Systematic review evidence supports the criticism that school-based law enforcement criminalizes students and schools

School-based law enforcement (SBLE) includes a variety of forms of sworn law enforcement officers stationed in schools on at least a part-time basis. Although SBLE is intended to maintain school safety, critics claim it is ineffective in this role and has negative consequences for students. The existing literature does not find that SBLE makes schools safer. The evidence suggests that SBLE has detrimental consequences, particularly for exclusionary discipline.

What is this review about?
The past several decades has witnessed a steady growth of the presence of SBLE around the world. There is no standard definition for SBLE, nor is there a common training, job description, or chain of authority. In the USA, the two most common approaches are to contract officers from a local law enforcement agency to work in the school, and school district police departments, in which the local school or district employs its own sworn police force.

There is debate about whether SBLE is effective or harmful.

This study synthesizes the empirical literature that examined the relationship between SBLE presence and school-related outcomes including (a) crime and behavior problems; (b) perceptions of school; and (c) student learning.

What studies are included?
This review includes quantitative studies that examine any outcomes related to crime and behavior, perception, and learning outcomes. Included studies must have compared outcomes in units with SBLE to units without SBLE (including different dosages of SBLE, such as increasing SBLE presence).

What are the main findings of this review?
Contrary to what is intended, schools with SBLE had higher rates of crime and behavior problems than schools without SBLE. This was primarily driven by higher rates of exclusionary discipline,
with no detectable improvements to school crime or violence.

We also found that students in schools with SBLE tended to feel safer at school, although this finding is less trustworthy because it is based on very little data.

None of our other analyses showed that SBLE had beneficial effects.

These results suggest that SBLE is an ineffective practice for keeping schools safe, and even has detrimental consequences.

The findings are based on studies that vary in the extent to which we can infer causal relationships between SBLE and the outcomes of interest, so we urge caution in interpreting this as a cause-and-effect relationship. Still, the study’s findings are consistent across studies with different methodological characteristics.

What do the findings of the review mean?

These findings suggest that SBLE is not an effective strategy for maintaining school safety and lead to harm for students in the form of exclusionary discipline. However, limitations in the strength of the evidence affect the ability to claim that these relationships are causal.