secretary of Juvenile Justice for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, told a small group of Duke graduate students that most of his department's cases come from schools. He reported decreases in case referrals during schools' breaks and stated frankly: "School should not be a risk factor" for children coming under correctional control.<sup>1</sup>

Is school really a risk factor for students becoming justice-involved? Researchers have approached studying this potential "school-to-prison pipeline" from various angles, including examinations of school segregation, attendance rates, and student poverty in relation to school discipline and safety. Recent nationwide reflections on the role of police in the communities they serve have prompted specific interest in the role of school resource officers (SROs) in the school-to-prison pipeline.

To study the role of SROs in the school-to-prison pipeline in North Carolina, the first information researchers need is a simple accounting of which schools have SROs assigned to them. But school districts are not required to report this information to the state's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), so no such list exists.<sup>2</sup> Without it, no statewide assessment of the role of SROs can be made.

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<sup>1</sup> William Lassiter, Deputy Secretary of Juvenile Justice for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, presentation to former State Senator Floyd McKissick, Jr.'s "Criminal Justice Issues" course, Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, January 29, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> K.C. Elander, NC DPI Senior Data Analyst, in conversation with the author, March 4, 2021.

## Background

SROs are typically understood to be law enforcement officials permanently assigned to schools for the purpose of enhancing school safety. They can be from a local police department, sheriff's office, or other law enforcement agency in the community. Few schools across the nation had SROs in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The proliferation of SROs began in the 1990s in response to a series of high-profile school shootings.<sup>3</sup> The National Association of School Resource Officers, established in 1991, estimates there are now between 14,000 and 20,000 SROs currently in service across the country.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the number of SROs in schools is uncertain, so is their relationship with the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the ongoing trend of referring students to law enforcement for minor infractions or penalizing them with suspension or expulsion, increasing the likelihood of future incarceration.<sup>5</sup> The pipeline disproportionately impacts students of color and has grown on pace with the general trend of mass incarceration.<sup>6</sup> The pipeline is of particular concern in North Carolina, where Black students are almost six times more likely than white students to be arrested at school and school activities. For the 2015-2016 academic year, that was the fourth highest arrest disparity in the nation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew T. Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no. 3 (January 2009): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.008>; Michael P. Krezmien et al., "Juvenile Court Referrals and the Public Schools: Nature and Extent of the Practice in Five States," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 26, no.3 (August 11, 2010): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986210368642>; Jason P. Nance, "Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," *Washington University Law Review* 93 (2016): 931, <https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/facultypub/766/>; Kenneth Alonzo Anderson, "Policing and Middle School: An Evaluation of a Statewide School Resource Officer Policy," *Middle Grades Review* 4, no. 2 (2018): Article 7, 1, <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol4/iss2/7/>.

<sup>4</sup> "FAQ National Association of School Resource Officers," *National Association of School Resource Officers*, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.nasro.org/faq/>.

<sup>5</sup> Nance, "Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," 923.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 924-925; Evie Blad and Alex Harwin, "Black Students More Likely to Be Arrested at School - Education Week," *Education Week*, January 25, 2017 <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/01/25/black-students-more-likely-to-be-arrested.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly Hinchcliffe and Tyler Dukes, "NC's 'alarming' disparity of black student arrests among worst in the country," *WRAL*, May 24, 2018, updated July 13, 2018, <https://www.wral.com/nc-s-alarming-disparity-of-black-student-arrests-among-worst-in-country/17515727/>.

## Landscape Analysis

In 2013 – at least partially in response to the December 2012 Newtown school shooting – the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill that matched funding for SROs at a rate of two dollars in state funds for every one dollar of local funds.<sup>8</sup> Because the General Assembly also requires the Board of Education to report annually on crime and violence in schools, Kenneth Alonzo Anderson of Howard University was later able to determine whether middle school safety had improved from the time before the state subsidized SROs to the period after.<sup>9</sup> In a summary of his work published by Brookings in late 2018, Anderson concluded, “Increasing investments in school resource officers does not lead to safer schools.”<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the publication of Anderson’s findings – in direct response to Parkland school shooting in February 2018 – the General Assembly approved a one-time, \$35 million spending package to improve school safety measures, including the hiring of SROs.<sup>11</sup> Months later, DPI published a report on the “North Carolina School Resource Officer Survey” in which they estimated the number of SROs statewide to be 1,200 (though the authors provided no basis for their estimate).<sup>12</sup> Despite the lack of evidence indicating SROs improve school safety and the lack of certainty over how many SROs were actually assigned to schools, Governor Roy Cooper’s Special Committee on School Shootings recommended placing an SRO in every public school across the state in its 2019 final report.<sup>13</sup> The General Assembly has not yet adopted that recommendation, making now an ideal time to learn more about the role of SROs.

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, “Policing and Middle School,” 3 & 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Alonzo Anderson, “Does More Policing Make Middle Schools Safer?” *Brookings* (blog), November 8, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/11/08/does-more-policing-make-middle-schools-safer/>.

<sup>11</sup> Will Doran, “Students are back in school, and with an extra \$35 million for security and mental health help,” *The News & Observer*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article217785115.html>.

<sup>12</sup> North Carolina Center for Safer Schools, “North Carolina School Resource Officer Survey,” June 5, 2018, <https://files.nc.gov/dpi/documents/cfss/law-enforcement/2018-srosurvey.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Special Committee on School Shootings, Governor’s Crime Commission, “Final Report,” January 7, 2019, vii, [https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/Special\\_Committee\\_on\\_School\\_Shootings\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/Special_Committee_on_School_Shootings_Report_Final.pdf).

The prevalence of SROs in North Carolina became a flashpoint during the summer of 2020 as uprisings for racial justice erupted across the nation in response to the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Many activists called for the removal of SROs as part of larger police reform and abolition efforts. This movement included North Carolinians such as Aissa Dearing, a student organizer from Durham. Interviewed about her activism on WUNC, she explained, “I would argue that the institution of policing is a bad institution. It’s not about a few good SROs reaching out to mentor students. It’s about the institution as a whole and what effect that institution has on a school.”<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of racial disparity in school discipline is at the heart of current calls for the removal of SROs in districts such as Wake County. In September 2020, a coalition of students and other advocates for educational equity launched the #CounselorsNotCops campaign to remove SROs from Wake County Public School System and replace them with trained counselors.<sup>15</sup> This coalition highlighted the fact that “Black students accounted for 73% of school-related entries into the youth justice system in Wake County during the 2018-19 academic year while only making up 22% of students.”<sup>16</sup> The school board rejected this proposal, but is revisiting its memorandum of understanding governing SROs in the district.<sup>17</sup>

Renewed interest in racial justice combined with Anderson’s evidence that SROs don’t improve middle school safety in the state may encourage North Carolina’s policymakers to reconsider whether they support the presence of SROs in public schools. With some LEAs already reviewing their own policies, access to data on SRO assignment statewide is urgently needed.

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<sup>14</sup> Stacia Brown and Frank Stasio, “NC Communities Examine The ‘Resource’ School Resource Officers Offer,” *WUNC*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.wunc.org/post/nc-communities-examine-resource-school-resource-officers-offer>.

<sup>15</sup> Allison Riggs, “Students, Advocacy Organizations Urge Wake County Schools to Fund #CounselorsNotCops,” *Southern Coalition for Social Justice*, September 1, 2020, <https://southerncoalition.org/counselorsnotcopswakecounty-pressrelease/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> T. Keung Hui, “Wake will keep police in schools, but vows to address concerns of minority students,” *The News & Observer*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article249507925.html>.

## Literature Review

While both school resource officers and the school-to-prison pipeline are topics of popular debate, there is little empirical research on the relationship between them. The debate tends to surface after high-profile school shootings and similarly high-profile killings of Black people by police. The general arguments are as follows: a) public schools need *more SROs* to prevent future school shootings, or b) public schools need *fewer SROs* because they perpetuate the racist school-to-prison pipeline. Existing empirical evidence supports the latter argument.

The most commonly cited research by news media and advocacy organizations — and the original model for this research project — is Matthew T. Theriot’s 2009 analysis of the presence of SROs in a southeastern U.S. school district. SROs in this district were assigned only to schools within the city limits. Schools outside of city limits but within the county did not have SROs.<sup>18</sup> Using this sample, Theriot was able to compare thirteen schools with SROs to fifteen schools from the same district without SROs. Controlling for a school size, race, economic disadvantage, and attendance in a series of regressions, he found “having an SRO did not predict more total arrests, but did predict more arrests for disorderly conduct.”<sup>19</sup> These findings were “consistent with the belief that SROs contribute to criminalizing student behavior.”<sup>20</sup>

Two more regularly referenced studies found their own links between schools, SROs, and juvenile justice referrals. One focused on the school-to-prison pipeline by examining school referrals to the juvenile courts in five states from 1995 to 2004 to determine whether schools were increasingly relying on police to handle misbehavior.<sup>21</sup> Researchers concluded that “schools are generally referring a greater proportion of students to the juvenile court system over time and represent a direct link between schools and the juvenile delinquency system.”<sup>22</sup> This supports the idea that schools are a risk factor for children coming under correctional

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<sup>18</sup> Theriot, “School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior,” 282.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>21</sup> Krezmien et al., “Juvenile Court Referrals and the Public Schools,” 273.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.



control. The other study relied on restricted data from the 2009–2010 School Survey of Crime and Safety.<sup>23</sup> The researcher controlled for a number of variables and found, “a police officer’s regular presence at a school is predictive of greater odds that school officials refer students to law enforcement for committing various offenses, including lower-level offenses that school officials and teachers should handle themselves.”<sup>24</sup> This is the strongest available evidence that the prevalence of SROs contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Despite empirical evidence indicating the presence of SROs leads to the criminalization of student behavior, political leaders in North Carolina continue to support the expansion of SRO assignment. They do so without knowing which schools already have SROs assigned to them or whether there are patterns in those schools’ characteristics. A better understanding of SRO prevalence is the necessary first step for helping policymakers and stakeholders make informed decisions on behalf of North Carolina’s students.

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<sup>23</sup> Nance, “Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” 959.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 983.

## Methodology

For an accurate picture of the prevalence of SROs in North Carolina, I contacted all 115 public local educational agencies (LEAs) under state jurisdiction over the course of three months at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021. Using phone calls and emails, I asked each LEA which schools in their jurisdiction had SROs assigned to them. LEAs (also referred to as *districts*) reported having SROs assigned full-time to specific schools, part-time to multiple schools, or on a rotation physically checking in on designated schools. For the purposes of this report, a school in any of these circumstances is considered to have an SRO assigned.

Ninety-five LEAs responded to my inquiries and will be referred to as *responsive LEAs* for the remainder of this report (the 20 districts that did not respond will be referred to as *nonresponsive LEAs*). All but one of the responsive LEAs had SROs assigned to one or more of their schools, the exception being Hyde County Schools, a small district on the east coast with just three schools serving 576 students, according to data from 2019 [see Maps in “Results”].

To broadly determine the prevalence of SROs, I created three categories of schools: 1) schools with SROs in responsive LEAs, 2) schools without SROs in responsive LEAs, and 3) schools in nonresponsive LEAs. Using DPI’s School Report Card dataset for 2019, I tabulated how many schools were in each of these categories, then calculated corresponding percentages. I applied the same methodology to determine the number and percentage of students in each of the categories above [see Table 1 in “Results”].

Taking into consideration the schools and students in nonresponsive LEAs, I also calculated the minimum and maximum number and percentage of schools with SROs. To do this, I made two assumptions; first, I assumed none of the schools in nonresponsive LEAs had SROs. This provided a minimum number and percentage of schools with SROs assigned statewide. Then I assumed all of the schools in nonresponsive LEAs had SROs, providing the maximum number and percentage of schools with SROs assigned statewide. In this way, I established a narrow range for estimated SRO assignment.

While the focus of this project is the collection of data for the purposes of determining which schools have SROs assigned, I did utilize some publicly available data to look for basic patterns among schools with and without SROs. Using both DPI's School Report Card and Statistical Profile datasets for 2019, I sought patterns based on variables utilized by Theriot: race, economic disadvantage, and attendance. I did not include Theriot's variable of school size due to the likelihood of this variable being a proxy for school level, with high schools typically having larger student populations than middle or elementary schools. Instead, I assessed the prevalence of SROs at different school levels: elementary, middle, and high school. Most schools fall into these categories, but there are also combinations of elementary/middle, middle/high, and elementary/middle/high schools, which I refer to as *multi-level schools*.

Like Theriot, to study race I used the binary variables of *majority white* and *majority non-white* because previous studies had linked these variables to school discipline outcomes.<sup>25</sup> I also used Theriot's measure of *economically disadvantaged*, which is based on the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch according to federal income eligibility guidelines.<sup>26</sup> If more than half of students at a school qualified for free or reduced lunch, that school was considered *majority economically disadvantaged*. If less than half of students at a school qualified for free or reduced lunch, that school was considered *minority economically disadvantaged*. For attendance, I used DPI's *chronic absenteeism* measure. A chronically absent student is defined by DPI as: "a student who is enrolled in a North Carolina public school for at least 10 instructional days at any time during the school year, and whose total number of absences is equal to or greater than 10 percent of the total number of days that such student has been enrolled at such school during such school year."<sup>27</sup> I calculated the median rate of chronic absenteeism (0.1452 percent) and if a school had a rate of chronic absenteeism higher than the median, I considered that school to have *high chronic absenteeism*. If the school had a

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<sup>25</sup> Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior," 283.

<sup>26</sup> "Income Eligibility Guidelines," USDA Food and Nutrition Service, last modified 3/10/21, accessed 4/15/21, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/income-eligibility-guidelines>.

<sup>27</sup> North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction, "School Attendance and Student Accounting Manual," 2020-2021: 28-29, <https://files.nc.gov/dpi/documents/fbs/accounting/manuals/sasa.pdf>.

rate of chronic absenteeism lower than the median, I considered that school to have *low chronic absenteeism*.

Using 2019 data from the School Report Card and Statistical Profile, with the methodology outlined above, I calculated the percentage of schools with SROs in responsive LEAs based on a school's level, racial demographics, economic disadvantage, and chronic absenteeism. I also calculated minimum and maximum SRO prevalence for each of these characteristics. These percentages serve as estimates for SRO prevalence statewide [see Table 2 in "Results"]. Using these two datasets in tandem can result in small point-in-time discrepancies because of when the data are collected for each dataset.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the percentages reported in the School Report Card when applied to the raw numbers from the Statistical Profile could result in small variations, but any such variation would be minor and not significant for the purposes of the calculations in this report.

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<sup>28</sup> Elander, in conversation with the author.

## Results

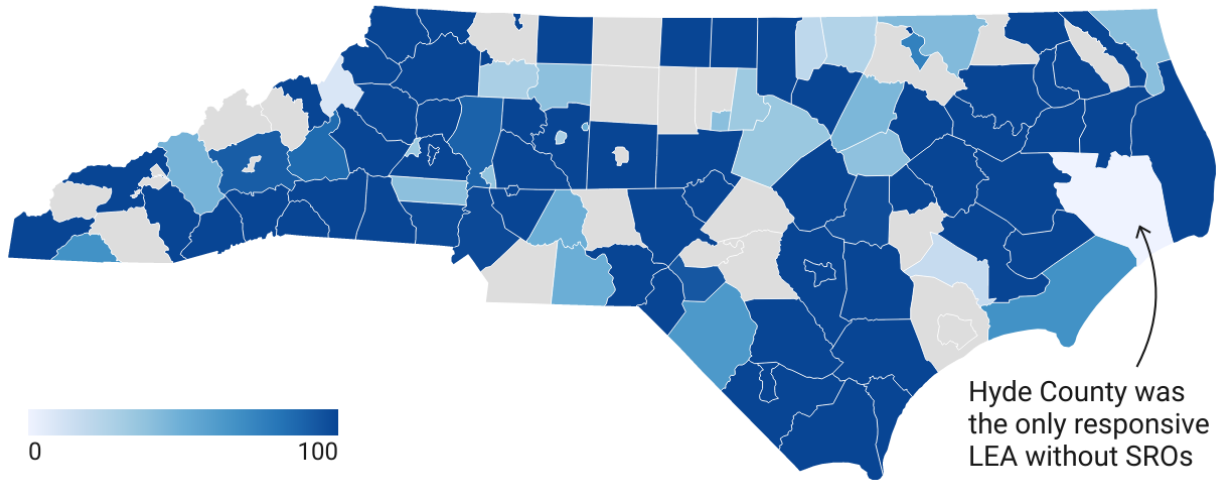
*Approximately 79 percent of North Carolina’s public schools have SROs assigned to them and an estimated 84 percent of the state’s public-school students attend those schools.*

The vast majority of North Carolina’s students attend schools with SROs assigned on at least a rotating basis. Between 62 and 84 percent of schools have SROs assigned. The 95 responsive LEAs are home to 1,937 of North Carolina’s 2,461 public schools under DPI’s jurisdiction. Of the 1,937 schools in responsive LEAs, 1,536 (79.3%) have SROs. This represents 62.4 percent of all schools, which is the minimum percentage of schools in the state with SROs if none of the schools in nonresponsive LEAs have an SRO. Assuming every remaining school (524) from the nonresponsive LEAs has an SRO, the maximum percentage of schools with SROs is 83.7 percent. If the percentage of SRO assignment for the schools in nonresponsive LEAs is the same as that of responsive LEAs, a reasonable estimate would be that 79.3 percent of schools have SROs assigned to them [see Map 1 & Table 1].

**Table 1: Prevalence of SROs in responsive LEAs**

	Number (%) of Schools	Number (%) of students
All LEAs under NC DPI	2,461 (100.0)	1,421,281 (100.0)
Nonresponsive LEAs	524 (21.3)	300,650 (21.2)
Responsive LEAs	1,937 (78.7)	1,120,631 (78.9)
With SROs in responsive LEAs	1,536 (79.3)	938,098 (83.7)

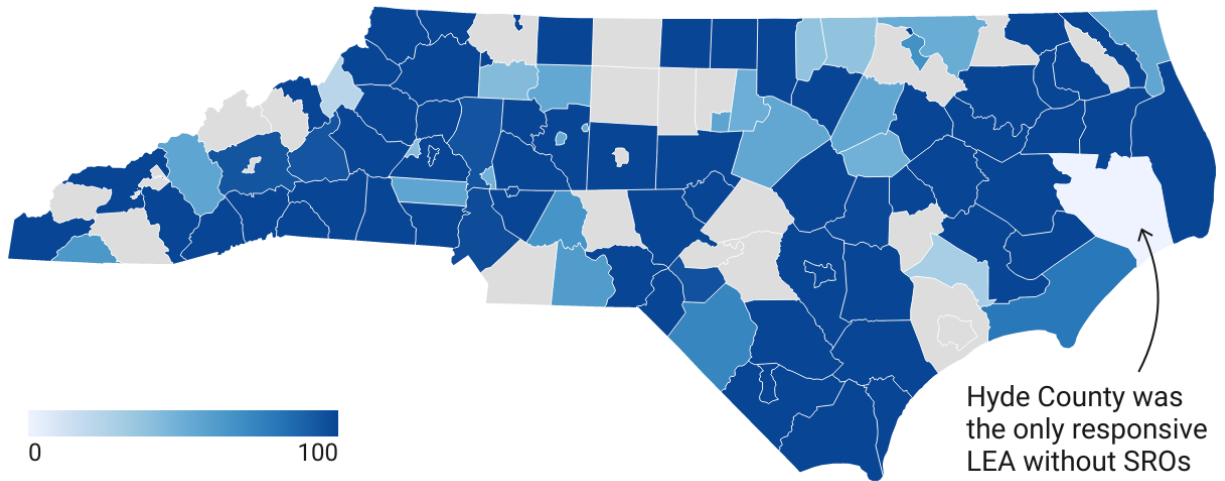
## Map 1: Percentage of schools with SROs



*Grey LEAs did not respond to inquiries*

Map: Katie Dukes, MPP Candidate, 2021 • Source: Katie Dukes • Created with Datawrapper

## Map 2: Percentage of students attending schools with SROs



*Grey LEAs did not respond to inquiries*

Map: Katie Dukes, MPP Candidate, 2021 • Source: Katie Dukes • Created with Datawrapper

Between 66 and 87 percent of students attend a school with one or more SRO assigned on at least a rotating basis. The responsive LEAs contain 78.9 percent of North Carolina's public-school students. Of those students, 83.7 percent attend schools with SROs. This represents 66.0 percent of all public-school students in the state, which is the minimum percentage of students in the state who attend schools with SROs if none of the schools in nonresponsive LEAs have an SRO. Assuming every remaining school from the nonresponsive LEAs has an SRO, the maximum percentage of the state's students attending schools with SROs is 87.2 percent. If the percentage of SRO assignment for the schools in nonresponsive LEAs is the same as that of responsive LEAs, a reasonable estimate would be that 84 percent of students attend schools with SROs, because nonresponsive LEAs have approximately the same average number of students as the responsive LEAs [see Map 2 & Table 1].

Based on the methodology outlined in the previous section, approximately 83 percent of majority white schools have SROs assigned to them, with a minimum of 68 percent and a maximum of 85 percent. For majority non-white schools, approximately 75 percent have SROs, with the true percentage falling somewhere between 56 and 81 percent. Whether the majority of students at a school are economically disadvantaged or not, the likelihood of having an SRO assigned to that school is similar — 81 and 78 percent respectively. At schools where the minority of students are economically disadvantaged, the true percentage of SROs falls between 65 and 82 percent; for schools with a majority of students being economically disadvantaged, the range is 61 to 86 percent. Approximately 85 percent of schools with high chronic absenteeism have SROs assigned to them, compared to 75 percent of schools with low chronic absenteeism. The range for high chronic absenteeism is 63 to 88 percent; for low absenteeism its 62 to 79 percent [see Table 2].

**Table 2: Prevalence of SROs by school characteristic**

	Estimated % of all schools w/SROs	Min. % schools w/SROS	Max. % schools w/SROS
Majority white	83.3	68.4	85.4
Majority non-white	75.1	56.6	81.2
Minority economically disadvantaged	77.8	64.7	81.5
Majority economically disadvantaged	80.8	60.7	85.5
Low chronic absenteeism	74.9	61.9	79.2
High chronic absenteeism	84.5	63.1	88.4
Elementary	66.7	51.6	73.4
Middle	97.1	76.8	97.7
High	91.7	71.6	93.5
Elementary/Middle	89.0	84.9	89.5
Middle/High	88.5	76.7	90.0
Elementary/Middle/High	68.8	52.4	76.2

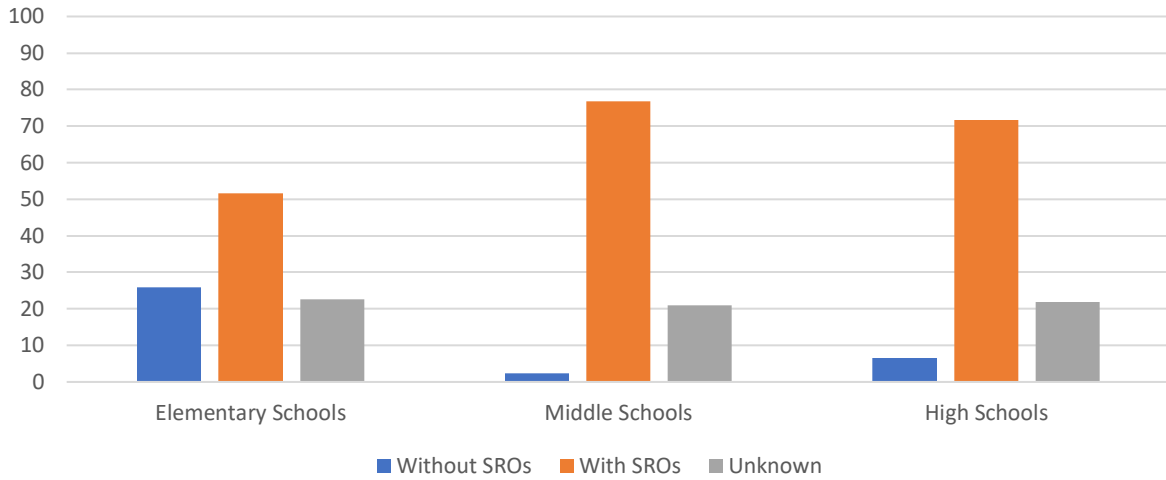


It's worth noting that majority non-white schools, majority economically disadvantaged schools, and schools with high absenteeism were all underrepresented among responsive LEAs, as evidenced by the 25-percentage point range between their minimums and maximums (compared to 17 percentage points between minimums and maximums for majority white, minority economically disadvantaged, and low absenteeism schools). This indicates that the data on SRO prevalence based on school characteristics in this report is more accurate for schools that are majority white with low rates of economic disadvantage and chronic absenteeism. If data on SRO prevalence from nonresponsive LEAs were collected, it might make a more significant difference in the results for majority non-white and majority economically disadvantaged schools, as well as those with high chronic absenteeism.

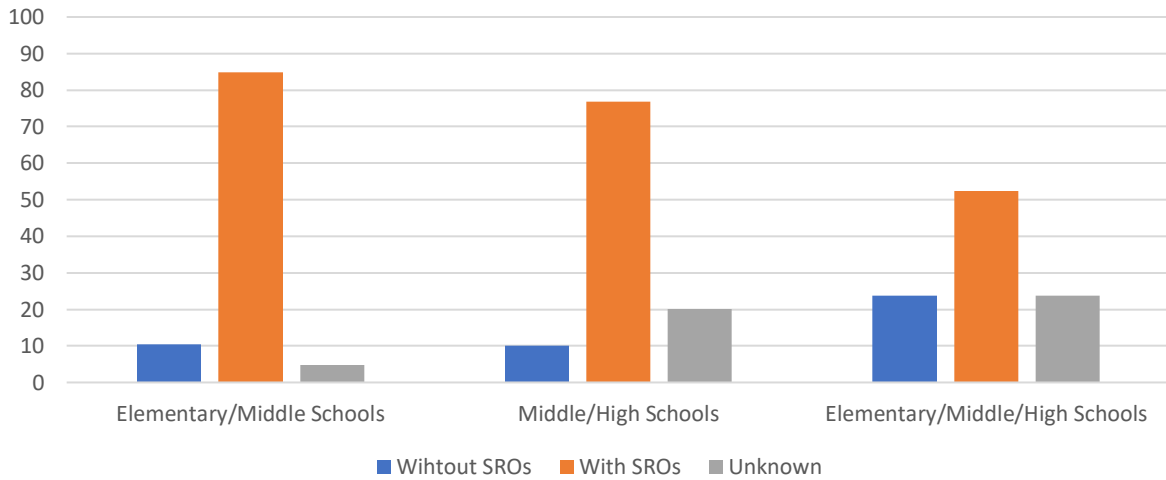
Two-thirds of all elementary schools in responsive LEAs have SROs assigned. The same is true for 97 percent of middle schools and 92 percent of high schools. Taking into consideration schools in nonresponsive LEAs, between 52 and 73 percent of elementary schools, 77 to 98 percent of middle schools, and 72 to 94 percent of high schools have one or more SRO assigned on at least a rotating basis [see Table 2 & Chart 1].

Almost all schools (92 percent) fall into the categories of elementary, middle, or high, but the remaining schools fall into the multi-level category outlined in the previous section. These schools could be a combination of elementary/middle, middle/high, or elementary/middle/high. In responsive LEAs, 89 percent of both elementary/middle and middle/high schools had SROs, compared to 69 percent of elementary/middle/high schools [see Table 2 & Chart 2].

**Chart 1: Percentage of N.C. public schools with and without SROs**



**Chart 2: Percentage of N.C. public schools (multi-level) with and without SROs**



## Discussion

The most notable finding in this project is the high prevalence of SROs in schools across the state, particularly based on school level, with the vast majority of middle and high schools across the state having an SRO assigned to them. One might expect SROs to be most prevalent among high schools, but they're slightly more prevalent in middle schools. Perhaps most surprising is their prevalence among elementary schools. More than half of the state's elementary schools are assigned one or more SROs on at least a rotating basis. One reason prevalence may be high among younger students is parental concern for school safety in the wake of school shootings. But such shootings are vanishingly rare, and empirical evidence demonstrates more SROs in middle schools do not improve school safety.<sup>29</sup> Empirical evidence also shows the presence of SROs increases the likelihood of referrals to juvenile justice departments.<sup>30</sup>

One puzzling finding is the percentage of majority white schools with SROs is eight points higher than majority non-white schools with SROs. This contradicts general patterns of over-policing in communities of color, patterns that are typically thought to exist in schools as well. One possible explanation could be the role of white parents. As explained in the *New York Times* podcast series "Nice White Parents," white parents are more likely to be affluent, giving them the flexible time to become involved in parent-teacher associations or school board meetings, and giving them outsized influence in decision-making processes.<sup>31</sup> Just as white parents created re-segregated schools over the last several decades, perhaps they are now insisting on greater policing in these schools to protect their children from the perceived threats of school shooters or non-white students against whom they are implicitly or explicitly biased.

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<sup>29</sup> Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior;" Krezmien et al., "Juvenile Court Referrals and the Public Schools;" Anderson, "Policing and Middle School."

<sup>30</sup> Nance, "Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline."

<sup>31</sup> Chana Joffe-Walt, "Nice White Parents," *The New York Times* (podcast), <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/nice-white-parents/id1524080195>.

Missing data posed a challenge in this project. Twenty LEAs were nonresponsive — representing 300,650 students — but I was able to make estimates about the prevalence of SROs in those districts based on information from responsive LEAs. However, there were also data missing from DPI’s School Report Card dataset (the source of data on economic disadvantage and chronic absenteeism) when compared to the Statistical Profile dataset (the source of data on school level and student population, including race). Additionally, six schools in six separate LEAs were part of the SRO data collection process and the Statistical Profile but did not appear in the School Report Card. Ten schools in the School Report Card were missing information about economic disadvantage and thirty schools were missing information about chronic absenteeism (in both cases, this included the aforementioned six missing schools). These missing data could impact some results, but any impact is likely small due to the large overall size of the population represented in the datasets. Indeed, even assuming every school with missing data did not have an SRO, the estimates would still suggest that the vast majority of schools of all characteristics have SROs.

The problem of missing data could have been avoided if DPI or the General Assembly required schools to report SRO assignment. As it stands, this report’s analysis could quickly become outdated as districts reconsider their SRO policies. For ongoing and comprehensive analysis of the role SROs may play in the school-to-prison pipeline, DPI could include questions about SRO assignment when it collects data for the School Report Card. Questions might include:

1. Do you have one or more SROs assigned to your school on at least a rotating basis?
2. How many SROs are assigned full-time? Part-time? On rotation?
3. How many hours per week do SROs spend on your campus?
4. From which law enforcement agencies are your SROs assigned?
5. Where do you receive funding for SROs?

Requiring LEAs to report the prevalence of SROs in their schools would enable researchers to start answering important questions about how SROs function in schools and how they impact interactions between students and the juvenile justice department. This information could also

empower students, parents, advocates, and school boards to make local decisions about the prevalence and role of SROs in their own schools.

There are many additional types of analysis for which the new data in this report could be used. For example, I chose to create three binary variables: majority white or majority non-white, economic disadvantage above or below 50 percent, and rate of chronic absenteeism above or below the median. This is sufficient for a broad overview of the prevalence of SROs but breaking the data into quintiles might offer a more nuanced view. Perhaps a closer examination of specific racial categories would illuminate new patterns of SRO prevalence. Additionally, I adopted Theriot's variables, but other researchers could easily choose their own. There's also potential to follow up with responsive LEAs to acquire data on whether SROs are present full-time, part-time, or on a rotating basis. How many SROs are employed and by whom are also potential future questions. Clearly, this project is merely a starting point and there is much more research needed.

## Conclusion

As the deputy secretary of juvenile justice for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety has said, “School should not be a risk factor” for children being referred to his department.<sup>32</sup> At this point in time, it’s difficult to know whether the presence of SROs makes school a risk factor because DPI does not require schools to report whether they have SROs assigned. Existing empirical evidence suggests the presence of SROs does not make North Carolina’s schools safer and generally contributes to the criminalization of student behavior.<sup>33</sup> For policymakers considering whether to place SROs in every school across the state or remove them on the basis of racial equity and justice, basic information about their prevalence is the first step to informed decision-making.

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<sup>32</sup> Lassiter, presentation.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, "Policing and Middle School: An Evaluation of a Statewide School Resource Officer Policy;" Krezmien et al., "Juvenile Court Referrals and the Public Schools: Nature and Extent of the Practice in Five States;" Nance, "Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline;" Theriot, "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior."