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

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Summary from chapter 5 of the report
“Assigning Value to Peel Regional Police’s
School Resource Officer Program”



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SROI (Social Return on Investment) is an outcomes-based measurement tool that helps organizations to understand and quantify the social, environmental, and economic value they are creating. In 2015-2016, we undertook a major research project that sought to use SROI techniques to assess the value that Peel Regional Police created by the Neighborhood Police Unit (NPU). More specifically, we seek to identify the value of having a police officer (i.e., a School Resource Officer or SRO) assigned to work on a full-time basis in every high school in Peel Region.

Five high schools located in Peel Region participated in this study. These five schools were selected in such a manner to ensure that we had schools from both school boards operating in the region. Schools located in a diversity of neighborhoods: two were designated “urban-grant” schools and were located in socio-economically challenged areas in Peel Region, one school was in an affluent community, and two schools were situated in “middle class” communities. Four of these five schools had student populations that were ethnically diverse.

This summary presents key findings from the phase of this study that focuses on understanding the school administrator’s perceptions of the value delivered by the NPU program and the SRO.

Who did we interview?

We conducted 29 interviews with key administrators at the five schools participating in this study (5 Principals, 13 Vice-Principals, 7 Guidance Counselors, and 4 Social Workers). This summary focuses on the key findings from our analysis of this set of 29 interviews. The emphasis will be on responses provided by a substantive number (operationally defined as twenty percent of the sample) of the administrators.

Our sample of administrators was well distributed with respect to the number of years they had spent working at their current school (one half had worked at their school between 1 to 3 years; the other half worked at their school longer than 3 years). These administrators performed a wide range of activities during a “typical” school day, including interacting with students, staff, teachers, parents, and the outside community. Half were also engaged in programming. Interactions with students took two forms: those that were positive in nature (n = 22) and those that involved student discipline (n = 17).

Administrator’s Views of their School and SROs

We asked the administrators a number of questions to help us better understand the environment within the five schools in the study. Key findings from this stage of the interview are summarized below.

The strengths of the school they work in: Almost all of the administrators talked about how their school provided a safe and caring community for students and staff. One in three either bragged about the extracurricular activities that were available at their school and/or boasted about the variety of programming offered at their school.

What makes their school unique: The majority of administrators identified two things that they felt made them unique: (1) the wide variety of programs for students offered at their school and (2) the culture within the school (i.e., students are put first and staff care). One in four also felt that their school's high academic standards set them apart.

Main challenges facing the students in these schools: Administrators identified mental health issues (i.e., students are overwhelmed) as a key challenge facing the students in their school. They also noted that many of the students living in the school's catchment area lived in families that were socio-economically challenged (i.e., many families are part of marginalized groups, parents work multiple jobs and do not have time for their children). The final challenge identified by a plurality of administrators related to their perception that students were over-engaged in activities such as part-time work or drug use (during and/or after school) that made it difficult for them to concentrate on their school work.

Main challenges facing the teachers in these schools: Administrators felt that the teachers at their school struggle to keep students engaged, to remain engaged themselves, and to deal in an effective manner with an educational environment in constant flux.

Administrator's view of the SRO role: Virtually all of the administrators we talked to agreed that the role of the SRO was to:

- create a positive relationship between the police, the students, the school, and the community (i.e., relationship building);
- act as the main point of contact between the school administrators and the Peel Regional Police (e.g., investigate incidents that occurred within the school or in the school's catchment area); and
- act as a resource to administrators, teachers, and students on anything involving the criminal justice system (i.e., education).

Additionally, half the administrators felt that the SRO should attend/participate in school activities.

Safety Concerns in Peel Regional High Schools

The NPU program seeks to create safe school environments, which promote respect, responsibility, and learning. A number of questions were included in the interview to help us understand the key issues of concern within the high schools operating within Peel Region at this time.

Issues of concern within the schools: All school administrators agreed that bullying, cyber-bullying, and drugs are either a significant challenge (half said this) or somewhat of a concern (half said this) within their school at this time. There was also a high level of consensus within our sample of administrators that stealing was an issue within their school, with virtually all identifying thefts as either a significant challenge (one in three) or somewhat of a concern (sixty percent) within their school at this time. Four other challenges – gangs, trespassing, assaults, and

racial/ethnic conflict – were a source of significant or moderate concern in some (approximately half) schools but not others. Finally, it is heartening to note that religious conflict does not appear to be an issue within the schools in our sample at this time.

Which of the above challenges do administrators perceive to be the most serious in their school at this time? Three-quarters of the administrators we interviewed identified either the selling or using of drugs or bullying/cyberbullying. One in four felt that thefts were the most serious issue facing their school at this time.

What are the SROs doing to address these issues of concern? The actions taken by the SROs to deal with the issues of concern in the school they were working in depended very much on the problem being addressed. Administrators mentioned the fact that the SRO consulted with the school administrators and took concrete actions when necessary (i.e., running locker searches). Administrators also identified the information sharing role of the SRO as a key activity that was important to school administrators as they addressed any or all of the above issues. As police officers, the SROs have access to a wide range of information about what is going on in the community at large that is unknown to the school administration unless the SRO tells them (e.g., administrators may not know that the police are investigating one of their students for conducting illegal activities off-campus unless the SRO tells them). By keeping the school “in the loop,” the SRO helped resolve problems as they arose. Finally, administrators also said that they are grateful to have access to the SROs and their ability to discipline and/or charge the offending student when appropriate.

What’s the school doing to address these issues of concern? Administrators identified ten different actions that the schools take to address the issues of concern, all but two of which relied on the SROs presence and availability within the school. Key actions included asking the SRO to give a talk/conduct a workshop on how to avoid/deal with problems such as bullying, asking the SRO to undertake an investigation (i.e., locker searches, bag searches, video surveillance footage), and collaborating with the SRO to address issue (i.e., administrators collect evidence so that the police can charge/stop the offending students).

How serious do you consider your school’s safety problems to be? Ten percent of the administrators flagged safety as a serious source of concern within their school at this time. All who gave this response worked at a school that was located in a socio-demographically challenged area of Peel where petty crime was common. The view of these administrators was that, “*Without the SRO, we would be calling 911 frequently.*”

Sixty percent of the administrators we interviewed felt that safety was a moderately serious issue in their school at this time. These individuals identified a number of underlying issues that contributed to these safety issues, including the socio-economic environment in the catchment area, the fact that students lack discipline, parents do not support attempts on the part of the school to discipline their children, and mental health issues within the student body. All administra-

tors who gave these responses stated that the presence of the SRO in the school diminishes the severity of the safety issue within their school from one that is a source of serious concern to one that they view as moderately problematic.

Finally, the administrators who worked at the one school in the sample that was located in a socio-economically advantaged area felt that safety was not an issue in their school at this time.

Consequences of feeling unsafe at the school: While none of the administrators stated that they had missed work out of fear for their safety, half stated that they personally felt stressed or anxious at work because they felt their safety or security was compromised. Some mentioned that concerns about their safety and security at work sometimes made it difficult for them to get a good night's sleep. These individuals also noted that having the SRO in the school helped alleviate their stress.

Perceptions of safety: Administrators said that the presence of the SRO in the school made them feel either much safer (31%) or somewhat safer (34%). Others (34%) stated that having an SRO in the school made no difference to their feelings of safety.

Those who responded that they felt a lot safer during work hours because of the SROs attributed these feelings to their belief that they could count on these officers to be available if they were needed, that the SRO understood the school and the "troubled" students within the school and was able to defuse problematic situations, and/or the presence of the SRO diminished the threat of aggression, drug dealing, and bullying within the school population.

Those who responded that they felt somewhat safer attributed their answer to the fact that they had confidence that the officer assigned to their school could deal with any unpredictable threat or crisis that occurred.

Finally, for the administrators that said the presence of the SRO made no difference to how safe they felt during work hours, this was because safety was a non-issue in their school.

Interactions Between School Administrators and SROs

Contacting Peel Police: One in five of the school administrators indicated that they never had to contact Peel Police as their SRO was able to handle all of their policing needs.

Frequency: All of the principals and vice principals in the sample interacted frequently (in many cases daily) with the SROs operating in their school. Social workers and counselors, on the other hand, did not interact directly with the SRO very often – a finding that can be attributed to the fact that school policy dictates all school staff bring any concerns they have, which may require police attention, to their vice-principals who would then involve the police as necessary.

Nature of SRO – School administrator collaboration: Administrators and SROs “touched base” every day to keep each other informed. Such collaborations between the SRO and the school administration took many forms including: (1) information sharing about students who were involved in issues such as bullying, stealing etc. and under investigation by the police, (2) information sharing about students that the administrators would like the SROs to investigate (i.e., students that the administrators suspected of bullying or assaulting other students), and (3) information-sharing about students at the school who had been suspended, charged with a crime, arrested, or had conditions placed on them (either on school property or off). Other common forms of collaboration include working together on how best to deal with a safety issue that had occurred within the school that had either safety or criminal code implications, as well as collaborating on youth diversion programs.

Quality of these collaborations: Two thirds of the administrators avowed that the quality of the collaborations between themselves and their SRO were “excellent.” One in three rated the quality of their collaborations as “good.” Only one administrator felt that the quality of the collaboration “needed improvement.”

Perceived value of such collaborations: The value of having an SRO assigned to the school to work full-time with the school’s administrators is many faceted and varied. A plurality of administrators stated that the SRO offers value within the school in the following ways:

- **Value – They can enforce the law:** Students are not deterred by threat of school suspensions, but think twice when involved in a discussion with the police; parents are more likely to appreciate the severity of an issue unless when the police are involved.
- **Value – Having a good relationship in place between police and school increases police effectiveness:** Any investigation is more effective when the SRO is involved rather than uniform patrol as parents and students and administrators are more likely to communicate with the SRO than an officer that they do not know.
- **Value – Information sharing:** Police have information or have access to information that the school administrators might not (e.g., assaults that occur off-campus, graffiti and gang-tagging that occurs on and off school grounds).
- **Value – Bring a different perspective:** Police bring a different perspective to the issues going on at the school than do the school administrators who are often too close to the situation.
- **Value – Deter crime:** The presence of the police in the schools acts as a deterrent to those students who are thinking of behaving inappropriately.
- **Value – Enhanced perceptions of safety:** The quick/easy access to the police ensured by the presence of the SRO makes students/parents feel safer.
- **Value – Familiarity with students and community increases police’ effectiveness**

The value of this program and the quality of the relationship between administrators and SROs can be better appreciated by noting that 100% of the administrators that we talked to indicated that they trusted the officers assigned to their school enough to talk to him or her about problems that are occurring in the school as well as to ask him or her for personal advice. The following quote typifies the positive sentiments expressed by the administrators we interviewed:

“Quality of collaboration is excellent.... The SRO understands the culture of my building and can advocate to their hierarchy for help. Also, the kids understand who they are and respect them so it makes it more collaborative. Because the students understand who the SRO are and often have a better relationship with the SRO than they would with the general police that would come in if we called 911.”

What would happen if the officer was not around? Administrators stated that if the SRO was not around the volume of 911 calls and calls to the Peel Police would increase dramatically. They also envisioned a myriad of other negative consequences, including: the victims of a crime/bullying might not come forward and report the issue, it would be harder to coordinate any response to challenging incidents at the school between the police and the school, students would not be diverted and would end up dealing with the criminal justice system, school administration might never be able to identify the perpetrator of a crime that was impacting the school, and perpetrators of crimes might never be charged. The following quotes again illustrate these concerns.

“Yes, I mean, again, we know that for our young people their mental health is not getting better. In fact, we're seeing more and more young people in mental health crisis so, again, being able to have someone to do wellness checks, to be able to accompany to the hospital. We're also seeing, again, cyber stuff is not getting better. I mean there is more awareness but having officers to liaise and to interrupt that where we can, is huge.”

“The SRO really adds to the sense of safety so that everyone in the school can focus on education. Administration can only do so much to ensure the safety of students - what is administration going to do against a person with a gun?”

Also noteworthy are the data showing that none of the administrators anticipated any positive outcomes that would occur if the SRO was taken out of the the school. This reinforces the notion that the SRO program bring value to the schools within Peel Region and underscores the importance of the SRO program in the eyes of school administrators.

Administrator's Views of the Most Important Activities Executed by the SRO

SROs perform a wide variety of different activities. Which of these do school administrator's see as most critical to the creation of a safe school environment?

The majority of the administrators we talked to identified that the following SRO activities were critical:

- support the administration in their duties;
- be visible in the school because such visibility discourages students from committing crimes during school hours which, in turn, increases the sense of safety of students and staff;
- interact with students in a constructive manner (i.e., getting involved in student activities, counseling the students individually or in groups, running workshops and having pleasant conversations with the students) as such activities help the police build a positive relationship with the students;
- enforce the law, including charging and arresting students who are committing crimes such as drug dealing;
- educate students and families on the role of police in Canadian society;
- act as a bridge between the school and the community;
- run wellness checks on students that are missing classes; and
- divert students from the justice system when appropriate.

The administrators we talked to stated they were very satisfied with their SROs performance of the activities they felt were important.

Impact of SROs on Administrators' Workloads, Satisfaction, Ability to do Job

Two thirds of the administrators we talked to felt that the SRO had little to no impact on their workloads. In contrast, only one in three indicated that the SRO had no real impact on either their job satisfaction or their ability to do their job.

SRO decreases administrators' workloads: One in four administrators (mostly principals and vice principals) stated that having the SRO in their school decreased their workload by reducing the number of discipline issues within the school, by performing a number of critical duties (e.g., conducting wellness checks, researching 'Do Not Attends,' and providing security within the school) that would otherwise need to be done by the administrators if the SRO was not there, and by making a real effort to enhance school safety.

SRO increases administrators' job satisfaction: Two thirds of the administrators we talked to stated that their job satisfaction was higher because they worked in a school with an SRO than it would be if the SRO was not there. They attributed this increase in job satisfaction to the fact that the SRO was a valuable resource that helped the administrators successfully resolve issues that they faced, the SRO assisted in the creation of a better learning environment within the school, the SRO gave administrators information about what their students were up to in the community, the SRO made it easier for school administrators to deal with parents of children who have committed an offense, and the SRO provided the school with a personal connection to Peel Police.

SRO increases administrators' ability to do their job: Two thirds of the administrators we talked to felt that the SRO had positively impacted their ability to do their job effectively. This increase was attributed to the assistance the SRO gave them in establishing and maintaining a safe and caring learning environment within the school and responding effectively to crises and problems as they arose.

Summary Questions: Administrators Opinion of the NPU Program

We ended the interview with the administrators by asking them a number of questions designed to help us better understand the value of having an SRO within the high schools in the Peel Region. Responses to these questions are summarized below.

Schools with SROs versus schools without SROs: Half of the administrators in our sample had worked in schools that did not have an SRO assigned to the school full time prior to their transfer to a high school in Peel Region. These administrators identified the following important differences between schools with a full-time SRO and schools without, including the following: (1) SROs act as a deterrent to crime so that students and staff in schools with an SRO feel safer, (2) there is a greater degree of trust between the police and the students in schools with an SRO than in schools without, (3) administrators and teachers in schools without an SRO spend more time dealing with discipline issues than their counterparts in schools with an SRO, and (4) teachers in schools without SROs are more fearful than their counterparts who are in schools with an SRO. The following responses illustrate these views:

"I'm basing my answer on 15 years of administration in seven different schools that have had SRO officers. It just... it makes life easier. It's a connection, it's a peace of mind that kids know that they're connected, and I think they make kids feel safer just knowing that they're connected to schools. I think once you explain to parents that when there's a police car out front it's not a bad thing, people feel better knowing that there are police around if you need them."

"Oh, yes, 100%. Like, I can't believe... and that's why I literally laugh when I hear in Toronto where the schools are balking against having police involved. I think, you're crazy, because... the fundamental thing we believe in Catholic schools is a safe school, is a school where kids can learn, that's the fundamental. It doesn't matter what you're teaching kids - if they're not safe, they're not going to learn jack and the SRO increases this sense of safety."

Administrator's opinions of the SRO program: All of the administrators we talked to expressed very positive opinions about the SRO program and the officers that worked at their school. They felt that the SRO program allows officers to become part of the school community and establish trusting relationships with students, staff, teachers, and administration; increases student's feelings of safety; facilitates a fast response to an emergency; and provides a mechanism that connects the school to the community.

Concerns with the program: Half of the administrators felt it was problematic that the Peel Police move SROs every two to three years. Many of these administrators had formed close bonds to their SRO and did not want to have to establish new relationships every two or three years.

Perceived importance of having SRO in school on full-time basis: All but one of the 29 administrators we talked to felt it was very important or somewhat important for Peel Regional Police to assign an officer to work in the school on a full-time basis.

Perceived impact on the school of discontinuing the NPU program: All but one 29 administrators indicated that they would prefer to work in a school with an SRO officer than in one without. They identified five important things (all negative) that they felt would change if Peel Police discontinued the NPU program:

- the amount of unlawful activity occurring in the schools would increase;
- school administrators would have to deal with the Peel Police switchboard or 911 when problems occurred;
- school administrators would not have a personal relationship within anyone within Peel Police;
- school administrators would lose a key asset in their efforts to run safe schools; and
- the school administrator's job would become more difficult and stressful.

"I am a strong advocate of this program and I would be very upset if they were to pull it out of the school because it would be doing a disservice to the youth of today. We are a society that has a positive policing presence but how do we get our youth to understand it if they are coming from immigrant backgrounds that don't have a positive view of policing. How then do we teach them that police can have a positive presence? We have to introduce it somewhere before these youths become adults."

"Don't cancel the programme and then expect the schools to be the same in five years. Communities can expect real problems if the SRO programme is discontinued."

Conclusion

Reviewing these results, it is clear that administrators in the schools with full-time SROs had a very positive view of the program and felt that the program delivered real value to the schools and the students. The fact that the majority of administrators began their interviews by saying that their biggest "brag" about their schools was that they are safe and caring communities show that administrators truly value safety in their schools. The fact that virtually all administrators talked about how the SROs presence in the school increased student's and administrator's sense of safety makes it clear that the SRO is delivering value to many school administrators. Also noteworthy is the response that we got when we asked what the administrators liked least about the program – it was not extensive enough or large enough! It would appear then that the administrators see a strong link

between the SRO program and safe schools – a sentiment that was expressed very eloquently by one of our respondents:

“The Education Act requires students to be in schools, regardless of that student’s individual problems. As a result, the school has become a treatment centre for all kinds of problems. A population struggling with myriad problems absolutely need the police.”