



Value of the SRO Program: The Insider's View

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

Summary from chapter 8 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 which 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 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 a more socio-economically advantaged community, and two schools were situated in “middle class” communities. Four of the five schools had student populations that were ethnically diverse.

This summary presents key findings from one component of this research: an ethnographical study of the SRO role. The goal of this phase of the research was twofold. First, we wanted to identify and describe any activities undertaken by the SRO that might create social value (i.e., stopping a fight at a school). Second, we wanted to help the reader understand the job of the SRO by “telling their story.”

How this Study was Conducted?

Ethnography, simply stated, is the study of people in their own environment. Ethnographers generate understanding by taking what researchers call an emic perspective, which provides the “insiders point of view.” They do this by engaging in a research methodology called participant observation. This form of research requires the researcher to take on two roles: (1) a participant in the setting and (2) an observer who can describe the experience with a measure of objectivity. Key findings were drawn from field notes taken by Gregory Dole, a PhD student at the Sprott School of Business. These notes represent his interpretation of observations made during the course of 10 full-day “ride-alongs,” an arrangement whereby a civilian spends a shift in the passenger seat of an emergency vehicle, observing the work day of a police officer. These ride-alongs were undertaken with four neighborhood police units from October 9, 2015 to March 21, 2016. During these ride-alongs, Greg observed the SROs working in all five schools that were participating in this study. Three of the schools were visited twice and two schools were visited three times.

Activities Performed by SROs that Add Value

SROs engage in a variety of activities that add value within the schools and communities they serve. Details on each are provided below.

Dealing with criminal activity occurring either in the school or the surrounding neighborhoods: The most common criminal activities that the SRO encounters include (in order of frequency) drugs, thefts, and break and enters (B and E's). The ethnographic study revealed the myriad of ways that the officers address drug dealing on school property: they follow up on information provided to them by the school administrators, they invest their own time working on Problem Oriented Policing (P.O.P.) Projects relating to drug crimes in their catchment area, and they use social media to identify and charge drug dealers operating in the schools.

Responding to calls for service: When the SROs do not have planned activities at their schools, they may work in support of other Peel Police Bureaus responding to calls for service that come through by radio dispatch. This could happen on a quiet day at the schools, but also occurred when the school was closed during school holidays and before and after school hours. Many of the calls for service were made directly to the SRO's personal cell phone by school administrators in high schools and elementary schools in the catchment area. The schools used this strategy to avoid having to call 911, thereby ensuring a fast response from an officer who had knowledge of the schools and experience dealing with younger people. Other activities grouped under this heading include serving warrants, working on proactive police work associated with P.O.P projects, responding to calls for back-up over the police radio, responding to Amber alerts, and spending time in court.

Activities that result in students feeling safer: The researchers observed a strong link between the presence of the SRO in the school and students' feelings of safety on multiple occasions during the ride-alongs. The most common way in which the police make students feel safer is by "just showing up." It was noted that the visible presence of the police at the school and in the catchment area acted as a deterrent to the commission of assaults, bullying, and drug trafficking by young offenders. Other activities that the ethnographer saw the SRO perform that enhanced student safety included investigating threats of gun violence in the school and in the community, monitoring the school grounds, confronting trespassers, and responding to mental health calls at the school.

Relationship building: The SROs engage in a number of activities with the goal of building relationships with key stakeholders in the community. Relationship building activities noted by the ethnographer included the SROs attendance at community events, participation in sports with the students, offering seminars and training to students and community members, helping organize community charity events, attending school dances, acting as a liaison between the school and other police bureaus, and helping school administrators communicate with school parents on matters of the law.

Activities Performed by SROs that Add Value

A myriad of ways in which SROs create value were observed or discussed during the ride-alongs. Details on each are provided below.

Source of intelligence: This study uncovered multiple instances where the SROs were an invaluable source of intelligence because of the relationships they had built within their school and the community. This intelligence was used to benefit the school and the community.

Stopping or following up on an assault of any kind: There was a mix of real-time observations and second-hand accounts of the SROs dealing with multiple incidents of assaults.

Stopping a suicide attempt: During one of the ride-alongs, the ethnographer witnessed the SROs stopping a suicide attempt.

Dealing with bullying: During one of the ride-alongs, the ethnographer witnessed the SROs dealing with a bullying situation at the school. During the ride-along, the officers told the ethnographer that the SRO is more likely to be called in to deal with more serious cases of bullying. They note that this is done as a deterrent and a way for school administrators and parents to escalate the severity of the situation (i.e., charges are possible when the police are brought in).

Managing a rape threat: During one of the ride-alongs, the ethnographer witnessed an SRO assist a colleague who was dealing with a rape threat.

Youth diversion: We observed the SROs placing a juvenile who distributes drugs into a diversion program, thereby offering the student the opportunity to pursue a healthier life track without a criminal record.

SRO has in-depth tacit knowledge that helps the Peel Police solve crimes more efficiently: There is value in the fact that the SRO has a fine grained knowledge of the community. During the ride-alongs, the ethnographer observed how the SROs in-depth knowledge of youth gang members operating within the school's catchment area is a real asset when solving crimes. Their knowledge allowed for a rapid response to a crime that might have otherwise taken up officer resources for days/weeks in both the uniform patrol and robbery bureaus of the Peel Regional Police.

Providing extra authority to school administrators: In an effort to make safer schools, the SROs were often asked to attend meetings with students and parents. These officers were able to make the student's aware of the consequences of their behaviour in a more direct way than either the school administrators or the parents could administer. In the situation we observed, the discussion with the SROs allowed the student to recognize there were legal consequences to the behaviour they were displaying. We also note the value to the school administrators of having access to this extra level of authority when they require it. The opportunity to use the SROs is valuable to the school administrators because it adds to their abilities to make the schools safer. From the school administrator's perspective, the SROs are a "super-charged" tool that they can use to create safer school environments.

De-escalation: On several occasions we observed SROs help school administrators solve serious problems that happen in the schools. Armed with the history of the situation, as well as the background of the school administration, the SROs

were able to deftly navigate complicated situations. By remaining calm, refraining from confrontational behaviour, and taking an empathetic approach, the SROs were able to de-escalate heated situations.

Encourage young people, particularly visible minorities, to consider joining the police: Students that are interested in a career in law enforcement may not have access to information on how to proceed into that type of career. They may also be discouraged from learning about how to get into law enforcement for a myriad of cultural and/or personal reasons. At the same time, there are calls from the community for greater diversity within the Peel Regional Police. By creating the opportunity for youth to meet police officers in a non-threatening way, the youth who may otherwise not have thought about careers in law enforcement may now consider the profession. Subsequently, the Peel Regional Police may have gained an opportunity to increase its ability to be representative of the population in Peel.

Providing peace of mind to the school administrators/teachers: The fact that school administrators have the ability to call their SROs when a serious problem occurs in the school or the community around the school provides these individuals with an increased sense of security and peace of mind.

Establishing a positive view of police in the minds of young people: By interacting with young people in non-threatening circumstances, the SROs are creating positive impressions of police that contrast with the many negative examples of policing that are communicated through the media and the anecdotal experiences of dissatisfied community members. To counter these perceptions, it is important for the police to seek out ways to create positive interactions with the communities they serve.