

**Statement Regarding Concerns Raised About
“Assigning Value to Peel Regional Police’s School Resource Officer Program”
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In 2018, Dr. Linda Duxbury and I prepared a 258-page report, which was later published as a book, that reviewed our findings from an evaluation of the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program that is delivered by the Peel Regional Police Service to high schools in the region. The evaluation focused on five racially-diverse high schools.¹ To determine the value of the SRO program we: (1) interviewed a small sample of students ($n = 8$) from various racialized groups; (2) surveyed students when they were first introduced to the SRO program in Grade 9 (Time 1; $n = 610$), and again six months later (Time 2; $n = 655$); (3) interviewed school administrators ($n = 29$) and SROs ($n = 8$) at these schools, along with police supervisors who regularly interact with the SROs; (4) tracked the activities of the SROs throughout an entire term; (5) observed SROs directly as they carried out their duties during ride-alongs over the course of nine days; and (6) conducted a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of the SRO program (which was the primary purpose of our research project).

In brief, we found that:

- the students we interviewed saw value in the SRO program and spoke positively about it, although they also indicated that they weren’t particularly familiar with the program;
- the majority of survey responses were generally positive in relation to the SROs, although negative reactions were reported by a minority of students;
- all but one school administrator spoke of the SRO program in very positive terms and strongly endorsed the program given how much it benefitted their school and their students, including the fact that it allowed the police to quickly respond to crises and criminal activity, build healthy relationships with the students in the school, help errant students get back on track, protect victims of crime and bullying, divert students away from the criminal justice system, and help with mental health issues;
- SROs were involved in a broad range of activities, but spent more of their time on proactive policing activities (43.8%) than reactive policing activities (34.2%);
- ride-along data revealed various ways in which the SROs impact their schools – among other things, officers were observed providing additional authority to school administrators, stopping assaults, preventing a suicide, dealing with bullying, de-escalating situations, managing a rape threat, diverting youth, solving crimes, and encouraging racialized youth to consider careers in policing; and
- despite the extremely high costs associated with the program, the return on the investment was positive and significant.

¹ In a recent census undertaken by the Peel District School Board, they report that only 16.8% of secondary school students (Grade 9-12) in their district identify as White. Most of the remaining students identify as South Asian (45.3%), Black (10.2%), Middle Eastern (5.6%), or East Asian (5.4%) (Peel District School Board, 2019). We could not locate similar statistics for the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board.

Based on these sorts of findings, we concluded there were numerous benefits associated with the SRO program.

On June 5, 2020, we were contacted by someone who had concerns with the research we conducted and some of the conclusions we reached in our report. This individual had specific concerns about our survey. More specifically, he had concerns about: (1) methodological limitations related to our survey, (2) conclusions that we reached about the SRO program based on our survey, and (3) a lack of comparative analyses related to race-based survey data. This individual also had concerns with our inability to address important research questions because of the way we conducted our study; in his view, questions that need to be addressed to ensure BIPOC students are not being mistreated.

As researchers who strive to present their research in an accurate and fair fashion, while also meaningfully contributing to effective and responsible policing, we take any criticism of our work very seriously. We have spent the last week reflecting on the issues that were raised by this individual and thinking about how they impact on our research. In this statement, we'd like to describe the concerns that were raised and respond directly to them.

Lack of “control schools” and the impact of this limitation on our survey conclusions

One of the concerns that was raised about our survey related to our conclusions about certain variables that showed significant improvement from Time 1 to Time 2. These findings included the fact that students generally reported increased ratings of perceived safety at school over time, decreased ratings of fear and anxiety, and improvements to variables like truancy. We interpreted these changes as evidence that the SRO program was associated with positive outcomes.

The main point of concern that was raised with this conclusion is that we did not have access to “control schools” – that is, schools that did not have an SRO program – to compare our results to. During the study, we attempted to collect data from control schools in other districts,² but were unable to. As a consequence, there is no way of knowing if the improvements we observed for these variables resulted from the presence of SROs in Peel high schools; instead, the improvements could be attributed to other factors, such as students in Peel gradually acclimatizing to high school.

We agree that this methodological issue prevents us from attributing these specific positive outcomes directly to the SRO program; they could have occurred in the absence of that program. While we acknowledge this fact (and other limitations) in our book, upon reflection we should have incorporated this limitation into our conclusion about this aspect of the survey more than we did and temper our conclusion accordingly. We will be contacting our book publisher to see if we can clarify these portions of the text if a second printing of the book takes place.

Notwithstanding this valid concern, it's important to point out that other survey results are not impacted by the lack of a control group. For example, a number of survey questions asked students to reflect on the SROs in their school. Most, but not all, of these items suggest that the students who responded to our surveys at Time 2 had positive reactions to their SRO. For

² The schools could not be located in Peel because all Peel high schools have SROs associated with them.

example, although 34% of students indicated that they felt anxious (half the time or more) when they saw the SRO assigned to their school, 70% of students said they felt safer (half the time or more) when they saw their SRO.³ These results are not compromised by the lack of a control group because students at schools without an SRO would have no such views.

Claims that all students benefit from the SRO program

Another concern that was raised was that our survey data didn't support a specific conclusion we reached. The conclusion was that all students in the schools we studied benefited from the SRO program (but especially students who have been bullied or physically harmed). This conclusion is found in a section of the report/book that dealt with analyses where we compared certain survey items across various groups of students, based on gender, contact with the SRO, having been arrested/stopped by the police, and having been the victim of bullying or physical harm.

Our conclusion that all students benefited from the SRO program was meant to imply that, regardless of the groups we examined, our findings generally reflected positive change (e.g., both male *and* female students reported higher feelings of anxiety and/or stress at Time 1 compared to Time 2). However, on reflection, we agree that this specific conclusion should have been worded differently. Even if we could attribute the positive changes reported in the survey to the SRO program, average group level changes captured in the survey do not suggest that every student in the high schools we examined benefit from the SRO program.

Given that we didn't survey all students in the five high schools we examined, there could be students in these schools that would have responded quite differently to the surveys (i.e., more negatively) than the surveyed students. In addition, as we mention above, despite the positive views that most students expressed about their SROs, a smaller percentage of students did report feeling anxious when seeing their SRO, which might signal a negative reaction. Thus, it was incorrect to give the impression that all students in the five high schools benefit from the SRO program, when only the majority of students we surveyed appear to benefit from the program. Again, we will be contacting the publisher to see if we can clarify this issue in our book.

Lack of attention to minority group status

As mentioned above, one component of our survey results involved comparative analyses across different groups of students. A third concern was raised that we didn't conduct comparative analyses based on minority group status despite asking students whether they "considered themselves to be members of a minority group." We didn't analyze this variable because the responses to that survey item were insufficient for comparative purposes due, we believe, to the question being challenging to answer (an issue that was raised during the course of the study).

Given the racial breakdown of students in Peel high schools, where BIPOC students make up the large majority of the student population (Peel District School Board, 2019), the way we asked students about this issue may have been problematic. For example, BIPOC students may not see

³ The fact that the combined percentage exceeds 100% suggests that feelings of anxiety and safety are not mutually exclusive. For example, one can feel anxious when they see a police officer, but still feel safer when they see that officer (e.g., such as might happen if the presence of a police officer signals that a crime has recently occurred).

themselves as belonging to minority groups in the school context, where they make up the majority of the student population. Given the demographic profile of students in the high schools we sampled (Peel District School Board, 2019), we believe our survey results represent the views of a racially diverse set of student respondents, but unfortunately we cannot attribute survey responses to particular racial groups or compare responses across racial groups. We do view these sorts of comparisons as very important, however, and will strive to examine these issues in our future work.

Our inability to answer important questions to ensure students are not being mistreated

A final concern that was raised related to our inability – because of the way we conducted our study – to address important questions that need to be addressed to ensure BIPOC students in Peel are not being mistreated. The primary goal of our study was to conduct an SROI analysis of the SRO program in Peel. As such, we fully accept that our study was limited in scope and cannot be used to answer a range of critically important questions.

For example, while we still firmly believe that our data suggests that the SRO program benefits the majority of staff and students in Peel high schools, in that it provides them with a safer environment within which to teach and learn than would be the case if SROs were not associated with these schools, we cannot say that the current program would be more effective or less oppressive than alternative approaches for dealing with problematic student behaviours, including approaches being called for by some advocacy groups (e.g., wider availability of trained crisis response workers).

While we would argue that careful consideration needs to be given to the legal authority of other professionals to respond to criminal activity in schools, and whether it is safe for non-police professionals to respond to certain problems that arise in schools, we actively support and encourage the examination of alternative response models, especially if they are likely to reduce harm experienced by BIPOC students (or any other student). We believe these conversations and debates should be happening all the time and that they should include a broad range of voices from police, school, and neighbourhood communities. We hope our research can inform these discussions.

References

Peel District School Board. (2019). *Student census 2018: Secondary school report (grades 9 to 12)*. Mississauga, ON: Peel District School Board.