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HOW SRO PROGRAMS CAN BENEFIT FROM RESEARCH

By Timothy Servoss, Canisius College, and John Rosiak, Principal, Prevention Partnerships, Rosiak Associates, LLC

In the Fall of 2018, more than 20 researchers and practitioners, including NASRO executive director Mo Canady, were invited to attend the "School Security Measures" conference (<http://ed.buffalo.edu/school-security.html>) sponsored by the Spencer Foundation and hosted at American University in Washington DC. Attendees discussed a variety of approaches related to school-based law enforcement, looking at the existing research associated with various practices. People in attendance recognized that currently there is an explosion of interest in school-based law enforcement, and

that sometimes districts are moving toward narrow security approaches that focus mostly on "target hardening" to counter school shootings. According to one of the conference leaders, Dr. Jeremy Finn from the University of Buffalo: "It's not that security measures are never helpful, but there's often no data to substantiate them."

While presenting an overview session at the conference on the roles of School Resource Officers (SROs), John Rosiak posed a simple question that many SROs use when they explain their jobs to various audiences, namely, "What does the "R" stand for in

SRO?" Of course, the audience answered right away with, "Resource," which achieved the objective of reinforcing a point about a key role of today's SRO. NASRO past president Don Bridges likes to say that the "R" could stand for "Relationship" to make a point about that essential role of the SRO. Dr. Finn light-heartedly suggested the R could also stand for something else important to the field: "Research."

This last point was fitting for the small meeting, which was attended by many of the leading researchers in the country knowl-

edgeable about the topic of school security. It also points out the importance of research to the SRO community as it engages in continuous quality improvement of its work by trying to pay attention to important findings from research. This article conveys some of the relevant research that was discussed, as well as a number of questions that require further investigation. So, just what do we know from current research that practitioners can learn from and put into place, and what questions still remain unanswered?

PERCEPTIONS OF SROs

A fair amount of research has been conducted regarding how various school stakeholders perceive SROs and other school security measures. Administrators' perceptions tend to be positive; they tend to like having the SRO at the school, feel the SRO is effective, and believe that the SRO makes the school a safer place.

Perhaps not surprisingly, research on student perceptions of SROs and other security measures is very inconsistent. Some studies do indicate that students perceive SROs and other security measures as an effective means to ensure a fair and safe school environment; however, there are studies suggesting that more security is related to students feeling that school is less safe and more unfair, and other studies suggesting there's no relationship.

While on the surface this inconsistency is difficult to make sense of, upon deeper reflection, it likely underscores the true diversity in students' backgrounds and experiences. The degree to which students are victimized by their peers, academically successful, socially accepted, subject to discipline, and the degree to which they might come in contact with SROs or other security measures vary greatly from student to student.

One thing that SROs can take away from this research is an awareness and appreciation of the diversity of student perceptions regarding SRO presence in the school. An SRO may be viewed as a protector, helper or mentor by some students. But SROs may be seen by other students as a threat, nuisance, or just another power-hungry adult in the school who is there to hassle them. Because an SRO is there, some students may feel safer; because an SRO needs to be there, some students may feel less safe.

SROs AND STUDENT ARRESTS

A question that has been tackled by a number of researchers relates to the concern that if you place individuals in schools with the authority to arrest, inevitably more students will be arrested—a path with great financial, personal, and societal costs.

Do schools with SROs have more student arrests than schools without any





school-based law enforcement personnel? The answer is yes, but a “yes” that requires examination that may provide direction for SRO practice. First, research does not suggest that SROs across the nation are indiscriminately arresting students. In fact, depending on the study, researchers find that two-thirds to 80 percent of schools that employ SROs arrest no students at all.

Nonetheless, on a national level, schools with SROs do have more student arrests than schools without SROs. Can this relationship be explained away by differences in school characteristics like geographic region of the country, urbanicity, socioeconomic status, the racial/ethnic composition of the student body, neighborhood crime, or the level of student crime and misbehavior in the school? No. If you take two schools in the same type of location, with the same poverty level, same student population, and most importantly, the same levels of crime and misbehavior in the school, the school with the SRO is about 4 to 5 times more likely to have a high number of arrests relative to the school with no SRO.

So, what differentiates the schools with SROs that have a high number of arrests

from the two-thirds to 80 percent of schools with SROs that have no arrests? A couple of things: (1) the presence of other security personnel (i.e., security guards) and (2) the roles that the SROs play in the school.

First, schools with both security guards and SROs tend to have the most student arrests. Schools that have this personnel configuration (both guards and SROs) tend to be large, urban schools, with relatively large proportions of minority students. The process/dynamics through which guards and SROs working together manifests in more students being arrested is not currently well-understood by researchers, but the difference is not attributable to differences in those school characteristics that predict the security personnel configuration (e.g., urbanicity, school size, school crime, neighborhood crime, poverty, etc.).

Second, what about SRO roles and arrests? Research using the most recent national data provides a clear answer here. Schools where SROs are involved in school discipline arrest significantly more students than schools where SROs do not take on this disciplinary role. Other roles that SROs commonly take on, such as security enforce-

ment and patrol, coordinating with local police or emergency teams, mentoring students, and student/teacher education are not associated with increases in student arrests. Bottom line, SROs should avoid getting involved in school discipline.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Researchers acknowledge that there is still much to learn about and from SROs. Many unanswered questions, from the basic to the more nuanced, emerged from discussions among participants at the conference. What follows is a list of some of the most pressing questions.

A number of questions focused on training and personal characteristics of SROs:

- What does it mean to be a highly qualified SRO?
- What is the ideal training for an SRO and what proportion of the SRO workforce receives this level of training?
- To what degree does the nature and level of training vary across individual SROs, schools, districts, or states?

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- What is the ideal temperament/personality for an SRO?
- How is an SRO evaluated for fit at a particular school?

Another series of questions focused on the relationship between SROs and the schools they serve:

- What are the qualities of current school/SRO relationships?
- What differentiates an effective relationship from one that is less effective?
- How are SRO roles negotiated?
- Are expectations of SRO roles consistent across schools?
- How are SROs introduced to and integrated into the school community?
- Do the teachers/staff understand the roles and purpose of the SRO and vice versa?
- Does deploying an SRO in a school affect teachers’ sense of responsibility for enforcing discipline?
- To whom does an SRO directly report? To whom should they report?



Another series of questions focused on the size and demographics of the SRO workforce:

- How many SROs are currently at work in American schools?
- What is the racial/ethnic composition of the SRO workforce and how does that match up with the students they serve?
- Is there any evidence that SRO/student racial/ethnic match is related to any academic, behavioral, or disciplinary outcomes?
- Does the presence of SROs in schools come at the expense of mental health professionals like counselors, psychologists, or social workers; or are SROs seen as a necessary complement?

Finally, what are some of the challenges that SROs face when making the transition

from the community into the school setting? And, if the phenomenon of police in schools is here to stay—and it clearly is—what can we do to help them do their jobs more effectively?

CONCLUSION

While research on school-based law enforcement continues, SROs and researchers need to work together to figure out how learnings are applied to make schools safer and, at the same time, help get students the supports they need to stay in school and out of involvement with the justice system.

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