



## **FACT SHEET #5: School Resource Officers (SROs)**

November, 2008

Matthew J. Mayer, Ph.D., Rutgers University

### **BACKGROUND**

- Schools have the option of using school resource officers (SROs), in addition to traditional police officers, private security, or school staff members, to meet security needs.
- SROs are sworn law officers assigned through cooperative agreements to work within local schools; however, SROs can be called from school duty to meet other policing needs in the community.
- School Resource Officer programs have a reported origin in the 1950s in Flint Michigan, with later adoption in Florida, California, and Nevada, followed by nationwide implementation in the 1990s.
- Most SROs serve in secondary school settings.
- D.A.R.E. officers may or may not qualify to be SROs.
- Above and beyond being a community-based liaison between schools and law enforcement, core duties of most SROs fall into three areas: (1) law-related education, (2) counseling, and (3) law enforcement.
- There is no reliable estimate of the number of SROs nationally; however, grants from the federal Cops in Schools program placed over 6,400 SROs in schools nationally.

### **KEY ISSUES**

- Selecting individuals for specific SRO positions based on good fit to the job and personal commitment.
- Ensuring adequate education and specialized training (e.g., counseling) for the job.
- Defining core roles and duties of the SRO relative to the administrative structure of the school.
- Defining authority boundaries, and decision-making and communication protocols, for SRO-related activity.
- Creating avenues of communication between SROs and faculty/staff members, students, and families.
- Coordinating SRO activity with other prevention and intervention programming at school.
- Problems with low quality evaluation studies of SRO program effectiveness and a need for better data.

### **RESEARCH SUMMARY**

- There is a strong need for rigorous causal research demonstrating effects of SRO programs in schools.
- Although most study authors have suggested that SROs help reduce violence and disorder in schools, the scientific evidence in support of these conclusions is quite limited. Of fifteen studies of SROs over the past 14 years that were reviewed, almost all relied on opinion surveys and study designs that could not provide solid evidence of the impact that SROs have on schools.
- The body of research as a whole suggests that SROs are viewed favorably by school personnel and parents. Students also tend to view SROs favorably, but less consistently so.
- Four industry surveys of SROs at a national SRO conference (2001-2004) indicated that respondent SROs believed (1) schools are unprepared for terrorist attacks and other serious crises, (2) No Child Left Behind has led to underreporting of school crime, and (3) significant school safety threats remain.
- Several studies have suggested that SRO effectiveness is hampered by a lack of clarity in their roles and responsibilities in relation to school administrators, particularly in decision-making and authority in situations that involve borderline illegal or potentially dangerous activity.
- Research on school discipline, classroom management, and behavior management collectively suggest that explicit instruction on school rules, as well as ongoing communication about how the school enforces its rules, can reduce problem behavior at school. This research suggests that SROs can potentially play an important role in educating students about school rules to help prevent behavioral problems and delinquent acts.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Before implementing an SRO program, ensure that operational details have been fully clarified as to roles and responsibilities of SROs and school administration, protocols for incident communication and decision-making, and school administrator/SRO authority in special circumstances.
- Ensure that law officers selected for SRO duty are a good fit to the program and highly motivated.
- Counseling and teaching services provided by SRO should be limited to those SROs who have met minimal professional standards required by professionals providing those services.
- Provide ongoing professional development support to SRO personnel, especially in areas such as positive behavioral supports, counseling, and proactive problem solving.
- Empower SROs with significant material and financial resources to improve their ability to assist students/families and substantively demonstrate their “helper” role within the school community.
- School districts implementing SRO programs must address sustainability issues, working with local government to ensure appropriate supports and follow-through for SRO programs to operate efficiently, especially in cases where they are using short-term grants to launch the SRO program.
- Create standardized data collection systems that accurately and reliably account for school-based incidents of crime, delinquency, and problem behaviors, reviewing the data with school/community stakeholders and posting the data publicly on the Web.
- Create and implement an evaluation system for the SRO program that uses a data-driven approach of formative and summative assessment linked to program review and modification that also includes analysis of contextual school and community-based factors influencing the success of the SRO program.
- In order to strengthen an SRO program:
  - The decision to implement one should be based on evidence of need to improve school safety and order.
  - SRO programs should operate in conjunction with a local school/community stakeholder panel, with open lines of communication and regular meetings.

## CAUTIONS

- Avoid implementing SRO programs solely on the basis of grant funding being made available (such as Safe Schools/Healthy Students or Community Oriented Policing).
- Avoid political pressure to rush implementation of a SRO program without adequate assessment of need and input from school and community stakeholders.
- Ensure that SROs have appropriate and sufficient formal training in counseling before engaging in such activities.
- Understand that above and beyond the core mission of law-related education, counseling, and law enforcement, a SRO program is one part of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to school safety that depends on balanced and multi-faceted programming, strong school-law enforcement-community stakeholder communication, fostering connectedness within the school community, and providing supports for at-risk students.

## RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Finn, P., & McDevitt, J. (2005). National Assessment of School Resource Officer Programs. Final Project Report. Document Number 209273. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED486268)
- Miller, J. M., Gibson, C., Ventura, H. E., & Schreck, C. J. (2005). Reaffirming the significance of context: The Charlotte School Safety Program. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33, 477-485.
- Schuiteman, J. G. (2005). *SRO Program Evaluation Issues Plus New Commonsense Findings*. (2005 Hamilton Fish Conference papers available at [www.hamfish.org](http://www.hamfish.org))
- Center for the Prevention of School Violence. <http://www.ncdjjdp.org/cpsv/>
- U.S. Dept. of Justice COPS Program school safety page ([www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=106](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=106))
- The Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence. [www.hamfish.org](http://www.hamfish.org)
- National Association of School Resource Officers. [www.nasro.org](http://www.nasro.org)

The Consortium to Prevent School Violence (CPSV) is non-profit group of researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who are focused on advocacy that promotes effective implementation of positive school violence prevention practices, and fostering technical assistance, information dissemination, and professional development based on high-quality scientific research. CPSV promotes open access where stakeholders in schools and surrounding communities are an integral part of the Consortium’s work.