

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS IN NORTH CAROLINA: SCHOOL YEAR 2003-2004

The assignment of law enforcement officers to schools continues to take place in North Carolina. The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – CPSV) 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 DJJDP - Center has determined that there are 747 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.

DJJDP - 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 747 SROs currently working in schools reflect an increase of 504 SROs from the DJJDP - Center’s baseline of 243 SROs in 1996. One-hundred-fifteen of the 117 school districts have at least one identified SRO, and 99 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.

Over the past two years, the growth in SROs statewide has begun to plateau. Although the growth of new programs has slowed, schools and communities commitment to the programs remain constant. During a year when many other programs were being cut because of tough economic conditions, schools sought to maintain SRO programs. These decisions are being justified by anecdotal and research based evidence. During the past school year, SROs in the state of North Carolina have been credited with discovering contraband on campuses, uncovering plots by students to use weapons of mass destruction, and wrestling at least one student with a loaded gun to the ground. These stories combined with continued positive research evaluations continue to justify public officials desires to maintain SRO programs.