

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS IN NORTH CAROLINA: SCHOOL YEAR 2002-2003

The assignment of law enforcement officers to schools continues to take place in North Carolina. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence has been involved with the trend of placing “School Resource Officers” (SROs) in schools since the Center’s establishment in 1993 and has carefully documented the increasing use of SROs since 1996.

Using a definition developed through research, the Center has determined that there are 731 SROs currently working in schools across North Carolina. The definition is of critical importance since it distinguishes those law enforcement officers who may be only visiting schools occasionally from those who are permanently assigned to schools. Specifically, the Center’s definition for an SRO is:

a certified law enforcement officer who is permanently assigned to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools. The SRO is specifically trained to perform three roles: law enforcement officer; law-related counselor; and law-related education teacher. The SRO is not necessarily a DARE officer (although many have received such training), security guard, or officer who has been placed temporarily in a school in response to a crisis situation but rather acts as a comprehensive resource for his/her school.

The Center’s definition excludes non law enforcement agency security guards, law enforcement officers who are rotated in and out of schools as part of their regular duties, and off-duty law enforcement officers who work in schools for extra pay. Instead, the definition emphasizes the permanent assignment and specialized training that characterize a programmatic approach to placing law enforcement officers in schools.

The 731 SROs currently working in schools reflect an increase of 488 SROs from the Center’s baseline of 243 SROs in 1996. One-hundred-thirteen of the 117 school districts have at least one identified SRO, and 97 counties have an SRO presence in at least one school. Three-hundred-fifty-three (78%) of the state’s 454 high schools have SROs assigned exclusively to cover them which means that the SRO is not shared with another school. Two-hundred-seventy-eight (61%) of the 455 middle schools have exclusive SROs. Six percent of the elementary schools in the state receive services of some type from SROs. At this level, the SRO role of law-related education teacher appears to dominate the services provided although the other roles of law enforcement officer and law-related counselor are also filled.

A Center survey of high school principals in the late 1990s resulted in the SRO approach being given the highest effectiveness rating possible by almost sixty-two percent of the respondents. The Center, which is helping to conduct a national assessment of SROs, has found that teachers and students feel that the SRO program creates as a safer school environment through deterrence and prevention. This perceived effectiveness, mounting anecdotal evidence, surveys of school climate in schools where SROs work, a state funding initiative, and heightened concern about the security of schools help explain why the assignment of specially trained law enforcement officers to schools continues. The Center’s involvement with SROs has also contributed to the increased use of the SRO approach as a means to prevent violence in schools across the state.