

SRO PROGRAM EVALUATION ISSUES PLUS NEW COMMONSENSE FINDINGS [9514]

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Abstract

The published research on School Resource Officers (SRO) programs is rather simpleminded because researchers have attempted to discern SRO impact when hard or scientifically valid impact measures simply do not exist. What is left to report is the overwhelming support these programs have engendered and the widespread belief that SROs reduce student bullying, fighting, drug use, etc.

The article reviews the two most ambitious studies of SRO programming and suggests that until the terms “SRO program” and “SRO impact” are more clearly defined and measured, researchers should deal with smaller questions. An analysis of the factors that 164 SROs reported as hindering their efforts to enforce the law is offered as an example.

Introduction

Perhaps there should be a moratorium on School Resource Officer (SRO) research until there’s some agreement about what we really need to know about these programs. So far, the research findings are positive but entirely commonsensical, and they do not tell us much about how SRO programs should be implemented or whether they actually reduce school-based crimes or misbehavior. This article reflects on the research to date and presents even more commonsensical information, some of which concerns the problems SROs face as they try to enforce the law in our schools.

Literature Review

A Web-based search for articles or reports on SROs or SRO programs from the period 1991 to 2005 found only ten publications that contained data-based findings. This search included a review of National Criminal Justice Research and Statistics (NCJRS), Educational Research Information Center (ERIC) and InfoBase of State Activities and Research (ISAR). Each publication presented opinion data from surveys of SROs, students or teachers. To summarize, these data reveal overwhelming support for SRO programs and widespread *belief* that SROs reduce bullying, fights, drug use, gang activity, weapon carrying, disorderly behavior, fear of crime and dislike of police (Goggins et. al. 1994; Johnson 1999; Kenny and Watson 1998; Humphries 2001; Kennedy 2001; Schuiteman 2002; NASRO Survey 2001; Finn and McDevitt 2005). Only two of the studies utilize pre/post research designs (Johnson, 1999; Humphries, 2001) and all but the NASRO (National Association of School Resource Officers) survey report and the national evaluation report (Finn and McDevitt 2005) rely on a single locality SRO program as its source of data. Thus far, there has been no comprehensive effort to catalogue or study SRO programs nationwide.

The Question of SRO Effectiveness

The SRO research data are assuring and interesting, yet they fail to answer the main question that people ask, namely, Does the every day presence of sworn, uniformed, and armed law enforcement officers reduce or prevent crime, violence and disruptive behavior in our schools? There are two reasons for this.

First, no state or locality is collecting reliable data on school-based criminal or disciplinary incidents, that is, the type of data needed to answer the question. The U.S. Department of Education is pushing school officials to classify incidents in line with federal definitions, yet the uniformity and reliability of school incident data

continues to be undermined by our decentralized educational system (different schools with different codes of conduct). In addition, nearly all of our information about school-based criminal or disciplinary incidents is based on self-reported data. This means that some types of incidents get reported in some school districts but not in others. Until there is uniform and reliable school incident data, any research to determine SRO effectiveness, impact or outcomes seems unwise—except, of course, for research that governments request and are willing to fund (see below).

Second, if poor incident data constitute a barrier to SRO impact studies, the problem of defining and measuring the concept “SRO Program” is equally troublesome. The assignment of SROs to schools is anything but a simple treatment variable ready for testing.

How sure can we be, for example, that findings attributed to SROs are not equally attributable to other security personnel? For years, Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officers, Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) officers, Class Action officers, Child Safety officers, etc. have visited our schools. Furthermore, many schools have had a permanent cadre of uniformed security guards. Virginia, for example, has an estimated 550 SROs in its schools, yet these SROs serve alongside more than 900, mostly uniformed, School Security Officers (SSO). Discerning SRO impacts from SSO impacts might be difficult.

The SRO treatment effect may also vary in accordance with SROs’ personalities, training, ages, job experience, and ability to deal young people. School factors also intervene, for example, when school officials are unwilling to involve SROs in disciplinary matters, refuse to report incidents to SROs, or fail to provide SROs with adequate resources (private offices and phones) to do their jobs. Other factors such as differences in the size and layout of schools, student population diversity, and the rate of SRO turnover, may also interfere.

What Is It We Really Need to Know about SRO Programs?

Perhaps we do not need to have scientific proof that SROs reduce and prevent crime and misbehavior. The published survey and anecdotal evidence (comments by teachers, counselors, administrators, SROs, and law enforcement officials) suggest that they do, plus the consequences of not having such proof may be minimal. SRO programs are popular because citizens believe they make our schools safer and because it makes sense to place law enforcement officers in the midst of the populations most likely to spawn criminal or negligent behavior. From what I know, only the direst of budgetary circumstances can lead local officials to end SRO programs.

The thought of calling for a moratorium on SRO research arose after I reviewed the available literature and reflected both on the findings from my own SRO research and those presented in the “National Assessment of SRO Programs, Final Project Report” (Finn and McDevitt 2005). Both of the latter endeavors contributed new information about SRO programs, but did not take us much beyond the empirical validation of commonsense notions or relationships. A brief review may explain the difficulties of SRO research and why it may be time to ask some different questions about SROs and SRO programs.

The National Assessment of SRO Programs (A Research Contract Gone Bad)¹⁰

The national assessment research project began in May 2000 with high expectations. The researchers (five professors, three from different campus-based research centers and two “consultant” professors from other universities, plus staff from Abt. Associates Inc.) hoped “to identify . . . (SRO) program “models,” how

¹⁰ The information presented is from the February 14, 2000, research proposal “A National Assessment of School Resource Officer Programs” submitted by Abt. Associates Inc. to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), and the “National Assessment of School Resource Officer Programs: Final Project Report,” that Abt. Associates Inc. submitted to NIJ on February 28, 2005.

(SRO) programs have been implemented, and what the (SRO) programs possible effects may be.” They intended to conduct “ex post facto time series outcome assessments” that “focus(ed) on crime, victimization and other measures of disorder” and, in addition, use a “pre-post comparison group design” to “examine student and teacher fear pre-post implementation through a survey.”

Unfortunately, as work proceeded, the project’s ambitious plans slowly unraveled. According to the project’s final report, the researchers were finally forced to conclude that “for reasons beyond anyone’s control,” the pre/post impact evaluation design “could not be implemented.” As a consequence, they resigned themselves to the development of “especially rich case studies” and the administration of a “single-point-in-time survey involving questioning students.”

Two major problems sabotaged the goals of the national assessment project. First, in investigating why newly funded SRO positions were not filled at the research sites (schools), the researchers discovered that most of these schools had had part-time police officers stationed in them for years (DARE officers, GREAT officers, Class Action officers, Child Safety officers, etc.) and that most of the *new* SRO officers would be the same individuals who had already been working at these sites (schools). This reality made the pre-post research design untenable.

Second, the Abt. Associates Institutional Review Board (IRB) “unexpectedly” decided that the researchers use “active consent” during the sampling process of their survey. The project’s final report states that IRB’s decision was based on a concern that “asking students about past victimization and fear of crime could have negative emotional effects.” Once decided, the researchers had to obtain written parental consent from every student they hoped to survey. This led to a reduction in the number of students surveyed and created sampling problems that could harm the generalizability of the survey’s findings.

Thus, from the material published so far, the \$700,000 contract provided us with 19 one-page case studies of locality SRO programs and findings from a survey of 907 students from four school districts. The survey found, among other things, that regular contact between SROs and students increases the students’ comfort level in reporting crimes, that students with positive opinions about SROs are also more likely to have these same higher “comfort levels” and that students who live in safe communities are more likely than students from less-safe communities to feel safer in school.

As a program evaluator, I know how a research project can implode in the face of data problems, bureaucratic delays, incomplete knowledge about the program, organizational politics, multiple site scheduling, multiple researchers, and so forth. Any pointing of fingers at the “national assessment” study is therefore unwise and, I believe, unwarranted. The project is valuable in that it provides clear evidence that we are decades away from a scientifically blessed SRO impact study. It showed, again, that SRO programs are well supported, and it provided more data on SRO-student interaction. It is one of the reasons why we should ask smaller and clearer questions in the next round of SRO research.

The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services SRO Program Evaluation

For the past six years, I have headed up the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice’s (DCJS) ongoing SRO Program evaluation. DCJS began awarding grants for SRO positions in the 1990s and peaked in this endeavor in 2002 when it funded 146 SRO positions on the rosters of 92 police departments or sheriff’s offices.

In return for funding, the grantees were required to have their grant-funded SROs submit quarterly activity reports, incident reports that detailed violations of the *Code of Virginia* (even when prosecutorial action was not anticipated), and in the Spring of 2000 and 2002, administer surveys to staff and students at the schools where they served. DCJS administrative staff keyed responses and comments from activity reports into

Access databases and entered responses from the incident reports and surveys by way of Bubble Publishing scanner technology.

An enormous amount of evaluation data has been and continues to be collected. During the period of fall 1999 to spring 2003, the responses from 987 quarterly activity reports (23 questions), 37,042 incident reports (53-items), 9,286 staff surveys (49-items) and 64,612 student surveys (51-items) were entered into databases. Our most recent evaluation report, "Second Annual Evaluation of DCJS Funded School Resource Officer Programs, December, 2001," is available on the DCJS Web site.

Unfortunately, a planned final evaluation report covering all the data from this period has not been published. One reason has been the difficulty of finding time to do the analyses and write the report. A second reason is the fact that the many analyses conducted have not produced findings that are particularly interesting or original. For the most part, the findings from the four-year data mirrored those produced by the fiscal year 1999–2000 data.

To illustrate the point, Table 1 presents findings from the 4,473 staff and 27,988 student surveys administered in the spring of 2002. Sample percentages on five questions are presented for "all" respondents of each group, and for three subsets of respondents that divide staff and students on the basis of their location in—

1. HS (High Schools, grades 9-12) or MS (Middle Schools, grades 6-8)
HS Staff n=2,920; HS Students n=17,509
MS Staff n=1,437; MS Students n=9,483
2. Small, Medium or Large-size Schools
Small – approx. 400 students each MS and HS; Staff n=546; Students n=3,037
Medium – approx. 700 students MS and 1,000 HS; Staff n=2,229; Students n=16,410
Large – approx. 1,000 students MS and 1,800 HS; Staff n=1,698; Students n=8,541
3. School Divisions Rated *Most-in-Need* or Divisions Rated *Least-in-Need* of SROs ¹¹
Most-in-Need Divisions; Staff n=530; Students n=3,001
Least-in-Need Divisions; Staff n=348; Students n=2,400

There is some interesting variation in the percentages across items and a few within items, but, overall, the staffs versus student variations and the subset variations are not striking. The percentages of staff and students who said they were the victims of theft in the past year are very consistent within each group, as are those that indicate the degree respondents feel safe in school. Students are a little less likely than staff to credit SROs with reducing their fear and are even more unlikely to agree that SROs reduce bullying or fights. About a fourth of the students said that they just "don't know" if SROs produce these effects.

Generally speaking, my findings are quite similar to the findings in the SRO research literature. They reflect the fact that nearly all students and staff feel safe and substantial numbers see SROs as having reduced bullying and fighting in their schools.

The division of respondents on the basis of "school size" and on the basis of their location within "school divisions most or least in need of SROs" is original. These divisions, however, do not produce much variance in item percentages. This has been the case in nearly every analysis I have done (male versus female; older

¹¹ Respondent school divisions were ranked on seven factors including percent poverty, medium family income, crime rate, average school size, percent drop-outs, incidents resulting in suspensions or expulsions, and juvenile court cases. Their average rankings on these variables were calculated and the distribution of these average rankings determined whether they were most-in-need of SROs or least-in-need of SROs. Students and staff from the divisions at the highest and lowest ends of this distribution populate the samples compared.

versus younger students; those who have stayed home at times because of fear versus those who have not, etc.). On the whole, the percentages from these analyses simply validate the general and positive perception of SRO programs.

Table 1: Consistency in Staff/Student Assessment of School Safety: 2002 (all numbers in percent unless otherwise indicated)

Part A: Staff Survey (n=4,473)					
Group	Reported Theft	Feel Safe at School	SRO Reduced My Fear*	SRO Reduced Bullying*	SRO Reduced Fighting*
All	39	92	76	67	64
HS	39	92	75	66	64
MS	39	93	77	67	63
Small School	34	93	78	73	70
Medium	39	93	76	66	63
Large	39	92	76	66	63
Need SRO District	41	89	78	68	61
Do Not Need SRO District	40	94	73	65	64
Part B: Student Survey (n=27,988)					
Group	Reported Theft	Feel Safe at School	SRO Reduced My Fear**	SRO Reduced Bullying**	SRO Reduced Fighting**
All	33	87	64	38	39
HS	30	88	61	36	38
MS	37	87	69	41	41
Small School	31	89	67	45	46
Medium	34	87	66	40	40
Large	31	88	59	33	34
Need SRO District	32	85	63	38	39
Do Not Need SRO District	36	93	66	38	38
* Calculations included “neutral” responses. ** Calculations included “don’t know” responses.					
Source: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services					

A Different Type of Question: The Problems SROs Face as Law Enforcers

Perhaps the most productive direction for future SRO research are studies that reveal differences among SRO programs or discern the types of SRO personalities, activities and relationships that can maximize both the reality and the staff and student perceptions of school safety. We might start by looking more closely at what students and staff actually mean when they say they feel safe at school.

To formulate new, more precise, research questions, we first need to conduct intensive studies on what SROs are expected to do, what activities they engage in and what problems they face while performing their roles.¹² Rather than look for SRO impact, we should examine the processes and variables affecting their performance.

¹² SROs are expected to serve as law enforcers, crime analysts, crime prevention specialists, instructors, mentors, intelligence gatherers and liaison to local criminal justice agencies.

To that end, I offer the following analyses of data from 987 SRO quarterly activity reports. These reports were submitted to DCJS during school years 2000–2001, 2001–2002 and 2002–2003.

One of the questions on the report asks the SROs if they have “encountered any factors in (their) school environment that make it more difficult for them to carry out their law-enforcement responsibilities.” If “yes,” the SROs are asked to write a description of such factor(s). Thirty-nine percent (n=164) of the 424 SROs who submitted reports identified at least one factor that, in their opinion, impeded their ability to enforce the law.

Content Analysis

The written descriptions were entered into a database and printed. They were read twice, once to determine the number of impeding factors per description, and twice to classify the factors by type. Each unique factor was assigned a code number. Factors repeated by SROs in subsequent reports of a given year were excluded, that is, they were counted only once. As similar or identical factors were encountered, a search for a more encompassing or global content category was initiated. For example, factors such as the lack of private office space, phones, two-way radios, etc., were incorporated under the content category “inadequate resources.” In total, 300 factors were revealed by the content analysis.

A content analysis was conducted on each year of report data. Somewhat surprisingly, the same types of factors were identified in each analysis and the same nine encompassing or global content categories (plus a “miscellaneous” category) emerged as the best means to summarize the data. Consequently, the findings from all three analyses have been combined and presented in Table 2.¹³

By far, the most frequently reported factor was the resistance or interference of administrators and teachers who, according to many SROs, did not understand or accept the SRO’s role in their schools. The most common expression of this resistance was a refusal or delay in the reporting of incidents. Other comments cited administrators who viewed SROs only as enforcers (“they should get tough with offenders”), traffic cops or patrol officers. A few indicated administrator lack of trust, for example, an administrator who refused a SRO’s advice to allow drug-dogs in school.

The second most prominent factor suggests that SROs often work without resources, such as private offices, private phones, or secure storage cabinets (items critical to the investigation or prevention of incidents) or without equipment that allows them quick communication with school disciplinary staff or other security personnel. Also cited was the lack of computer access, police cars, cameras, and metal detectors.¹⁴

Next in frequency were SRO workload problems. A good number of SROs feel hindered by their large, overcrowded schools, their assignment to multiple schools, or the difficulty of having to perform multiple roles.

Certain school conditions are also viewed as hindrances. SROs said they were hindered by lax or inconsistent school discipline, insufficient teacher/administrator monitoring, unexpected influxes of problem students, the

¹³ A separate factor is one cited by an SRO and counted as one even if the SRO repeated it in subsequent reports of a given year. When the data were combined, such factors were counted according to the number of years they were voiced by the SRO. Thus, a factor repeated by a SRO in each of the three years was weighted or counted as three of the 300 factors displayed in Table 2.

¹⁴ There is no requirement that SROs be equipped in a certain way when they enter a school. SROs operate under Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between local law enforcement and school officials and seldom specify the equipment and resources SROs would find beneficial. SRO resources increase as SROs are accepted and school budgets modified.

disruptions and added security issues associated with construction projects, staff turnover and overwork, faulty phone or intercom systems, and administrator preoccupation with Standards of Learning (Quality) testing.

Table 2 Factors Impeding SRO Law Enforcement

Description	Number	Percent of Total (N = 300)
Teacher and Administrator Problems	112	37
Refuse or fail to report incidents (8 percent)		
Unknowledgeable/unsure about law or role of SRO (6 percent)		
Uncooperative or meddlesome (6 percent)		
Reluctance or delay in reporting incidents (5 percent)		
Want to keep control of discipline/law enforcement (4 percent)		
Overly harsh, wants quick arrest and prosecution (2 percent)		
Fear SRO will give school a bad reputation (2 percent)		
Overly protective of students (2 percent)		
Other (2 percent)		
Inadequate Resources	51	17
No private office, phone, storage, car, 2-way radio		
Workload Problems	37	12
Too many responsibilities, demands, role conflicts (5 percent)		
Too many students, overcrowded conditions (4 percent)		
Have to cover multiple schools (2 percent)		
Other (1 percent)		
School Climate and Conditions	34	11
Construction/renovation-related security problems (2 percent)		
Poor or inconsistent discipline (2 percent)		
Staff turnover or inexperience (2 percent)		
Poor "administration-teacher" communication (2 percent)		
Not enough teachers as monitors (1 percent)		
Other (2 percent)		
School Access and CPTED Problems	21	7
Non-secure locks, doors, fences, lack of visitor control, Faulty phone/radio/intercom system, poor scheduling, too Many master keys issued, barriers to visibility.		
Resistance or Interference by School Board or Superintendent	15	5
Resistance or Interference from Parents	13	4
<i>SRO Limitations, Uncertainty, Lack of Experience</i>	8	3
Uncooperative Juvenile Court Officers or Judges	7	2
Other	4	1

Source: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services

Site Planning and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) factors were reported as well. Most common were insecure doors and fences, poor building design, lack or poor quality of surveillance

cameras, obstacles to line-of-site vision, SRO office placement, overcrowded hallways due to poor class scheduling, and inadequate visitor control.

The remaining factors—interference from school board members, superintendents, parents, and juvenile court personnel—are more situational or policy related factors. Among these were a superintendent’s challenge of a SRO’s decision to arrest the grandson of a local leader, school board policies requiring social service staff or administrators to be present at investigative interviews, parents who pestered administrators about SRO charges, court intake officers who were reluctant to issue petitions against juveniles or would not allow “drunk in public” charges against students, and a juvenile judge who saw “disorderly conduct” as a school problem rather than as a crime.

Discussion

Ideally, a new SRO would, over time, work through problems of staff resistance, workload stress and other difficulties, and be accepted as a member of his or her schools’ disciplinary and instructional staff. Staff and parental concern about their role as law enforcer would subside and having a sworn, uniformed and armed officer in school would be viewed as a natural extension of local community policing. Of course, the underlying assumption here is that the SRO would stay at a particular school long enough for his or her presence and law enforcement function to become part of its institutional milieu.

That said, any interpretation of these data must consider that—

- most study SROs were new SRO’s;
- turnover among these SROs was at least 30 percent per study year;
- staff and students of most study schools were new to the experience of having sworn officers in their presence; and
- anytime a new SRO enters a school, a person whose ability to work with students and staff is unknown or unproven, yet who’s authority allows him or her to exact strong punitive measures, that SRO will be viewed with caution.

These facts may help to explain why the resistance of school personnel, parents, school board members, and superintendents was the most prominent impeding factor cited by the SROs. Unfortunately, time limitations and the fact that aggregate data preclude all but crude explanatory analyses, I can only provide scant insight on the role of SRO inexperience.

SRO Inexperience and the Reporting of Impeding Factors

Combining the three years of report data brought a realization that only 33 percent of the SROs submitted reports in two of the three study years, and only 5 percent submitted reports in all three years. Consequently, the SROs approached the question about impeding factors from different levels of SRO job experience. We found, in fact, that SROs who were only in their first year of job experience were more than twice as likely to cite impeding factors than those who reported in two or three of the study years (72 percent compared to 34 percent). In addition, the SROs who cited impeding factors came from agencies whose SRO programs averaged 2.6 years in age while SROs who did not cite impeding factors came from agencies whose SRO programs averaged 2.9 years of age. Though rather indirect, these findings suggest a positive relationship between SRO inexperience and the reporting of impeding factors.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the questions raised and the research presented here will encourage others to look further at the variables and processes affecting SRO performance. From this point forward, researchers must be more

precise, both in discerning what it is they expect of SROs and in their descriptions and measurement of the factors that impede or fulfill these expectations.

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