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Value of the SRO Program: The View From Within – High School Students

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Summary from chapter 4 of the report
“Assigning Value to Peel Regional Police’s
School Resource Officer Program”



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Both school boards operating in Peel Region (Peel District School Board - PDSB and Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board - DPCDSB) emphasize the importance of student safety:

The safety of our students and staff is at the core of everything we do. PDSB

The board strives to ensure that its schools and facilities are safe, caring, healthy, and inclusive places in which to learn and to work. PDCDSB

To help keep students safe, Peel Regional Police assign an officer working within their Neighbourhood Police Unit (SRO) to each high school in Brampton and Mississauga (Peel Regional Police's catchment area). This School Resource Officer (SRO) is given primary responsibility for the creation of a safe learning environment within the region's secondary schools. They do this by: (1) forming positive partnerships with students and high school administrators, (2) using a proactive style of policing whenever possible, and (3) interacting with youth in a non-enforcement manner on a regular basis.

This, however, begs the following questions: Does the presence of the SRO within the high school make students feel safer or not? Why does this matter (or does it)? What is more likely to occur when students feel safer? What is less likely to happen because students feel safer?

To answer these important questions, we turned to the key stakeholder at the heart of the SRO program: the student. Two very different types of data were collected from students attending the five Peel high schools participating in this study: qualitative interview data, and longitudinal, quantitative survey data. We focused our data collection efforts on Grade 9 students in particular, as these students had recently transitioned from feeder schools that were not part of the SRO program (i.e., no full time SRO within these schools) to a high school with a full time SRO. These students were, therefore, uniquely qualified to help us in our evaluation efforts.

This summary is divided into three main sections: key findings from the interview phase of this research, key findings from the two student surveys we completed during our evaluation of the SRO program, and an overview of the value the SRO program provides to high school students as seen through the eyes of the students themselves.

The Student Interview

We interviewed eight high school students. Seven of the eight students we interviewed were male. All students had started grade 9 in September 2015. All students planned to go to university after they finished high school. Their career plans were diverse ranging from computer engineering, film studies, science, accounting, social sciences, and air traffic control. None of the students were Caucasian and all volunteered to be interviewed.

Student's View of Their School

Students were proud of the sports program at their school, perceived that their schools were friendly, and that the teachers were great and helpful. Perhaps most importantly, as pertains to this study, half of the students talked about how their school felt like a safe place, especially when compared to the other schools they had attended. Students did, however, identify three issues they faced at the school: (1) social challenges from starting a new school, (2) the academic pressures that were part and parcel of being a high school student, and (3) the incidence of illegal activity at their school (thefts, drug use).

What do students perceive to be the most serious problem within their school at this time? The answer from this study is unequivocal: the threats they faced from other students such as thefts of electronics and phones, other students selling or taking drugs on school property, and verbal and physical bullying.

Student's Familiarity with the SRO Program

The majority of the students we talked to claimed that they were somewhat familiar with the SRO program in their school. This proved to be the case as all of the students we interviewed knew what the job of the SRO entailed (keep the school safe, enforce the law, act as a resource to the students and the school).

Interactions Between Students and SROs

Talked to SRO: None of the students we interviewed had ever spoken to the SRO at their school either because they had never had a reason to talk to the officer (n = 6) or because they did not want to get involved in other student's problems.

Situation where SRO made a positive difference: We asked the students to identify and describe a time where they thought that the SRO assigned to their school had really made a positive difference. Half the students identified situations when the SRO intervened to break up a fight, two described an auditorium session where the SRO provided information about bullying and how to handle it to all new students at the school, and two described situations where the SRO investigated and resolved an issue involving a theft at the school.

What difference did it make that the SROs were around when this happened?

Responses given to this question help us understand the value the SRO program provides to high school students. According to the students we spoke to, having officers in schools provides value in the following ways:

- they can respond more quickly when issues arise (i.e. faster response time);
- they are there when the students need them (i.e. students do not need to seek them out);
- their behaviour on school property increases student's faith in and trust of the police;
- they can stop problematic situations before they escalate;
- students feel safer when they are at school;

- they reduce the likelihood that other students will behave inappropriately on school property; and
- they reduce the likelihood that students will be bullied or engage in fighting.

Trust in SRO: All of the students we talked to stated that they trusted the SRO at their school enough to talk to them if they knew about a crime that had occurred at the school. While all but two would talk to the SRO at their school about problems that they knew were occurring at their school, only two students would talk about personal problems with the SRO. The rest said that they either preferred to deal with personal issues themselves or would talk to their family about such issues. Finally, one student made a comment that we think is important to include as it testifies to the value of the SRO program:

“Would you talk to Police? Absolutely. My friends who go to schools where there are no police have a pretty different view though...like the police are bad and they don’t want to have any communication with them...here it’s more like, they are like your friends you speak to them if you have any problems...”

Impact of the SRO Program on Students’ Perceptions of Safety

Perceptions of safety while at school: Although all of the students we interviewed described their school as safe, five of them also identified situations when they did not feel entirely safe in the school. Students attributed their feeling safe to a number of factors including: (1) the visible presence of the SRO in their school, (2) the actions taken by teachers, supervisors, and principals, and (3) the fact that dangerous situations were rare in their school. The students who did not feel safe in their school talked about risks to safety from strangers entering the school and attacking the students, and periods of time between classes when there is no supervision in the halls *“when anything can happen.”*

Perceptions of safety on way to and from school: Half the students we interviewed walk to and from school each day, two were driven to and from school by their parents, one student took the school bus, and one used public transit. Perceptions of safety during the commute to and from school depended very much on how the student made the journey, with the two students whose parents drove them saying they felt very safe while the students who walked and took the bus felt either mostly safe or unsafe.

Why do students feel mostly safe or unsafe when walking or busing to and from school? Students in both groups talked about how they encountered groups of students engaged in suspicious activities (mentioned drug dealers and suspicious characters) on the way to and from school. Seeing these individuals made the students nervous. Students reduced the risks they perceived they faced on the way to and from school by going home immediately when school ended, avoiding anyone they did not know (along with some people that they did) and, whenever possible, making the trip to and from school in the company of friends.

Impact of having SRO patrolling the neighborhood after school lets out: All but two of the students who walked or bused to school agreed that having the SROs patrol in their community after school had let out for the day enhanced their feelings of safety. They gave the following reasons for this perception: (1) the SRO is able to respond quickly to unsafe situations (bullying, fighting) and criminal activity (dealing drugs, thefts) that occur outside school hours and (2) the officers act as visible deterrents to other students or strangers engaging in criminal or unsafe behaviour. Two students noted that they did not see the officers enough to feel safe and still felt nervous.

Impact of the SRO on Perceptions of Safety: The eight students in our interview sample all agreed that having an SRO assigned to their school on a full-time basis made them feel safer at school:

“...a SRO is like a feeling at the back of your mind ... if anything does go bad they are here. You always feel secure.”

Why do students feel safer because of the SRO in their school? The interview data identified three key reasons why this is the case:

- the presence of the SRO acts as a visible deterrent to students and others who might do harm (SROs can enforce the law, while teachers, vice principals, and the principal can only enforce school rules);
- they are at the school and can respond immediately if there is a problem; and
- They are a resource the students can go to if they need advice or help.

What would change if the SROs were not in the school on a daily basis? Students stated unequivocally that if the officers were not in the school on a daily basis there would be more illegal activity and more school rules would be broken. They also felt that there would be more fights, thefts, and drugs in the school.

Student’s Evaluation of the SRO Program

What students like about the SRO program: Students like the following things about the SRO program: (1) the SROs enhance feelings of safety in the school just by being there, (2) SROs stop students (including themselves) from making bad choices and doing stupid things and getting into trouble, (3) SROs are able to take action immediately if anything unsafe happens in the school, and (4) SROs patrol and monitor the school at all times and act as a deterrent to students who bully or physically harm other students.

What students do not like about the SRO program: Six out of the eight students could not think of anything they did not like about having an SRO working in their school. One student felt that the SRO could be more visible and didn’t like it when the officer was not around. One student worried about the possible overreaction of the officer to small things.

Preference: School with SRO or School without SRO: All of the students we interviewed reported that they would prefer to go to a high school that had a full-time SRO. They justified their responses by listing four advantages of being in a school with an officer, and one disadvantage of being in a school without an officer. Advantages of being in a school with an SRO include: (1) increased perceptions of safety for both the students and their parents, (2) a reduction in the number of illegal and unsafe activities occurring within the schools to which the officers are assigned, (3) a reduction in the amount of bullying occurring at the school and within the surrounding community, and (4) an increased ability to focus on their school work without distraction from feelings of insecurity. Two students mentioned that they knew people who attended high schools in Toronto that did not have SROs. These students stated that their friends did not need feel safe in their schools, and were exposed to more illegal activity when at school:

“They don’t have them in Toronto, and I hear from my friends that there are more problems there ...and more crime too.”

Should the SRO program be continued? All of the students we interviewed indicated that the SRO program should be continued in its current format because: (1) it improves student well-being by enhancing student’s feelings of safety in the school, giving them the peace of mind to focus on their education and reducing how stressed they felt at school, (2) it reduces the number of unsafe and illegal activities occurring in high schools, and (3) it offers students a place to go if they need help or information.

What value does the SRO program provide students: We concluded the interview by asking students, all things considered, what value did having an SRO in their school deliver to them. The students gave three responses to this question, many of which are consistent with responses to previous questions: (1) The SRO program stops students from making bad life choices, (2) The SRO program creates (or enhances) a safe environment for learning and makes it easier for students to stay focused on their studies, and (3) The SRO program gives the police a greater knowledge of the school and its students which is invaluable in the case of emergencies.

The Student Survey

Surveys were administered to a randomly selected group of Grade 9 students who attended the five Peel District high schools participating in the study. These five schools were selected in such a manner to ensure that we had schools from both school boards operating in the region. The schools were located in a diversity of neighborhoods: two were designated “urban-grant” schools and were located in socio-economically challenged areas in Peel Region; two schools were situated in “middle class” communities; and one school was in an affluent community. All five schools had student populations that were ethnically diverse. The survey was designed to evaluate the extent to which the SRO program delivers on its goal of working with the schools to create a “safe learning environment” for students in Peel Region. More specifically, the survey was designed to evaluate the impact of

SROs on young people's views and attitudes about the police and offending and on a number of key outcomes including perceptions of safety, student quality of life (i.e., bullying), school attendance, and student well being. Surveys offer value in a study such as this as they facilitate the collection of information in a non-intimidating, non-confrontational environment where anonymity is ensured.

Who Did We Survey?

A randomly selected group of pupils completed the survey at two points in time. The questionnaire was administered by the administrators in each of the five schools participating in our study during a one-week period in September 2015 and March 2016. Students who received the survey in September 2015 (i.e., Time 1) had little to no exposure to the SRO program or SROs as they had come from feeder schools where this program did not operate. In total, 610 Grade 9 students completed the survey at Time 1 (approximately 35% of the Grade 9 students at each of the five high schools). The Time 2 survey was administered in March of 2016. The 655 students who completed the survey in March 2016 were slightly older, they were moving out of grade nine, and had been exposed to the SRO program for just over half a year. While some students completed both surveys (Time 1 and 2), not all of the students who completed the Time 2 survey also completed the Time 1 survey. Standardized instructions and procedures were used in all five schools. Pupils were assured that their replies would be strictly confidential to encourage honest responses. Ethics clearance was obtained from Carleton University as well as the two Peel District school boards. A note was sent home to all parents telling them about the study and offering them the opportunity to withhold consent if they did not want their child to participate. Only three sets of parents withheld consent.

Data Analysis

We administered the survey at two different points in time to allow us to make statistical comparisons between the Time 1 and Time 2 data. As noted above, the goal of the SRO program is for "Peel Police to work with the school to create a safe learning environment." If the program is meeting this goal we would expect that students who responded to the survey at Time 2 would report feeling safer at school (and, by extrapolation, be less likely to experience the negative consequences of feeling unsafe) than students who responded to the Time 1 survey. Since the SRO program also aims to develop more positive perceptions of the police and more responsible orientations towards offending, we would also expect to see a more positive pattern of attitudinal change in both of these areas over time.

Who Responded to the Survey?

We collected a range of demographic data to help us interpret the responses to the survey. Examination of the sample for the two different time periods showed that there were no statistically significant demographic differences between the Time 1 and Time 2 samples. In both the Time 1 and Time 2 samples just under half the respondents were male and half were female (5% of respondents elected not

to provide their gender). While the vast majority of the students lived with both their mother and their father, 10% lived with only one of their parents (typically their mother) or lived in a family with an atypical household arrangement. Many of the students engaged in extra-curricular activities as 10% of the students had a part time job, half engaged in volunteer activities, and half belonged to a club or were members of a sports team. Approximately 25% of the students self-identified as visible minority.

Many of the students who completed the survey had either personally been arrested/stopped by the police prior to starting high school (9%) or had a close friend or friends (29%) or a family member (40%) who had been.

Feelings About the Police and Perceptions of Crime

The survey data support the following conclusions. First, the Grade 9 students in our sample tend to feel positively about the role of police in Canadian society (only 5% disagreed with the idea that police are a positive force in society). Second, the majority of students in the sample take no stand on whether or not the police in Canada tend to pick on young people and/or visible minorities too much. Third, students' views of the police appear to be relatively stable over time. Fourth, the views the Grade 9 students in our sample have of the police are largely positive (three-quarters of them view the police positively 50% of the time or more; two-thirds do not express negative views of the police). Fifth, students' views of the police in general are relatively stable over time. Sixth, with the exception of property crime, the Grade 9 students in our sample appreciate the seriousness of a variety of offenses, particularly those relating to bullying, harassment, and carrying a gun. Unfortunately, many also do not think that the police would know about it if they themselves commit any of these offenses. The data with respect to carrying a gun are worrisome (26% of the Grade 9 students in our sample who attend a school with a full-time SRO do not think that they would get caught if they carried a gun).

Attitude Towards SRO Program

The survey data support the following conclusions on how the Grade 9 students view the SROs working in their school as well as the program overall. First, we note that the majority of students (75%) rarely if ever make contact with the SRO in their school. One in five of the students in the sample interact with their SRO on a monthly basis and 5% make regular contact (once a week or more). Second, a substantive number of students (one in ten of the Grade 9 students in both our Time 1 and Time 2 samples) have turned to their SRO for help when they have had a problem. Third, only a small number (5%) have been questioned by the police, either because they were suspected of doing something wrong, or because they witnessed someone else committing some form of offense. Fourth, Grade 9 students seem to use a different set of cues to evaluate the SRO in their school than they use to judge police in general. More specifically, the data from this study suggests that students are more likely to give their own SRO the benefit of the doubt, especially when it comes to making negative judgments about their behaviour

(only 5% feel that their SRO is aggressive, rude, racist, or stupid). Similarly, they appear to be more nuanced in their positive views of the SRO in their school than they are in their evaluations of police in general (75% feel that the SRO in their school is helpful, trustworthy, friendly, fair, or approachable 50% of the time or more). These data support the idea that the students in our sample relate to the SRO at their school in a different (and more positive) fashion than they do to the police in general.

A number of additional important observations can be made from the data on how the Grade 9 students we surveyed view the SRO program. First, vast majority of the Grade 9 students we surveyed (approximately 75%) felt safer because there was a police officer assigned to their school. Second, most students seem to agree that the SRO program is a good idea with a plurality either linking the presence of a police officer in their school to feeling safer and less stressed and anxious or saying that the police officer has no impact on them at all. Also noteworthy are the data showing that their views of the program became more favourable over time as the percent who agreed that the SRO program is a good idea increased from 53% of the Time 1 sample to 60% of the Time 2 sample. Only 5% of the Grade 9 students felt that the program was not a good idea. The student's favorable attitude towards the program does not, however, necessarily translate into them approaching the officer to report a crime, report being bullied or harassed, or to seek help for another student. While it is reassuring to note that approximately one in three surveyed students do feel comfortable enough approaching their SRO for help in these areas, it is also important to note that approximately 10% of the students disagree that they would take such actions and a majority are on the fence with respect to this issue, preferring perhaps to use their own judgment as to what they would and would not report to their SRO.

Impact of the SRO Program on Students

We included measures of a number of important student outcomes in our survey to help us evaluate the value of having an SRO assigned to high schools. Key outcomes quantified in the survey include students' perceptions of safety, their attendance at school, and a number of well-being outcomes. These data support a number of very strong inferences and observations.

First, half the students we surveyed felt safe at school, 40% felt safe in some areas of the school, but not others (the commute to and from school appeared to be particularly problematic), and 5% of the students indicated that they felt unsafe when they were at school.

Second, bullying (psychological and physical), particularly by gang members, seems to be an issue in the high schools in Peel Region, even with the presence of SROs in the schools. More specifically, the data from the surveys show that Grade 9 students are particularly fearful of being bullied and physically harmed by gangs on the way to and from school, a finding that is consistent with what we heard in the interviews. A substantial number are also worried about being physically harmed by gang members on school property.

On a positive note, the data strongly supports the idea that the SRO program seems to be effective at reducing the amount of bullying taking place on school property and in the surrounding area. The number of students who claimed to be afraid of being bullied or physically harmed by other students or by gang members either at school or during the commute to and from school decreased significantly over time. This corresponded with an increase in the percentage reporting that they are rarely if ever afraid of being bullied or physically harmed and a significant decrease in the number of students who avoided going to school or skipping classes because they either had been bullied or feared being bullied. These findings provide support for the idea that the SRO program meets its goal of increasing students' perceptions of safety, both within the school and on the way to and from school.

So, students feel safer in a high school with a police officer present or not? What value does this offer the students (and by extrapolation, the community and Canadian society)? The data from this study informs this debate. Five months after becoming a student at a high school with a police officer on site, the students who responded to our survey were significantly more able to concentrate, were in better mental health (i.e., reported less anxiety, stress, and feeling depressed), were less likely to report difficulties sleeping, and were less likely to think about harming themselves or others. Given the data showing that these students who feel safer are also less likely to skip class, miss school, and think of dropping out we also expect that students who feel safer are also more able to take advantage of the learning opportunities offered in this school.

Graphs illustrating these sources of value are provided at the end of this summary as they are critical to both the evaluation of this program as well as the SROI calculations in Chapter 9.

Who Benefits from Having SRO's in School?

All students realize measureable benefits from the presence of SROs in their school: While follow-up analysis determined that some groups (females, those who have been bullied or physically assaulted) realized more value from the SRO program than others, it is important to note our comparison of the Time 1 and Time 2 data determined that all students, regardless of their gender, whether they have had contact with their SRO, whether they have been arrested/stopped by the police, or whether they have been victimized indicated that they felt significantly safer at school and less stressed and anxious 5+ months after exposure to the SRO program. These findings support the view that all surveyed students realized measureable benefits from the presence of SROs in their school.

The greater the contact, the greater the benefits: Students who have had contact with the SRO in their school are more likely than those who have not had contact to agree that the police are a positive force in our society, to have a positive view of the police in general, to have a positive view of the SRO in their school, to agree that they feel safer because the SRO is around, and to be favorably predisposed to the SRO program. These findings support the idea that students

who have more exposure to the police in a non-confrontational environment are more likely to form relationships with the police and see beyond the stereotypes of police that are common in our society.

It is interesting to note that the data implies that students who have had contact with the SROs may have been the victims of bullying and harassment, either in public school or in their current environment. This claim is supported by data showing that the students who have had contact with the SRO at their school are significantly more likely than those who have not had contact to report fear and anxiety due to bullying, to report that they have experienced negative consequences from feeling unsafe at school, and (as noted above) feel safer because the SRO is around. This suggests that the SRO program may be particularly beneficial for the more vulnerable students attending Peel District high schools.

Female students respond differently to the SRO than male students: There were surprisingly few gender differences in our findings. Generally, females held the most positive views of the police and their SRO (most likely to agree that police are a positive force in society, less likely to hold a negative view of the police or their SRO) and males and those who preferred not to give their gender held the most negative views. The females in the sample were also more likely to report stress and anxiety due to bullying and harassment and the males were more likely to indicate that they reacted to police presence in school by thinking before they acted.

Students who have been arrested/stopped by the police have a different response to the SRO: Examination of the data show that students who have been arrested or stopped by the police prior to starting grade 9 (9% of the sample) have very different attitudes towards the police and the SRO program than students who have not been arrested/stopped. They also report very different outcomes. Compared to those who have never been arrested/stopped by the police, those who have are significantly more likely to agree that police pick on young people/minorities and view the police and the SRO at their school negatively. In contrast, those who have never been arrested/stopped by the police are significantly more likely than those who have to agree that the police are a positive force in society, have a positive view of the police and their SRO, and agree that the SRO program is a good thing.

How these two groups of students react to the presence of the SRO in the school is also different; those who have never been arrested/stopped by police are significantly more likely to say that they feel safer because the SRO is around. Finally, those who have been arrested/stopped by the police are significantly more likely than those who have not to report that they feel safe at school and less likely to experience stress and anxiety at school because they are fearful of being bullied or harassed.

Students who have been victimized gain the most from the presence of the SRO: Approximately 84% of the sample identified as non-victims while the remaining 16% had experienced either actual bullying and/or physical harm. Compared

to those who have not been victimized (i.e., bullied or physically assaulted) those who have been victimized are significantly more likely to feel safe when they see the SRO. This is important as this group is significantly more likely than those who have not been victimized to report anxiety and stress due to a fear of victimized, have missed school because they are afraid of being victimized, and experience a number of negative mental health consequences that can be attributed to feeling unsafe. These data support the view that those who have been victimized are one of the greatest beneficiaries of the SRO program and can expect to gain the most from the presence of police in the high schools.

We end this summary with the following quotes from the Grade 9 students we interviewed which speak to the above data and provide evidence on the value of the program

"I was bullied like throughout last year and that was a big issue for me. Like all of Grade eight... this school is a lot safer compared to all the other schools..."

"They make me feel safer walking home...because the kids see them around and it stops them from bullying me."

"...a SRO is like the feeling at the back of your mind that's like, if anything does go bad they are here. You always feel secure"

"Teachers, admin, and students make me feel safe, but the police add an extra measure of safety because like I feel like they can enforce the rules... Teachers can't do what they [the police] can."

"... students take the rules more seriously because the police can enforce them...it really does give me a feeling of safety when I can see them... and nervous when I can't."

"I like how like their presence affects other students and how students think twice because students are like...Oh if I do this then this will happen, and then it makes them realise that whatever they're about to do is a negative decision and they do the right decision instead of the wrong."

"I feel like they enforce the rules and like people realise how serious they are...I feel like...their presence like affects other students' choices...They think twice about trying to sell some marijuana or steal so and so's cell phone."

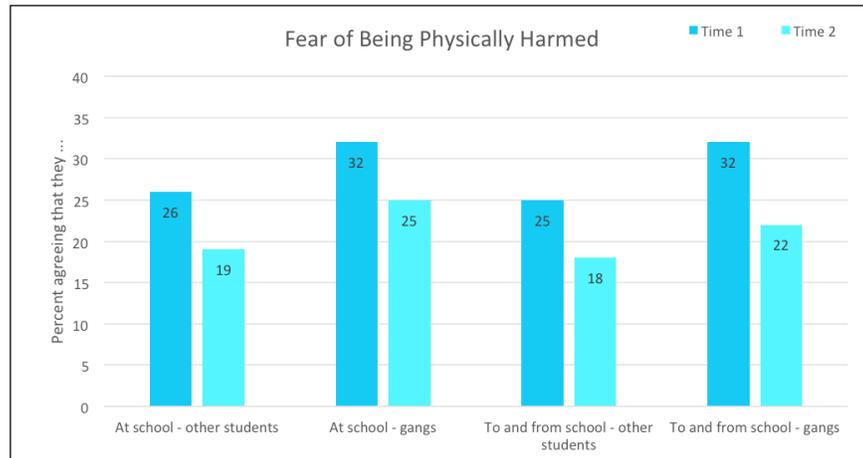
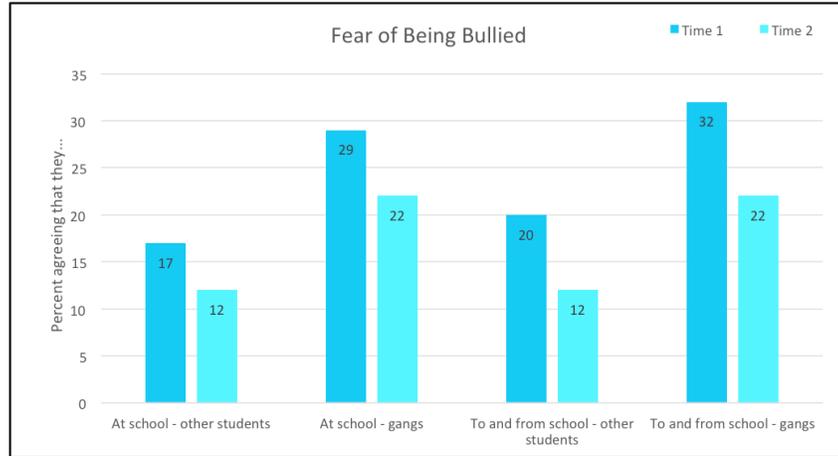
"My friends and I, like we always like think about what will happen when the police are around...and then we always end up doing the right decision...Like to be honest, like sometimes we like think about doing something we know is wrong...but then we go, oh no we can't do this, like we'll get caught and whatever it will be bad so we just end up not doing it...but then the fact that a police officer is...present...yes we think twice."

"The police have more authority than VPs [vice principals]... Kids aren't afraid of being suspended but they are afraid of being arrested. So, they are more careful when the police are in the school."

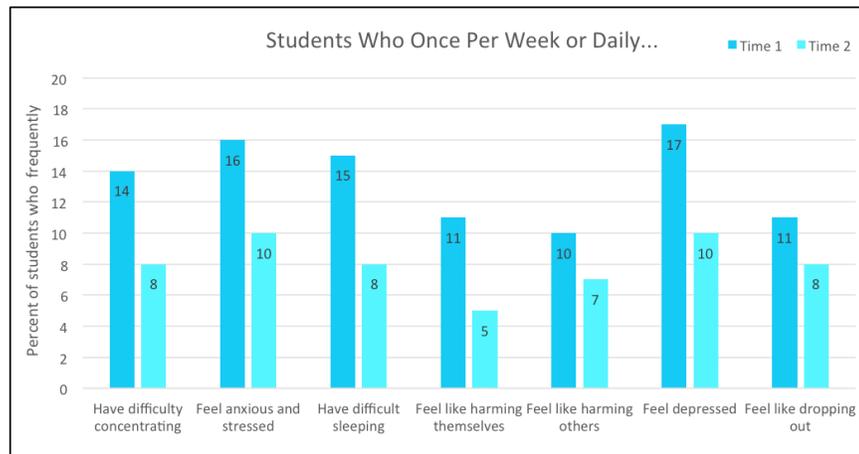
"...having the police at the school helps all of us, but especially victims of bullying...it means you don't have to be a victim..."

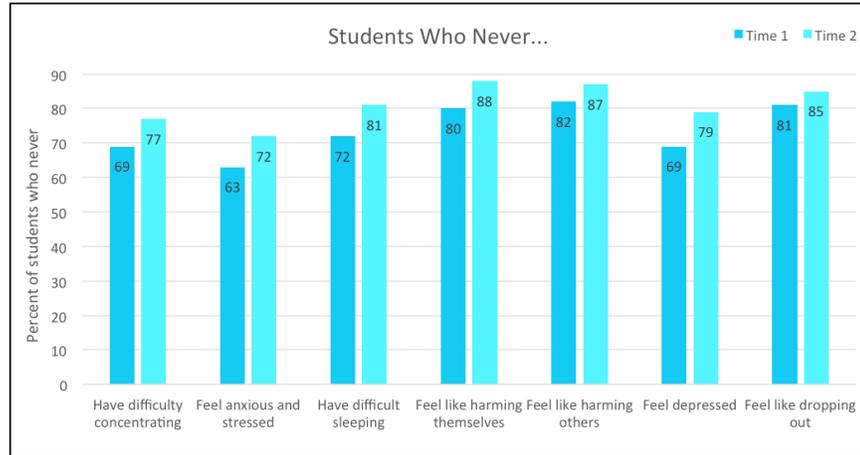
"I can focus on my studying and long-term goals without worrying...[be]cause I know they are here."

Fear of Being Bullied and/or Physically Harmed

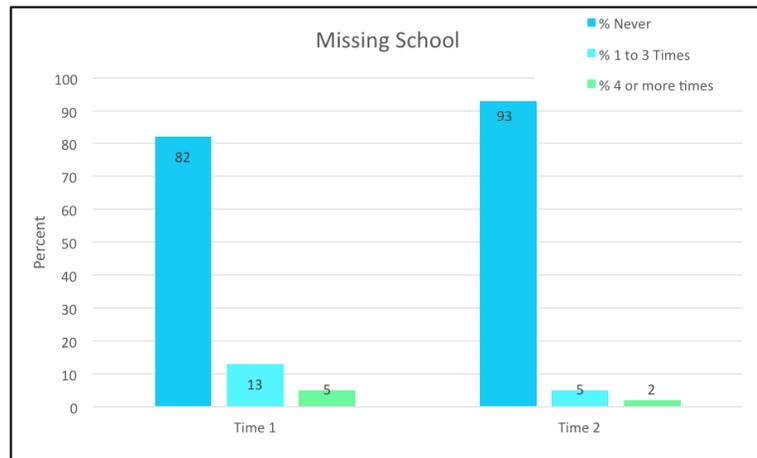


Consequences of Feeling Unsafe at School





Missing School Due to Fear of Bullying/Physical Harm - Total Scale Score



Fear and Anxiety at School - Total Scale Score

