

IN-DEPTH

HISTORY IN THE HALLWAYS: A TIMELINE OF POLICE IN OUR SCHOOLS



1950s

The first police officer permanently assigned to an American school was in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s, according to the Texas State Safety Center. The main goal of the program was to foster better relationships between students and police officers. The officer served not only as a security guard, but a counselor. After a positive report from the school's administration, other districts took notice and officers in schools became more common. Though police have become more widespread in public schools, private schools are less likely to employ SROs, according to the NASRO.

The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was passed. The law encouraged states to pass their own "zero tolerance policy" laws, which prohibits firearms on school campuses. With new enforcement policies in place, police became the answer to enforce these laws in schools. Other government actions like increased grant funding also contributed to a rise in SRO employment. In 1999, following the Columbine massacre, The Department of Justice Office of Community Policing Services (COPS) began the "COPS in Schools" (CIS) grant program, according to an article in Justice Quarterly.

1994

**"I STAND FIRM
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April 20, 1999

Two high schoolers murdered 13 people at Columbine High School in what is one of the most deadly school shootings to date. Columbine has since been recognized in American history as one of the most devastating school shootings, and a wake-up call for school safety. After the shooting, there was a notable increase in police presence in schools, with an emphasis on security. In the 1970s, police officers were present in about 1% of American schools, according to The National Institute of Education. By 1997, the figure rose to 22%. After Columbine, according to the National Crime Victimization survey, students reported 54% of schools having an SRO or security guard, while in 2015, the statistic became 69.5%.

Most KHS students know Officer Donald Douglas. They see him standing in the Essex parking lot greeting students as they make their way to first period, standing in the hallways during lunches and passing periods and sitting in his office near the library.

While many students find the presence of a police officer commonplace, there has been a nationwide surge in the discussion of the police's role in schools.

This dialogue follows recent calls for racial justice and restructuring of the policing system. Subsequently, the roles and effectiveness of SROs have come into question. While opinions vary in both the country and the Kirkwood community, many people, regardless of their beliefs, wonder how officers have come to be a part of schools in the first place. (TKC)

STORY

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Kirkwood High School has had a SRO since 1999, when Officer Mike Bales of the Kirkwood Police Department began to work at KHS. Since then, the SRO program within KSD has expanded. KSD currently employs four law enforcement officers through the Kirkwood Police Department: Officer Donald Douglas (Kirkwood High School), Officer Larry Nilges (North Kirkwood Middle School), Officer Daniel McCune (Nipher Middle School) and Officer Steven Olsen (elementary schools). KSD also employs former St. Louis County Police Department Detective Martise Scott as their Safety and Security Coordinator.

With recent conversations about racial justice and the policing system following the death of George Floyd, there have been several calls for schools to terminate their contracts with police officers. In June, the Missouri American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Executive Director, Luz Maria Henríquez, sent a letter to various school districts - many of which are in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The letter points to cities like Denver, Milwaukee and Portland that are "rethinking their SRO programs" and asks Missouri schools to join them.

Protests were organized in downtown St. Louis calling for an end to police presence in schools. They demanded that all SROs be removed from schools, and more funding toward counseling, Black studies curriculum and anti-racism training. At one protest led by the Keep Kids in Class Coalition, 8-year-old KSD student Nolan Davis spoke out against policing in schools. With the prompt of what he would do with a million dollars in schools, Davis advocated for increases in counselor and teacher training. His mom, Kristin, attended with him. "Do you know how many resources, how many counselors or social workers or teacher training that that money could go to," Kristin said.

June 2020

1999



According to St. Louis Public Radio, the letter was sent to nine Missouri school districts, including five in the St. Louis area: Jennings, Ritenour, University City, Ferguson-Florissant and Hazelwood. Mo Canady, the executive director of the NASRO, responded to the letters in a statement appearing on the NASRO website. The letter condemned racism, and said that they were "dismayed to learn that some school systems have recently discontinued or considered discontinuing their SRO programs." The letter also said that some communities choose not to take part in training provided by the NASRO for SROs, and recognized that change regarding SROs may be necessary in some communities: "If systemic, agency-wide law enforcement issues exist in such communities - and we acknowledge that is unfortunately possible - resolution is necessary and could require drastic measures," the letter read. "We hope, however, that rather than eliminating SRO programs, communities will consider transforming them, as needed, with best practices."

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"The presence of police in schools has not really been shown to have any significant benefits, so it's not like it's money that I feel is getting put to good use." Last year, \$6.3 million of the St. Louis Public Schools budget went towards security, according to an article from the St. Louis American. When asked if Kirkwood has heard any feedback on the removal of SRO officers, Scott said, "It has come up. But I stand firm on keeping our police officers in school based on what we have here at Kirkwood and the officers we employ here, and they're doing a great job. Their relationships with our students [are] meaningful and needed because sometimes you'll step out here and hear these stories about policemen, and some have done wrong, but that doesn't mean in total, that that's the walk of all police officers."