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Value of the SRO Program: The View From Above – Staff Sergeants

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Summary from chapter 7 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 maintaining a Neighbourhood Police Unit (NPU). More specifically, our goal was to identify the value of having a School Resource Officer (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 were 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 out of five of these schools had student populations that were ethnically very diverse.

This summary presents key findings from one stage of this study. More specifically, it reports key findings from a study done exploring staff sergeants’ perceptions of the value delivered by the SRO program and the SRO. Police staff sergeants take on the role of front line supervisors in police services and they are generally recognized to hold one of the most important roles in any police department. As such, their views of the program are important to any evaluation of its impact.

Who Did We Interview?

In January and February, 2016, we conducted interviews with 11 Peel Police staff sergeants who had high familiarity with the SRO program:

- the four staff sergeants who directly supervise the efforts of the SROs who work in the five schools participating in this study;
- a staff sergeant in charge of administration who interfaced with the SROs in our study as well as the other staff sergeants in terms of scheduling; and
- six staff sergeants who represent units (or bureaus) within Peel Police whose work is likely to be impacted by the work of the SRO (i.e., Robbery, Drugs, Special Victims, Street Crime, and Uniform Patrol - 2 officers).

These staff sergeants high level of knowledge with Peel Police’s SRO program can be attributed to the following factors: (1) the officers were supervising SROs at the time the interview was being conducted, (2) the officers had previously supervised within the NPU, and/or (3) the officers had direct experience coordinating work between their unit and the SROs. Thus, these 11 staff sergeants were uniquely positioned in terms of their ability to comprehensively pass judgement on the value of the SRO program.

The interviews were done in person at one of Peel Police’s buildings. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. This document summarizes the key findings from our analysis of these 11 interviews. The emphasis is on

responses provided by a substantive number (operationally defined as twenty percent of the sample) of the staff sergeants.

Staff sergeants had worked in their current position from 0.5 years to 2 years. These officers spent time each week in one or more of the following activities: supervising and managing the work of the officers in their unit, supervising calls to service, supervising investigations, providing personal and professional support to the staff under their command, providing oversight for operations undertaken by their unit, providing administrative oversight to their unit, and engaging with the community. Only those staff sergeants in the NPU indicated that they spent time engaging with the community.

Duties of the SRO

We asked the 11 staff sergeants to describe what they understood to be the duties required of an SRO. Analysis of the responses to this question produced strong consensus amongst these officers that the SRO role includes a myriad of activities and responsibilities. They expect the SRO to:

- provide police services (i.e., law enforcement, patrol) to secondary schools in the region along with the community surrounding the school (n = 11);
- act as a liaison between Peel Police and the administrative staff at their assigned school (n = 9);
- investigate any issues occurring either at the school and/or in the community around the school that students or staff bring to their attention (n = 8);
- organize and/or attend activities at the school or in the community (n = 8);
- educate those in the school and the surrounding community with respect to the law (n = 8);
- act as a resource to students by providing career advice as well as counselling on how to resolve a problem that they are facing at school or at home (n = 8);
- help create a safe-school environment (n = 5);
- act proactively to address problems within the school (n = 5);
- provide support and intelligence to other police bureaus (n = 3); and
- project a positive image of Peel Police in the schools and the community (n = 3).

What Makes a Great SRO?

The SRO program is only as good as the officers who work within the unit. This begs the question: What are the skills and attributes of a successful SRO? The vast majority of the staff sergeants that we talked to felt that successful SROs had good interpersonal skills (i.e., were perceived as friendly, approachable, personable, compassionate, and good listeners), were self motivated and able to work independently, were articulate communicators with good presentation skills, had strong policing skills, had demonstrated good judgment and the capacity to make sound and defensible decisions, had a strong knowledge of legislation, and had a professional demeanor.

“You know they have to have enough common sense to realise that not everything has to be dealt with by a hammer, that you can if you get in there early enough, you can head off a lot of these issues before they escalate.”

Most Important Activities Undertaken by the SRO

SRO officers perform a wide variety of different activities. Which of these do staff sergeants see as most critical to the creation of a safe school environment? Virtually all of the staff sergeants interviewed agreed that three sets of activities were critical to the role of SRO:

- activities directed to building strong positive relationships between the police, students, and school staff, such as spending time interacting with students and liaising with staff;
- activities that actively involve the SRO the community, such as going to events, being seen around the neighborhood, and participating in outreach activities; and
- education, such as delivering presentations in the school and community on how the law views issues of importance or relevance (e.g., bullying, cyberbullying, drugs).

“The most important thing they do is attending the schools and interacting with the students.”

“...with the multicultural component comes the first generation and new immigrants to the country who, you know, a lot of the immigrants come from countries where policing is not respected, it’s not professional, and it can be very corrupt, absolutely, and very oppressive to society. So its important that the officers develop relationships, get their trust...you know, they’ve never experienced anything different, they just see police through their experiences before they came here.”

Collaboration Between SROs and Officers in Other Units

Frequency of collaborations: SROs collaborated with each other (i.e., SROs in other schools) and with officers in Uniform Patrol on a daily basis. They also collaborated with the officers in the Robbery and Street Crime units several times a week and officers working in the Drug and Special Victims units a couple of times a month. These data support the following conclusion: SROs interact and collaborate with many other bureaus in the police service on a regular basis.

The nature of these collaborations: The nature of these collaborations vary from sharing information with the SRO ($n = 9$), liaising with the SROs during an investigation ($n = 8$), and asking the SROs to provide back up/assistance to patrol officers in their enforcement activities ($n = 3$).

Quality of these collaborations: All staff sergeants rated the quality of the collaboration between their unit and the SROs to be very good to excellent. They justified their view by talking in a very positive manner about the officers who were

working as SROs, by focusing on the positive results they have experienced from previous collaborations with the NPU, and by noting that the fact that they once had been SROs themselves facilitated productive work relationships.

Perceived value of these collaborations: The value of the NPU as identified by these staff sergeants is multi-faceted, varied, and often somewhat idiosyncratic (i.e., unit specific). Staff sergeants identified the following ways that the NPU and the SROs offered value to their unit/Peel Police:

- *Value - Gives police access to information that they cannot get any other way:* The trust the SRO has built up within the school creates cooperation between the school and the police and encourages students and school staff to share what they have heard/know.
- *Value - Increases the efficiency of the investigation:* The relationship the SRO has with the school reduces the amount of time that the police need to spend in information gathering, which contributes to a reduction in the total amount of time required to investigate an infraction.
- *Value - Increases awareness of criminal activity in Peel region:* The SRO's information network ensures that these officers hear about criminal activities that would otherwise remain unreported. The SRO reports these crimes to the appropriate unit for investigation, which reduces the amount of unsolved crime in the region.
- *Value - Prevention of crime:* The information gathered by the SROs helps the police intervene and prevent a crime from occurring (e.g., robbery, drug trafficking).
- *Value - Mitigation of harm:* SROs offer education and counselling, which helps to mitigate the harm resulting from negative activities, such as bullying, cyber-bullying, fighting, and drugs. These interventions also increase perceptions of safety in the student population.
- *Value - Extra resources:* SROs offer a source of skilled back up when needed (often during a crisis).
- *Value - Diversion:* When a youth commits a crime, SROs can use their discretion to intercede without laying charges. Diversion offers value in two ways. First, it prevents or stops criminal activity within the school and community. Second, it reduces the number of young people with criminal records.
- *Value - Career development:* Collaboration with the community, other police units, and community associations develops the skill base of the SRO and helps them learn the role of investigator more quickly and efficiently.
- *Value - Increases the efficiency of the service overall:* SROs are more able to prioritize a call from the school correctly. This results in a reduction of calls for service associated with false emergency situations that need to be attended by uniform patrol. The program also reduces the total number of calls for service to patrol as the school staff call the SRO directly when they require police services rather than 911.
- *Value - Enhances the reputation of the service:* The positive interactions that SROs have with schools, teachers, and school boards demonstrate that Peel Police cares about the community.

The following quotes illustrate these often intangible sources of value:

“SROs can work with school staff to intercede in activities without laying charges to prevent or stop criminal activities. Activities stop and kids stay out of the corrections system.”

“I think that, just the empathy level that these officers develop for you know, our victims, and the community concerns, I think it’s easier to become a little disconnected from the community when you’re just running around from call to call. And I think the fact that these guys have to engage with the community, it provides them with a better insight into how to deal with the concerns of the public, and...I would say they probably generate a lot less complaints, because they don’t become crusty habituated cynics...like oh no, not another accident, kind of thing. And it’s like...there’s a greater sympathy level because they’ve had that community involvement, and they feel that connection.”

“They represent Peel Police to the youth and if we can break down any type of barriers or stereotypes, the earlier that we can do it, the better.”

Role of the staff sergeant: Staff sergeants in the NPU take an active role in facilitating collaboration between their unit and other units within Peel Police by: focusing on good management of information flow, encouraging awareness of the SRO role throughout the organization, encouraging officer exchanges, ensuring that their officers participate in career development opportunities, recognizing those officers who demonstrated good collaboration skills, and encouraging their officers to get help from other units when necessary. These data support the following conclusion: the behaviour of the NPU staff sergeants is key to successful collaborations between the NPU and the service overall.

Impact of the SRO Program on Key Stakeholders: SROs

Skills developed by working as an SRO: A substantial number of the officers we interviewed agreed that the job of SRO helped develop skills in the following areas: community policing, how to conduct an investigation, how to gather intelligence, problem solving, communication, time management, and social media. They also commented that SROs gain a very comprehensive knowledge of the different dimensions of police work during their two years in the role. These findings support the following conclusion: the job of the SRO provides a unique opportunity to learn a wide range of skills that are critical to effective police work.

Other ways that officers can acquire these skills: Virtually all of the staff sergeants felt that there was nowhere else that young police officers could acquire this sets of skills this thoroughly and quickly.

Importance of these skills to career advancement: The staff sergeants felt that the acquisition of the above set of skills was very important to the ability of these officers’ (or any officer for that matter) career progression within the police. They justified their answer by noting that the job of the SRO allows an officer to gain experience with all stages of the investigative process, manage a variety of chal-

lenging situations, and develop and demonstrate that they have acquired an array of critical communication and relationship building skills.

Impact of the SRO Program on Key Stakeholders: Peel Police

Importance of the development of these skills to the Peel Police: All eleven of the staff sergeants in our sample unequivocally stated that skills developed during their work as an SRO were fundamental to the ability of the service to do their job effectively. They gave a wide variety of reasons for their response. Almost all of the staff sergeants felt strongly that the skills developed by SROs encouraged the development of long lasting positive relationships with the community, which gave these officers the ability to: (1) interact effectively with the public, (2) build trust between the police and the community, and (3) reduce the barriers that often exist between the community and the police.

The majority of staff sergeants also saw a link between the skills developed within the NPU and the demand they were seeing from the community for a new type of police officer that appreciated the importance of relationship building. The program also benefits Peel Police by promoting organizational learning, encouraging the development of a culture of learning with the population of officers who had been and/or are SROs, reducing the pressure on the front line by reducing the number of 911 calls, and facilitating investigations by developing sound information sharing mechanisms between the NPU, Special Victims, Street Crime, Drugs, and Robbery units. Finally, many officers spoke about how the SRO program reinforces a positive police image which makes *“all of our jobs easier.”*

Impact of the SRO Program on Key Stakeholders: The Community

Staff sergeants indicated that the SRO program conferred three benefits to the community. First, this program humanises the police and increases the amount of trust the community has in its police service. This benefits the community as it increases the likelihood that community members will go to the police if they need assistance. Second, the diversion program benefits not only the students who are kept out of the system, but also reduces crime in the community and the costs to society associated with incarceration. When these two things are considered together, the third benefit becomes clear - the SRO program helps the police create a safer community.

Impact of the SRO Program on Key Stakeholders: The Schools

Staff sergeants agreed that the SRO benefits schools in a number of ways, most of which result from the fact that this program promotes positive relationships between the police, school staff, and students. It builds trust, encourages open communication channels, and provides students with the ability to interact with police officers in situations that are non-confrontational. The fact that the SRO acts as a deterrent to criminal activity within the schools and enforces the law means that both students and staff experience a safer environment and feel more

secure. Many officers also felt that the SRO program reduces the stigma young people often attach to the police and reduces the need for the school to call 911 when something goes wrong which. Having an officer on site also means that the school benefits from faster police response times and an ability to deescalate problems quickly. Finally, officers noted the benefits of having an SRO in the school who is able to share information on their student population and what is happening in the catchment area with school administration as well as educate students on issues of importance to this age group (e.g., cyber-bullying, drugs).

Should the Program Be Continued?

All of the staff sergeants we interviewed felt that the SRO program should be continued in its current form. All had personally seen the positive results the program was having and felt strongly that having the SROs in the school reduced crime within the community. Officers in the Robbery, Special Victims, Street Crimes, and Drugs units also lauded the SRO's ability to provide intelligence when investigations involve young people.

The following quote illustrates in quite a poignant manner why staff sergeants believe in the program and support its continuation:

“There is so much need in communities right now. Early intervention and social interaction with young offenders give the program the most value... you know...when I’m interacting with an 18 year and 20-year-old that’s been involved in, some pretty serious crime and stuff like that or you know, he’s got himself in a bad place or hanging with a bad crowd, it’s pretty difficult to get those guys back on track, right? I really do believe that if you’re going to change society...the earlier the intervention component of it the better. These early interactions, give it (the SRO program) the most value. It’s not perfect but we have a much better chance of saving somebody, early on than we do much later, right? It’s a much bigger uphill battle. Once they’ve already played in the mud puddle and they’ve got some dirt on them, it’s tough to wash it off.”