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Research and Evaluation on School Safety: An Evaluation of State School Safety Centers

The History and Characteristics of State School Safety Centers

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Introduction

Background

      Tragedies such as those that transpired at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe High School in Texas, both occurring in 2018, once again brought school safety to the forefront for the federal government, states, and local organizations. Despite national data indicating that fatalities at schools due to homicide among children ages 5–18 are rare, and that other indicators of school safety are improving (Wang et al., 2020), these high-casualty massacres substantially elevated national concern about whether youth are safe in school. The level of concern across the country is evidenced by the more than 40 states that have created task forces or commissions to examine school safety since the Parkland massacre, and the fact that nearly every state has passed legislation to address school safety since 2018 (e.g., Petrosino et al., 2018). This legislation has focused on topics such as bullying prevention, emergency response, changes in mandated reporting requirements for schools, arming teachers, providing funds for districts to address school safety, and how states support school safety (e.g., state school safety centers). Additionally, early data from the 2021/22 academic year indicates that violence, including shootings, is becoming more concerning given the return of students, many suffering from increased trauma from the pandemic (Smith, 2021).

      In addition to forming task forces and commissions and engaging in legislative efforts, states play a major role in addressing school safety by creating and managing funding and resources, and by providing training, technical assistance, and guidance to local jurisdictions within the state (Burke, 2018). One common vehicle used to maintain an organized and consolidated effort at the state level to address school safety is to create a state school safety center (SSSC). Although more prevalent in the past two decades, SSSCs, in some states, have been around since as early as the 1990s. SSSCs generally have a common mission to be the centralized state unit that provides a wide range of services to stakeholders in the state to enhance the safety and security of schools in their jurisdiction (National Crime Prevention Council [NCPC], 2020). For example, Washington State recently created an SSSC to "serve as a clearinghouse and to disseminate information regarding school safety…develop model policies and procedures, identify best practices, and provide training on school safety…[and] work with the regional centers to help school districts meet state school safety requirements" (Office of State

Representative Laurie Dolan, 2019). Similarly, Texas has had an SSSC since 1999 with the purpose of "serving as a clearinghouse for the dissemination of safety and security information through research, training, and technical assistance for K-12 schools and junior colleges throughout the state of Texas." The use of SSSCs as a mechanism to address school safety has been further underscored by the federal government's investment, including the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), which recently awarded over $12 million to support grant awards to create or enhance SSSCs in 12 different states (BJA, 2019).

Despite state and federal interest in developing and implementing SSSCs, the exact number of SSSCs in existence today is currently unknown. Although it is unclear when this list was compiled, the NCPC currently lists 20 states with SSSCs (2020). Conversely, a review carried out by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in 2016 suggests that up to 48 states have SSSCs (Carlton et al., 2017). The variation in these accounts may be fueled by the lack of a uniform definition to delineate what is an SSSC versus other types of school safety supports. For example, despite the logical assumption that an SSSC should be structured to serve the entire state and therefore only one per state is plausible, the NIJ report (Carlton et al., 2017) identified 56 SSSCs across 48 states. Regardless of the confusion about the exact definition of an SSSC, it is safe to assume that numerous states now operate an SSSC.

There are many important questions in an evidence-informed policy environment, including "what is going on?" and "what works?" (Petrosino & Boruch, 2014). Finding empirical studies that address these questions relevant to SSSCs is a difficult process. We utilized several comprehensive search strategies using Google and several online databases (including the National Criminal Justice Reference Service [NCJRS] abstracts database and the Education Resources Information Center [ERIC]) and did not find a single empirical study of SSSCs. The most relevant document retrieved was the NIJ publication referenced above (Carlton et al., 2017), where NIJ staff reviewed websites and convened a two-day meeting of SSSC representatives to describe SSSCs and identify their successes and challenges. NIJ staff summarized themes from that meeting, including key strategies SSSCs use to increase knowledge about school safety, such as convening training and conferences (Carlton et al., 2017). However, that report does not include any systematic data collection from the SSSCs or any examination of SSSC outcomes. Although trends show an increased interest from states to establish such centers, as well as the federal government's increased interest to support these efforts, more information is needed to better understand how these centers should operate and what leads to a successful center.

This will allow for promising approaches and models to be replicated to facilitate the future development and improvement of centers across the country.

Goals and Objectives of This Evaluation

Given the widespread use of SSSCs, their potential role to improve safety, and the lack of information currently available to inform the development of high-quality centers, we sought to conduct the first empirical evaluation of the SSSCs. The goals of this evaluation are to develop a firm understanding of the history, characteristics, structure, activities, and perceived impacts of SSSCs across the United States to identify promising practices and models for replication, expansion, and evaluation. Ultimately, findings from this project will contribute to improved functioning of SSSCs, more intentional development of new SSSCs, and more coordinated state efforts to improve local jurisdiction efforts in addressing school safety.

Over three years, this evaluation will utilize a descriptive design that brings together numerous sources of evidence that shed light on SSSCs within their real-world context to drive the creation of new knowledge for informing federal and state policy, lead to more targeted federal support of SSSCs, and allow researchers to evaluate SSSCs more rigorously moving forward. Specifically, we will conduct surveys with key school safety leaders in each state, interview center directors, gather detailed activity data from each state center, and conduct interviews and surveys with key stakeholders in each state to include policymakers, superintendents, principals, school resource officers, and others involved in school safety efforts in each state.

The specific objectives of the evaluation are to: (1) document the history of SSSCs across the United States following the massacre at Columbine High School, a seminal school safety event in 1999, and a point at which several SSSCs were started; (2) describe the characteristics, practices, structures, and activities of current SSSCs; (3) assess the perceived impact of SSSC activities from the perspective of diverse stakeholders including SSSC intensive service users, state educational agency (SEA) and state Department of Justice (SDOJ) staff, policymakers, school resource officers, district superintendents, and school principals; and (4) utilize the information collected to develop a framework outlining promising structures and practices to facilitate the development and improvement of SSSCs and to guide future research to examine the impacts and outcomes associated with various SSSC practices.

The Focus of This Report

This report is the first in a series that will highlight findings from each of the specific data

collection efforts associated with this evaluation of SSSCs. Specifically, in this report, we utilize survey data from at least one school safety key informant (e.g., SSSC staff, SEA staff, policymaker) in each state who is knowledgeable about the current SSSC context, as well as the state's history of SSSCs. From these data, we detail our initial efforts to learn more about which states have ever had SSSCs, which states have had centers and discontinued them, and which states have never had centers. We specifically focus on examining the existence of SSSCs over the past two decades after the massacre at Columbine High School. As aforementioned, we selected the Columbine High School shooting for the starting point of documenting the history of the SSSCs, as this seminal event significantly influenced how Americans think of school safety and led to the creation of several SSSCs; however, we also do include states that had SSSCs in place prior to this point that are still operational today.

For those states that reported ever having an SSSC, we present preliminary data on the characteristics of these SSSCs, including how the center is structured within the state government, how the center is funded, how many staff are employed by the center, and what products and activities the centers engage in. This report will also examine if the existence of SSSCs coincides with high-visibility school violence events. Finally, we will also explore how different states define SSSCs with the aim of developing a uniform definition of an SSSC. This initial report solely focuses on describing the history and characteristics of SSSCs, including both those that are currently operational as well as those that have been discontinued. As the project progresses, future reports will utilize interview and activity data to further describe the characteristics of these SSSCs. Additionally, interviews and surveys with potential end users of SSSCs (e.g., principals, superintendents, etc.) later in the project will allow us in a future report to examine perceived impacts of SSSCs.

Methodology

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this portion of our evaluation of SSSCs and are addressed in this report:

- What is the history of SSSCs across the United States over the past two decades (following the massacre at Columbine High School)?
    - Which states currently have an active SSSC, why were these SSSCs developed, and what common characteristics exist among these SSSCs?
    - Since 2000, which states created and subsequently discontinued an SSSC, and why were these SSSCs discontinued?
    - Since 2000, which states have not created an SSSC, and what motivated this choice?
    - What is a useful operationalization of the term SSSC to ensure consistency in how states label school safety centers?

Survey Respondents

To identify at least one key stakeholder in each state, the evaluation team drew on the relationships established by WestEd's extensive networks across the country in education, facilitated by its involvement in many of the key technical assistance and research centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). This was coupled with a robust review of resources available online (e.g., websites, school safety legislation, media coverage). Additionally, we sought out various professional associations in which ideal respondents for this survey might be engaged and asked them to share information about the project and how their members could contact us to provide an appropriate individual for their state.

As potential key informants were identified, the evaluation team conducted outreach via telephone and email to assess whether each of the individuals was well-positioned to provide necessary information or if they would recommend other key informants in the state. This process, akin to snowball sampling, allowed us to focus on individuals who possessed the richest information about the SSSCs and statewide school safety efforts, rather than selecting a sample based purely on job title. As

such, these individuals served in varied roles and were in different agencies and organizations within each state. This sampling procedure culminated in the identification of at least one key informant in each state and the District of Columbia (n = 51) who were invited to participate in the online survey on their state's history with SSSCs and other efforts to facilitate school safety.

Survey Development and Dissemination

The online survey was developed and administered via Qualtrics and included both multiple-choice and open-ended response items. The survey was divided into four broad sections: (1) Background Information; (2) State School Safety Center History; (3) Characteristics of Active State School Safety Centers; and (4) Characteristics of Discontinued State School Safety Centers. The survey programming included extensive skip logic to ensure that respondents were directed to sections/questions that were most applicable to their state. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A.

In the first section of the survey, respondents were asked to provide their job title, agency or organization they worked for, and their role in school safety for the state. In the second section, participants reported whether they have or have ever had an SSSC in their state. If they reported ever having a center in their state, they were asked the following: when the center was started, the reason behind starting the center, whether the center served the entire state or just a portion of the state, and whether the center was still operational today. Those who reported having a center, but it was not currently operational, were asked to provide a rationale as to why the center had been discontinued. Those who reported never having a center were asked to provide a rationale behind why a center was never started and what other state school safety efforts exist currently. The third section of the survey pertained to only those who reported having a currently active SSSC and were asked to provide information on the following: the person responsible for the day-to-day operations of the center, how the center is situated within the larger state government, funding sources for the center, center staffing, and the center's focus areas (training, technical assistance, compliance, etc.). The final section of the survey pertained to only those respondents who reported having a center, but that it had been discontinued, and were asked similar questions about the characteristics and structure of the previous center.

The survey also included an item in which respondents could provide other detail and information they felt was pertinent to our efforts. Additionally, respondents were given the opportunity to identify an alternate individual who would be better suited to respond to the survey questions if they

felt they were not the ideal respondent. In the cases in which participants identified someone else as a key informant in their state, the evaluation team regularly reviewed those responses and sent the survey invitation to the alternate individual identified.

Once programmed in Qualtrics, the evaluation team conducted a rigorous review and testing process before the survey was sent out to the key informant contact list. The survey was sent to the 51 identified key informants via email invitation through the Qualtrics system on May 5, 2021. Subsequent reminder emails were sent through the Qualtrics system on May 12, 2021; May 17, 2021; May 25, 2021; and June 1, 2021. Additional follow-up was conducted via individualized emails and phone calls throughout the data collection period. The data collection period spanned from May 5, 2021, to June 30, 2021.

Analysis Approach

Data from the state key informant survey were primarily analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed at an aggregate level to understand overall histories as well as disaggregated to examine data specific to each state, where appropriate. As we progress through this evaluation of SSSCs and gather additional data, a comprehensive database will be developed that houses data from each survey and from the activities data extraction tool to allow examination into the relationships and connections among the information gathered.

Results

To analyze the survey data, the evaluation team imported the data from Qualtrics and cleaned the data in Excel. If respondents submitted more than one survey per state, the research team worked with key informants to identify the valid survey and merged responses if necessary. The research team used Stata to run descriptive statistics for quantitative survey items. For qualitative survey items, responses were coded for common themes. Forty-three respondents, representing unique states/territories, submitted a survey, which is a response rate of 84.31%.

SSSC History

The survey first collected general SSSC history using four survey items. One multiple-choice item assessed whether the state has ever had an SSSC(s) following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999 (see Exhibit 1). Out of 43 respondents, 28 states (65.12%) reported a total of 29 SSSCs to have ever existed. Specifically, of those 43 respondents, nearly two thirds (62.79%) reported to have or had *one* SSSC that serves or served the entire state, and one respondent (2.33%) reported *multiple* SSSCs that collectively serve or served the entire state. One respondent (2.33%) was not sure if their state ever has had an SSSC.[1] The remaining nearly one third (32.56%) reported never having had an SSSC in the state. If respondents indicated that more than one SSSC existed in the state, the survey included a multiple-choice item to assess how the SSSCs function. The one respondent reporting multiple SSSCs indicated the two centers in their state were standalone centers that worked independently from one another.

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[1] Attempts made to locate another individual who could confirm the status of an SSSC were unsuccessful.

EXHIBIT 1.

Existence of SSSCs Across States

2%

33%

43
states

63%

2%

- One SSSC that serves/served the entire state
- Multiple SSSCs that collectively serve/served the entire state
- Never had an SSSC
- Not sure
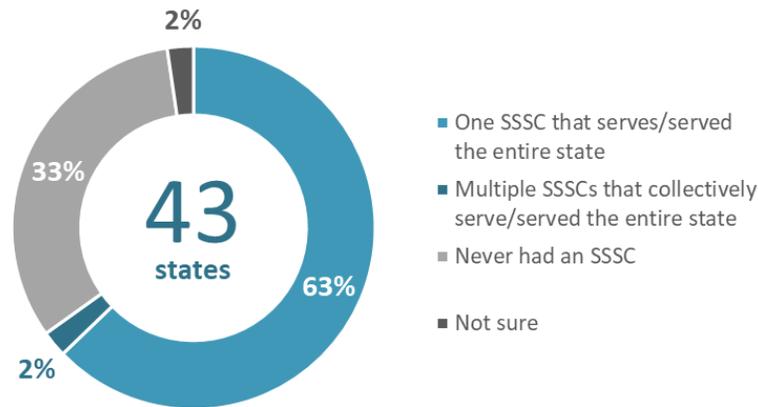
For respondents who indicated at least one SSSC ever existed in the state, the survey included items that assessed the history of each SSSC. Survey items included the name of the SSSC and the month and year the SSSC started. Nearly two thirds of SSSCs (62.07%) started in the last decade, that is, between 2010 and 2020 (see Exhibit 2). Approximately 13% started between 2000 and 2009, and 21% started their centers in 1999 or earlier. The start date for one SSSC was unavailable. The survey also included a write-in item asking why the SSSC started and a multiple-choice item assessing whether the SSSC was still operational at the time of the survey (see Exhibit 3). Nearly all SSSCs reported (96.55%) were currently operating at the time of the survey; only one respondent (3.45%) reported that their center was not operational and had been discontinued.

EXHIBIT 2.

Starting Year of SSSCs

2010—2020

62%

2000—2009

14%

1999 and earlier

21%

Missing

3%
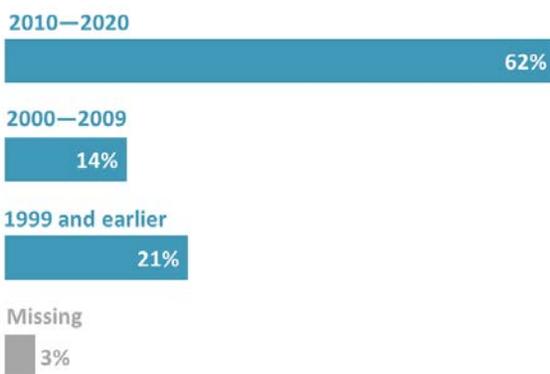
EXHIBIT 3.

Currently Operational SSSCs

97%
of SSSCs are
still operational

Most commonly, SSSCs were started due to state legislation (see Exhibit 4). State legislation generated the conception and funding of nearly two thirds of SSSCs (65.52%). Over a quarter (27.59%) further indicated the legislation was a direct response to school shooting incidents, specifically those that took place at Columbine High School (17.24%), Sandy Hook Elementary School (6.90%), and other local school incidents (3.45%). Other reasons mentioned included receiving grant funding (10.34%), leadership or stakeholder desire (10.34%), a desire to streamline state resources (6.90%), and better preparation for potential disasters (6.90%).

EXHIBIT 4.
Reasons for Starting SSSCs[2]

Legislature/legislation
66%

Response to school shootings
28%

Received grant/university funding
10%

Leadership and stakeholder desire
10%

Unify resources
7%

Increase preparation for disaster
7%

States with a Currently Operational SSSC

As mentioned previously, 28 SSSCs were reported to be currently operational (see Appendix B for a list of states with operational SSSCs at the time of the survey). Operational SSSCs were asked to respond to multiple-choice survey items that assessed how the SSSC is situated within the state

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[2] As noted, this was a write-in response item in which respondents could describe why the SSSC started. Because of that, the sum exceeds 100% as some respondents described multiple reasons and/or several themes identified in analysis (e.g., legislation stemming from a school violence incident).

government system, its funding sources, the number of full-time staff, and focus areas. Nearly three quarters of operational SSSCs (71.43%) were part of a larger state agency (see Exhibit 5). Among SSSCs housed at a larger state agency, half were situated within state education agencies, including departments of education (40%) and state boards of education (10%). Thirty percent of SSSCs were situated within agencies related to public safety and law enforcement, including departments of public safety (25%) and state police (5%). Fifteen percent of SSSCs were situated in justice-related agencies, including departments of justice (5%), departments of criminal justice services (5%), and commissions on crime and delinquency (5%). Ten percent of SSSCs were housed in agencies related to emergency management, including departments of emergency services and public protection (5%) and departments of emergency management (5%).

EXHIBIT 5.

State Agencies Housing SSSCs[3]

Education agencies

50%

Public safety/law enforcement agencies

30%

Justice agencies

15%

Emergency management agencies

10%

The most common funding source for operational SSSCs was state appropriations (75%), followed by federal grant funds (46.43%) and state grant funds (17.86%). One SSSC (3.57%) was funded by nongovernment funds, and another was funded through "other" funding sources. Most operational SSSCs operated with relatively small numbers of full-time staff (see Exhibit 6). Half of the operational SSSCs included five full-time staff members or less. A quarter had six to ten full-time staff, and approximately 11% employed 11 to 20 staff. Only one SSSC (3.57%) had more than 21 staff members. The number of full-time staff members was missing or unknown for the remaining 7.24% of SSSCs.

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[3] Sum exceeds 100% because one respondent reported their SSSC is shared by more than one agency.

EXHIBIT 6.

Full-Time Employees (FTE) of SSSCs

Five FTE or less

54%

6—10 FTE

25%

11—20 FTE

11%

More than 21 FTE

4%

Not sure

7%

The most common focus areas of operational SSSCs included technical assistance, training, and resource development. Nearly all operational SSSCs (92.86%) focused on technical assistance, 85.71% focused on training, and 82.14% focused on resource development. Over half (54.57%) focused on grant administration, and half focused on compliance related to school safety requirements in the state. Approximately seven percent had "other" focus areas, including crisis management (3.57%) and coordination (3.57%).

States with a Discontinued SSSC

For respondents who indicated the SSSC in their state was discontinued, the survey included multiple-choice items that assessed how the SSSC was situated within the state government system, its funding sources, the number of full-time staff when it was discontinued, and the focus areas. A write-in survey item also assessed the rationale for discontinuing the SSSC. For the one discontinued SSSC (see Appendix B), the center was part of a university/college and funded through both state and federal grant funds. The SSSC's focus areas were training and technical assistance. The number of full-time staff was unknown, and no rationale was provided for its discontinuation.

States That Have Never Had a SSSC

If no SSSC existed in a state, the survey included two write-in survey items assessing (1) the rationale for never introducing an SSSC, and (2) other structures in place to address school safety in the state (see Exhibit 6). Out of the 14 respondents who reported never having an SSSC in their state (see Appendix B for a list of states that reported never having an SSSC), rationales were evenly split among lack of funding or capacity, school safety being housed in a state agency, and unknown rationale (each 21.43%). Additionally, one respondent (10%) described that, in their state, schools control their own safety measures in partnership with local law enforcement. Approximately 29% of respondents did not provide a rationale for never introducing an SSSC. When identifying other structures in place, half of the respondents indicated that state agencies already addressed school safety, including the Department of Education, State Police Department, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Public Health, or Department of Public Safety. Approximately 29% described resources that are available for schools, including toolkits, help lines, trainings, assessments, and technical assistance.

EXHIBIT 6.

Reasons for Never Having an SSSC[4]
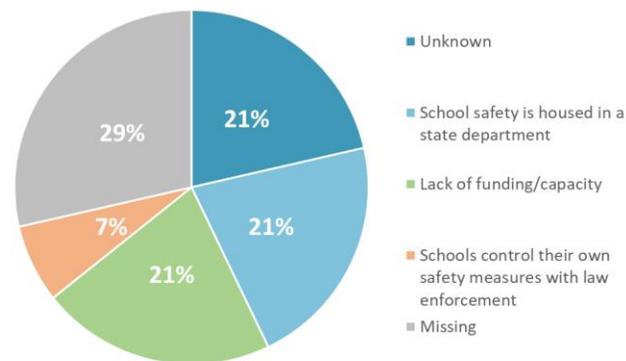
States That Did Not Respond to the Survey

As noted previously, there were eight states that did not participate in our survey data collection effort, and one territory that was unsure of their history regarding an SSSC that we were unable to resolve in our follow-up efforts. As a matter of due diligence and completeness, and to fully understand the history of SSSCs and a state's role in school safety, our team used what could be found

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[4] Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

publicly on the internet (e.g., websites, reports, legislation) to describe the school safety efforts in each of these nine states/territories for which we did not receive a response:

- **Arizona**: The Arizona Department of Education has a school safety and social wellness department that provides resources, training, and technical assistance in the areas of (1) comprehensive school wellness, (2) emergency preparedness, (3) mental health, (4) school nursing, (5) school safety program and task force, and (6) bullying. These resources and services appear mainly on their website, but dedicated staff are listed to contact for additional support in some of these content areas.

- **Hawaii**: The Hawaii State Department of Education has a single webpage that outlines the reasons why districts should address safety in their schools and provides contact information and links/resources in various content areas, including: (1) legal statutes around school safety, (2) general safety on campus, (3) violence prevention, and (4) safety committees.

- **Mississippi**: The Mississippi Department of Education has a Division of School Safety that supports schools in the areas of physical security, emergency operations, and school discipline. Training and technical assistance may be requested to provide guidance in the development of a safe and secure school environment for students, faculty, and administrators. Resources and areas of technical assistance include (1) school resource officer (SRO) training, (2) active shooter training, (3) emergency planning, and (4) site visits.

- **New Jersey**: The New Jersey Department of Education houses the Office of School Preparedness & Emergency Planning (OSPEP). The office provides support to district and school leaders in assisting with the establishment and maintenance of a school safety and security plan that addresses all hazards and follows the phases of crisis management planning — mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. To achieve these goals, the staff of the OSPEP work in conjunction with the New Jersey State Police, New Jersey Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force, and the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. The website highlights resources on state laws pertaining to safety, courses/trainings, and reports/newsletters.

- **New Hampshire**: The state has a website that highlights the work of various task forces and partner agencies, which include New Hampshire Homeland Security, New Hampshire Department of Education, New Hampshire Health and Human Services, the New Hampshire State Police, and other state and federal partners. The website is a collection of various resources organized by the following categories: (1) task force; (2) legal review; (3) legislative; (4) mental health; (5) planning, training, and exercises; (6) communication; and (7) facilities upgrades.

- **New Mexico**: The New Mexico Public Education Department has a school safety website that contains resources and training opportunities. The website also contains information on state legislative requirements and resources to support these requirements, including emergency operations plan development and drill requirements.

- **North Carolina**: The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction operates the Center for Safer Schools. The Center serves as a hub of information and technical assistance on school safety to faculty and staff, law enforcement, youth-serving community agencies, juvenile justice officials, policymakers, parents/guardians, and students. Staff are available to provide trainings, guidance, and technical assistance upon request for faculty and staff, and for those working with

children and adolescents. Information/resources/topics on the website include: (1) anonymous reporting, (2) bullying, (3) SROs, (4) reunification, (5) crisis intervention, (6) available trainings, and (7) safety grants that districts can apply for.

- **North Dakota**: The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has a school safety/security webpage with information on a wide variety of topics to provide schools with resources. The topic areas covered include: (1) bullying, (2) emergency drills, (3) school climate, (4) emergency preparedness, (5) SROs, (6) suspension/expulsion, and (7) truancy. The website also provides training opportunities in some of these content areas. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction also has similar webpages for student health (e.g., nurses, immunizations, medications) and behavioral health (e.g., social emotional learning, suicide prevention, trauma).

- **Washington, DC**: Although we had contact with a key school safety stakeholder in Washington, DC, the individual was unsure if they had ever had a school safety center. Attempts were made to reach out to the alternate contact provided but were unsuccessful. The DC Metropolitan Police Department has a website with a collection of local and national resources for schools to access. These resources include information on (1) school bus safety, (2) truancy, (3) national data on school safety trends, and (4) various school safety-related associations.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our goal in this evaluation project is to better understand the history of SSSCs as well as their characteristics and activities so that funding and resources can be prioritized appropriately and so that activities associated with positive outcomes can be shared and replicated. This evaluation has the potential to influence how SSSCs are funded and structured, impact the activities that are prioritized by SSSCs, and inform how SSSC impacts can be more rigorously examined in future research. Ultimately, having a clearer understanding of SSSC history, characteristics, activities, and perceived impacts provides a springboard to improving the work of SSSCs, ultimately influencing the safety of students and school staff.

Although this report is based solely on our initial and singular data collection activity to this point, there is much to be gleaned that will influence future data collection activities associated with this project. This report, as mentioned, focuses on the status of SSSCs, including the characteristics of past and present centers and attempts to develop a uniform definition of an SSSC for the field. This report is part of a series of data collection efforts/reports that will build on each other, ultimately culminating in a promising practices framework. Below, we outline some critical takeaways from our analysis of the initial key informant survey.

A Growing Number of States with SSSCs

A clear finding is the large number of states that have implemented SSSCs. Over 65% of states responding to the survey reported having an SSSC, with most of these centers serving their entire state. Of those states that reported ever having an SSSC, over 96% indicated that the SSSC was still operational at the time of the survey. This indicates that not only are many states choosing to adopt SSSCs, but once implemented, they tend to remain in operation as the state's main source for supporting school safety. These findings are important, given that we know very little about the characteristics, structures, activities, and impacts of SSSCs. As states likely continue to add, and perhaps even expand, SSSCs, it will be critical for policymakers, state leaders, and federal agencies to have a firm understanding of how centers can be established and/or reworked to ensure the greatest impact.

Additionally, if a respondent indicated their state had never had an SSSC or it had been discontinued, they were asked to provide a rationale. The two most common responses to this question

were a lack of funding/capacity or that school safety was already being housed in a state agency. Both responses are important to consider. First, regarding a lack of funding/capacity, although some respondents indicated that that their states did not have the funding available, others responding to the survey reported the use of state allocations and/or grant funds to support the SSSC in their state. This highlights either funding streams that are unique or only available to certain states to fund SSSCs, or varying priorities within states on how to allocate funds to address school safety (e.g., SSSC vs. an office within a state agency). The second reason provided for never establishing an SSSC by some respondents was that school safety was already housed in a state agency, thus indicating there was no need for a center. This is interesting considering that so many states that reported having an SSSC also indicated that their center was housed in an existing state agency. In other words, whether housed in a state agency or not, states view what constitutes an SSSC differently. This has implications for how we approach a uniform definition of SSSC (discussed in more detail later in this section).

School Violence Is Often the Motivation for SSSCs

It is important to consider the motivation behind why states are implementing SSSCs. First, a majority of SSSCs have been established in the last decade, with 62% of respondents indicating that the center in their state was started between 2010 and 2020. Looking at the past two decades (2000–2020), almost 75% of SSSCs were established in that time frame. This indicates that SSSCs are still relatively new in a large majority of states. However, it is also important to note that there were several states that reported having SSSCs even prior to 2000.

Additionally, respondents shared that a majority of SSSCs were started because of state legislation requiring the creation of a center, often in response to high-profile national school violence incidents. Some respondents also shared more localized incidents of school violence being their impetus to create an SSSC. The other top reason noted in terms of the rationale behind states creating an SSSC was an increase in grant funds to do so. Independently, each of these findings is important, but collectively, they may be even more useful. Specifically, over the past 20 years, school safety has certainly become even more of a topic of discussion across the country, often fueled by high-profile violent incidents (e.g., Sandy Hook Elementary School, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School), which has led to an increase in resources and financial support from federal and state agencies. It appears, at least from our initial data collection, that these three factors have contributed to the significant growth in states creating SSSCs.

Structure, Funding, and Staffing Influence the Work of SSSCs

Those respondents that reported ever having an SSSC in their state provided information on the structure, staffing, funding, and types of work of that center. As noted, over 70% of SSSCs were reported to be situated in larger state agencies. These agencies included those related to education, public safety (i.e., law enforcement), justice, and emergency management. This type of structure, being a part of a larger state agency with additional resources, services, and obligations as opposed to a standalone independent center, is important not only to how we define what an SSSC is, but also in terms of understanding how they go about achieving their work. Additionally, in many of the write-in survey items, respondents discussed the collaboration between state agencies in the areas listed above. This was true for states that had an SSSC situated in one of these state agencies (they collaborated with others) and those that had standalone SSSCs. This is likely indicative of, and necessary for, the expanded nature of all that is encompassed under school safety. In addition, in responding to the item about how the SSSCs are situated within state government, a large majority of respondents indicated that SSSCs in their states were funded using state and/or federal funds. In some cases, these were state appropriations within the state's budget, but in other cases they were grants given by state and/or federal agencies.

In terms of staffing, over 50% of respondents reported that SSSCs in their state had 5 or fewer staff, with 75% reporting that their SSSC had 10 or fewer staff. However, respondents also indicated that their SSSCs are responsible for several different activities in support of school safety in the state. For instance, in each of the following categories, over 50% of respondents reported that their SSSC engaged in this type of work: technical assistance, training, resource development, grant administration, and compliance. Collectively, these findings suggest that, in most cases, a small staff dedicated to the SSSC is responsible for a large amount of work that supports schools and districts in their safety efforts, but the work often occurs through collaboration with various partner agencies who also have an interest in school safety. As what is considered school safety grows and expands, it will be critical to ensure that SSSCs are staffed with individuals with the right expertise and skill sets to effectively engage in this diverse set of activities and that lines of communication and collaboration between agencies are strong.

A Uniform Definition of SSSCs

One of the main aims for this initial data collection activity and report was to develop a uniform definition for what constitutes an SSSC. However, through this initial effort we have identified a potential issue with defining centers that likely has resulted in the previous conflicting and inconsistent reports on the prevalence of SSSCs (e.g., Carlton et al., 2017; National Crime Prevention Council, 2020). Specifically, of the 28 respondents who reported their state had an operational SSSC at the time of the survey, over 71% indicated that this SSSC was part of a larger state agency (department of education, department of public safety, etc.). However, in contrast, we also had three respondents who reported that their state *does not* have an SSSC, but when asked to provide a rationale as to why they did not have a center and how the state addressed school safety alternatively, each of their responses indicated that school safety was already handled by an existing state agency, and therefore, there was no need for an SSSC. Interestingly, across these different responses, respondents indicated that school safety was housed in a state agency, yet the perspectives on whether this was an SSSC differed among states. Even after closer inspection, it appears that the three respondents who indicated their states did not have an SSSC, but that school safety was housed in another state agency, described similar work being done as those who reported having an SSSC (e.g., technical assistance, training, etc.).

There are several potential explanations for these varying perspectives. For instance, it is likely that some states have state legislation that specifically mandates the creation and support of an SSSC, even if it is housed within a larger state agency. Other states may not have such legislation. Alternatively, and perhaps even more simplistically, states may just differ in their terminology of how they refer to this specific office or department within a larger agency that is responsible for school safety. Thus, when completing the survey, if the structure is not commonly referred to as an SSSC, it was not reported as such, and vice versa. To further explore this, our project team has decided to include these three states in our next data collection effort (i.e., interviews with the directors of SSSCs), which will allow us to parse out similarities and differences among those who reported this structure as an SSSC and those that did not.

Despite these different perspectives, which we will continue to explore, we felt it was important to propose at least an initial definition of what constitutes an SSSC, based on our survey data and subsequent conclusions. As such, we propose the following:

A state-level resource that is funded either through state appropriations or state/federal grant

funds, or some combination of the two, that at a minimum serves the entire state as a central clearinghouse for school safety information and resources, but that also may provide technical assistance, training, and/or develop resources to support local education agency school safety efforts.

As mentioned, within our larger evaluation project, our future work will include collecting additional data from SSSC directors; gathering detailed activity data from each SSSC; and conducting interviews and surveys with key stakeholders in each state that includes policymakers, superintendents, principals, school resource officers, and others involved in school safety efforts in each state. These additional efforts will further influence how we define SSSCs, and therefore, lead to refinements in this definition as the study progresses.

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Appendix A. Key Informant Survey

SCHOOL SAFETY KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. State:
2. Position/Job Title:
3. Agency/Company/Organization:
4. What is your role in school safety for the state?

II. STATE SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER HISTORY

5. Following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, has your state ever had a state-level school safety center?

For this purpose, a school safety center is simply defined as a central location for the state to receive technical assistance, training, and/or resources related to school safety.

Yes, we have/had *one* school safety center that serves/ed the *entire* state (Continue to #8)	Yes, we have/had *multiple* school safety centers that collectively serve/ed the *entire* state (Continue to #6)	Yes, we have/had *one* school safety center, but it only serves/ed a *portion* of the state (Continue to #8)	Yes, we have/had *multiple* school safety centers, but collectivity they only serve/ed a *portion* of the state (Continue to #6)	No, we have never had a school safety center in the state (Continue to #13)	I am not sure if my state has ever had a state-level school safety center (Continue to #15)

6. How do/did the multiple school safety centers in your state function?

Multiple standalone centers that work independently (Continue to #7)   Multiple locations/offices of the same center that work collectively (Continue to #8)

7. How many standalone centers that work independently are/were part of the SSSC in your state?
Note: Based on the number of standalone centers you provide above; we will then ask you to provide a name for each of these centers in the following question. After naming these centers, we will ask a series of questions related to EACH center's history and operation individually. The answers you provide for each center may be the same or different, but we ask that you answer the questions individually for each of the centers you identified. Follow up questions about each center will be asked collectively per center. For instance, all questions about "Center #1" will be asked before moving to the same questions being asked about "Center #2", and so on.
(Enter total number of locations numerically)

8. Please provide the formal name(s) of the state school safety center(s) in your state. (the number of text boxes to provide names will be based on questions 5-7 above)

(Q 9-11 will repeat based on the number entered in Q7 and the names provided in Q8)

9. When was the state school safety center started (enter approximate month and year; if you are unsure of the exact month or year please use your best estimate or indicate that you do not know)**?**

10. Why was the state school safety center started (e.g., school safety events, policy/legislation, shifts in leadership, desire from stakeholders, etc.)**?**

11. Is the state school safety center still operational today?

    Yes (If Yes, continue to section III.)   No (If No, continue to #12)

12. What was the rationale behind discontinuing the state-level school safety center? Continue to section IV

13. What is the rationale for never introducing a state-level school safety center?

14. In lieu of a state school safety center, what other structures are in place to address school safety in your state (e.g., professional associations provide resources, other state agencies provide resources, etc.)**?** *Please list and describe each below.* END SURVEY

15. Please provide the first and last name as well as the email address, phone number, position/job title, and agency for someone else in your state who may have knowledge related to a state school safety center.

As a reminder, we are looking to survey individuals in each state who are knowledgeable about its history and approaches to school safety over the past two decades. END SURVEY

(Items 16-23 are repeated based on number of centers identified in Q7)

III. ACTIVE STATE SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER DETAILS

16. How is the state school safety center situated within the state government system?

Part of a larger state agency (please specify)	Standalone state agency	Part of a university/college (please specify)	Standalone non-profit	Other (please specify)

17. Who is the individual currently responsible for the day-to-day operations of the state school safety center at this location? (Enter first and last name)

18. What is this person's title? (Enter title)

19. What is this person's phone number? *XXX-XXX-XXXX*

20. What is this person's email address? *XXX@XXX.com*

21. What are the major funding sources that support the center's operation at this location (check all that apply)**?**

- State grant funds (e.g., a grant provided by a state agency)
- State appropriations (e.g., funds allocated within the state's general budgeting process for the center)
- Federal grant funds (e.g., a grant provided by a federal agency)
- Non-government funds (e.g., private funds, donors, funds from a non-profit agency)
- Other (please specify)

22. How many fulltime employees does the center have at this location?

(Enter number)

23. What are the main focus areas of the center at this location (check all that apply)**?**

- Training
- Resource development
- Technical assistance
- Grant administration
- Compliance/regulatory
- Other (please specify)

24. Is there anything else about the history and context of SSSCs in your state that is important to understand? END SURVEY

(Items 25-28 are repeated based on number of locations identified in Q7 and the names provided in Q8)

IV. DETAILS OF DISCONTINUED STATE SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

25. How was the state school safety center situated within the state government system?

Part of a larger state agency (please specify)	Standalone state agency	Part of a university/college (please specify)	Standalone non-profit	Other (please specify)

26. What were the major funding sources that supported the center's operation at this location (check all that apply)**?**

- State grant funds (e.g., a grant provided by a state agency)
- State appropriations (e.g., funds allocated within the state's general budgeting process for the center)
- Federal grant funds (e.g., a grant provided by a federal agency)
- Private funds / donors (e.g., non-government funds use to award a grant, donation, or other form of support)
- Funds from a non-profit agency
- Other (please specify)

27. How many fulltime employees did the center have at this location at the time it was discontinued?

(Enter number)

28. What were the main focus areas of the center at this location (check all that apply)**?**

- Training
- Resource development
- Technical assistance
- Grant administration
- Compliance/regulatory
- Other (please specify)

29. Is there anything else about the history and context of SSSCs in your state that is important to understand? END SURVEY

Appendix B. Status of SSSCs

Key informants from the following states reported having currently operational SSSCs:

- Arkansas
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Florida
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Kentucky
- Maine

- Maryland
- Minnesota
- Missouri
- Montana
- Nevada
- New York
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Pennsylvania

- Rhode Island
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Vermont
- Virginia
- Washington
- Wisconsin

A key informant from the following state reported having a discontinued SSSC:

- Oregon

Key informants from the following states reported having never had an SSSC:

- Alabama
- Alaska
- California
- Delaware
- Georgia

- Iowa
- Kansas
- Louisiana
- Massachusetts
- Michigan

- Nebraska
- South Carolina
- West Virginia
- Wyoming

A key informant from the following territory reported being unsure whether they ever had an SSSC:

- District of Columbia