



February 23, 2018

Department of Justice Support for School Safety Initiatives

The February 14, 2018, shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, has generated renewed interest in federal government efforts to support school safety. After school shootings in Columbine, CO, and Newtown, CT, Congress provided funding for Department of Justice (DOJ) grant programs to support school safety efforts. This In Focus provides an overview of DOJ programs for improving school safety, including grants for school resource officers (SROs) and physical security (e.g., metal detectors and cameras).

Currently Funded Grant Programs

DOJ has two grant programs that can help state, local, and tribal governments start SRO programs and another that provides funding for research on school safety. DOJ does not currently have a program dedicated to physical security measures in schools.

What are “SROs”? There is no universal definition of an SRO. It has been argued that SROs are a new type of public servant; a hybrid educational, correctional, and law enforcement officer. The duties of SROs can vary from one community to the next. However, their activities can be placed into three general categories: (1) safety expert and law enforcer, (2) problem solver and liaison to community resources, and (3) educator. SROs can act as safety experts and law enforcers by assuming primary responsibility for handling calls for service from the school, making arrests, issuing citations on campus, taking actions against unauthorized persons on school property, and responding to off-campus criminal activities that involve students. They also serve as first responders in the event of critical incidents at the school. SROs can help to solve problems that are not necessarily crimes but that can contribute to criminal incidents (e.g., bullying or disorderly behavior). Problem-solving activities conducted by SROs can include developing and expanding crime prevention efforts and community justice initiatives for students. SROs can also present courses on topics related to policing or responsible citizenship for students, faculty, and parents.

The **Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) Office’s hiring program** provides grants to state, local, and tribal governments with primary law enforcement responsibilities to hire and re-hire law enforcement officers for entry-level positions (see also CRS Report RL33308). COPS hiring grants can be used to hire SROs. Applicants who want to hire SROs are required to submit a

memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the law enforcement agency and the partner school that outlines the program’s purpose, partner roles and responsibilities, requirements for information sharing, and how SROs will be supervised. The COPS Office also requires SROs hired with grant funds to attend a regional training program. COPS hiring grants can cover up to 75% of the salaries and fringe benefits of full-time entry-level officers for a three-year grant period. Hiring grants do not cover more than \$125,000 in salary and benefits per officer over the three-year grant period.

The **Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) program** is a formula grant that provides funding to state, local, and tribal governments for a variety of state and local criminal justice initiatives (see also CRS In Focus IF10692). Grant recipients can use their JAG funds for state and local initiatives, technical assistance, training, personnel, equipment, supplies, contractual support, and criminal justice information systems for

- law enforcement;
- prosecution and courts;
- prevention and education;
- corrections and community corrections;
- drug treatment;
- planning, evaluation, and technology improvement;
- crime victim and witness assistance (other than compensation); and
- mental health and related law enforcement and corrections programs, including behavioral programs and crisis intervention teams.

JAG’s eight broad program purpose areas are intended to give states and local units of government flexibility in creating programs to address local needs. As such, grant recipients *could* use their funding for school safety initiatives, but they are not *required* to do so. According to the Bureau of Justice Assistance, states can subaward JAG funds to public or private schools as long as the intended program falls within one of the eight JAG program areas. Because JAG funds can be used for personnel related to law enforcement programs, it appears likely that grantees could use their funding to hire SROs. There might be a question as to whether JAG funds could be used for physical security measures in schools. While JAG funds can be used for equipment and supplies, it is not clear whether purchasing

metal detectors or cameras for schools would fit into one of the JAG purpose areas.

In the wake of the Newtown school shooting, Congress provided funding for a **Comprehensive School Safety Initiative**. Congress has provided funding for this initiative, which focuses on supporting research related to school safety, every fiscal year since FY2014. Under the initiative, the National Institute of Justice engages in the following activities:

- Funding programs and research in local schools to develop and test innovative approaches to enhancing school safety.
- Developing and testing comprehensive school safety strategies through coordinated activities and evaluations with select school districts.
- Assessing technology designed to increase school safety.
- Enhancing data collection efforts related to school safety.
- Convening experts, including school professionals and researchers, to make research findings regarding school safety applicable to real world settings.
- Engaging in partnerships with other federal agencies to bring a multi-disciplinary approach to school safety (e.g., education, law enforcement, health and mental health, and criminal justice).

What About Unfunded Grant Programs?

In late 1990s and 2000s, Congress appropriated funding for two programs that provided funding for physical school security measures, the Matching Grant Program for School Security and the COPS in Schools program. However, neither program has been funded for several years. Policymakers might consider whether to revive these programs to help support school security efforts, especially if Congress is looking for an avenue to provide funding to schools for installation of physical security measures.

Grants under the **Matching Grant Program for School Security** can be awarded to state, local, and tribal governments to improve security at schools and on school grounds. Specifically, grants can be used for

- placement and use of metal detectors, locks, lighting, and other deterrent measures;
- security assessments;
- security training of personnel and students;
- the development and operation of crisis intervention teams, which may include coordination with law enforcement agencies and specialized training for school officials in responding to mental health crises;
- coordination with local law enforcement; and

- any other measure that, in the determination of the Director of the COPS Office, may provide a significant improvement in security.

Grantees are required to provide a 50% match for projects funded under this program. Congress last provided funding for the program in FY2011, and the authorization of appropriations for it lapsed in FY2009.

After the Columbine school shooting, Congress set aside a proportion of the funding provided for the COPS hiring program for grants to hire SROs. The COPS Office awarded this funding under their **COPS in Schools (CIS) program**. Congress provided funding for the CIS program from FY1999 to FY2005. This program provided grants for hiring SROs to conduct community policing services in and around primary and secondary schools. Grants awarded under the CIS program were subject to the same requirements as hiring grants, but funds had to be used to hire SROs. This program ensured that a certain amount of hiring funds was used to support SRO programs. CIS did not have an authorizing statute. Congress supported this program solely through appropriations.

Other DOJ Resources on School Safety

In addition to grant programs to support school safety, DOJ has compiled resources that could be helpful to policymakers who want to understand more about this issue, or school administrators and law enforcement professionals who want to explore ways to enhance the safety of their local schools.

For example, the COPS Office has a webpage that provides background information on SROs, including fact sheets on MOUs between schools and law enforcement agencies that provide SROs and SRO training.

- <https://cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=2687>

DOJ's Crime Solutions website provides information on evaluations of school safety programs and practices. Evaluations can be sorted by those DOJ has rated as effective, those that are "promising," and those that are ineffective.

- <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/TopicDetails.aspx?ID=314>

The National Criminal Justice Reference Service has a webpage that provides a directory of resources related to school safety. This webpage has Q&As on school safety topics, links to DOJ publications on school safety, and links to school safety resources.

- <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Topics/Topic.aspx?Topicid=153>

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IF10836