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Students as Risk Objects: Willful White Ignorance in the School Policing Debate

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Abstract: Activists in K-12 educational settings have challenged the reach of the criminal legal system into school contexts through the pervasive use of school resource officers (SROs). Community organizations, student leaders, and teachers (among others) have challenged the ways in which SROs perpetuate systemic racism and structural injustice in schools, highlighting the carceral dimensions present in school disciplinary policies. However, within this debate administrators and policy makers often invoke a safety narrative which must override concerns about the harms produced by use of police in educational contexts. In this paper we apply the lens of epistemic injustice to the school safety debate, examining the ways in which willful White ignorance plays a role in the continuation of structural racism in the school policing debate. We introduce two alternative conceptual frameworks for understanding school policing—the universal safety narrative (USN) and the institutional protection and societal stability framework—to illuminate the ways discourse around school safety neglects the historical legacy of school policing, research on the

efficacy of SROs, and overarching concerns around how carcerality undergirds school disciplinary systems. We argue that willful White ignorance plays an important role in maintaining the epistemic conditions that both create and sustain the USN.

Keywords: school resource officers; safety; epistemic injustice; willful White ignorance

Los estudiantes como objetos de riesgo: La ignorancia blanca deliberada en el debate sobre la presencia policial en las escuelas

Resumen: Activistas en entornos educativos de K-12 han cuestionado la expansión del sistema penal dentro del contexto escolar mediante el uso generalizado de oficiales de recursos escolares (*school resource officers* [SROs]). Organizaciones comunitarias, líderes estudiantiles y docentes (entre otros) han denunciado las maneras en que los SROs perpetúan el racismo sistémico y la injusticia estructural en las escuelas, destacando las dimensiones carcelarias presentes en las políticas disciplinarias escolares. Sin embargo, dentro de este debate, los administradores y responsables de políticas suelen invocar una narrativa de seguridad que debe prevalecer sobre las preocupaciones respecto a los daños producidos por el uso de la policía en contextos educativos. En este artículo aplicamos la lente de la injusticia epistémica al debate sobre la seguridad escolar, analizando las formas en que la ignorancia blanca deliberada desempeña un papel en la continuación del racismo estructural dentro de este debate. Introducimos dos marcos conceptuales alternativos para comprender la vigilancia policial escolar—la narrativa universal de seguridad (NUS) y el marco de protección institucional y estabilidad social—con el fin de ilustrar cómo el discurso sobre la seguridad escolar pasa por alto el legado histórico de la vigilancia policial en las escuelas, la investigación sobre la eficacia de los SROs y las preocupaciones más amplias sobre cómo la lógica carcelaria sustenta los sistemas disciplinarios escolares. Sostenemos que la ignorancia blanca deliberada desempeña un papel importante en el mantenimiento de las condiciones epistémicas que crean y perpetúan la NUS.

Palabras clave: oficiales de recursos escolares; seguridad; injusticia epistémica; ignorancia blanca deliberada

Estudantes como objetos de risco: A ignorância branca intencional no debate sobre policiamento escolar

Resumo: Ativistas em contextos educacionais de K-12 têm questionado a expansão do sistema de justiça criminal para dentro das escolas por meio do uso generalizado de oficiais de recursos escolares (*school resource officers* [SROs]). Organizações comunitárias, líderes estudantis e professores (entre outros) têm denunciado as formas pelas quais os SROs perpetuam o racismo sistêmico e a injustiça estrutural nas escolas, destacando as dimensões prisionais presentes nas políticas disciplinares escolares. No entanto, dentro desse debate, administradores e formuladores de políticas frequentemente invocam uma narrativa de segurança que deve prevalecer sobre as preocupações com os danos causados pelo uso da polícia em contextos educacionais. Neste artigo, aplicamos a lente da injustiça epistêmica ao debate sobre segurança escolar, examinando as formas pelas quais a ignorância branca intencional desempenha um papel na continuidade do racismo estrutural no debate sobre policiamento escolar. Introduzimos dois quadros conceituais alternativos para compreender o policiamento escolar— a narrativa universal de segurança (NUS) e o quadro de proteção institucional e estabilidade social—para evidenciar como o discurso sobre segurança escolar negligencia o legado histórico do policiamento nas escolas, as pesquisas sobre a eficácia dos SROs e as preocupações mais amplas sobre como a lógica carcerária sustenta os sistemas disciplinares escolares.

Argumentamos que a ignorância branca intencional desempenha um papel fundamental na manutenção das condições epistêmicas que criam e sustentam a NUS.

Palavras-chave: oficiais de recursos escolares; segurança; injustiça epistêmica; ignorância branca intencional

Students as Risk Objects: Willful White Ignorance in the School Policing Debate

In recent years, calls for the abolition of school resource officers (SROs) have taken the stage in both local and national debates. Many major cities across the United States (US) have engaged in community dialogues and actions to reform their school policing policies in the wake of national protests against the murder of unarmed Black¹ citizens by police officers (Riser-Kositsky et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2021). While some reform efforts have successfully modified the funding and implementation of school policing, districts often face significant challenges in fully abolishing their use of SROs in school settings (Flowers, 2023). In several recent examples, changes to policing policies have been met with persistent calls for schools to ensure safety by reinstating recently removed SROs or finding similar alternatives in the form of school security personnel (Blume, 2022; Flowers, 2023).

Noting the pervasive injustices present in the school policing systems, educational researchers have rightly critiqued school discipline systems as carceral as well as cathartic, sanctioning and expelling Black and Brown students to protect dominant interests (Williams, 2024). Notably, Turner and Beneke (2020) have critiqued these trends through the lens of racial capitalism, highlighting the ways in which therapeutic discourse in the SRO debate has often overshadowed calls for racial equity and further cemented the status quo. Expanding on these important critiques, we examine the role of epistemic injustice—wrongs people experience in their capacities as knowers and participants in knowledge-making practices—in the discourse surrounding SROs. It is our view that the racial injustices that are present in this context also raise important questions of epistemic injustice that are worthy of closer attention from policy makers and school leaders. In this paper, we engage in applied philosophical inquiry (Siegel et al., 2018), examining the role of one form of epistemic injustice—*willful White ignorance*—in discourse surrounding SROs.

Within this conceptual and theoretical paper, we engage in the methodology of empirically engaged philosophy (Wilson & Santoro, 2015). With this approach, we advance a philosophical analysis of a contemporary educational issue—school policing—that is grounded in empirical evidence and offers both conceptual tools and a theoretical lens for understanding the educational issue in question. In what follows we examine the role of willful White ignorance in the context of the SRO and school policing debate. We introduce two conceptual frameworks for understanding school policing as an epistemic phenomenon: the universal safety narrative (USN) and the institutional protection and societal stability framework. In outlining these two frameworks, we argue that despite countervailing evidence that supports an understanding of school policing as a tool for institutional protection and societal stability, willful White ignorance perpetuates the dominance of the USN by creating and sustaining the epistemic conditions under which this narrative can continue. By applying the lens of epistemic injustice, we can understand how willful

¹ In this paper, we follow the style guide of the National Association of Black Journalists in capitalizing colors whenever they are used to describe race. With this usage, we intend to indicate the socially constructed nature of these racial identifiers.

White ignorance creates and sustains the USN as a dominant epistemic resource by allowing for the dismissal of alternate epistemic resources that challenge this narrative.

We begin in the next section by introducing epistemic injustice and willful White ignorance as philosophical frameworks that ground our analysis. We, then, briefly discuss our empirically engaged philosophical methods. In the substantive core of the paper, we introduce a dominant epistemic resource that we call the USN and examine challenges to it presented through multiple bodies of evidence—historical accounts of the development of SRO programming in schools, student testimony, and contemporary social scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of SROs and their impact on school safety. Based on this evidence, we introduce a second alternative epistemic resource for understanding school policing, which presents school policing as a tool for institutional protection and societal stability. Through this analysis, we articulate the USN as a dominant epistemic resource used in safety debates to justify use of policing practices that disproportionately harm Black and Brown students by suggesting that they benefit everybody. More specifically, we offer a theoretical argument for interpreting the tension between these two frameworks. We argue that the USN is deployed in epistemically unjust ways that reflect willful White ignorance and undermine the alternative epistemic resources offered by students, scholars, and activists that challenge this narrative. To conclude, we call upon school leaders, school board members, and legislators to recognize the role of dominant epistemic resources in undermining the counternarratives of non-dominant knowers and urge them to reconsider their commitments to the use of school policing structures.

Epistemic Injustice and Willful White Ignorance

Philosophers in feminist epistemology have developed *epistemic injustice*—a theory of wrongs done to people in their capacities as knowers and participants in knowledge-making practices—as a powerful theoretical tool for understanding the role of ignorance in discourse and decision-making (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007). Contemporary theorizing about epistemic injustice draws attention to the ways that some *epistemic resources* (e.g., knowledge, concepts, and understandings) dominate shared practices of inquiry, while other epistemic resources are discredited or unrecognized. In the context of the SRO debate, epistemic injustice offers an important lens through which to examine communicative interchanges between educational institutions and their constituents, highlighting those epistemic resources that are employed within decision-making processes. Through analysis of how different epistemic resources are received or ignored in discourse, we identify barriers for marginalized interlocutors within testimonial exchange.

Moreover, by offering an analysis that employs the concept of willful White ignorance, we aim to draw attention to the often invisible role that Whiteness plays in this debate. The concept of *willful ignorance* elucidates the ways in which institutions and social relationships perpetuate conditions of ignorance for dominant knowers and sheds light on how social conditions silence those in non-dominant groups (Bailey, 2007; Medina, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012). In her account of willful hermeneutical ignorance, Pohlhaus (2012) argues that this form of ignorance is both agential and structural, exploring the responsibility of individual agents for their willful ignorance within social conditions that undermine cooperative relationships between dominant and non-dominant knowers.

Moreover, the concept of *White ignorance* situates Whiteness as a group identity with epistemic dimensions and offers important insights into how racial identity plays a role in discourse (Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 2007). According to Mills (2007), White ignorance is the epistemic structure that sustains White supremacy through the maintenance of social structures and institutions that maintain White privilege and dominance (Mills, 2007). As Medina (2012) argues, White ignorance is an epistemic position that results in “a kind of hermeneutical inability of privileged White subjects to

recognize and make sense of their racial identities, experiences, and positionality in a racialized world” (p. 202). One way that White ignorance functions is through the reliance on dominant epistemic resources that ignore or exclude alternative epistemic resources that challenge White supremacy. In our previous work, we argued that a form of *willful White ignorance* plays a central role in safety discourses in higher education (Taylor & Perez-Mugg, 2022). In this paper, we extend the application of this philosophical lens to the use of SROs in K-12 schools.

Methodological Approach

In our analysis of school policing, we are undertaking empirically engaged philosophy, a tradition that has a long history in philosophy of education and has been gaining momentum in the last decade as applied philosophers of education seek to bring philosophical resources to bear on empirically grounded issues in education (Levinson & Newman, 2015; Taylor, 2021; Wilson & Santoro, 2015). Empirically engaged philosophy comes in several forms: applying philosophical concepts to interpreting what is at stake in empirical cases; studying the philosophical questions that arise within teaching, learning, and educational policy; and conducting new empirical research grounded in philosophical conceptions (Taylor, 2021; Wilson & Santoro, 2015). Here, we engage in the first form, offering a conceptual and theoretical analysis. Within this methodological approach, empirical cases can be identified through a combination of media sources and social science research evidence (Taylor, 2021). Conceptual and theoretical tools from the discipline of philosophy are then applied to deepen understanding of the case. Here, we apply the philosophical concepts drawn from the philosophical study of epistemic injustice and willful White ignorance to an analysis of school policing, examining trends in school policing in the US as well as the case of recent student activism against school policing in Los Angeles.

First, we introduce two alternative conceptual frameworks for understanding school policing, one dominant rationale in which school policing is posited as a tool in service of universal safety and a second framework that understands school policing as in service of institutional protection and societal stability. In line with methods of empirically engaged philosophy, we reviewed historical, social science, and popular media evidence to inform our understanding of national debates surrounding SROs. In presenting these three kinds of evidence, we are not embarking on new empirical research but rather reviewing existing evidence to bring to the fore epistemic resources that challenge the USN that are available to school leaders and policy makers. More specifically, the three types of evidence we introduce are drawn from our review of historical resources on school policing, one recent case of student activism against school policing in Los Angeles, and social scientific evidence on the effects of school policing particularly on Black and Brown students. We selected the case of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), in part, due to the extensive student activism associated with the case and the wealth of publicly available documentation surrounding it. While the SRO debate has often included student voices, the prominence of those voices in the case of LAUSD informed our choice. Further, we introduce a media interview with student leaders as an important piece of empirical evidence because we believe that student testimony constructs a powerful counternarrative to the USN that has too often gone unexamined. In our analysis, we highlight points of convergence among the historical evidence, the LAUSD case, and the social scientific evidence. These points of convergence support a second conceptual framework for understanding school policing, which we introduce as an alternative to the USN.

Second, we move from the introduction of these two alternative conceptual frameworks to the application of the lenses of epistemic injustice and willful White ignorance in the theoretical portion of the paper. Here, we offer a theoretical interpretation of the persistence of the USN

despite evidence supporting the alternative institutional protection and societal stability framework. We argue that a particular form of epistemic injustice, willful White ignorance, helps explain the persistent tension between the two conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, we aim to offer conceptual and theoretical resources that are grounded in evidence for understanding the discourse surrounding school policing.

The Universal Safety Narrative

Characterizations of school safety, and the use of school policing, often articulate safety as a priority for all students, framing safety as a universal good that is attainable for all. Here, we introduce this way of characterizing school safety as a conceptual framework (one type of epistemic resource) that we label “the USN” and provide some examples of its appearance in educational research and public policy discourse. School safety researchers have often investigated the role of security and policing in contributing to student bodily safety and the role of school staff in fostering student psychological safety (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Cornell et al., 2021; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Mubita, 2021). There is an underlying assumption in these bodies of research that safety is an important and universal good which schools owe their students (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Mubita, 2021). Within these analyses, safety has often been presented as containing two important strands—bodily and psychological safety—both of which are important for all students (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Cornell et al., 2021; Nickerson et al., 2021). In articulating the importance of bodily safety, researchers have often drawn attention to the role schools play in protecting students from physical harm and school-based violence (Cornell et al., 2021; Mayer & Aster, 2023). In these studies, researchers often point to school surveillance, security, and policing as systems that maintain students’ bodily safety (Cornell et al., 2021; Mayer & Aster, 2023). Similarly, research around psychological safety has highlighted school personnels’ responsibility to prevent acts of peer-to-peer aggression and cultivate classroom spaces of belonging (Cornell et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Research on psychological safety highlights the use of positive classroom and school systems (e.g., positive behavioral interventions and supports [PBIS] to prevent bullying and create positive school discipline systems; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Yet the discourse assessing school safety has been overwhelmingly color-evasive, treating safety as a neutral and common good that can be achieved similarly for all students (Edwards, 2021). These accounts support an underlying USN that has been utilized to support the continued use of SROs and security measures within school systems.

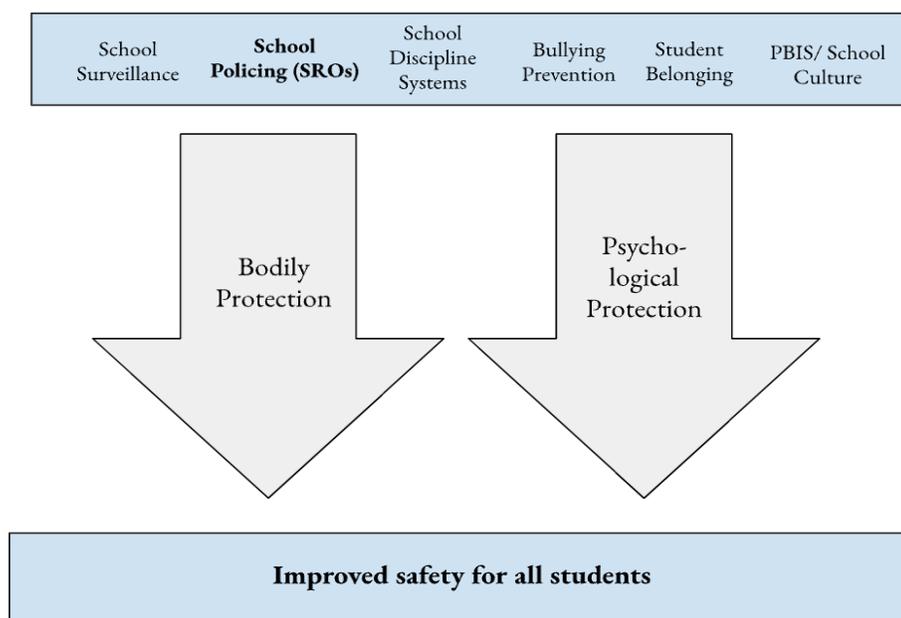
Similarly, the USN is readily apparent in public policy discourse where national organizations refer to the benefits that security measures provide students. For example, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), a 125-year-old organization, identifies their founding principle as promoting “the safety and well-being of all children and youth” (National PTA, n.d.). In a joint statement from August 2020, the National PTA (along with national associations of school counselors and psychologists, SROs, and secondary principals) responded to concerns about harms SROs might pose to Black and Brown students (American School Counselor Association et al., 2020). The statement endorses the view that SROs contribute positively to the physical and psychological safety of all students and that harms that policing has caused in some schools can be resolved through improved training of SROs (American School Counselor Association et al., 2020). Parents often also endorse the necessity of SROs for student safety. For example, Los Angeles parent Maria Agueda voiced her support for police using canines for randomized drug searches in schools (Blume, 2022). Similarly, LA parent Prentis Hill voiced concerns over a student bringing a gun into his son’s middle school, stating that he’d like to see more policing, not less (Blume, 2022). In the case of LAUSD, this narrative prevailed even in the face of substantive student testimony

challenging the USN (Blume, 2022). In these discussions, national organizations and community members rely on the USN to anchor public decision-making under the assumption that safety measures are equally protective of the entire student body.

In Figure 1 we offer a visual representation of the USN, drawing on empirical research to illustrate its components. This framework proposes that school policing is one of various inputs—including school surveillance, school discipline systems, bullying prevention, student belonging, and PBIS—that result in improved safety for all students through the mechanisms of bodily and psychological protection. The USN functions as an epistemic resource that is taken up in discourse to suggest that safety is a neutral good that is equally offered to all students. Safety is articulated as a central institutional function for schools, a good to be produced by institutional structures through the implementation of security and surveillance systems.

Figure 1

The Universal Safety Narrative



Challenges to the Universal Safety Narrative: Whose Safety?

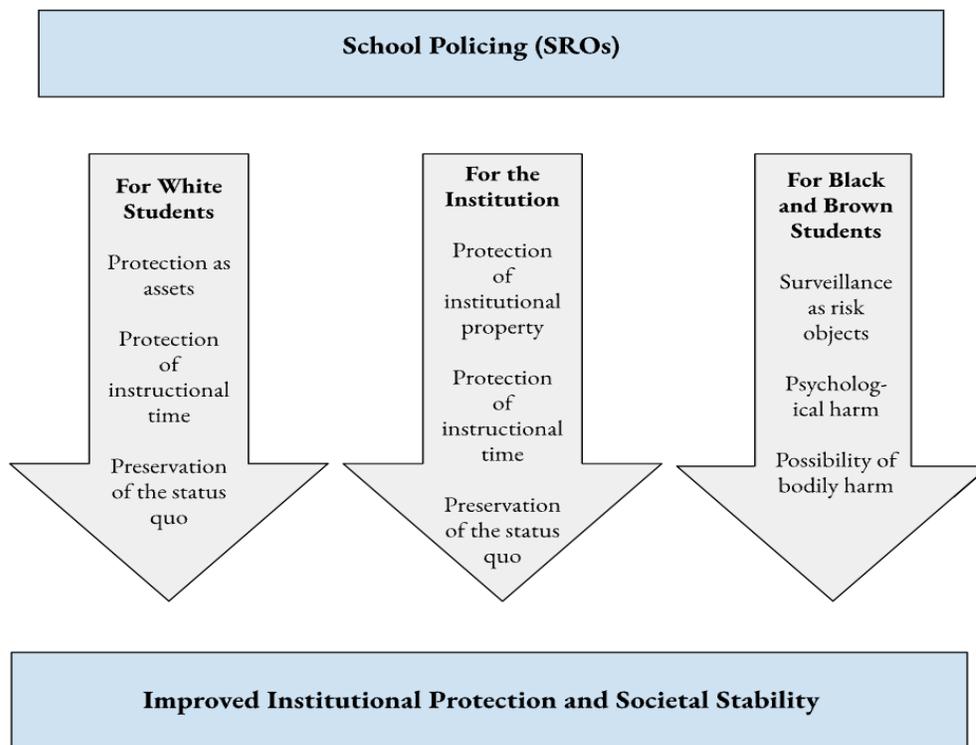
A number of existing critiques question the veracity of the USN and offer alternative epistemic resources that are worthy of consideration (Turner & Beneke, 2020; Zabala-Eisshofer et al., 2024). These critiques point to an alternative framework for understanding school policing—the institutional protection and societal stability framework. Figure 2 outlines the components of this framework, highlighting that the resulting outcome of school policing is institutional protection and societal stability rather than universal safety for all students. This framework notes the ways in which outcomes diverge for different students and the institution that are overlooked by the USN framework.² This framework illustrates that students are not treated as a universal group but have

² This framework is intended to represent trends in group experiences and does not imply that individual student experiences of school policing within racial and ethnic groups do not vary. We focus here on race and

diverging experiences based on their race and ethnicity in the context of school safety. In what follows, we introduce the three bodies of evidence that ground this alternative framework. First, we interrogate the historical development of school law enforcement programming as a source of universal safety. Next, we introduce new epistemic resources rooted in student discourses and activism to challenge the notion that students perceive safety as a universal good within schools. Then, we examine new developments in educational research regarding school safety.

Figure 2

Institutional Protection and Societal Stability Framework



The Historical Development of SRO Programming

The first epistemic resource that challenges the veracity of the USN is a brief unpacking of the historical development of school police forces. The Los Angeles School Police Department is widely considered the first school policing program, originating in 1948 (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). In the 1950s, SROs and school policing structures grew out of pressure from White families and school officials to intervene in newly segregated schooling systems (Lindberg, 2015). Flint, Michigan was the first city to introduce a permanent law enforcement officer within its school system as a part of a “community policing strategy” (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). During desegregation, school police became a common structure aimed at preventing school violence and keeping young people out of trouble. From its inception, the Department of Education’s

ethnicity. Incorporation of evidence on the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities and other student groups could add further layers of challenge to the USN.

implementation of SROs centered on the monitoring and control of students of color, with media accounts in the 1960s reporting the dangers of groups of Black students taking “over certain areas and terroriz[ing] residents” and maintaining “continual youth warfare” (ACLU, 2017, p. 4). By 1966, Chicago Public Schools introduced the nation’s first “officer friendly” program that was intended to reduce crime among children and paved the way for similar programs (Center for Public Integrity, 2021).

Demand for SROs increased dramatically during the 1970s, with the implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) of 1974 (ACLU, 2017). The JJDP paved the way for law enforcement to engage with youth based on assumptions of possible future behavior and widened the power of law enforcement in schools (ACLU, 2017). By the 1980s and 1990s, the nationwide focus on reduction in crime and the “war on drugs” created a central space for SROs in schools. Programs like D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and G.R.E.A.T (Gang Resistance Education and Training) made it possible for law enforcement officers to have widespread influence in schools nationally (ACLU, 2017; Center for Public Integrity, 2021). In 1998, following a sequence of school shootings, President Clinton called for even greater presence of law enforcement in schools, spurring intensified focus on increasing police presence in school spaces (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). In 1999, the Columbine High School shooting further intensified school safety concerns and renewed focus on surveillance and security measures across the nation. Between 1999 and 2005, federal agencies offered significant funding (\$750 million) to increase law enforcement presence in schools dramatically, resulting in the hiring of over 7,000 SROs nationally (Center for Public Integrity, 2021).

Yet, the growth in use of SROs led to questions about inequity. In 2012, the Department of Education released data detailing the incidence of student interactions with law enforcement demonstrating that a disproportionate number of infractions cited by law enforcement included students of color and students with disabilities (Lindberg, 2015). Despite data demonstrating harms perpetuated by school law enforcement practices, the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting prompted President Obama to prioritize federal grants for greater SRO presence in schools (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). However, federal agencies also shifted their focus during Obama’s presidency to addressing bias in school law enforcement practices (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). This guidance was later rescinded by President Trump, who, following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, called for greater presence of “cops in schools” (Center for Public Integrity, 2021). This call for increased policing in schools was challenged by testimony from community members and activists, drawing attention to the ways that students of color, and Black boys in particular, were harmed by law enforcement policies and practices (Advancement Project, 2022).

From their inception, SROs have held the purpose of surveilling Black and Brown students to ensure the safety of White students and school property. In the 1980s and 1990s, SROs transcended this straightforward role of student surveillance and attempted to change communities of color through educational programming. This evolution can also be viewed as a continued form of surveillance centered on “rehabilitating” or “educating” urban youth through police-led programming. This historical legacy of student surveillance within the development of SRO programming serves as an important epistemic resource that challenges the USN.

Student Testimony: Interrogating the Universal Safety Narrative

The debate around SROs in the Los Angeles Unified School district (LAUSD) presents an interesting case for analysis, especially regarding student activism and testimony. Previous research has highlighted dynamics in the district, analyzing the ways in which school policing has been historically used to suppress student activism and dissent in the city (Gomez, 2021). Additionally,

researchers have examined the intricate social dynamics present in the relationship between school police and Black communities in LAUSD (Allen & Noguera, 2023). In this paper, we examine the role of student testimony about school policing from activists in LAUSD as an important epistemic resource that can be considered within the debate.

Following the murder of George Floyd, student activists led by Kahlila Williams and the group Students Deserve offered testimony to the LAUSD school board, successfully diverting nearly one third of the district's funding away from law enforcement (\$25 million dollars; Escobar, 2021). Following their successful activism in LAUSD, members of Students Deserve were interviewed by PBS NewsHour where they offered a counternarrative to the USN. In this interview, students called into question the necessity of law enforcement in schools and illuminated the psychological consequences for students of color who experience fear due to policing structures. As Williams argued in her testimony:

You know, I don't want to do anything around a school police officer. And people may say, that's a good thing. That means there's no crime, there's no drugs, there's no this. But what that means for Black students is that's more trauma, more fear. They're scared when they're on campus. (Escobar, 2021)

Here, Williams draws attention to the ways in which the comfort that policing may offer with regards to minimizing certain criminalized behaviors comes at the expense of Black students' psychological safety. Her remarks challenge the USN in pointing out that in her own experience her psychological safety is eroded by the presence of police officers in her school. This statement presents an alternate epistemic resource that characterizes institutional security and policing structures as damaging the safety of Black students.

In addition, LAUSD students offered their own nuanced conception of school safety that further challenges other underlying assumptions embedded within the USN. Mani Sefas-Loos, another student activist, remarked that: "What safety is, is being able to be who you are without fear that somebody else who doesn't understand you is going to threaten you" (Escobar, 2021). Rooted within Sefas-Loos' statement lies a critique of school safety, suggesting that safety for some students does not equate to safety for all students. This illuminates the reality that under school policing systems not all students are surveilled in the same ways. Furthermore, Sefas-Loos points out that marginalized students are positioned in virtue of their identities as objects for surveillance by "people who don't understand" them (Escobar, 2021). For students like Sefas-Loos, policing structures are not implemented for their protection as the USN suggests. Rather, they experience these structures as threatening and harmful (Escobar, 2021). These student testimonies offer alternative understandings of school policing and underscore surveillance of students as a central function of school safety. In these exchanges, student activists share their own discomfort with being positioned as objects of surveillance and call for the elimination of these institutional structures. Their challenges to the USN raise important questions about the purpose of school policing structures and the historical development of school law enforcement programming.

Educational Research that Challenges the Universal Safety Narrative

A third set of epistemic resources challenging the USN comes from two bodies of educational research that theorize the purpose of school policing and study the efficacy of school policing. Here we note that this research broadly intersects with the LA students' testimony by challenging the ways in which policing positions groups of students as requiring surveillance and the notion that policing is protective for all students.

Theorizing the Purpose of SROs in Educational Contexts: Students as Risk Objects

Dizon et al. (2022) offer an intervention into the USN by articulating an alternate paradigm which understands safety as risk management. Within their discussion of risk management and “relational risk,” they position safety as a good that is offered to those who are worthy of protection (Dizon et al., 2022). Within this frame, risk is a socially constructed relationship that exists between objects at risk, and those objects which pose a risk, or risk objects (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011). In this discourse, White students and institutional resources/assets can be characterized as objects at risk, while Black students are positioned as risk objects. The student testimony examined earlier illuminates students’ perception of their own positioning as risk objects and the psychological impacts that result. When Sefas-Loos describes his own experience of being “threatened” by school law enforcement or Williams describes her own “fear” in the school context, they point to the potential psychological impacts of being positioned as risk objects.

The characterization of school safety as risk management also illuminates the ways in which surveillance and policing work to protect institutional assets as objects at risk (Corbett & Wall, 2022). Educational institutions act in ways that protect their own material assets through the use of surveillance and policing structures. When considered through this lens of institutional protection, relational risk recontextualizes safety as primarily benefiting the dominant members of the institution rather than providing bodily and psychological safety to all students. In addition to these theoretical challenges, significant educational research challenges the veracity of the USN by raising two important questions that we turn to next. First, do SROs actually provide bodily and psychological protection for students in school spaces? And second, are students universally offered this protection?

Social Science Research on the Effectiveness of SROs

Despite appeals to the USN in the development of SRO presence in schools, an exploration of available data suggests that the effectiveness of SROs in providing school safety is inconclusive (Fisher & Petrosino, 2022; McKenna & Petrosino, 2022). Rather, their pervasive use causes harm to students, with particularly negative effects for students of color (especially Black students; Fisher & Petrosino, 2022). Although it is difficult to capture with accuracy the number of SROs employed within districts across the US, a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) report estimates that between 14,000 and 20,000 SROs currently hold positions in U.S. schools (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022). While the NIJ report suggests that the number of SROs has largely remained stable from 2000 to 2021, they also document a decline in school-based crime during this time period (apart from multiple casualty school shooting events that increased in the period between 2009 and 2018; McKenna & Petrosino, 2022). While these acts of mass violence are horrific, there is only minimal evidence that SROs prevent these kinds of incidents (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022).

Instead, SROs overwhelmingly engage in lower-level disciplinary actions that result in student surveillance. This has the detrimental impact of recharacterizing particular youth behaviors as criminal in the context of schools where they might otherwise be considered “typical juvenile behaviors” (Washington, 2021). For example, the presence of SROs might alter the treatment of tardiness, use of inappropriate language, or classroom disruptions—recharacterizing these behaviors as criminal rather than developmentally appropriate adolescent behaviors. While it is difficult to capture the true number of SROs on school campuses, there is some evidence that SROs are disproportionately placed in schools with higher concentrations of students of color (Morris et al., 2017). In fact, Black young people are most likely (of all groups) to attend a school where they will encounter SROs (Communities for Just Schools Fund, 2020). This reflects the reality that students

of color face significantly greater exclusionary practices in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Recent systematic literature reviews have examined the current evidence gathered by researchers and concluded that SROs contribute to increased use of exclusionary disciplinary measures (Fisher & Hennesy, 2016; Fisher & Petrosino, 2022). Moreover, these increases in exclusionary practices are not offset by positive safety outcomes (Fisher & Petrosino, 2022). Numerous studies have detailed the ways in which SROs' roles vary based on school context and result in harmful effects for students (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Lynch et al., 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Owens, 2017; Theriot, 2009). For example, a 2016 study by Lynch et al. found that SROs engaged in more law-enforcement activities when they were placed in contexts where students were more socioeconomically disadvantaged. Similarly, studies indicate that when SROs are employed within schools, students are more likely to be reported for minor and major infractions (Gottfredson et al., 2020). In these schools, greater records of student misconduct are also recorded and reported to law enforcement (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Theriot, 2009). In addition, SRO presence was positively associated with arrests for children under 15 at school (Owens, 2017). Taken together, the research suggests that students of color are more likely to be subjected to law enforcement presence within schools and that the presence of SROs often results in substantively more recorded infractions and arrests.

Additionally, studies have offered conflicting evidence regarding whether SROs have a positive impact on students' feelings of safety (Bracy, 2011; Breen, 2020; Theriot & Orme, 2016). While one study suggests that consistent contact with SROs improved student opinions of SROs, substantive contact decreased students' feelings of connectedness (Theriot, 2016). In addition, while some studies have suggested that SROs have a positive impact on students' perceptions of safety, they have also documented a significant gap in the perceptions of school safety between White and Black students, with Black students reporting a significantly lower sense of safety in the presence of school police officers (Breen, 2020; Nakamoto et al., 2019). Black girls in particular experience decreased feelings of safety as they report sexual harassment, body policing, and public humiliation during interactions with police officers and security guards (Bernadel et al., 2024). In addition, teachers report concerns about the ways in which security personnel intervene into student-teacher relationships, resulting in disproportionate behavioral interventions for students of color (Hara, 2020). These findings suggest that the minimal benefits of school law enforcement do not outweigh the significant adverse psychological impacts for marginalized students.

Given the minimal benefits to students' psychological safety, it is important to consider the additional physical and psychological risks posed to Black and Brown students in classrooms by SROs, as well as the resulting impact on student learning outcomes. Researchers have highlighted the multitude of ways in which school disciplinary structures produce school environments which are psychologically and emotionally unsafe for Black students and include the process of hardening (Communities for Just Schools Fund, 2020; Heidelberg et al., 2022). School hardening, or the process of increasing and harshening penalties for student misbehavior along with increased school securitization, has been associated with worse psychological and academic outcomes for students (Education Trust, 2023). In addition, studies in community policing indicate substantive psychological impacts for Black community members due to police violence (Stansfield, 2022). Researchers have also found that Black community members experience disproportionate levels of violence from law enforcement, with police violence constituting one of the leading causes of death for young Black men (Edwards et al., 2019).

This has also been explored in the context of student surveillance as a disciplinary policy. Johnson and Jabari (2022) conducted an analysis of national high school survey data examining the

impact of school surveillance measures on exclusionary disciplinary practices, standardized testing performance, and subsequent college enrollment for students. They concluded that Black students paid a significant “safety tax” in that they were subject to greater surveillance measures that result in lower attainment of proficiency in Math and English as well as lower rates of college attainment. These results pose a significant challenge to school policing structures and their potential impacts on student learning.

The existing research on school policing offers substantial analysis of how racialized discourse plays an important role in school safety debates. For example, in their case study of a midwestern city, Turner and Beneke (2020) apply a racial capitalism framework to debates around police presence in schools and identify two competing discourses. First, proponents of continued use of SROs used a neoliberal therapeutic discourse to assert the benefits for marginalized students in maintaining the status quo. Alternatively, community members who advocated against the continued use of SROs employed what they term as a “race radical” discourse highlighting the harms perpetuated against Black youth in school disciplinary policy.

These findings offer some preliminary responses to the two questions about the USN that we outlined earlier. First, existing evidence is inconclusive regarding whether SROs truly provide bodily protection to students. However, it is very clear that while SROs may provide psychological protection to students from dominant groups, they perpetuate psychological harm against marginalized students. Given the significant risks to marginalized students’ psychological wellbeing and learning outcomes posed by SROs, it is clear that they do not provide universal protection to all students. This raises important questions about the veracity of the USN as a prevailing epistemic resource that undergirds district and national policy making around SROs.

The existing research we have reviewed offers important analytic frames for examining the ways in which historical and contemporary social conditions have systematically undervalued the experiences and perspectives of those who are marginalized in the school policing debate. Taken together, they challenge the USN (Figure 1) and instead offer strong support for the institutional protection and societal stability framework (Figure 2). In the next section, we expand on these contributions by demonstrating that the reliance on the USN is rooted in willful White ignorance.

Willful White Ignorance in the Current SRO Debates

In this section we situate the tension between the two alternative frameworks for understanding school policing as an example of what philosophers have termed epistemic injustice. Emphasizing the way in which the USN is established as a dominant epistemic resource in the debate, we call attention to the resulting epistemic injustices that occur when alternative epistemic resources (e.g. historical accounts of school policing, student testimony) are ignored. In what follows, we first situate the USN in the context of willful White ignorance. Situating the school policing debate in the context of epistemic injustice, we suggest that there are important epistemic dimensions worthy of analyzing in the debate around SROs. Then, in the next section, we consider the epistemic harms that result from the persistence of the USN and examine potential avenues for alleviating these harms.

The Role of Willful White Ignorance in the School Policing Debate

Analyzing the school safety debate through the lens of willful White ignorance reveals the ways in which Whiteness plays a persistent role in upholding the USN. In this debate, White ignorance is evident in both the construction of the narrative itself, but also in the creation of social conditions under which resistance to challenges to the USN thrive. Willful White ignorance plays a central role in the construction and perpetuation of the USN, persistently positioning students of

color as individuals protected by school safety personnel, ignoring or rejecting the narratives that students themselves share about their positioning as risk objects. Yet, despite this narrative, historical evidence and social science research suggest that the USN is a flawed conceptual framework, and that school policing is better understood as a mechanism of institutional protection.

This contradiction reveals a significant tension for interlocutors within the school safety debate because it suggests that although Black and Brown students can refer to their subjective experiences of being positioned as objects of risk to the institution, the USN asserts that they have been positioned as equally worthy of protection by law enforcement personnel. This illustrates an important epistemic dimension present in the safety discourse. When Black and Brown students publicly share their experiences of being marginalized and targeted in the name of institutional safety—as exemplified in the LAUSD example—their testimony comes into conflict with a widely held narrative that suggests otherwise. Both the persistent reassertion of the USN as well as the denial of student testimony and research evidence suggest that willful White ignorance plays a substantive role in the repudiation of the harms that SROs perpetuate.

Moreover, this resistance to alternative epistemic resources suggests that for dominantly situated interlocutors, including White school leaders, there is a substantive epistemic barrier to the reception of testimony and other epistemic resources offered by students of color and education researchers in the exchange. Given the widespread use of the USN as a rationale for school policing, as well as White interlocutors' own experiences being positioned as objects of protection by law enforcement officers, willful White ignorance sets the social conditions under which White interlocutors can comfortably resist testimony. Under these conditions, White interlocutors may have difficulty understanding another's positioning as a target of surveillance by law enforcement when their own lived experience is that of being positioned as an object of protection by those same individuals and institutions. Under these epistemic conditions, White ignorance plays a major role in sustaining the illusory USN through the denial of testimonial resources and empirical evidence that reconceptualize safety as risk management.

Additionally, we argue that willful White ignorance plays a significant role in prioritizing particular aspects of safety within school contexts. For example, research into school safety has privileged two aspects of safety, namely, physical and psychological safety, and funding for school safety has been primarily targeted at students' physical safety (Gottfredson et al., 2020). This focus on bodily protection as the driving force behind decisions about school safety orients those policies, which have been shown to harm the psychological and physical safety of students of color and in particular Black students, as beneficial to students as a whole. Rather than offering protection, students of color may be targeted as risk objects by school policing structures and be subjected to further psychological and physical harm through interaction with carceral institutions. This tension demonstrates the ways in which prioritization of bodily safety appears racially neutral but reveals the ways in which decision-makers substitute the safety of White students for the safety of Black and Brown students. Moreover, because most decision-makers frame these policies as race neutral, the debate continues without the acknowledgement that their decision-making marginalizes or ignores the epistemic resources offered by scholars and by Black and Brown students whose experience contradicts the underlying assumptions of the debate.

In many ways, the USN obfuscates multiple dimensions of carcerality interwoven into school disciplinary policies and systems. As Corbett and Wall (2022) argue, using the term school resource officer works to obscure the truth of what SROs do within schools. Rather than provide resources, SROs are law enforcement officers that surveil school buildings and that they do in fact perpetuate violence against students, especially Black and Brown students. However, the fact that we “soften the language” makes it possible to further ourselves from the underlying carceral logics that

the use of SROs depend on (Corbett & Wall, 2022, p. 1450). We contend that willful White ignorance sets the conditions for this discourse to continue without acknowledging that SROs only provide safety to some students. In this way, the assertion that school policing is a benefit for all students plays an epistemic role in the perpetuation of harmful school policy.

A re-articulation of school safety as relational risk, as our second framework presents, also reveals the underlying carceral logic that relies on the perpetual characterization of some students as risks. This characterization creates the epistemic conditions under which those students who are constructed as risks carry the blame for unsafe conditions and unwelcoming environments in schools. The need to punish these students drives disciplinary decisions in schools and denies the history of systemic inequality in the US that has set the conditions that challenge school safety in the first place (Corbett & Wall, 2022; Turner & Beneke, 2020). This systemic denial of the underlying causes for unsafe conditions in schools is itself evidence of underlying willful White ignorance that obfuscates the reality of school policing by positioning students themselves as the source of unsafe school conditions.

Examining the Epistemic Harms of the Universal Safety Narrative

There are important epistemic harms that result from the continued use of the USN in policy discourse. First, it is worth noting that, as Dotson (2012) and Medina (2012) highlight, silencing is often an important dimension of epistemic injustice. As Dotson (2012) suggests, silencing occurs from epistemic exclusion whereby epistemic resources that might be offered by marginalized knowers are either excluded from discourse or ignored. Medina (2012) emphasizes the phenomenon of self-silencing whereby marginalized knowers suppress their own testimony as they perceive that it is unwelcome in discourse. These forms of epistemic exclusion can produce what Fricker (2007) theorizes as hermeneutical injustices where epistemic resources that are produced by marginalized knowers are excluded from dominant discourse and produce lacunae in our epistemic resources.

In the case that we have presented, student testimony is silenced through willful White ignorance that preserves the USN, which serves as a dominant epistemic resource that overshadows (and calls into question the veracity of) student testimony and historical accounts of school policing. Further, we suggest that this is an important instance of epistemic exclusion where epistemic resources have been repressed in the debate. Additionally, this is importantly an instance of testimonial injustice—a type of epistemic injustice that involves unfairly misjudging the credibility of a speaker (Fricker, 2007)—because it positions student testimony as hyperbolic or unreliable without good reason.

Additionally, important hermeneutic injustices result from the persistence of the USN. In upholding the USN as a dominant epistemic resource relied upon in school policing discourse, other epistemic resources are overlooked or suppressed. This results in challenges for marginalized knowers whose experiences do not map onto the widely available epistemic resources within society. For example, if the prevailing narrative is the USN and this epistemic resource does not accurately represent the experience of marginalized knowers, then they may face challenges making sense of their experience given the prevailing narrative. This means that when Black students attempt to make sense of their experiences with school police, they encounter a dominant narrative that is incongruent with their experiences. As they seek to make sense of experiences that contradict this dominant narrative, they may experience epistemic friction (Medina, 2013), which occurs when two or more ways of interpreting the world come into conflict. Importantly, epistemic friction as described by Medina may be either beneficial or detrimental. In this case, the epistemic friction students encounter is detrimental if it leads them to question the veracity of their own experiences and self-silence. On the other hand, it may be beneficial if it prompts positive epistemic resistance

that challenges the dominant narrative, seeking to revise our shared understanding of school policing.

Following Medina (2013), we argue that this is a case where the epistemic friction that is present between the dominant discourse represented in the USN and the alternative resources provided in critical research and student testimony might serve to benefit school policy making. Medina argues that insensitivity to the epistemic resistance that arises through this friction: promotes active ignorance and the epistemic vices that support it, whereas the acknowledgement of and engagement with epistemic resistances facilitate the achievement of epistemic virtues and, under some conditions, can also produce a subversive lucidity that can have an enormous critical and transformative impact on the epistemic community and its environments. (pp. 51-52)

The evidence thus far suggests that epistemic friction and resistance in the case of school policing have been functioning detrimentally, silencing students whose experiencing of SROs contradict the dominant narrative and perpetuating willful White ignorance. However, the epistemic friction that exists between the USN and the alternative institution protection and societal stability framework has the potential to foster positive epistemic resistance that prompts greater open-mindedness and other intellectual virtues. It has the potential to foster transformation of our shared understandings of school policing. This epistemic friction is a tool that can allow interlocutors to consider nondominant epistemic resources alongside dominant resources in order for social change to occur. In highlighting alternative epistemic resources that call into question the veracity of the USN, we hope to draw attention to the potential for productive epistemic friction. In doing so we hope to improve our shared understanding of the role that school policing plays in schools.

Additionally, we offer epistemic friction as a potential avenue for addressing the epistemic harms identified earlier in this paper. Marginalized interlocutors face epistemic barriers to the reception of their testimony in the case of discourse around school safety. As we've argued, these epistemic injustices produce both testimonial injustices as well as important societal silences. Highlighting the importance of these alternative epistemic resources serves to offer a means through which we might address these injustices.

Conclusion

Our current moment is one of significant epistemic challenges. Epistemic rifts are evident in policy-making discourse across the US, with significant disagreement on what constitutes the truth. Additionally, school policing structures have given way to even greater carcerality with the addition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) raids in communities and schools. Further, many of the safeguards that once protected marginalized students from discrimination have eroded under the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education (Walker, 2025). These troubling occurrences have only made calls for epistemic friction and the resistance of dominant epistemic resources more necessary and timelier.

In this paper, we have introduced the conceptual framework of the USN to describe the dominant epistemic resource upheld in K-12 educational policy making. In doing so, we have suggested that a pervasive form of willful White ignorance plays a substantive role in creating and sustaining this narrative in K-12 school safety debates. In this debate willful White ignorance not only constructs the USN but creates the epistemic conditions necessary for maintaining the status quo and resisting systemic structural change.

Despite evidence challenging the USN, there has been a continued insistence from the federal level that law enforcement officials ensure safety in schools. This dissonance has resulted in

continued resistance in many communities and calls for defunding and abolition of school policing programs. These calls have effectively challenged the use of SROs in schools in some cities. For example, when taken seriously as alternative epistemic resources, student testimonies like those of Students Demand in LAUSD can usher in positive changes to school policing structures. Following the decision by LAUSD to cut law enforcement funding substantially, the district committed to devoting these financial resources towards supporting school programs and personnel that are intended to contribute to the psychological safety of Black and Brown students (Escobar, 2021).

However, even with these local changes, the dialogue employed around the abolition of SROs reveals underlying logics that support the use of carceral structures in schools. This raises substantive questions about whether the removal of SROs from schools will address the entirety of the problem. In some cases, SRO policy reform and abolition has been short lived with districts finding alternate ways to introduce surveillance for students after adopting policy change (Blume, 2022; Flowers, 2023). This suggests that changing the structures and systems alone may not solve the entirety of the problem.

In identifying and interrogating the underlying arguments used to sustain punitive systems in schools, we propose that along with substantive structural change we must also call for reform to our ways of thinking about students in educational institutions. We suggest that epistemic friction offers a means through which to consider alternative epistemic resources as a challenge to the dominant narratives around school safety. We call on decision-makers to engage multiple epistemic resources that might better position them to enact enduring systemic change. Here we recommend creating space within policy discourse for student testimony that has the potential to serve as an alternative epistemic resource that counters the dominant narrative. In addition, we suggest that policy makers become better acquainted with the historical development of policing in their own communities, as these narratives often reveal the ways in which policing has served to protect dominant interests. Lastly, we propose that policy makers consult educational researchers in determining which solutions are effective. In this case, evidence suggests that a commitment to further implementation of SRO programming is ineffective and should be reconsidered. Taken all together, this course of action would better position policy makers to engage in a cost-benefit analysis around school policing that would take into consideration the psychological and physical harms posed to Black and Brown students in the implementation of SRO programming. Moreover, we suggest that unwillingness to take these steps is evidence of complicity in a system of willful White ignorance that enacts systematic harm on marginalized students and communities and is a significant moral failing.

We also call on researchers to pay closer attention to the ways in which SROs impact the bodily and psychological safety of Black and Brown students to better understand the risks posed by SRO programming. By understanding the underlying assumptions of the USN in discourse, we must examine the veracity of its claims and elucidate the effects of school law enforcement on marginalized students and their communities. Continued research on the efficacy of SROs must better target the experiences of marginalized knowers and better capture their testimonies about school safety. As other researchers have suggested in the context of higher education, strategies that center community participation and partnership are central in creating enduring systemic change to systems of structural violence (Stoudt et al., 2019).

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