

A large, light blue fingerprint graphic is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the page, partially overlapping the title text.

Value of the SRO Program: The View From Inside - The SRO

Dr. Linda Duxbury, Professor, Sprott School of Business
Dr. Craig Bennell, Professor, Department of Psychology
Carleton University
January 2018

Summary from chapter 6 of the report
“Assigning Value to Peel Regional Police’s
School Resource Officer Program”



Value of the SRO Program: The View From Inside - The SRO

Dr. Linda Duxbury, Professor, Sprott School of Business

Dr. Craig Bennell, Professor, Department of Psychology

Carleton University

January 2018



In January and February 2016, we conducted five interviews with the eight School Resource Officers (SROs) working in the five Peel District high schools participating in our study.¹ Six of these officers worked in pairs in three of the five schools involved in the study. The other two officers worked together in the other two schools in the study, which were in proximity to each other. This pair of officers was asked to give us information on both high schools.

All interviews lasted from one to two hours. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Terms such as “your school” and “their school” are used throughout this summary to refer to the school that the SRO works in that is included in this study.

The SROs who were interviewed for this study have been in their respective schools for varying periods of time. One SRO had been at their school for nearly 3 years at the time of the interview, while another officer had only been at their school for a few weeks. Three of the officers had been in their schools since September 2014 (i.e., were 2nd year SROs), while the other three officers had been in their current schools from September 2015 onwards (i.e., were 1st year SROs). These time periods are consistent with how Peel Police administer the SRO program.

SROs Views of Their School

SROs talked with pride about the great students (friendly, respectful) at their school. They also spoke enthusiastically about the strong working relationship they had with the administrative staff at their schools, describing them as collaborative, fantastic people who were fair and who made the SRO feel like they were “*part of the school family.*”

The SROs also identified the following “challenges” that were present in some or all of the schools in our study: inappropriate social media use, cyberbullying, over-protective parents, high levels of student entitlement, students with no respect for authority, high levels of recreational drug use (prescriptions, MDMA, cocaine), and racial tensions between different groups of recent immigrants to Canada. The fact that most schools experience some combination of these issues suggests that they are linked in some manner.

What Makes a Good SRO?

SROs identified 7 personality traits and 4 operational skills that they feel are critical for high performance in the SRO role. Personality traits considered important include: compassionate, patient, dedicated to their job, friendly (approachable, easy to talk to), decisive, self-disciplined, and able to keep things in perspective (i.e., a big picture person). The fact that many of these traits are difficult if not impossible to train for (e.g., compassion, patience, extroversion, dedication)

¹ Please note that we use the term SRO to refer to the officer working in the school while the term Neighborhood Police Unit or NPU refers to the bureau within Peel Police that these officers are part of.

emphasizes how important the SRO selection process is to the success of the program.

To do the job well, SROs also have to have a number of operational strengths, including excellent communication skills, good organizational skills, the ability to work effectively within a team, and a good knowledge of the law.

Training is also essential to outstanding performance in the SRO role. All Peel Regional Police SROs receive one week of job-specific training prior to taking on the SRO role. During this week they are given instruction on how to deal with students, how to deal with school specific situations that they are likely to face (e.g., bullying, cyberbullying, social media related crimes, dealing with students with mental health issues), and they are provided with material and tools associated with S.P.E.A.R. (School Police Emergency Action Response). All officers also receive training in Immediate Rapid Deployment (IRD), a police tactic where first responders must actively confront a developing high-risk crisis (e.g., school shooter). Finally, the program is administered in such a fashion that all SROs receive one year of on the job training from the senior officer of their SRO team. This on the job training is more specific to the schools and communities where these officers work.

Challenges SROs are Likely to Face on the Job

The job of the SRO is very challenging. Key challenges facing the SROs we talked to include: it is hard to overcome the negative image people have of the police, it is hard to establish relationships of trust with young people today, it is difficult to educate people on why some actions are against the rules but others are against the law, it is hard to manage all the different and varied demands of their job in a limited time frame, and the Young Offenders Act makes enforcement of the law difficult.

“I think one big challenge is connecting with the kids because there’s a lot of kids just through watching like music videos and watching TV...there is just a lot of negativity about the police on TV...they don’t like police. So you kind of try to break that barrier, and try to build positive relationships with them and show them like we’re here for them, we’re here to help.”

But the rewards offset the challenges: All the SROs that we talked to said that they felt the rewards of the job offset the challenges, mentioning in particular that they appreciated the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the students they deal with. They talked about how great they felt when “*kids who had hated police now say hi*” when they see the officer in the yard or hall; how great it was to see “*kids learn from the police and make better choices;*” how great it was to change people’s perceptions of police officers (i.e., eliminate the negative image); and how good it felt “*working with young people and stopping them from getting a criminal record.*” They also talked how rewarding it was for them to feel really connected with the community that they serve, and being assigned to the SRO where they get to work with a group of people with the “*same mindsets,*” where

everyone is happy help each other out. In other words, they are rewarded by the sense of team within the SRO.

Most Important Activities Undertaken by the SRO: The SROs' Perspectives

Analysis of the interview data show that the SROs awarded more importance to activities associated with preventing crime than activities typically considered part of policing (i.e., enforcement). In fact, SROs at each of the five schools were in complete agreement on the importance of activities linked to:

- Relationship building: Activities that encourage positive relationships to be developed and maintained between the police and students, staff, and community members (i.e., engaging in conversations, asking questions, listening).
- Enhancing visibility: Activities that increase the visibility of the SRO in the school and the community (i.e., walking the school with the administrators, patrolling the community, being present at school events and functions).

“build a rapport... be consistently present at the school and its events and put the effort in as it takes time...every day. Just keep going in...just keep trying to talk to them. Like you're not going to win over every kid, but you put the effort in. You're at the school every day, you're walking the hallways, you're connecting with them.... I think that's all you can do is just keep trying.”

“Yes, I think the best way to deal with it is talking to them and reaching out as much as possible and reassuring them that you're not out there to arrest them. You're not looking to arrest kids... you're not.... You don't benefit from that. You're actually trying to help them out.”

“Just our mere presence in the school...just that alone. I mean, who knows how much we deter just from that? How much bullying or criminal offences and misbehaviors do not happen because of us just being there.”

Other activities nominated for the top three list of important activities include collaborating with students, staff, and other police units to make the schools safer; educating students and staff on the role of the police and the law; intelligence gathering; and solving crimes.

Officers gave four reasons for identifying these activities as critically important to effective enactment of the SRO role: (1) they deter crime/misbehavior, (2) they create a sense of trust between the police and community, (3) they enhance feelings of safety in the school and in the community, and (4) they facilitate more effective police work in a number of ways, including the gathering of community intelligence that can expedite the solving of crime and the reduction of police response times.

What value do these activities deliver? Relationship building activities add value by: (1) increasing the extent to which high school students and school administration trust the police and (2) enhancing perceptions of safety. Being visible in the

school delivers value by: (1) deterring misbehavior and criminal activity and (2) enhancing relationship building and helping increase trust in the police. Collaborations between the SRO, the school, and other units in Peel Police bring value by increasing police effectiveness. By spending time educating students, staff, and community members, SROs provide value by: (1) reducing the amount of crime/misbehavior within the schools and the community, (2) enhancing police effectiveness, and (3) increasing feelings of safety within the school and the community.

Collaboration Between SROs and School Administrators

All of the SROs we talked to collaborated with the administrators at their school on a daily basis. Analysis of the data showed that these collaborations were either proactive and preventive in nature and/or reactive interactions that involved enforcement. Proactive collaborations outnumbered interactions with a reactive/enforcement flavor by a ratio of two to one.

Analysis of the interview data supports the following conclusions about the nature of the collaborations that occur between SROs and school administrators, as well as the impact these collaborations have on key school and community stakeholders. First, collaboration is required in a variety of different situations, many of which are quite complex: some relate to the SRO's ability to enforce the law, some are illustrative of proactive efforts to prevent a crime or injury, while others combine elements of both proactive community-based policing with reactive attempts to enforce the law. In all cases, however, the fact that the SRO was present in the school helped prevent any or all of the following from occurring:

- the student from getting a criminal record;
- students getting injured or perhaps even dying (fights, drug overdoses);
- property damage (to the school or in the community);
- the school from having to call 911 and wait for the police to arrive at the school;
- Peel Police having to take officers from the road and send them to the school in response to a call for service; and
- students with mental health issues being unable to get help.

In other words, the value of having an SRO assigned on a full-time basis to high schools in Peel District is realized in a number of different ways by a number of different stakeholders.

In all cases, officers rated the quality of the collaborations between themselves and the administrators at their school as excellent, a rating that they attributed to the high degree of trust between themselves and the administrators, strong and positive relationships, and the open communication channels that have developed between the SROs and school administrators over time.

Collaborations Between the SROs and Other Units within Peel Police

The frequency with which the SROs collaborate with other police units varies from daily to three or four times a week on average. As one officer noted: “we collaborate as needed and it depends on the files.”

Analysis of the data showed that collaborations between SROs and other Peel Police bureaus were of two types: information sharing and investigations. All officers in all five schools mentioned both types of collaborations, often when describing the same situation. The following examples illustrate how the SROs collaborate with other Peel Police bureaus:

- worked with the Special Victims Unit (SVU) to investigate a sex assault and got help for the victim;
- worked with the Central Robbery Unit to locate a student who was a robbery suspect;
- worked with the Criminal Investigation Bureau to find a missing student; and
- worked with Criminal Investigation Bureau to locate a student in the school and arrest him for mischief after uniform patrol was called to investigate a domestic disturbance (student assaulted mother).

All but one of the SROs we interviewed described the quality of the collaboration between SRO officers and the Peel Police as being excellent or very good, a rating that they attributed to the fact that they felt appreciated and valued. One officer felt that the quality of the relationship was okay, a rating that he/she linked to his/her perception that the SROs were underutilized by the rest of the police force.

Value Delivered by the SRO Program

This section summarizes key findings with respect to the value of the SRO program as seen by the officers most intimately involved with the SRO at this time: the SRO themselves.

Situations illustrating the value of the SRO: We asked the SROs working in the five schools in our study to describe a situation where they believed that they delivered value to a key stakeholder. The situations provided are summarized below:

- **Situation one:** This situation involved a gang problem that, prior to SRO involvement, had resulted in regular fights between three schools. SRO officers were able to prevent the fights from taking place through a visible presence after school and in the community.
- **Situation two:** This situation involved two SROs on patrol in the neighborhood around the school recovering a loaded firearm from a student who was in the back of a taxi in the area.
- **Situation three:** This situation involving a series of robberies that were happening in a nearby green space. The SROs matched the descriptions of the

students who were committing the robberies to students that they had talked to when they were investigating a fight that had occurred earlier that day at the school. They investigated and found the students with stolen goods. The students were arrested and the robberies stopped.

- **Situation four:** This situation involved a known drug trafficking problem in the school that SROs were able to resolve and eliminate through investigation and prosecution.
- **Situation five:** This situation involved dealing with a threat of violence made against the school. SROs were able to resolve the concern by using information they had about the personal relationships of the students to identify the source of the threat and stop him.

We refer the interested reader to the full report where these situations (and others) are described in detail.

Value - Analysis of situations: Analysis of these situations reveal that the SRO program provides value in a number of ways:

- the visibility of the SRO in the school (stick around our schools, show presence) acts as a deterrent to crime in the school (gang violence, threats, drug trafficking, gun seizure);
- the relationships that the SRO has developed in the schools (knows students, trusted by the administrators) means that these officers are able to gather intelligence (knowledge/information) that makes it possible for the police to either prevent crimes from occurring and/or enforce the law (solve crimes attached to robbery, break and enters, violence) in a timely fashion;
- the SRO reduces the number of young people in the community with criminal records and helps keep kids in school; and
- the SRO reduces the number of young people experiencing physical harm by preventing violence and controlling the number of firearms in the community.

The following quotes illustrate these sources of value:

“And we have an investment in these kids, too. Like XXX.... He’s a good kid, and he’ll... I mean, if he can figure it out he’ll probably be pretty successful in life. Like he’s a smart kid, he’s charismatic. He’s got a lot of things going for him, but if he didn’t have somebody who was invested in him, who wanted to see him succeed from a police point of view, I mean, he’d probably already have a handful of criminal charges. You know, he’d be fighting an uphill battle already. Where at this point he’s made it this far with, you know, a clean record, and we are working to make sure he gets out of high school without one, so.... It depends on him. But he’s a lot better off that he’s got officers in school who know him and can work with him...”

“If that same assault had happened on a bus or in public, he would likely have been charged criminally...as it is he won’t have any consequences other than penalties imposed by the school. So because we know what the school’s doing...and we know the background on the suspect...we decided that a criminal charge would probably not be in the best interests of him or society...”

Value of the SRO program – School and community stakeholders: The data strongly supports the following conclusions with respect to the value that accrues to schools, communities, and society from programs such as the one implemented in Peel Region:

- The presence of the SRO in the school helps prevent or deter crime in the school and surrounding areas (fights, drugs, and robberies in particular) in the following three ways:
 - o the SRO acts as a deterrent (people think before they act when they see the police);
 - o the SRO intercepts and stops crimes from happening; and
 - o the SRO intervenes early with troubled youth and helps guide them towards more positive behaviour.
- The SRO is at the school and/or in the community and can act quickly to reduce the severity of crimes/de-escalate problematic situations.
- SROs are more able (and more likely) to recommend diversion to students when appropriate. This gives young people a chance for a meaningful future as it reduces the likelihood that a student will get a criminal record.
- The presence of the SRO in the school helps prevent or minimize property damage in the school and surrounding areas.
- The presence of the SRO in the school reduces the likelihood that a student will suffer physical or psychological harm when at school by reducing the incidence of physical violence, bullying, and cyberbullying.
- The presence of the SRO in the school increases the likelihood that students will get the help they need from the social service and health care systems.
- SROs provide school and community stakeholders with a resource that they can easily consult if they need information or advice on matters of the law.
- SROs make it easier for students and citizens to see the police as someone they can talk to if they have a problem rather than someone to fear.
- SROs increase the level of trust between key community stakeholders and the police. which increases the likelihood these individuals will seek help from the police or share information with the police as required.
- The SRO's knowledge of the community and the school enhances their ability to effectively investigate criminal activity in the area.
- The SROs provide school administrators with important information on what their students are doing outside of the time they are in school as well as provide intelligence on the law and how the police operate.
- The SROs provide invaluable support for administrations who are having difficulties enforcing school rules and managing the behaviour of problematic students.

The value of the SRO to the Peel Police: The data strongly support the following conclusions with respect to the value realized by Peel Police from the SRO program:

- The personal relationships that the SRO has formed with members of the school community (administrators, students) facilitates the collection of intelligence and information that is valuable to other units within Peel Police.

- The SRO can use their social networks to obtain information and intelligence that would have been time consuming or impossible for other police officers to acquire. The following units seem to gain the most value from the SRO's ability to make connections and gather information: robbery, drugs, and Special Victims.
- The presence of the SRO in the schools and the SRO's information networks decreases the number of 911 calls and calls for service coming from the high schools.
- Proactive policing in the high schools decreases the total number of investigations required.
- The actions taken by the SRO increases the efficiency of police investigations as well as solvency rates (i.e., investigations experience fewer delays and take less time).

The value of the SRO to the SRO: SROs working in the SRO report that their job offers them a number of benefits that they personally value:

- They find the job personally very fulfilling as they are often able to make a real difference in the lives of students that they interact with.
- They appreciate and value the personal relationships they develop in the course of their work.
- They enjoy that fact that their job, and how they behave, helps people see police in a different, more positive light (i.e., "*we can show the person behind the badge*").
- They benefit from the opportunity to engage with average citizens ("*we get to work with some good people whereas on patrol we often only deal with people who have commit a crime*"). This gives them a more complete perspective of who lives in their community.
- Performance of the SRO job helps them develop key skills, such as how to deal with students, communicate effectively with a variety of different audiences, work collaboratively with both the police and the community, and gain experience with investigations. Officers believe that the skills they gain from the job of SRO prepare them for other desirable positions within Peel Police (e.g., investigative units) and help them advance within the service.

What would change if police officers were not in high schools on a daily basis?

Officers agreed that if they were not in the schools, the following would increase:

- drug use (smoking weed in particular), drug trafficking and thefts, and the amount of violence, particularly in the form of fights that occurred in the schools;
- crime in the community as students skipped classes, trespassed, and engaged in other forms of criminal behaviour;
- the workload of uniform patrol officers (more 911 calls); and
- police response time to the schools.

Officers agreed that if they were not in the schools, the following things would decrease:

- the number of preventative interventions undertaken with high school students in the region (i.e., no one there to prevent the escalation of misbehaviour; no one to “nip things in the bud”);
- the number of diversions; and
- the amount of intelligence available for other Peel Police units.

“I think just our mere presence in the schools deters a lot of crime from happening. I think, without us there, problem students would probably feel they need to act out more...we could potentially stop something from happening before it starts, rather than just responding to a call that’s happening.”