

School Resource Officers: Benefits and Challenges

John Rosiak, Founder, Prevention Partnerships

Abstract

With the continuation of high profile school shootings in the United States, and growing concern about school violence in countries across the world, the issue of whether and how to engage law enforcement in schools has been raised to a new level of discussion. Communities must decide whether they want to employ police in schools in the capacity of School Resource Officers (SROs). If so, these communities must figure out how they go about it in the most effective way by developing positive relationships with students and collaboration with educators and mental health professionals to proactively address school safety issues and *divert* at-risk students from the juvenile justice system. Implementing effective SRO programs that support the positive development of youth is an essential part of youth justice reform.

This article presents the SRO model of school-based law enforcement (SBLE), discussing the SRO's role as an educator, informal counselor, and proactive law enforcer. It presents the potential benefits and challenges of school-based law enforcement, and outlines the key steps to creating an effective SRO program through proper selection, training, and governance.

Introduction

If students and educators are to achieve their full potential, schools must be safe and feel safe. Students who report feeling safe in school are more engaged in class, have higher academic achievement, and have lower rates of absenteeism, truancy, and behavioral issues. Educators also benefit from safe schools. Those educators who report feeling safe in school are better able to focus on academics, are more likely to remain in their positions, and are better equipped to teach and support students. Simply put, feeling safe in school is connected to achieving educational outcomes for students.

Many communities seek the help of law enforcement to promote school safety and protect schools from violence. SRO programs that are implemented and sustained through a well-conceived, organized and comprehensive process can help prevent school-based violence, connect at-risk students to needed services, divert youth from juvenile court, and create safe, secure, and peaceful school environments.

Effective school-based law enforcement programs require more than simply assigning officers to schools. More established SRO programs are built on careful selection of the right officer, and training that SRO in well-defined roles and responsibilities. More robust school-based law enforcement programs involve a comprehensive agreement between the school and the law enforcement agency that fosters collaboration, communication, and ongoing evaluation. This article outlines the important issues related to school-based law enforcement, including:

- What SROs are and their roles as educators, informal counselors, and law enforcers
- The potential benefits and pitfalls of school-based law enforcement programs
- The proactive, collaborative role SROs can play in schools
- The value of a comprehensive agreement between the school and the law enforcement agency, and of written guidelines clarifying an SRO's work
- How to properly select and train SROs.

What Are School Resource Officers?

SROs are sworn law enforcement officers who are specially selected and trained to promote safety within schools. These officers are typically employed by law enforcement agencies, such as the local police department or sheriff's office, and are usually funded through local law enforcement or education budgets

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(or a combination of the two). In the United States, funding may also come from government agencies, such as the U. S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). The school is the SRO's "police beat" where the officer fulfills a multifaceted role, proactively promoting safety by building trusting relationships with students, staff, and other caregivers.

First initiated in the 1950s, school-based law enforcement programs have grown in popularity in recent decades. In the 1990s, amid growing fears about juvenile crime, several high-profile school shootings, and increased federal funding for school-based law enforcement programs, more communities began assigning officers to schools. From 1997 to 2003, the number of school-based law enforcement officers rose 52 percent, from 9,400 to 14,337. As of 2012, well over 10,000 officers police approximately 40 percent of U.S. schools nationwide, primarily at the secondary school level.

School-based law enforcement poses some unique challenges to policing. SBLE is a broad term that includes SROs as the largest group. But others play roles in SBLE, including: School security guards, patrol officers who make stops at the school, and juvenile officers. There are important distinctions among these different groups in terms of background and training, and roles and responsibilities.

Traditionally, schools focus on promoting academic achievement, while the work of law enforcement centers on creating and maintaining public safety. These differing missions can impact how each party interacts and relates with youth. Differences in training and disposition can also result in differing approaches in responding to problem behavior. SRO programs encourage dialogue between schools and law enforcement to help bridge the gap across these professional cultures, identify and develop a shared vision, and align school philosophies with SROs' commitment to safety.

Unlike most law enforcement officers, who typically work with a largely adult population, SROs predominately serve youth in schools. Challenges that SROs face are many, including: the need for crisis intervention training, communications skills with youth as well as school personnel, a thorough understanding of juvenile justice, and knowledge of and sensitivity to the social, emotional, and intellectual development of young people. Full-time, long-term assignments to schools coupled with comprehensive training can help to ensure that SROs build the skills, knowledge, and relationships necessary for serving in a school environment.

SRO Roles: Educators, Informal Counselors, and Law Enforcers

SROs can fulfill a variety of roles: Preventing and responding to school-based crime; fostering positive relationships among law enforcement, educators, and youth; and helping to promote a positive school climate. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) in the U.S. advocates for SROs to fulfill a "triad" role encompassing three primary functions: Educator, informal counselor, and law enforcer.

Educator

Law enforcement training and experience equip SROs with specialized knowledge that can be particularly valuable in an educational environment. SROs apply this knowledge to school staff, students, parents, and the community in several ways:

Educating students. SROs can serve as guest lecturers in the classroom. They can: Implement evidence-based curricula, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Second Step, and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT); teach students about criminal investigation, laws and constitutional rights, law enforcement as a career, substance abuse, conflict resolution and restorative justice, and youth-relevant crimes such as dating violence. Officers have even shown math students the value of mathematics as it is applied to accident reconstruction investigations. Spending time in the classroom also serves to build positive relationships between law enforcement and youth.

Teaching school staff. SROs can lead in-service trainings for school personnel, educate staff about crime and justice issues, and provide training on crime prevention.

Advising on emergency preparedness and crisis and incident management. SROs can help prepare schools to handle crises by informing crisis planning and management systems, developing and coordinating emergency response plans, creating protocols for handling specific emergencies, and leading exercises, ideally according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Incident Management System (NIMS) in the U.S.

Promoting crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). SROs can educate administrators on how to decrease risks and opportunities for problem behaviors by employing the CPTED principles of surveillance, access control, territorial reinforcement, and maintenance. These principles may require altering aspects of the physical environment (e.g., building architecture or landscape design), increasing supervision in problem areas, and revising school policies to ensure that students and visitors move through monitored areas.

Teaching parents and the community. SROs can provide training and present information at community meetings on relevant crime and legal issues, such as the signs of substance abuse or gang involvement.

Informal Counselor

Another very important role of the SRO is that of informal counselor. Positive relationships between the SRO and students are consistently identified as a key to success for SRO programs. Youth often view and turn to officers in the same way they might turn to parents or other adults in their lives, seeking out SROs to discuss issues. SROs can build trust and foster relationships with youth through formal and informal interactions. For example, as part of the Boston Public Schools' Saturday Morning Alternative Reach Out and Teach Program, SROs meet with at-risk students on Saturday mornings to discuss their behavior and educate them about criminal justice.

When youth are guided about a variety of challenging issues, such as underage drinking, stressful life situations, or even the illegality of school pranks, students can come to trust SROs to answer questions and address problems, which in turn enables the officers to identify at-risk students early. These relationships also allow SROs to intervene before issues escalate, refer students to appropriate resources (e.g., mental and behavioral services within and outside of the school), and divert them from the juvenile justice system.

"The kind of relationships police forge with teachers and students, rather than the number of arrests they make, promotes school safety." —*American Civil Liberties Union and Citizens for Juvenile Justice*

Law Enforcer

Protecting students and staff from threats of violence is a primary component of an SRO's law enforcer role. Having a sworn law enforcement officer available at the school diminishes critical response time when a violent incident or other emergency occurs. Likewise, an SRO's familiarity with a school's layout and design, as well as knowledge of the individuals involved in a problem, can further improve the efficiency of response to an incident.

SROs fulfill a number of traditional law enforcement functions:

- Responding to emergencies or other calls for service on campus, such as dealing with trespassers, and dealing with off-campus crimes involving students
- Deterring on-campus violence and criminality
- Conducting criminal investigations, and sharing information with investigation units
- Patrolling the school property, and attending to truancy, security, and traffic issues
- Issuing citations and making arrests if necessary.

The Case for High-Quality SRO Programs

In recent years, school-based law enforcement has come under heightened scrutiny. The result of this attention can serve to advance the way law enforcement interacts with students and school staff. News reports of some local officers misusing their power to search, restrain, or arrest youth inside schools have raised significant concerns for SRO programs nationwide. This is a serious matter because involvement in

the juvenile justice system can negatively impact a child's life trajectory, holding back educational success and raising the risk of adult criminal behavior. Some studies have found associations between the presence of school-based law enforcement and increased student arrests and referrals to juvenile court for school discipline issues—often for public order offenses, such as willful defiance, disorderly conduct, disrupting the educational process, or disrupting a public school.

At the same time, a larger view of the trend data from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice reveals that over the past two decades schools have been safer, juvenile arrests are down, and that this coincides with the expansion of SRO programs as part of a comprehensive strategy. Some studies and local evaluations indicate that SROs can have a positive impact, resulting in reduced suspensions, arrests for assaults and weapons charges, disciplinary actions, serious school violence, and crime in the areas surrounding schools.

Surveys of educators, students, officers, and community members suggest that school-based law enforcement programs are popular and perceived as effective. Respondents report that officers can do the following:

- Increase feelings of safety among students, teachers, and administrators
- Deter aggressive behavior, and empower staff to maintain order and address behavioral issues in a timely fashion
- Diminish classroom time spent on discipline and behavioral disruptions
- Improve school safety and reduce school-based crime
- Increase the likelihood that students report witnessing a crime, and help reduce community-wide criminality
- Improve relationships between law enforcement and youth.

Existing data suggest that more rigorous research, such as randomized controlled trials, may be warranted to assess the true impact of school-based law enforcement broadly, and SROs in particular. Nevertheless, in communities that opt to use school-based law enforcement as part of their school safety strategy, the evidence to date suggests that properly selected, trained, and governed SROs can achieve positive outcomes and avoid the pitfalls linked to some school-based law enforcement programs.

A Proactive, Collaborative Approach to School-Based Law Enforcement

In settings where SROs are well-chosen and well-trained they can focus on prevention and early intervention. This reflects a shift in the law enforcement role from *reactive* (responding to problems as they occur) to *proactive* (identifying and altering the conditions that create school safety issues). A common law enforcement approach to addressing school safety issues in a more proactive way is the SARA Model:

Scan the environment to identify patterns in recurrent issues of school safety

Analyze the causes of these patterns to target areas amenable for intervention

Respond with interventions to reduce the frequency or severity of these issues

Assess the impact of interventions, and refine them as needed.

Proactive school-based law enforcement relies on positive relationships between officers and students. These relationships build trust between SROs and the student body, reduce school safety issues, and promote perceptions of safety. Successful SRO programs require cross-sector connections among the school, law enforcement, mental health agencies, and other community-based partners. A cross-sector school safety team can help align these groups and play an integral role in school-based emergency planning, improving access to resources, and integrating all responders, including law enforcement.

Through their positive relationships with students, SROs can gain knowledge of issues occurring in the community that can impact school safety, which gives them insight into campus threats, community problems, and safety concerns. As a member of the school safety team, SROs can interpret the policies and procedures of the law enforcement agency, share knowledge of community resources, clarify the

connections between school and community crime, and help develop effective prevention strategies and interventions. In this way, SROs act as information liaisons, gathering and sharing knowledge across sectors.

Governing the SRO Program: Memoranda of Understanding and Standard Operating Procedures

Governance documents can be used to prevent confusion among SROs and school staff, decrease conflict between the agencies, while ensuring that the SRO program upholds the school's educational philosophy.

Memoranda of Understanding

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), sometimes called Memoranda of Agreement, define the school-law enforcement partnership and delineate the program mission and goals.

“One of the most frequent and destructive mistakes many SRO programs make is to fail to define the SROs’ roles and responsibilities in detail before—or even after—the officers take up their posts in the schools. When programs fail to do this, problems are often rampant at the beginning of the program—and often persist for months and even years.” —National Assessment of School Resource Officers, U.S.

MOUs should be created through a collaborative process that includes stakeholders from education, law enforcement, and the wider community. This process can establish a common vision that meets the unique needs, goals, and safety challenges of the school and its surrounding community. Moreover, MOUs should allow for adaptation to evolving needs and goals in the school and community.

Key components of MOUs

Mission. Define the overarching purpose of the SRO program (e.g., to promote school safety and improve the educational environment).

Goals and objectives. Outline the purpose and expected outcomes of the program. Goals and objectives should be informed by a needs assessment to identify the issues impacting school safety.

Roles and responsibilities. Define the SRO's responsibilities within the larger context of the educational mission, and the SRO's role related to teaching, crisis situations, and truancy. This includes clarification that the SRO's role is NOT to be a school disciplinarian.

Level and type of commitment from partners. Spell out allocations of funding and resources (e.g., school office space and supplies).

Governance structure. Outline the leadership team, the chain of command, the decision-making process, the lines of communication across agencies, and SRO supervision and accountability.

Process for selecting SROs. Outline the process, including how school administrators will be involved.

Minimum training requirements for SROs. Describe pre- and in-service training content and training funding sources.

Information exchange. Explain the process by which partners gather and share information.

Program and SRO evaluation. Clarify measures of success, evaluation, team composition and scope, and input from stakeholders.

Student rights. Discuss students' rights related to a safe and positive school environment, police search and seizure, and use of force.

Integrating the SRO. Outline mechanisms for incorporating the SRO into the school environment and existing school-based prevention and promotion efforts (e.g., involvement in evidence-based prevention programs).

Transparency and accountability. Clarify the collection and public sharing of data related to SRO programming, including numbers of SROs and law enforcement interventions, and outlining plans to openly and appropriately share information about arrests, police use of force, and school-wide disciplinary actions by SROs with school staff and parents.

Standard Operating Procedures

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) provide detailed guidance to SROs about daily operations, policies, and procedures. Some communities prefer to incorporate SOPs directly into their MOUs. Making SOPs available to the public can help to ensure that community members, school professionals,

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and administrators understand the SROs' role and duties, and what they are not, for example, school discipline.

“An SRO who observes a violation of the school code of conduct preserves a safe and orderly environment by making sure that a school administrator is aware of the violation so that school discipline can be determined solely by school officials.” —National Association of School Resource Officers, U.S.

Key components of SOPs:

- *School discipline versus legal processing*
Delineate which offenses require a legal referral versus the use of traditional school discipline procedures, including behaviors that fall into gray areas between criminal offenses and school discipline issues (e.g., harassment, fighting, vandalism).
Limit arrests for public order offenses (e.g., willful defiance or disobedience, disorderly conduct, disrupting the educational process) to help to ensure that discipline remains the responsibility of school staff.
- *Chain of command*
Delineate to whom the officer reports, how the administrator and officer collaborate to address incidents, and what the procedure is when there is a disagreement between the administrator and the SRO.
- *Arresting students and use of force*
Delineate when arrest or restraint of students or taking them into custody is appropriate, recognizing that these are actions of last resort to deal with offenses that cannot be handled through traditional school procedures.
Define procedures for arresting students, including whom should be consulted and when and where arrests should take place (e.g., off school grounds and outside of school hours, except in cases where there is an immediate threat to school safety).
Clarify procedures for calling in patrol officers to arrest students to protect the relationship between the SRO and the student body.
- *Communication and collaboration*
Define when the SRO will talk with school staff and law enforcement officials, including discussions about at-risk students and ongoing investigations.
Detail what meetings SROs should attend (e.g., parent-teacher organizations, school board meetings, faculty meetings).
Outline how SROs will be integrated into educational teams to help the SRO adapt to the school culture and improve understanding of school resources, referral options, and information sharing.
Specify SRO engagement in periodic roll calls and other law enforcement meetings to help SROs remain part of the law enforcement team and aware of changing community issues impacting school safety.
- *Uniform*
Outline SRO uniform requirements, which may include law enforcement attire, a utility belt, and a service weapon, which can be a deterrent to criminal behavior. This SOP recognizes that in some communities traditional police uniforms may create disruptions or mistrust among the student population and that SRO uniforms can vary based on community needs and the requirements of the law enforcement agency.

“Because of their special training, school resource officers are the only professionals who should be armed in a school, and the decision to use such armed security should be made based on individual community and school need, not via universal mandate.” —National Association of School Psychologists
- *Searching and questioning students*
Outline when and how SROs can search and question students, and whether administrators and/or parents need to be alerted prior to the search.

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Discuss limitations on strip searches and other intrusive searches, and may prohibit SROs from being present when school staff are searching or questioning students. (Generally, SROs in the U.S. can constitutionally search students if the SRO has probable cause that the student has committed or is committing a criminal act.)

Selecting the Right Officer

SRO programs are built on the selection of qualified officers, chosen for their willingness and ability to work with youth and educators. Effective SROs are motivated by opportunities to proactively address safety issues, build effective working relationships with school staff, and positively impact the lives of children.

Programs benefit when officers selected are motivated and willing to meet the unique challenges of working in schools, such as fulfilling nontraditional police roles like teaching, and serving in a more confined patrol areas than traditional policing. Support from supervising officers in managing these challenges increases the SROs' dedication and improves their performance.

School and law enforcement administrators can work collaboratively to identify SRO employment criteria that are the best match for the school. Certain character traits, including being patient, approachable, non-authoritarian, team-oriented, and being less sensitive to disrespect, are likely to enhance SROs' effectiveness. Because SROs serve as role models and rely heavily on individual discretion, high levels of integrity and dependability are essential. Officers skilled in de-escalation techniques and who have expertise in how to counsel or refer students can better promote school safety and a positive school climate. An officer's professional and life experience may provide added value to a school. For example, veteran patrol officers or road deputies bring experience working in the community and responding to crisis situations, along with knowledge of law enforcement work that is often of interest to students.

Providing Multifaceted SRO Training

SROs must not only be well-chosen but also well-trained. Studies suggest that traditional police training often does not provide adequate instruction on topics relevant to school-based law enforcement, such as prevention and early intervention, diversion, adolescent and developmental psychology, and substance abuse. This lack of specialized training can result in SROs who may be ill-equipped to fulfill key roles, jeopardizing the success of the SRO program and hindering school safety.

“Developmentally competent adults align their expectations, response, and interactions, as well as those of institutions and organizations, to the developmental stage of the children and youth they serve.” — Lisa Thureau, Strategies for Youth.

Comprehensive training programs can combine classroom-based training, online distance learning, role-playing or scenario-based instruction, field training (within or outside the district), and orientation to the educational mission and school policies. Programs also include regular in-service training that provides refreshers on key concepts and updates on new developments, and may include such topics as adolescent psychology, positive school discipline, and mental health referrals, while affording SROs opportunities to share lessons learned with one another.

Training and resources are offered by local, state, and federal agencies (such as the U.S. Department of Justice's COPS Office), technical colleges, and other private organizations, including the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, NASRO, and other organizations. To defray costs, communities can train officers to become trainers, sponsor local training conferences, and partner with other communities to implement training.

Basic SRO training includes instruction on how to teach, mentor, and counsel students, work collaboratively with administrators and staff, manage time in a school environment, and adhere to juvenile justice and privacy laws. Specialized training on other topics can also promote an SRO's effectiveness. For example:

Mental health. Training SROs to understand mental illness and mental health problems, recognize signs of emotional disturbance, and intervene in mental health crises can diminish referrals to juvenile court

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and promote diversion of at-risk youth into mental health services. Experienced officers can champion mental health awareness and increase support among new SROs through active endorsement of mental health training.

Adolescent development and communication. With continued development in key decision-making areas of the brain, youth are more reactive, prone to risk-taking behavior, and influenced by social pressures. Environmental factors (including culture, socio-economic status, and family structure) also impact youth behavior and perceptions. Instruction on adolescent physical and social development and developmentally appropriate communication prepares SROs to respond to youth misbehavior.

Implicit bias. Some communities train officers to understand that all individuals harbor unconscious bias, helping them recognize bias and its impacts, and instructing them on how to implement controlled responses can promote fair and impartial reactions to misbehavior and offenses.

Trauma-informed care. Adverse events (e.g., domestic violence, neglect, physical and sexual abuse) can potentially harm a child's emotional and physical well-being and can lead to behavioral issues. Instruction on how to recognize and respond to the causes and implications of trauma can help officers intervene more effectively when signs of trauma appear.

De-escalation techniques. SROs can benefit from instruction on how to interact with and respond to students in crises using validated communication and behavioral techniques. For instance, former patrol officers and road deputies may need to be "untrained" in standard law enforcement methods that promote a heavier reliance on use of force.

School-specific topics. Training in bullying, positive school discipline, substance abuse, truancy, dropout prevention, and school crisis planning can help SROs more effectively carry out their duties.

Cultural competence. This type of training prepares SROs to communicate and tailor interventions based on an understanding of student and staff cultures. Culturally competent SROs can work with individuals representing diverse cultures, including students of various socio-economic strata, religions, ethnicities, or countries of origin.

Conclusion

SROs can be valued members of a multi-disciplinary cross-agency school safety team, helping to promote a safe, supportive, and peaceful school environment. Creating an effective SRO program begins with a strong relationship between the school and law enforcement agency that defines the multifaceted role of the SRO as an educator, informal counselor, and law enforcement problem-solver. A clearly articulated description of SRO responsibilities recognizes that school discipline resides with school administrators, not the SRO. Through positive relationships with students and collaboration with educators and mental health professionals, SROs can proactively address school safety issues and divert at-risk students from the juvenile justice system. Properly selected, trained, and governed SROs can achieve positive outcomes for students and the community by providing youth with the supports they need to succeed in school and in life.

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