

**SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS:
WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW, WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW**

by

Joanne McDaniel - Acting Director
Center for the Prevention of School Violence
North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
313 Chapanoke Road Suite 140
Raleigh, North Carolina 27603

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Introduction

With more attention being paid to the safety of young people while they are at school, many communities are considering strategies which are intended to make schools safer environments. Although statistics on school crime and violence convey that such crime and violence are not necessarily occurring in greater numbers, there is, at a minimum, anecdotal evidence which suggests that the types of incidents which are taking place on school property may be more severe in nature and may be having marked negative impact on the educational processes for which schools are responsible. Additionally, media coverage of the tragic shootings which occurred during the 1990s school year has motivated many communities to act.

One of the ways communities are taking action is by making decisions that law enforcement officers of some type need to be assigned to provide coverage to schools so that safety, security, and order can be better maintained. The underlying rationale which is being employed by communities is that a given school's crime and violence problems are not just that school's problems but are reflective of community problems. Such a rationale leads to consideration of community approaches. Hence, in many communities the "School Resource Officer" (SRO) approach is being considered.

The following report will examine where we stand with reference to the SRO approach as we head into the next century. It will cover what we know about SROs at this point, what we think we know, and what we need to know. Much of the information which will be offered is reflective of work which focuses on SROs carried out since 1994 by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, a division of the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency

Prevention, located in Raleigh, North Carolina. As the following imparts, what we know with certainty about SROs is minimal, what we think we know is quite extensive, and what we need to know will keep us busy well beyond the beginning of the next century.

What We Know

As stated above, what we know about SROs with certainty is minimal. From our work, we know that the term “School Resource Officer” is increasingly being used. The initial work the Center for the Prevention of School Violence did in 1994 which focused on SROs often received by law enforcement and education professionals as well as lay persons with questions about what the letters “S” “R” “O” represent. Now, the acronym “SRO” is gaining meaning. Inquiries to the Center from across the country provide evidence that what once was met with question is now increasingly being used.

That is not to say that what we know with certainty is that everyone understands what “SRO” represents. In fact, what we know with certainty is that many still do not know, and, of those that do, we know with certainty that their definitions of the term differ. In fact, what we know with certainty is that there is no one standardized definition for what a “School Resource Officer” is. The requests for proposals for the “Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative,” sponsored by the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice, in 1998 provided for the first time a federal definition for “School Resource Officer” to which practitioners at the school district level across the country have been exposed:

A career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations to: (a) address crime and disorder problems, gangs, and drug activities affecting or

occurring in or around an elementary or secondary school; (b) develop or expand crime prevention efforts for students; (c) educate likely school-age victims in crime prevention and safety; (d) develop or expand community justice initiatives for students; (e) train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime awareness; (f) assist in the identification of physical changes in the environment that may reduce crime in or around the school; and (g) assist in developing school policy that addressed crime and recommend procedural changes (Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative).

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) defines “School Resource Officer”:

Officers [who] promote a better understanding of our laws, why they were enacted and their benefits. They provide a visible and positive image for law enforcement. They serve as a confidential source of counseling to students concerning problems they face. They bring expertise into schools that will help young people make more positive choices in their lives. They also work to protect the school environment and to maintain an atmosphere where teachers feel safe to teach and students feel safe enough to learn (NASRO web site).

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence’s definition of “School Resource Officer,” developed after the initial years of research and based upon encounters with law enforcement officers throughout the country who are assigned to schools, exists as a third definition:

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 (Center for the Prevention of School Violence material).

Although these definitions have much in common, each defines “School Resource Officer” differently with different emphases. Since each comes from well recognized sources, each definition may be perceived as THE definition of SRO. Thus, what we know with certainty is that there is no one agreed upon standardized definition for SRO.

Given that the definition of “School Resource Officer” is not even standardized, it should not be surprising that we know little else with certainty about SROs. Beyond increasing use of the term and certainty that there are more than a few definitions for it, our knowledge and understanding of SROs falls into the realm of “what we think we know.”

What We Think We Know

What we think we know about SROs is extensive. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence has been involved with SROs for almost eight years. This involvement has ranged from preparing SROs to work in schools to studying the effectiveness of these officers in schools. The information the Center has compiled about SROs provides a knowledge base from which to discuss what we think is known about SROs.

A good place to turn our attention as we discuss what we think is known is to turn to the historical development of the SRO approach. What we think occurred historically was a melding of police officer involvement in schools which can be traced to Flint, Michigan, in the 1950s with a community-oriented policing philosophy which emphasizes a proactive and prevention-oriented approach to policing. The term “School Resource Officer” is often attributed to a police chief in Miami, Florida, who coined the term sometime in the early to mid 1960s. Law enforcement agencies and school districts in Florida are believed to be some of the first to launch SRO programs in the 1960s and 1970s. Other programs found throughout the country, although not many, also trace their establishment to the 1970s.

The 1980s and early 1990s were not marked by a continuous growth in the number of SRO programs, but as the 1990s progressed, the SRO approach regained momentum as community

policing began again to be pursued by communities throughout the country. We think this resurgence of the SRO approach was stimulated by a linkage, in many communities, of the community-oriented policing philosophy with concerns about the safety, security, and order of schools.

Since the mid 1990s, we think that the number of officers identified as SROs who are working in schools has increased. The increasing number of such officers who are affiliated with NASRO and who attend NASRO's annual conference evidence this. A Center for the Prevention of School Violence survey of attendees at NASRO's 1997 annual conference found thirty-five states represented by attendees. The 1998 annual conference hosted attendees from forty states. Similar patterns can be found at the state level with state SRO associations being established and attendance at state conferences increasing.

The Center's survey of attendees at NASRO's 1997 annual conference adds several other pieces of information to what we think we know about SROs. It reveals, for example, that the vast majority of attendees are working in positions formally designated with the SRO label. This enhances the points made earlier about what we know with certainty about SROs. It also opens the door for us to think that maybe we are moving toward a more standardized approach to policing in the schools since officers from across the country are being exposed to similar types of training opportunities. The survey, in fact, reveals that over ninety percent of responding officers indicated that they had attended training "specifically designed to prepare [them] to be a 'School Resource Officer' " (Research Bulletin 3, Center for the Prevention of School Violence).

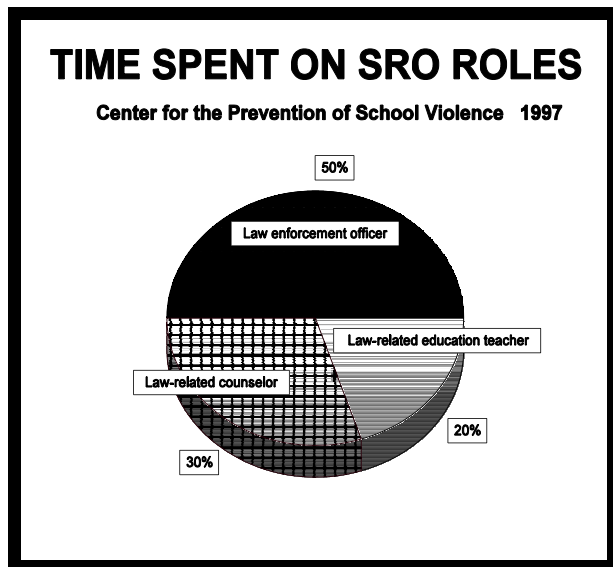
Other information that the survey provides leads us to think we know that:

- more SROs are assigned to high schools than to middle schools or elementary schools;
- a slight majority of SROs are assigned to provide coverage to only one school which is considered by the officer to be his or her “beat”;
- the vast majority of officers assigned to schools are not “rookie” police officers but instead have put in “street time,” have experience with young people in environments outside the schools, and are volunteers for their SRO assignments;
- most of the individuals who are described with the title “School Resource Officer” are certified or sworn law enforcement officers who technically work for either police or sheriffs’ departments;
- most SROs wear their law enforcement uniforms at least sometimes while performing their roles as SROs, and almost all carry a gun while working in their schools;
- the great majority of SROs are male and Caucasian.

We think we know the above not only from survey research of SROs but also from other research conducted by the Center. We also think we know what SROs do while they are working daily in schools from this combination of research.

Surveys of SROs both in North Carolina and nationally as well as site visits to schools where SROs are assigned reveal that what has been described as the “triad approach” to policing in the schools serves well as a description of what SROs do in the schools. This approach focuses on three roles which SROs are trained to carry out while providing service to schools. The roles are that of law enforcement officer, law-related counselor/advisor, and law-related education teacher. Research by the Center leads us to think that the law enforcement role tends to dominate the work SROs perform in schools while the law-related counselor/advisor and law-related education teacher roles enhance how SROs perform as comprehensive resources for their schools. The NASRO survey

again provides us with support for what we think we know about these roles with fifty percent of SROs' time identified by officers as being spent on law enforcement duties, thirty percent identified as being spent on law-related counseling/advising, and twenty percent identified as being spent on law-related teaching. Additional Center research leads us to think we know that the latter roles develop



more fully as officers develop relationships in the schools to which they are assigned. We also think we know that the particular needs of the schools to which officers are assigned play significant roles in determining how SROs perform as comprehensive resources for their schools. For example, we think we know that SROs who work in high schools and particularly in some alternative high schools spend more than a majority of their time carrying out the law enforcement role. Conversely, officers assigned to middle and elementary schools are able to spend more time in the law-related education role. The law-related counselor/advisor role tends to be equally important regardless of the type of educational setting being covered.

In fact, the role of law-related counselor/advisor we think may be the most controversial aspect of officers being placed in schools other than perhaps whether SROs carry guns. We think this is the case because the "counseling" or "advising" aspect of the SRO position is often taken literally by those who are critical of SROs performing counseling/advising in schools. With

reference to the training SROs receive for this role, counseling/advising is not approached as the type of activity that licensed counselors pursue but instead is put forth as performing the role of conduit to such services through active listening.

Based upon our understanding of these roles, we think we know that the training which officers undergo to carry out the SRO approach must be structured to prepare them for the school environment. This environment is much different from the street. We think we know that particular attention must be paid to the law-related counselor/advisor and law-related education teacher roles since these are somewhat specific to school environments. We think, in particular, that the officers preparing to be SROs need training in how to teach or convey the law enforcement knowledge they bring into the schoolhouse.

From early research and through continuous confirmation, we think we know the questions people most frequently ask about SROs. These questions continue to be asked, and we think we

THE TEN MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SRO PROGRAMS

1. What is a School Resource Officer (SRO)?
2. How does the SRO approach differ from the “cop in the shop” approach?
3. What is the community’s involvement with the SRO approach?
4. How does the SRO approach fit with other strategies that are directed at addressing school violence?
5. What qualifications should the SROs meet and how should they be selected?
6. How do the relationships SROs establish with their schools (with parents, students, teachers, staff, and principals) impact the way SRO programs work?
7. How do the relationships SROs maintain outside their schools (with their departments, community agencies, and communities at large) affect the way the SROs carry out their duties?
8. Should SROs wear uniforms and carry guns?
9. How can the impacts of an SRO program be identified?
10. How does a community determine that its school(s) will benefit from the SRO approach?

have information which allows us to provide answers to these questions in ways which enable communities to make informed decisions about whether they should establish an SRO program, what it offers, and what its major components should be.

We also think we know the issues which need to be addressed when communities choose to establish such a program. These issues come in the form of “challenges.” Based upon our experiences with both successful and less-than-successful programs, we think these challenges involve five dimensions: communications; expectations; the SRO program; the officer; and relationships which the SRO must form. We think these challenges characterize the implementation of SRO programs and must be continuously addressed if such programs are to be successful.

CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER PROGRAMS

Developing and maintaining effective communication between/among law enforcement, school officials, and the community.	Training the SRO to be successful.	Creating and maintaining successful working relationships between the SRO and community resources.
Understanding and communicating that placement of an SRO in a school does NOT mean that the school is unsafe.	Selecting and training the SRO supervisor.	Creating and maintaining successful relationships between the SRO and the principal and school staff.
Paying for an SRO program.	Developing effective and efficient school assignment and coverage plans.	Creating and maintaining successful relationships between the SRO and students.
Facing liability issues which surround SRO programs.	Making expectations of all involved parties clear and understood.	Preventing SRO “burnout.”
Addressing the “turf wars” that arise between/among involved jurisdictions.	Understanding the differences between school discipline and general statute law.	Evaluating the SRO’s performance.
Recognizing the impact of an SRO program on the internal workings of involved law enforcement agencies.	Understanding the difference between counseling and <u>law-related</u> counseling.	Determining whether an SRO program is successful.

Selecting the “right” SRO for a school.	Creating and maintaining successful working relationships between the SRO and law enforcement agencies.	
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We think that one of the most important challenges SRO programs must meet involves determining whether they are successful. This requires evaluation of both the activities or processes and impacts of the programs. We think we know what needs to be examined in both areas.

With reference to activities or processes, we think we know that what programs must track includes at a minimum data regarding investigations and arrests, searches, hours spent in the classroom, training hours, agency referrals, conferences with students, school staff, and parents, and coverage of special events. The tracking of this information allows programs to document the work SROs are doing in the schools and can be used by programs to adjust and improve the services SROs are providing.

Related to the tracking of the above information, we think activities or processes must be evaluated using instruments designed to measure the performance of the SRO himself or herself. Such performance evaluation we think must involve the voices of both school administrators and law enforcement supervisors, the former because they are likely to have the most firsthand knowledge of the daily performance of the SROs and the latter because SROs are, by any of the recognized definitions, ultimately employees of law enforcement agencies.

With reference to impacts, we think we know that SROs have the potential for impacting many aspects of the schoolhouses to which they are assigned. Potential aspects of these schools which we think SROs impact include student, staff, and parental feelings about or perceptions of school safety, the amount of resources spent by communities to provide both police coverage and

court services to schools, and the number of criminal and violent incidents which occur on school property.

Based upon our experiences with many programs in many different communities, we think we know that the last of these is often seen by those examining the “effectiveness” of SRO programs as the “bottom line” with regard to program success. We think we know that often what happens with the number of criminal and violent incidents on school campuses when an SRO initially provides coverage is an increase in these numbers because the extra “pair of eyes,” particularly because they are trained eyes, recognizes incidents which went unrecognized before his or her arrival on campus.

In addition to bottom-line numbers, which ultimately reflect quantitative evaluation, we think we know that qualitative evaluation with reference to effectiveness is valuable. We think this is true based upon our own findings in North Carolina where we measured school administrators perceptions of the “effectiveness” of the SROs who provide coverage to their schools. Despite the fact that many of these administrators were a bit hesitant to welcome an SRO full time onto their campuses, something we also think we know to be typically true, after having the services of an SRO for at least part of a school year, almost sixty-two percent rated the SRO approach as being “a most effective” strategy for helping to create and maintain safe schools. Another twenty-six percent rated it with the second highest rating.

With all of the information just described falling into the category of what we think we know, one wonders if there is anything left for the category of what we need to know. After all, despite the fact that what we think we know is just that, what we think we know, we are quite

confident that what has been put forth in that category is, in fact, very likely to be on target. What we need to know, then, begins at that target.

What We Need to Know

What we first need to know is if what we think we know is true. As just stated, we are quite confident that what we think we know is true. This confidence stems from the fact that we have worked with many SRO programs throughout the country. We have worked with small ones and large ones, urban ones and rural ones, ones which have been existence for a time and ones which are just getting started. We base what we think we know upon the work we have done but recognize that only further work, and particularly further research, will allow us to move what we think we know into the what-we-know category.

Beyond solidifying what we think we know, we need to know several other pieces of information about SROs. We need to know how to best train them to perform as “School Resource Officers,” and this likely involves the need for developing a career path for SROs within law enforcement.

We also need to know the best ways to accurately evaluate SRO performance. Related to this, we need to know how to best evaluate SRO programs so that findings are reliable and both internal and external validity are assured. This last need returns us to that great challenge of determining SRO effectiveness.

In addition to the challenge of determining effectiveness, we need to know some basics:

- how many SROs are working in schools in the United States;

- how much does it cost to implement and sustain an effective SRO program; and
- what definition of “School Resource Officer” best describes the work officers are doing in schools.

Reflectively, these needs return us to where we started, determining what the definition of “School Resource Officer” is to, at a minimum, law enforcement and education professionals. We think we know that the term is being increasingly used to describe the positions of law enforcement officers who are working in schools. And we need to know, as stated, what the best definition of “School Resource Officer” is so that it best describes what these officers are doing in schools.

Conclusion

What we know, what we think we know, and what we need to know provide structure to our understanding of the School Resource Officer approach as we move into the next century. We are at a point in time where information and knowledge about SROs is in a formative stage. As we move forward, we are confident that what we think we know will become what we know.

As far as what we need to know is concerned, only limitations on the questions we ask will eliminate this category. There will always be a need to know more. And that is as it should be. For an approach such as the SRO approach, continuous and never-ending attention will provide guidance about how the approach should be applied and will help ensure that ultimately the overall goal of such an approach, making schools safer for students and teachers, will likely be achieved.

References

The following Center for the Prevention of School Violence materials serve as references for this article and are available for those who want further information about School Resource Officers.

Meeting the Challenge of School Violence: School Resource Officers.

North Carolina’s School Resource Officers: A Profile (Research Bulletin 1).

Preventing School Violence By Helping Communities Help Children: School Resource Officers: An Analysis Overview.

School Resource Officers: Profiles in Preventing School Violence.

Starting a School Outreach Program: An Effective Practices Outline for the School Resource Officer Approach.

The North Carolina High School Strategy Survey: The Center’s Safe Schools Pyramid and Other Strategies for Ensuring Safety and Security (Research Bulletin 2).

The School as “The Beat”: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools (Research Bulletin 3).

What Having A School Resource Officer At Your School Means.