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School Safety and the Student Resource Officer

A successful school is one that has small class sizes, high quality teachers, intensely involved parents, and is diverse. These fundamentals prove to be effective when the school also fosters a student-safe environment. A student's physical and mental safety is crucial to the learning process. The school resource officer (SRO) was introduced in an effort to promote a student-safe environment and relieve teachers and staff of much of the pressures of safety and discipline responsibilities. His or her job is to be a teacher, law enforcement officer, and counselor. However, the typical SRO has transformed, perhaps not by choice, solely into a law enforcement officer and has abandoned their duties as a teacher and counselor. This article will highlight the deficiencies with the current SRO program and make some suggestions on how it can stay true to its principles while being a real and valuable resource to the student-safe environment.

The first SRO program was introduced in Flint, Michigan in 1953. Officers were placed in schools on a full-time basis in an effort to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the youth. In addition to being law enforcers, SROs were supposed to be teachers and counselors, establishing what is now known as the "triad" approach. The program was considered to be a large success and became the model for programs across the country. The program made the jump to high schools in 1963 when it was implemented in Tucson, Arizona. The majority of the country followed suit by starting programs of their own that were tailored to their schools' specific needs, but the common theme was that when the officer carried out all three of their responsibilities and focused

on maintaining a good relationship between law enforcement and students, SRO programs were a success and viewed in an extremely positive way.¹

Today, the SRO has been defined in 42 U.S. Code § 3796dd–8: (4) “school resource officer” means a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations—

- (A) to address crime and disorder problems, gangs, and drug activities affecting or occurring in or around an elementary or secondary school;
- (B) to develop or expand crime prevention efforts for students;
- (C) to educate likely school-age victims in crime prevention and safety;
- (D) to develop or expand community justice initiatives for students;
- (E) to train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime awareness;
- (F) to assist in the identification of physical changes in the environment that may reduce crime in or around the school; and
- (G) to assist in developing school policy that addresses crime and to recommend procedural changes. ²

Additionally, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) provides that the goal of SRO programs is to provide safe learning environments in our nation’s schools, provide valuable resources to school staff, foster a positive relationship with our nation’s youth, and develop strategies to resolve problems affecting our youth with the goal of protecting every child so they can reach their fullest potential.³

¹ http://www.blackfootpolice.org/sro/sro_history.html

² <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/3796dd-8>

³ <https://nasro.org/>

It's clear that there are multiple sources of guidelines for what the SRO's responsibilities are, and that these sources are easily accessible. The majority of criticism of SRO's is that law enforcement trumps their duties as a teacher and counselor. Instead of maintaining a relationship with students so that law enforcement is viewed in a positive light, officers are going straight for punishment or dealing out harsher punishments than deserved in what critics call a "school-to-prison pipeline." However, critics with this type of focus often fail to recognize that it may not be the officers themselves who are fostering this fast track introduction to the criminal justice system. The probable sources are the presence of zero tolerance policies, and the requirement for mandatory reporting, both of which tie the officers' hands and require him or her to enforce the law over truly helping the student.

Here is an example of a California elementary school's zero tolerance policy on violence: "Acts or threats of violence, including fights, will result in suspension and/or possible expulsion. Any student who engages in any violent act will be given 5 days of suspension for the first offense and may be recommended for expulsion for the first incident depending on the degree and severity of the incident. All second offenses WILL result in a recommendation for expulsion."⁴ Here is how this policy takes effect in real life and what an SRO's role in implementing it is. Jim, an 8th grader experiencing the normal emotions of a teenager, gets in a fight with a classmate over a girl. If this school has an SRO, he or she is the authority that is responsible for punishing the student, putting the SRO program in the spotlight. According to the policy, the officer must suspend Jim, automatically, for 5 days. By enforcing the suspension, the officer is forced

⁴ <https://glenview.schoolloop.com/ZeroTolerance>

to adhere to his law enforcement duty over his responsibilities as a counselor or teacher. If there is no mandatory suspension under the zero tolerance policy, perhaps the officer can conduct a counseling session with Jim to determine if there is a risk of further violence or if there is a possibility that Jim has mental issues that need solving, or rather if it was a misunderstanding that often occurs between hormonal teenagers. Instead, the officer is forced to suspend Jim without any further inquiry.

The previous hypothetical was rather simple, but it is easy to imagine how the same scenario pans out in different environments. Suspension is a serious punishment. For some students, school is the best place for them to be. Outside of school grounds, administration has little say in what the student does. Time outside of the classroom can give a student with unfavorable circumstances too much free time. The suspension or expulsion that results from a violation has a much greater effect than expected. According to The Council of State Governments Justice Center, suspension or expulsion makes a student almost three times more likely to encounter the juvenile justice system within one year.⁵

Now let's add an additional policy with similar effects to the zero tolerance policy in the hypothetical situation: mandatory reporting. South Carolina legislature provides that "school administrators must contact law enforcement authorities immediately upon notice that a person is engaging or has engaged in activities on school property or at a school sanctioned or sponsored activity that may result or results in injury or serious

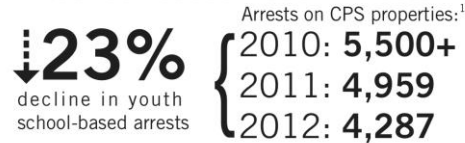
⁵ <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/01/30/are-school-resource-officers-part-of-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-problem>

threat of injury to the person or to another person or his property.”⁶ Perhaps the student Jim got in a fight with suffered a broken nose as a result of the fight. If Jim’s school has a reporting policy similar to that of South Carolina, the SRO is forced to report this incident to his or her law enforcement office. From there, Jim’s case could be treated as a possible crime. Given that there are different circumstances, including his or her family situation and surroundings, students in Jim’s position may or may not learn from their mistakes and the suspension and run-in with law enforcement is enough to scare them straight. Nonetheless, this introduction to the system was made through the zero tolerance and mandatory reporting policies, both of which are carried out by the SRO. It’s easy to see how critics relate the school-to-

prison pipeline immediately with the SRO program. Project NIA highlights this effect in Chicago public schools:⁷

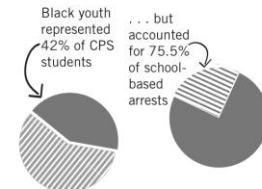
Moving on, the purposes of the SRO program must be emphasized in order to propose solutions on how to best serve those goals. First and foremost the officer must provide a safe learning environment. The student

Chicago School-to-Prison Pipeline School-based Youth Arrests

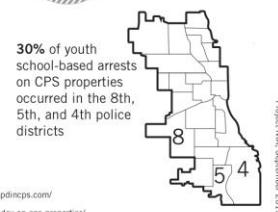


On average, **25 students** are **arrested** in Chicago Public Schools **each day**²

IN 2012:



86% of arrests happened in school buildings
84% of arrests were for misdemeanor offenses



CPS arrest data: Policing Chicago Public Schools Vol. 2 - <http://cpdincps.com/>
1 2010 youth under 18; 2011, 2012 youth 18 & under
2 <http://chiyouthjustice.wordpress.com/2012/04/27/25-arrests-a-day-on-cps-properties/>

Project NIA, September 2013

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https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0CDMQFjAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ncjrs.gov%2Fovc_archives%2Fbulletins%2Flegalseries%2Fbulletin2%2Fncj189191.pdf&ei=bG1XVb7vBsnAtQXo1YCYBg&usg=AFQjCNE85W_WAoUuDK8jwzdV7J_CTN_URA&bvm=bv.93564037,d.b2w

⁷ <http://www.chicago-bureau.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/arrests-fs-11.jpg>

must not only be physically safe, but mentally safe in order to learn effectively. This speaks to the officer's ability to be a counselor, emphasizing the second goal, which is to be a resource for the student. Another objective is for the officer to develop strategies to effectively solve problems, stressing his or her responsibilities as a teacher. Lastly, the idea that the officer should create a strong and positive relationship between law enforcement and the student is at the foundation of these principles.

The best way to achieve all of these goals is proper training. As shown in the U.S. Code, an SRO is a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority. The Code does not require or address training. Proper training should undeniably be a requisite to becoming an SRO. NASRO training is a good start, but should be expanded before it can be the standard for mandatory training. NASRO's basic SRO course trains law enforcement officers in "Functioning as a police officer in the school setting, working as a resource and problem solver, and developing teaching skills."⁸ The reason that NASRO is a good start is because it divides its training fundamentals into the three areas that an SRO is responsible for.

Training for becoming a "police officer in the school setting" must necessarily include techniques that are alternatives to enforcing school policies in a way where the SRO is viewed as just another authority figure for the student to fear. This sort of training will inevitably carry over into preparing the officer as a counselor, but the goal should be to at least make it to counseling. Of course for this to be possible there must be a push against zero tolerance and mandatory reporting policies where they're not necessary. As

⁸ <https://nasro.org/training/nasro-training-courses/>

mentioned before, these types of policies tie the officer's hands in that they are forced to use their law enforcement authority and prevented from being able to counsel.

A possible alternative and trainable practice would be investigative based. Instead of automatically administering a suspension or expulsion for certain violations, SROs could fully investigate matters before punishing the student to the fullest extent, which has been shown to have extremely negative effects. After the officer has determined the seriousness of the infraction, he or she should have the ability to administer punishment that does not involve the student missing school. This would serve two purposes: the student no longer has extra time to become familiar with the justice system, and he or she relates to the SRO in a more positive way. In the student's mind, the SRO is further removed from his or her role in law enforcement and can more closely communicate with the student as a teacher and counselor.

As a counselor specifically, the SRO should be sufficiently trained to at least recognize when a student's mental state needs addressing. To do this, the SRO first needs to be approachable. The officer is supposed to be a resource for the student. Training officers to become approachable would not be difficult; the SRO only needs to be welcoming and able to harbor the student's concerns. Once the officer is approachable, he or she needs to be able to recognize if the student needs help, at a minimum. Officers would need to be able to perceive when a student is not mentally well, or would like to communicate but is afraid of doing so. Training for this would certainly be more involved and costs would be higher. However, recognizing and addressing issues with the individual before they become problems with other students would greatly outweigh these costs.

An alternative in this area would be to mandate that a mental health professional become part of the SRO program, as an addition to the actual officer. Before any arguments for this option are advanced, the obvious dispute that there are not enough resources for this must be addressed. First, this proposal would not be for the professional to fulfill the same full-time requirements as the officer. Perhaps he or she could be assigned to a number of schools, and work on a traveling basis. The purpose of requiring their presence would be to aid and enhance the effectiveness of the SRO. If the officer is trained to recognize certain problems, he or she could then turn them over to the professional who could fully diagnose and further treat the student. Instead of mandatory reporting to law enforcement, the SRO could report all incidents to the mental health professional who would be well suited to determine if the matter warrants notification to the authorities, or if it can be handled within the school. The latter option avoids introducing the student to the justice system, so long as its not needed. Nonetheless, this is only a suggested supplement to the SRO, and the officer's training in counseling is far more important to establish first.

To develop and improve the officer's ability as a teacher, training must include ensuring that the officer is up to date on the latest safety procedures and matters of that sort, but should also involve encouraging the officer to constantly search for alternative ways to solve problems. Whether it is finding different, effective substitutes to suspension, or developing the best procedures for teachers and staff to deal with a student who brings a gun to school, officers need to be able to find the safest solution. Included in this area of training would be to guarantee that officers are up to date on the latest procedures. An example of where this would be useful is cyber-bullying. While an

experienced SRO may have gone through the necessary training and fulfills his duties to the utmost, his training may have not been recent enough to cover issues of the sort. A way to safeguard against this lack of knowledge would be to require SROs to regain their certification on a yearly basis. Re-certification would require additional training in the latest fields so that officers would be able to recognize an issue that may not have been a possibility the previous year.

Training is necessary to a good SRO program, but it is not the be-all and end-all. Who the actual candidate for the program is should also be addressed. According to NASRO, school-based policing is the fastest growing area of law enforcement.⁹ With the high demand, it's important to ensure that officers not only want a job, but want to promote a safe learning environment as well as foster a good relationship between law enforcement and the youth. To achieve this, the school should work together with law enforcement in assignment of trained officers because every school and district may have different demands. The officer should also be the one to apply for the position, as opposed to being assigned. Lastly, it's imperative to require all candidates undergo extensive background checks in addition to completing the necessary training and certification process.

It is important to remember that fundamental to a successful SRO program is the relationship formed between law enforcement and the student. Not only should an SRO bridge that gap, but also he or she has an obligation to the student to be a resourceful teacher and approachable counselor. It's vital to the program that promotion of school safety be paramount, but that the student's rights are not abandoned at the school door.

⁹ <https://nasro.org/>

Through proper training of the right people, the SRO program can fulfill its intended purpose of promoting a safe learning environment while fostering a positive relationship.