

Changing the Conversation from Cost to Value

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In an era where the costs of policing are constantly under scrutiny from governing municipalities, the time has come for police agencies to change the focus of the conversation from “what does this service cost” to “what value does this service provide.” To do this, they need to answer questions relating to the value the various activities they spend time on create in the communities they serve. While many police services think that the value of what they do is obvious and does not need to be explained or quantified, in our experience this is simply not the case -- particularly when it comes police activities and programs that are more proactive in nature and designed to prevent crime (e.g. COAST, School Resource Officers, Community Policing).

Being able to communicate the value of what you do helps to demonstrate the importance of the services police deliver to the communities they serve, the governments who fund them and the policy makers who establish the rules that govern how they do their jobs. Being able to demonstrate the value of the proactive and preventive activities undertaken by the police (e.g. COAST, community policing), in particular, is critical given the current environment of spending cuts and increased competition for financial resources. Finally, knowing the value (or lack of value) of the different activities police engage in within the community should help police organizations to focus their efforts on activities that really make a difference and make it easier for police to explain why they allocate resources the way that they do.

How then do police services assign a value to something not happening? How do they establish and communicate the value of the various ways in which they prevent crime or injury? In the article below we provide a short summary of our work in the area¹. More specifically, we describe our use of Social Return on Investment (SROI) to quantify the value of the School Resource Officer (SRO) program delivered by Peel Regional Police. SROI is the method of analyzing and putting a monetary value on a program or an intervention. According to the developers of this technique, the actual value created by public investments in prevention

programs is either under-valued or never documented. While the SROI technique has been widely used by organizations in the not-for-profit sector to quantify social value creation, the research team could not find evidence of this technique being used in by police services in Canada or elsewhere. Nor could we find any evidence that such an evaluation has ever been done within the context of police officers assigned to schools.²

Using SROI to Determine Value: Peel Regional Police's SRO Program

Between 2014 and 2017 we completed a longitudinal, multi-method case study undertaken to identify the value of School Resource Officers (SROs) that are employed by Peel Regional Police and work in the service's Neighborhood Police Unit (NPU). Evaluation of Peel Police's SRO program was motivated by a number of factors. First, the costs of this program are both easy to identify and significant (just over \$9 million per year). Second, it is very challenging to identify the value that this program provides to students and the community. The challenges of quantifying the value offered by assigning full-time SROs to Canadian high schools is evidenced by the fact that such programs are rare, as police services around the world have responded to pressures to economize by removing officers from schools and either eliminating the role of the SRO or having one officer attend to many schools.

While the program has gone through a few iterations of its mandate over time, the core objectives are to assign sworn police officers to work in the region's high schools with the goal of facilitating the development of positive relationships with the youth living in the region and to enhance perceptions of safety and security in high schools and the community. In that capacity, the SROs work directly with teachers, parents, and the community to ensure that the youth are either on the right path to a positive future or that they can get back to the right path.

There are 60 SROs working in the schools and school catchment areas in Peel Region. They are supervised by 8 sergeants and 4 staff sergeants. The total cost of

the program is \$9,004,880 per year (excluding costs for uniforms, law enforcement supplies, etc.).

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 of the five schools had student populations that were ethnically diverse.

SROI analysis requires the collection of a variety of indicators of value (i.e., desired outcomes of the SRO program). Value was determined in this study in a number of ways using a variety of different types of data. Indicator data were collected over several years and in several formats and required tremendous cooperation and commitment from the various stakeholders involved in this program. The challenges we faced when designing our study were exacerbated by the fact that the SRO program in Peel Region has been in place for more than two decades. This made it impossible for us to calculate value using pre-post comparisons. The fact that Peel Police’s SRO program does not, however, operate in middle or elementary schools gives us another option on how to evaluate the program as it implies that students would not regularly interact with a school police officer until they began grade 9. Accordingly, in this study we collected survey data that enabled us to compare relevant student attitudes and outcomes at two points in time: (1) when the student started in grade 9 (i.e., September 2015) and (2) at the end of the first semester of grade 9 (i.e., March, 2016).

As noted, our research initiative had one main objective in mind: to identify, and where possible quantify, the value that Peel Police’s SROs offer to key stakeholders including students and administrators working in the region’s high schools, communities surrounding these schools, Peel Regional Police, and the SROs themselves. SROI calculations determined that the social and economic return on the total investment of \$660,289, (the cost of running the SRO program in the five schools in the study) yielded a total present value of \$7,349,301.

This means that, for every dollar invested in the Peel SRO program, a minimum of \$11.13 of social and economic value was created.

This ratio represents a minimum value created as conservative estimates were selected for all financial proxy. It also compares favorably to the value created by other social programs, which typically yield \$3 to

\$5 dollars of social and economic value for every dollar spent.

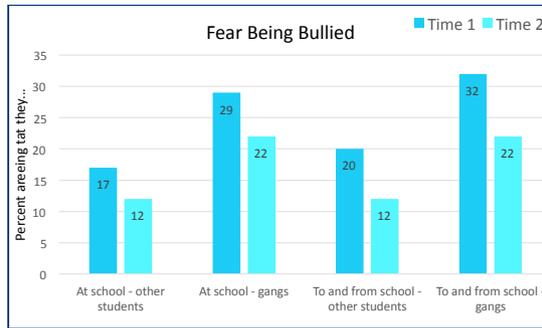
While this ratio was calculated using the data from the five schools who participated in the study, we feel confident that this value it can be generalized to schools who assign one SRO to work full-time in each high school in their area. The ratio can be expected to differ from what we calculated, however, if the SRO works part-time or covers a number of schools.

SROI analysis shows that high school students realize just over 80% of the value of the SRO program. Students who have been victimized in the past (i.e., bullied, cyberbullied, physically assaulted), in particular, benefit from the program. Also, of note are data from the SROI analysis showing that proactive SRO activities directed towards prevention offer just over twice as much value to students, administrators, and the community as reactive activities linked to enforcement. The fact that the SROs could (and quite frequently did) refer students to a diversion program was a key source of value of this program.

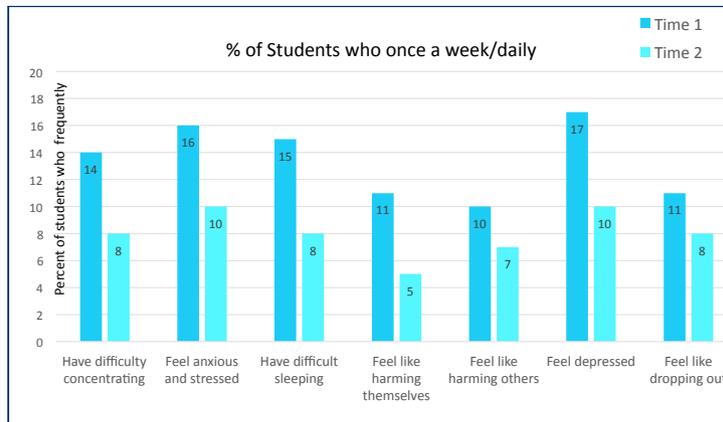
Our research provides strong support for the idea that the SRO program administered by Peel Police meets its goals of increasing students’ perceptions of safety both within the school and in the school’s catchment area. The fact that each of the stakeholders included in this study spoke at length during the interviews about how the SRO added value by making students and school staff feel safer reinforces our confidence in this conclusion. The fact that the student survey data as well as the ethnographic data mirror these findings provide additional support for this conclusion.

But so what? Why do we care that students feel safer? The data from this study is unequivocal in this regard. Five months after becoming a student at a high school with a full-time SRO, the students who responded to our survey were significantly more able to concentrate, in better mental health (i.e., reported less anxiety, stress, and feeling depressed), less likely to report difficulties sleeping, and 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 be thinking of dropping out we also expect that students who feel safer are also more able to take advantage of the learning opportunities offered in the school. These data are illustrated in the Figure below.

To conclude, the current conversations regarding the costs of policing require police services to demonstrate the value provided by investments in proactive policing programs. The costs of these programs are



Value of the SRO Program: Students' Mental Health Outcomes Improve Over Time



often high and visible while the value they provide has not been reasonably demonstrated. The approach we used with Peel Regional Police to determine the value the SRO program can be used by other police services to demonstrate the value similar programs create to their governing bodies (municipalities, police services boards, provincial governments). We encourage you to act now while such programs continue to exist.

Value of the SRO Program: Students' Fear of Being Bullied Decreases Over Time

Value of the SRO Program

While the data presented in this article is compelling in its own right, we believe that the following quotes illustrates in quite a poignant manner why Peel Regional Police, along with the schools that they serve, believe in the program and support its continuation:

"Would you talk to the 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..." **Grade 9 Student**

"So what is good about the program? For the kids, I think a lot of students in our area specifically are raised to be fearful of police authority, so it's nice for them to have that opportunity to build that relationship with an offi-

cer and to feel that sense of safety.... For our community, again I think it's nice for them to see that we have a liaison in our building who's trying to develop that relationship and that rapport. For myself, there are so many benefits to it, it's just... it just makes it so much easier because we're dealing consistently with the same team, and instead of constantly just calling the police to investigate a matter that might come up and be more reactive, I think now we can be more proactive, and that's the difference I think it makes." **School Administrator**

"... 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." **School Administrator**

"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." **The SRO** ♥

¹ The interested reader who wants more details is referred to our forthcoming book, *Police in Schools: An Evidence-based Look at the Use of School Resource Officers* to be published by Taylor and Francis in 2019.

² Full details on how SROI is done is outside the scope of this article. The interested reader is, however, referred to the following websites where they can obtain detailed information: <http://www.socialvalueuk.org/resources/sroi-guide/>