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Problem-Oriented Guides for Police
Response Guides Series
No. 10



Assigning Police Officers to Schools

Barbara Raymond

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Center for
Problem-Oriented Policing

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The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of February 2010. Given that URLs and web sites are in constant flux, neither the author nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

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About the Response Guide Series

The *Response Guides* are one of three series of the *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police*. The other two are the *Problem-Specific Guides* and *Problem-Solving Tools*.

The *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police* summarize knowledge about how police can reduce the harm caused by specific crime and disorder problems. They are guides to preventing problems and improving overall incident response, not to investigating offenses or handling specific incidents. Neither do they cover all of the technical details about how to implement specific responses. The guides are written for police—of whatever rank or assignment—who must address the specific problems the guides cover. The guides will be most useful to officers who:

- Understand basic problem-oriented policing principles and methods
- Can look at problems in depth
- Are willing to consider new ways of doing police business
- Understand the value and the limits of research knowledge
- Are willing to work with other community agencies to find effective solutions to problems.

The *Response Guides* summarize knowledge about whether police should use certain responses to address various crime and disorder problems, and about what effects they might expect. Each guide:

- Describes the response
- Discusses the various ways police might apply the response
- Explains how the response is designed to reduce crime and disorder
- Examines the research knowledge about the response
- Addresses potential criticisms and negative consequences that might flow from use of the response
- Describes how police have applied the response to specific crime and disorder problems, and with what effect.



The *Response Guides* are intended to be used differently from the *Problem-Specific Guides*. Ideally, police should begin all strategic decision-making by first analyzing the specific crime and disorder problems they are confronting, and then using the analysis results to devise particular responses. But certain responses are so commonly considered and have such potential to help address a range of specific crime and disorder problems that it makes sense for police to learn more about what results they might expect from them.

Readers are cautioned that the *Response Guides* are designed to *supplement* problem analysis, not to *replace* it. Police should analyze all crime and disorder problems in their local context before implementing responses. Even if research knowledge suggests that a particular response has proved effective elsewhere, that does not mean the response will be effective everywhere. Local factors matter a lot in choosing which responses to use.

Research and practice have further demonstrated that, in most cases, the most effective overall approach to a problem is one that incorporates several different responses. So a single response guide is unlikely to provide you with sufficient information on which to base a coherent plan for addressing crime and disorder problems. Some combinations of responses work better than others. Thus, how effective a particular response is depends partly on what other responses police use to address the problem.

These guides emphasize effectiveness and fairness as the main considerations police should take into account in choosing responses, but recognize that they are not the only considerations. Police use particular responses for reasons other than, or in addition to, whether or not they will work, and whether or not they are deemed fair. Community attitudes and values, and the personalities of key decision-makers, sometimes mandate



different approaches to addressing crime and disorder problems. Some communities and individuals prefer enforcement-oriented responses, whereas others prefer collaborative, community-oriented, or harm-reduction approaches. These guides will not necessarily alter those preferences, but are intended to better inform them.

The COPS Office defines community policing as “a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.” These guides emphasize *problem-solving* and *police-community partnerships* in the context of addressing specific public safety problems. For the most part, the organizational strategies that can facilitate problem-solving and police-community partnerships vary considerably and discussion of them is beyond the scope of these guides.

These guides have drawn on research findings and police practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Even though laws, customs and police practices vary from country to country, it is apparent that the police everywhere experience common problems. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, it is important that police be aware of research and successful practices beyond the borders of their own countries.

Each guide is informed by a thorough review of the research literature and reported police practice, and each guide is anonymously peer-reviewed by a line police officer, a police executive and a researcher prior to publication. The review process is independently managed by the COPS Office, which solicits the reviews.



For more information about problem-oriented policing, visit the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing online at www.popcenter.org. This web site offers free online access to:

- the *Problem-Specific Guides* series,
- the companion *Response Guides and Problem-Solving Tools* series,
- special publications on crime analysis and on policing terrorism,
- instructional information about problem-oriented policing and related topics,
- an interactive problem-oriented policing training exercise,
- an interactive *Problem Analysis Module*,
- online access to important police research and practices, and
- information about problem-oriented policing conferences and award programs.



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Introduction

Police agencies have long provided services to schools.[§] It has only been in the past two decades, however, that assigning police officers to schools on a full-time basis has become a widespread practice.^{1,§§} An estimated one-third of all sheriffs' offices and almost half of all municipal police departments assign nearly 17,000 sworn officers to serve in schools.² Moreover, nearly half of all public schools have assigned police officers. These officers are commonly referred to as school resource officers (SROs) or education resource officers.^{3,§§§} They are intended to serve various roles: safety expert and law enforcer, problem solver and liaison to community resources, and educator. Assigning officers to schools is becoming increasingly popular. SRO programs have been encouraged through federal funding support to local jurisdictions.^{§§§§} As the trend toward having police in schools grows, it is important to understand when and how assigning police officers to schools can be an appropriate strategy for schools and police agencies.

This guide summarizes the typical duties of SROs, synthesizes the research pertaining to their effectiveness, and presents issues for communities to bear in mind when considering the adoption of an SRO model. It will be apparent that despite their popularity, few systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of SROs exist. This is a concern as evidence from evaluative research can usefully inform future SRO programs. Consequently, this guide identifies the type of data that can be collected in order to measure program effectiveness. This guide does not provide a history of SRO programs nor does it describe in detail the myriad types of SRO models currently available. Similarly, although this guide highlights specific issues that communities considering the implementation of SRO programs should bear in mind (such as the legal issues that apply to police officers in schools), it is not an authoritative guide to the legal or other special issues that must be addressed with such programs. The guide does however provide additional resources for readers who wish to research these issues.

§The term "police" is used throughout this guide. It is intended to include other law enforcement officers, such as sheriff's deputies, as well.

§§Prior to the increase in prevalence of School Resource Officers, police presence in schools took various forms, including visible patrols, responses to calls for service, and criminal investigations.

§§§The Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Schools Act of 1968, as amended, Title I, Part Q, defines a school resource officer as "a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community oriented policing, assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with schools and community organizations."

§§§§For example, the COPS in Schools grant program of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) provided funding for SROs in and around primary and secondary schools. Since 1999, the COPS Office has awarded over \$750 million to more than 3,000 grantees, resulting in the hiring of more than 6,500 SROs (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2008).



§This guide has relevance for the high school context as well.

This guide should benefit the many stakeholders responsible for school safety: police, school officials, community members, students, teachers, and elected officials. It will be of particular interest to police and school administrators who are deciding whether to establish an SRO program and to those seeking to manage an existing program. Finally, the discussion is intended to provide guidance to community members and others who are interested in working with police and schools to improve public safety.

This Response Guide is intended to supplement school-related Problem-Specific Guides, which at the time of this writing include:

- *Bullying in Schools;*
- *Acquaintance Rape of College Students*§;
- *Underage Drinking;*
- *Bomb Threats in Schools;*
- *School Vandalism and Break-ins;* and
- *Traffic Congestion Around Schools.*



Common Roles for School Resource Officers

Officers in schools provide a wide array of services. Although their duties can vary considerably from community to community, the three most typical roles of SROs are safety expert and law enforcer, problem solver and liaison to community resources, and educator.[§]

[§]These are the three primary roles for SROs recognized by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (1999).

Safety Expert and Law Enforcer

As sworn police officers, SROs play a unique role in preserving order and promoting safety on campus by, for example:

- Assuming primary responsibility for handling calls for service from the school and in coordinating the response of other police resources
- Addressing crime and disorder problems, gangs, and drug activities occurring in or around the school
- Making arrests and issuing citations on campus
- Providing leads and information to the appropriate investigative units
- Taking action against unauthorized persons on school property
- Serving as hall monitors, crossing guards, and operators of metal detectors and other security devices
- Responding to off-campus criminal mischief that involves students
- Serving as liaisons between the school and the police and providing information to students and school personnel about law enforcement matters.⁴



Beyond serving in a crime prevention and response role, SROs are likely to serve as first responders in the event of critical incidents at schools, such as accidents, fires, explosions, and other life threatening events. In addition, SROs often support advance planning for managing crises, including assisting with:

- Developing incident response systems
- Developing and coordinating emergency response plans (in conjunction with other emergency responders)
- Incorporating law enforcement onto school crisis management teams
- Developing protocols for handling specific types of emergencies
- Rehearsing such protocols using tabletop exercises, drills, and mock evacuations and lockdowns.⁵

Problem Solver and Liaison to Community Resources

In the school setting, problem solving involves coordinated efforts among administrators, teachers, students, parents, mental health professionals, and community-based stakeholders. SROs frequently assist in resolving problems that are not necessarily law violations, such as bullying or disorderly behavior, but which are nonetheless safety issues that can result in or contribute to criminal incidents. Helping resolve these problems frequently requires the officer to act as a resource liaison, referring students to professional services within both the school (guidance counselors, social workers) and the community (youth and family service organizations). In particular, SROs often build relationships with juvenile justice counselors, who are responsible for supervising delinquent youths, connecting them with needed services, and recommending diversionary activities.



Problem-solving activities commonly include:

- Developing and expanding crime prevention efforts for students
- Developing and expanding community justice initiatives for students
- Assisting in identifying environmental changes that can reduce crime in or around schools
- Assisting in developing school policies that address crime and recommending procedural changes to implement those policies.⁶

Educator

A police officer can serve as a resource for classroom presentations that complement the educational curriculum by emphasizing the fundamental principles and skills needed for responsible citizenship, as well as by teaching topics related to policing.⁷ SROs can present courses for students, faculty, and parents. Although SROs teach a variety of classes, there is no research indicating which classes are most useful or how to ensure an officer's effectiveness in the teaching role. Topics commonly covered in an SRO curriculum include:

- Policing as a career
- Criminal investigation
- Alcohol and drug awareness
- Gang and stranger awareness and resistance
- General crime prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Restorative justice
- Babysitting safety
- Bicycling, pedestrian, and motor vehicle safety
- Special crimes in which students are especially likely to be offenders or victims, such as vandalism, shoplifting, and sexual assault by acquaintances.⁸



The above describes the various services provided by SROs. Although there is considerable diversity in the structure of programs and the specific activities of SROs, surveys find that most officers spend at least half their time engaging in law enforcement activities. Over half of SROs advise staff, students, and families, spending about a quarter of their time in this way, and one-half of SROs engage in teaching, on average for about five hours per week. Six to seven SRO hours per week are typically devoted to other activities.⁹

The variety of program structures and activities can lead to confusion about what individual programs are meant to accomplish and how to assess and measure their effectiveness. In particular, school and police officials often conceptualize the role of the SRO differently. Although school officials tend to view SROs as first responders, SROs themselves often view their roles more broadly, giving greater weight to job functions that represent an expansion of the traditional security officer role.¹⁰ For instance, more police than principals report that SROs did more than maintain order. Police also report significantly more teaching activity than do principals.¹¹



What We Know about the Effectiveness of Assigning Police Officers to Schools

Despite their popularity, few studies are available which have reliably evaluated the effectiveness of SROs. Addressing this is important in order to inform future SRO programs and to improve our understanding on how to maximize effectiveness with limited resources. Ideally, research should attempt to match the goals of a specific program with its outcomes to see if the program is achieving what it is intended to and through what mechanisms. In the case of school resource officers, the types of benefits that school administrators seek from having police officers working in their schools include:

- Increased safety in and around the schools
- Increased perceptions of safety
- Improved police call response times
- Reductions in truancy
- Fewer distractions from their teachers' teaching and class preparation duties.¹²

Most existing SRO research does not tell us if these hoped-for benefits are achieved. SRO research tends to be descriptive in nature—it characterizes what SROs do on a daily basis, typical traits of SROs, and the perceptions of people involved with SRO programs.

It also often addresses satisfaction with the program. Many school administrators and parents express satisfaction with their SRO programs, even in instances where there was initial resistance to the idea of placing police officers in schools.¹³



School administrator, teacher, and parent satisfaction is one measure of the value of an SRO program. However, given the investment that communities and the federal government have made in hiring, training, and maintaining a police presence in schools, it is important to combine such assessments with reliable impact evaluations to establish program effectiveness. More outcome-focused research is needed to establish whether (and how) SROs are effective in reducing crime and disorder; that is, whether they make schools safer.

Changes in Crime and Violence

Program evaluation is essential to determining whether a program is effective, to improving programming, and to gaining continued funding. However, numerous research studies note that SRO programs should do more to collect important process and outcome evaluation data.¹⁴ Most participating police chiefs indicate no formal evaluation systems in place, and few SRO programs participate in independent evaluations that assess whether program goals have been met.¹⁵

Studies of SRO effectiveness that have measured actual safety outcomes have mixed results. Some show an improvement in safety and a reduction in crime; others show no change. Typically, studies that report positive results from SRO programs rely on participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the program rather than on objective evidence. Other studies fail to isolate incidents of crime and violence, so it is impossible to know whether the positive results stem from the presence of SROs or are the result of other factors. More studies would be helpful, particularly research to understand the circumstances under which SRO programs are most likely to be successful.

There is research that suggests that although SRO programs do not significantly impact youth criminality, the presence of an officer nonetheless can enhance school safety. For example, the presence of SROs may deter aggressive behaviors including student fighting, threats, and bullying, and may make it easier for



school administrators to maintain order in the school, address disorderly behavior in a timely fashion, and limit the time spent on disciplinary matters.¹⁶ Again, these are usually self-reported measures. The difficulty with self-reporting is that outcomes are speculative. It would be more useful to see data that compare the frequency of the activities at issue both before and after the tenure of the SRO; for such data to be compelling, any changes would have to be attributable only to the presence of the SRO and not to other factors.

Success Stories in the United Kingdom and Canada

At least two programs have evaluated specific safety outcomes and found improvements due to the presence of police in schools. These are the Safer Schools Partnership (SSP) in the United Kingdom and the Toronto Police-School Districts School Resource Officer program. These programs hold lessons for school safety efforts in the United States.

The U.K.'s Safer Schools Partnership (SSP) is a comprehensive community and school safety program that incorporates many interventions and partners to improve pupil safety and to create safer working environments and safer communities.¹⁷ There is evidence that the SSP has reduced offending behavior and victimization, reduced truancy rates and total absences, and has provided safer school environments and safer routes to and from school. Students and staff report that they felt safer once the program was introduced. Other benefits of the SSP include improvements in educational attainment, improved multi-agency problem solving, improved relations between young people and the police, and an increase in the level of respect young people have for their fellow students.¹⁸ Key aspects of this program are the comprehensive nature of the intervention, the understanding that "school liaison officers" are but one component of an overall youth plan that is rooted in the community, and the incorporation of school liaison officers into local neighborhood policing efforts, rather than isolated at a particular school.



A chief accomplishment of the Toronto SRO program was the research effort to assess changes in safety measures at participating schools. In general, safety measures improved. The study can be looked to as an example of how to track the impacts of SRO activity. The Toronto study reported the following¹⁹:

- Students, teachers, and school administrators all reported feeling safe in and around the school both before and after the SRO program was implemented.
- Students were more likely to report being a crime victim to police, but no more likely to report witnessing a crime after the SRO program was implemented.
- Reported offenses both on school grounds and in the immediate surrounding neighborhood decreased after the SRO program was implemented although there were more crime victims in the immediate surrounding neighborhood during school hours.

The Toronto evaluators concluded:

Overall, the evaluation finds that the School Resource Officer program demonstrated a number of positive effects on schools and students, particularly those students who had interacted with the SROs. The SRO program has the potential to be increasingly beneficial to crime prevention, crime reporting and relationship building, in the schools and in surrounding neighborhoods.²⁰

Changes in Perceptions of Safety

A police presence can make some communities feel safer; this is true for school communities as well. Most studies of the effects of SRO programs focus on reports that faculty, parents, and students feel safer when there is a police officer present in the school. Research by the Center for Prevention of School Violence indicates that the presence of SROs in schools makes students, teachers, and staff feel safer and can be a positive deterrent to incidents and acts of violence.²¹ This finding corresponds with the results of a poll of the general public indicating that 65 percent of persons surveyed believe that placing a police officer in schools would reduce school violence.²²



Changes in Perceptions of Police

Studies provide conflicting evidence regarding the effects of SROs upon student perceptions of police. For example, an anecdotal argument in favor of SROs is that police officers assigned to schools have unique access to students, teachers, and parents, and as a result can fundamentally affect their perceptions of police. However, a study of SRO programs in four schools in southeastern Missouri suggests that the presence of SROs in schools does not change student views of the police in general.²³

The authors of the Missouri study surmised that the lack of change was partly attributable to the negative contact that young people have with police and SROs. More research would inform decisions about the most effective use of limited resources—for instance, it is important to understand whether a combination of counseling, crime prevention programs, and delinquency awareness programs as well as police in schools would have more impact on crime and safety.²⁴

Additional Effects of Officers in Schools

SRO programs can have other desirable effects, including providing police feedback on the concerns and fears of local youth, broadening departmental understanding about the educational concerns of community members, and encouraging young people to become involved in other police activities.²⁵ SRO programs sometimes even serve as indirect police recruiting tools.

There are also potential negative effects of having a dedicated officer in schools. It is possible these effects could be mitigated through careful communication with parents, staff, and students. Important topics to discuss include whether the presence of an officer with a gun gives the impression that something is wrong at the school or generates fear among staff, parents, and students.²⁶



Problem Solving in Boston Schools

The Boston (Massachusetts) Police Department (BPD), led by supervisors and officers in the department's Schools Unit, collaborated with faculty, teachers, students, and other stakeholders to develop a systematic approach to restore order and safety in the city's most troubled schools. The School Impact Project grew out of a crisis in Dorchester High School.

Dorchester High had been experiencing violence and criminal activity for many years, but the school had been reluctant to admit the severity of the problem. By early 2000, Dorchester High faced a spate of violent incidents that threatened to shut down the school. The principal requested focused police intervention.

The principal, superintendent of schools, and BPD officials agreed to assess the problem and implement a plan. The intervention team of primary stakeholders included school representatives, police personnel, a district attorney, probation officers, and staff from youth services, faith-based and nonprofit organizations.

The scanning process showed that incidents were typically gang and drug related, with frequent stabbings and shootings. School safety police officers, private security personnel hired by the Boston Public Schools, were also being attacked. The violent incidents led community leaders to call for the school's closing. The already high level of fear among students was exacerbated by a breakdown in basic order. One student described the situation: "It's scary here. School should be a safe place and it's not here. I'm nervous. Lots of people are."

Intervention team members made a year-long commitment to enhancing school safety. Their main goals were to create a safe school environment; to enforce the rules outlined in the school code of conduct; and to maintain a safe learning environment.

The principal announced the new initiative and members of the team addressed the entire student body with a unified message of intolerance toward violence and disruption, with a strong focus on consequences. The faculty was asked to play a significant role in supporting the plan, with the idea that once safety was restored, faculty would take on even more of the enforcement activity.



The plan was implemented in February 2000. The school saw immediate and dramatic results. As each week passed, the school enforced an additional rule from the code of conduct. For example, the “no hat policy,” the “no Walkman policy,” and rules against tardiness were phased in. As the weeks went by, teachers and school administrators became more confident in enforcing rules knowing that they had administration and police support. Administrators were able to effect expedient expulsions. Incident reports from before and after the initiative showed a dramatic drop. Incidents at the school dropped from 104 in the four months prior to implementation to just 14 incidents during the four months after the initiative—an 86.5 percent decrease. Interviews with students and teachers overwhelmingly showed a reduction of fear and an increase in feelings of safety. Students also felt better about being at school. The onset of the intervention proved most challenging, as strategies were developed and refined as needed. For example, placement of metal detectors at the front doors failed to stop students from carrying weapons in through side doors.

The other significant success was the establishment of a relationship between the school and the BPD. Prior to this partnership, schools were hesitant to allow official police intervention. Following the successful implementation of the program, however, incidents of crime and disorder drew immediate and coordinated responses, not only from police, but from community organizations as well. With the success at Dorchester High, the Boston Police School Safety Unit established similar initiatives with other public schools. The environment is now conducive to open information sharing and creative strategy development. The BPD School Police Unit has grown from one officer and one detective to a team of 10 full-time officers. The overall success of the initiative was summed up by the Superintendent of Schools: “Safety is no longer a concern at Dorchester High” (Boston (Massachusetts) Police Department, 2001).



Deciding Whether and How to Assign Police Officers to Schools

Police Can Improve Safety in Schools

Tackling problems in schools does not have to result in the initiation of school resource officer programs. Through targeted problem-solving efforts, some of the problems that police can reduce include graffiti, theft from lockers, bullying in schools, and truancy.

Before deciding whether to assign police officers to schools, you should develop a clear picture of the specific safety concerns at issue; it is this understanding that will help you determine which responses are appropriate and how to focus available funds and resources.[§]

[§]Under the Safe Schools Act, a school safety team is required at schools, and is responsible for developing a school safety plan. This team then, perhaps with some adjustments to membership, should have lead responsibility for the planning process.

Be Specific - Understand Your School's Safety Needs

Schools are generally safe, although this varies widely by location and some form of crime and violence can and does occur in nearly all schools.²⁷ The nature of crime and violence varies by school type—whether urban or rural, small or large. An effective safety plan depends on the school's specific public safety needs.²⁸



A National Perspective on School Safety

In the 2005–06 school year, an estimated 54.8 million students were enrolled in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Preliminary data show that among youth ages 5–18, there were 17 school-associated violent deaths from July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006 (14 homicides and 3 suicides). In 2005, among students ages 12–18, there were about 1.5 million victims of nonfatal crimes at school, including 868,100 thefts and 628,200 violent crimes (simple assault and serious violent crime). There is some evidence that student safety has improved. The victimization rate of students ages 12–18 at school declined between 1992 and 2005. However, violence, theft, drugs, and weapons continue to pose problems in schools. During the 2005–06 school year, 86 percent of public schools reported at least one violent crime, theft, or other crime. In 2005, 8 percent of students in grades 9–12 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon within the previous 12 months, and 25 percent reported that drugs were made available to them on school property. In the same year, 28 percent of students ages 12–18 reported having been bullied at school during the previous 6 months.

From Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2007



As with the United Kingdom’s Safer Schools Partnership, research on school violence in the United States indicates that effective school safety efforts require “a holistic approach that involves collaboration and partnership among schools, families, and community agencies.”²⁹ Thus, a safety planning team should include administrators, teachers and other school staff, parents, students, and community members.³⁰

§Official data on crime rates have limitations, including the underreporting to the police of crimes occurring on school grounds (Kingery and Coggeshall 2001; Turk 2004).

§§Primary schools, middle schools, secondary schools, and community colleges and universities all present different needs and challenges.

Safety plans should take into account factors that relate to disorder in schools, including location, community characteristics, demographics, and the physical, social, and academic environment of the school.³¹ In addition, plans should include short and long term responses to school safety; police should be involved in both.³² Although police are an important component of an overall safety plan, they should not be the only component. Similarly, the SRO is but one way for police to impact school safety. Stakeholders need to decide what will work best in any given situation.

Use Data Smartly

The planning team first needs to collect data about school safety, which will clarify and strengthen the team’s observations. Data collection should include a review of all aspects of the school security environment: persistent crime and disorder issues; physical and environmental considerations; threat assessments; and disaster planning. There are a variety of ways such data can be collected and assessed, including through statistical analysis of school disciplinary statistics and community crime and violence data, community forums, surveys, and interviews with key informants.³³

Types of information you might use include the following:

- School data: incident reports, disciplinary reports and referrals, and suspension and attendance records
- Police data, including field contacts, calls for service, and crime and arrest reports[§]
- Student, school staff, and parent surveys
- Community crime and violence data
- Benchmark to other schools like yours.^{§§}



§You can build a map of your school by downloading software at www.schoolcopsoftware.com.

A note on data: more comprehensive data such as described above are important for a planning team who needs a full picture of school safety issues. To address specific problems, police should pinpoint the exact nature of the problems through these kinds of data:

- Location: cafeterias, hallways, outside
- Time of day
- Age groups
- Participants
- Types of behavior.

It is also helpful to map out safety issues to obtain a visual picture of patterns and trends.§

School Safety Data Sources

There are a number of national sources of school safety data. Data are often broken into categories, such as urban/rural; age groups; male/female. These can be helpful in identifying where a school stands compared to other schools with similar characteristics.

National data sources:

- National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)
- School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey
- School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS)
- Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)

For state data, the state attorney general or child services agency can often provide information. Locally, school districts, law enforcement, social service agencies, and colleges and universities can be useful sources.



Develop Safety Goals

Once the school's safety needs are understood, specific safety goals must be established. These should pertain directly to the needs of the school and be specific enough to address the issues at hand. For instance, a goal of reducing the total amount of crime at the school is probably too broad to be useful in developing meaningful strategies. Instead, the planning team should focus on specific types of criminal or disorderly activity. Responses should then be selected and tailored to tackle these specific problems in the specific contexts.

Local implementers of SRO programs need to better link their activities to school safety goals. Currently, most SRO programs are not instituted because of specific safety needs. Instead, one large survey found that most school principals reported starting an SRO program because of national media attention on school safety whereas most police chiefs gave the availability of grant funding as their reason for assigning SROs.³⁴ Although media attention and the availability of grant funds might indicate a general school safety concern, they do not provide specifics as to safety needs in a particular school. In order to determine whether resources are being used effectively, a clear understanding of safety needs is necessary.

Depending on circumstance, some schools may not require SROs. It's important to justify the implementation of an SRO in response to a thorough analysis of the problem(s) a school is facing. Then resources can be distributed accordingly; it may be better to focus on assigning a few SROs to schools with chronic problems than to evenly distribute SROs among all schools thereby targeting some schools that have no problems whatsoever.



Develop a School Safety Plan

After safety goals are established, the planning team should next design a targeted safety plan. Strategies should be selected on the basis of the identified problems and could include the use of a SRO. If an SRO is to be used, his or her activities should address specific safety issues. For instance, if the officer is going to teach, classes should be focused on the safety concerns of the school. If an officer is going to be a student mentor, the officer should select children involved in the type of crime or disorderly conduct that is being targeted. It is critical that the SRO knows the safety needs of the school and tailors his or her activities specifically to address those needs (see Figure 1 on page 21).

There are many ways to have substantive school-police collaborations and police can play a number of valuable roles in a school system even if there is no SRO permanently assigned to the school. These can include:

- Problem-solving partnerships that pair officers with school personnel
- Situational crime prevention, including the use of physical barriers, security technology, and access control
- Participation in holistic efforts to decrease risk factors associated with violence or to increase protective factors at the individual, family, school, peer, and community level
- Technical assistance partnerships that focus on safety planning, crisis response planning, threat assessment, and security and safety audits
- Sponsorship of youth activities and periodic in-school trainings and presentations.

In addition, police can address any number of issues that fall within the traditional police role, including the threatened or actual use of weapons, other physical violence, disorderly conduct and hooliganism, the identification and disposal of hazardous or illegal materials, and criminal and disorderly behavior that take place on or immediately outside school grounds.³⁵

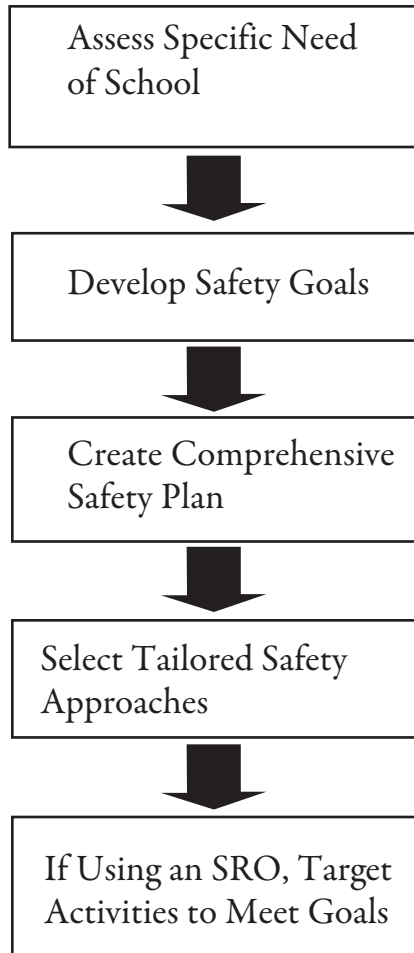


Figure 1. Process for Addressing School Safety.



§Operating protocols are discussed in more detail later in this guide. A sample protocol is included in the Appendix.

School Resource Officer Program Implementation

Although there are a variety of ways for police to be involved with schools, school-police planning teams might choose to assign an officer to the school. Due to the lack of research currently available on SRO programs, it is not possible to provide one-size-fits-all recommendations for implementing a program for maximum effectiveness. Instead, information about processes and partnerships that have worked well may suggest promising practices in SRO program development.

Issues to Address

Components that are essential to effective school-police problem solving include:

- Deciding to work together in a partnership
- Setting common goals
- Developing a memorandum of understanding
- Maintaining the relationship through regular dialogue.

Potential Challenges^{36, §}

Before agreeing to establish an SRO program, schools and police departments should be aware of potential pitfalls. There are institutional obstacles on both sides that can be either philosophical or operational in nature. Philosophical conflicts often relate to the differing organizational cultures of police departments and schools. Police are focused on public safety, schools on education. These different perspectives on school safety can be challenging for an SRO. Many school-based police officers must play dual roles, navigating between school and police cultures.³⁷

Operational obstacles that can threaten the success of an SRO program include a lack of resources for the officer such as time constraints or a lack of relevant training. Police turnover and reassignment is also a challenge. These challenges can usually be addressed if the proper framework is in place. However, this



can require in-depth discussions and negotiations as well as a commitment to long term success. Memoranda of understanding can be helpful tools in negotiating such partnership issues.

Selecting and Training SROs

Officers in schools are highly visible and regularly interact with students, faculty, and parents. They can serve as role models for students and can affect faculty and parental perceptions of police. Selecting officers who are likely to do well in the school environment and properly training those officers are two important components of SRO programs.

However, as with other aspects of SRO programs, there is no research to suggest what is most effective in SRO selection and training. Therefore, this guide cannot offer detailed recommendations in these areas. However, this guide does provide information gathered from surveys of SRO participants who have suggested that certain characteristics, skills, and knowledge are useful. Some key SRO characteristics are inherent; others can be developed through education and training. These key attributes include:

- The ability to work effectively with students within the age range of the school
- The ability to work with parents
- The ability to work with principals and other school administrators
- Knowledge of school-based legal issues
- Knowledge of school resources
- Knowledge of social service resources
- An understanding of child development and psychology
- An understanding of crime prevention through environmental design
- Teaching skills
- Public speaking skills
- Knowledge of school safety technology and implementation.



Although it might be possible to recruit an officer with many of these skills, it is nonetheless important to provide training in these areas. Many participants in SRO programs have found training in the following areas to be useful:

- Community policing in schools
- Legal issues
- Cultural fluency
- Problem solving
- Safe school preparation
- Child development
- Mental health intervention
- Teaching and classroom management strategies.³⁸

Allocating a School Resource Officer's Time

The lack of data makes it challenging to state with certainty which SRO activities are the most effective. It is most important that SROs choose activities that directly relate to specific school safety goals. For example, meeting with students each day is not directly tied to a safety goal; however, meeting with certain students—those who tend to be involved in specific safety problems—and discussing specific topics with them, such as services they might need or the reasons that the problems exist, can have a direct effect on school safety. Activities should be targeted to address identified needs.

Effective problem solving is one of the primary aspects of SRO work that has been shown to be successful in schools.³⁹ Police problem solving involves changing the conditions that give rise to recurring crime problems, rather than simply responding to incidents as they occur. Under the problem-solving process, officers take a four step approach:

- Scanning data to identify patterns in recurrent, patterned crime and disorder problems
- Analyzing the causes of these patterns and problems in order to identify high impact points for intervention



- Developing and implementing responses designed to reduce the frequency or severity of these problems based on crime analysis, emphasizing alternatives to arrest and incarceration and placing a high priority on prevention
- Assessing the impact of these responses on the identified problems and refining interventions as necessary.[§]

[§]For detailed discussions of the problem-solving process, see the POP Center website at www.popcenter.org.

SRO programs have been most effective where targeted strategies are implemented to address specific safety concerns. Examples of such strategies are presented in Table 1. Problem-Specific Guides on school-related problems also provide more detailed recommendations for how to address specific problems.

Safety problem	Strategies
Thefts in parking area	Limit access to property; develop enforceable parking policy; patrol parking area; involve students in reporting suspicious activities
Fights in cafeteria	Increase SRO presence during lunch periods; adjust schedule and pattern of cafeteria entry and exit and seating arrangement
Illegal parking on roadways and at nearby businesses	Post <i>No Parking</i> signs; collaborate with business owners to post notices; enforce ticketing and towing
Thefts from locker rooms	Increase frequency of patrol during periods that larcenies occur; install surveillance cameras
Graffiti and vandalism	Give classroom presentations about penalties or requirements for restitution; increase awareness among students and parents; establish crime hotline or SRO website to receive anonymous tips
Smoking or drug use near school	Increase surveillance of area; work with property owners to post <i>No Trespassing</i> signs; enforce trespassing violations

Table 1. Examples of Safety Problems Effectively Addressed by SROs.⁴⁰



Measuring the Value of Assigning Police Officers to Schools

Although the cost of assigning a sworn officer to a school will vary by jurisdiction, the average cost is substantial. Under the COPS Office grant program, each “cop in school” was funded at \$125,000 in salaries and benefits over a three-year period. With an investment of this size, it is imperative to know whether the program is successfully meeting its stated goals.

Before beginning an SRO program, it is important to set out clearly articulated goals. SRO activities should be aligned to meet these goals. Regular assessment can identify any challenges to reaching safety goals and course corrections can be made.

Deciding what data to collect can be tricky. Often, the temptation is to count activities and events. Although this might help an SRO see where his or her time is being spent, it does not provide information about the effectiveness of the program. Instead, the goals of the program should drive the data collection. That is, you should first identify the outcome measure of interest (for example, whether the workload of patrol officers has changed as a result of SRO presence) and then determine which data would help to answer that question. Table 2 suggests data that could be collected for given safety goals. The list is generic; each suggestion is not necessarily appropriate for every community. The local school-police collaborative should identify the appropriate data for its own particular situation.



Goal of program	Data that may help measure progress
Reduce crime and disorder in and around school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crime incidents in school by type of incident; e.g., fights, bullying• Crime incidents in vicinity of school• Non-criminal disorder incidents in school• Non-criminal disorder incidents in vicinity of school• Victimization in school• Victimization in vicinity of school
Develop positive relationships with students, parents, and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of students advised; nature of counseling• Parent and child informal counseling sessions• Perceptions of relationships among students, police officers, school staff, parents, school neighbors, etc.
Relieve school-related workload on patrol officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Police calls for service• Investigations, leads, clearances• Referrals to other agencies• Perceptions of patrol officers
Improve school attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Truancy rates
Improve student productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student levels of fear• Student academic performance
Prevent violence in and around school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number and severity of violent crime incidents
Improve overall school performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graduation rates• Academic proficiency• Delinquency rate• Severe discipline rate

Table 2. SRO Program Goals and Measures.⁴¹



South Euclid (Ohio) School Bullying Project

Spurred by the sense that disorderly behavior among students in South Euclid was increasing, the school resource officer (SRO) reviewed data regarding referrals to the principal's office. He found that the high school reported thousands of referrals a year for bullying and that the junior high school had recently experienced a 30 percent increase in bullying referrals. Police data showed that juvenile complaints about disturbances, bullying, and assaults after school hours had increased 90 percent in the past 10 years.

A researcher from Kent State University (Ohio) conducted a survey of all students attending the junior high and high school. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with students—identified as victims or offenders—teachers, and guidance counselors. Finally, the South Euclid Police Department purchased a Geographic Information System to conduct crime incident mapping of hotspots within the schools. The main findings pointed to four primary areas of concern: the environmental design of the school; teacher knowledge of and response to the problem; parental attitudes and responses; and student perspectives and behaviors.

The SRO worked in close collaboration with a social worker and the university researcher. They coordinated a Response Planning Team comprising many stakeholders that was intended to respond to each of the areas identified in the initial analysis. Environmental changes included modifying the school schedule and increasing teacher supervision of hotspots. Counselors and social workers conducted teacher training courses in conflict resolution and bullying prevention. Parent education included mailings with information about bullying, an explanation of the new school policy, and a discussion about what could be done at home to address the problems. Finally, student education included classroom discussions between homeroom teachers and students, as well as assemblies conducted by the SRO. The SRO also opened a substation next to a primary hotspot. The Ohio Department of Education contributed by opening a new training center to provide a nontraditional setting for specialized help.



The results from the various responses were dramatic. School suspensions decreased 40 percent. Bullying incidents dropped 60 percent in the hallways and 80 percent in the gym area. Follow-up surveys indicated that there were positive attitudinal changes among students about bullying and that more students felt confident that teachers would take action when a problem arose. Teachers indicated that training sessions were helpful and that they were more likely to talk about bullying as a serious issue. Parents responded positively, asking for more information about the problem in future mailings. The overall results suggest that the school environments were not only safer, but that early intervention was helping at-risk students succeed in school (South Euclid (Ohio) Police Department, 2001).



Establishing Operating Protocols

An operating protocol or memorandum of understanding is a critical element of an effective school-police partnership. It is essential to state clearly what the roles of the various agencies are and especially to delineate the reporting requirements of the SRO. This will help to establish clear expectations for all parties and to support the success of the program.

There are many descriptions of what protocols could include. The Safer Schools Partnership (SSP) in United Kingdom is a program with concrete evidence of success. SSP takes a broad view of police-school collaborations, as evidenced in the adapted list of protocols below. Additional operating protocol resources are provided in the Appendix.

The SSP protocols include the following⁴²:

- The level of commitment that each partner agency is expected to make in terms of resources and the relevant time frame for the delivery of such resources
- The overall aims and objectives the partnership is to address, with clearly defined targets
- A framework for information exchange, including data protection protocols
- Child protection policies
- A governance structure, including management framework and accountability
- Mechanisms for working with existing crime prevention agencies
- Procedures for liaising with outside agencies
- A strategy for integrating the SRO program with other partners and agencies that provide services to children and young people.



Special Issues

Legal Issues

School-police collaborations, and particularly assigning police officers to schools, raise some legal issues that should be worked out prior to implementing the collaboration. These issues arise out of the potential conflict between the traditional roles of police and educators. Where teachers and school administrators are legally obliged to act in the best interests of the students (*in loco parentis*, or “in the place of parents”), this can conflict with police obligations to act as representatives of the state enforcing legal norms.⁴³ Although school safety is a mutual goal, the core mission of school systems is education, whereas the core mission of police is safety; at times these missions can be difficult to reconcile.

The unique legal issues that arise in schools include the following⁴⁴:

Search and seizure. School administrators have different standards for search and seizure—of students’ persons and lockers—than do police officers. There is a question of which search standard applies in school. In general, police officers must have probable cause, whereas school administrators need only a reasonable suspicion. Courts have come to conflicting decisions on this issue.

Interviews of juveniles. It is unclear whether students must be advised of their constitutional rights before a police interview at school, as well as whether students have the right to have parents or guardians present during police questioning.

Police access to students. Principals must be familiar with the policies that determine whether a police officer can have access to a student at school. These rules vary by state. In some states, for instance, schools need to notify parents when arrests occur or official legal documents are served. Similarly, parents must be notified before a student is interviewed, especially if the matter is not school-related. However, typically police are allowed access to students who may be victims of parental child abuse without notification.



Reporting obligations. Whether the SRO reports directly to and takes direction from a police supervisor or the school administrator affects who is entitled to receive information from the SRO about student activities, how the information will be handled, and ultimately whether the activities at issue will be tolerated or prevented. It is important to establish whether the school or police agency has authority and how conflicts between these agencies are to be resolved.

Privacy. The dissemination of student information might be limited by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). If SROs are designated as school officials in the district's FERPA policy, they would have access to student education records. If they are not so designated, they would not have access.

Undercover Officers

Officers operating undercover in a school setting present special issues.⁴⁵ Undercover officers can be an important safety tool, but they can erode trust between students and police, students and school administrators, and school administrators and police. One oft-cited benefit of an SRO program is the trust developed and the resulting information flow. Because there are significant drawbacks to the practice, police and school administrators should weigh the trade-offs before placing undercover officers in schools. Many districts will examine crime trends to determine the frequency and seriousness of crime before allowing police to proceed with such operations.⁴⁶

The decision to place undercover officers in schools can be complicated by the presence of SROs. Any decision made in this regard should include a consideration of how undercover (or other special units) would work with SROs, including the effect that such an operation might have on the relationships among students, staff, and the SRO.



Conclusion

In recent years, SROs have become a popular response to perceived school safety needs. Millions of dollars have been spent to hire, train, and implement SRO programs. Evaluations of the effectiveness of this approach, however, have been limited. Few reliable outcome evaluations have been conducted. Often programs are not designed to facilitate assessment; some SRO programs lack clear safety goals and others do not tie SRO activities to desired outcomes.

In times of limited resources, communities must question how best to allocate police personnel. When choosing to put police in schools police activity should be strategic and intentionally aimed at clearly defined goals.

Based on available research on SRO program effectiveness, the following is recommended for communities:

- Take an analytical approach to safety problems to clearly understand needs and objectives. This should include a safety needs assessment, goal identification, and program design to meet goals and needs.
- Be creative. A police-school collaboration can take many forms; one size does not fit all.
- Regularly assess programs to make sure that desired goals are being met.
- Be flexible. A strategy that works well at one place or point in time might not fit a later situation; if so, review and revise.

It is possible that new research and information will emerge to guide future SRO program decisions. For instance, when accumulated research indicated that the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program was not as effective in preventing teen drug use as other strategies, many communities decided to redeploy their resources elsewhere.⁴⁷ Thus, communities should remain open to the many possibilities that exist for addressing school safety needs.



Police departments across the country are experiencing significant staffing shortages and regularly need to assess their most effective resource deployment. It is possible that departments could become short staffed and need to reassign school resource officers. Partnerships that have a comprehensive safety plan in place will be in a position to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their SRO program and if need be, to develop alternatives to address their particular safety concerns.



Appendix: Resources for Developing Operational Procedures for SRO Programs

The following documents are useful resources for school safety partnerships:

- The United Kingdom report, *Mainstreaming Safer School Partnerships*, is an excellent comprehensive source for planning a school safety initiative. It provides detailed strategic planning guidance and program development materials, including memoranda of understanding.⁴⁸
- The COPS Office publication, *A Guide to Developing, Maintaining, and Succeeding with Your School Resource Officer Program*, provides an extensive list of operational areas and school responsibilities.⁴⁹
- The COPS Office publication, *SRO Performance Evaluation: A Guide to Getting Results*, provides a step-by-step guide to help law enforcement and school personnel use SRO effectively, addressing many of the issues discussed in this guide.⁵⁰
- The COPS Office software program, School COP. See *Using School COP: A Guide for School Administrators and School Safety Personnel*.⁵¹ School COP is designed to enable personnel to record and store detailed information about incidents involving student misconduct and criminal activity.
- Anne J. Atkinson. (2002). *Guide 5: Fostering School-Law Enforcement Partnerships*. US Dept of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=195665>. This publication provides detailed operational guidelines for SRO programs. A sample of this information follows.⁵²



Whereas the memoranda of understanding (MOU) is the interagency agreement establishing the framework for the school-law enforcement partnership, the standard operational procedures for a SRO program are typically developed by the law enforcement agency that employs the SRO with consultation from the school division. The procedures should address a broad range of operational issues. Examples of key operational areas and issues to be addressed in the procedures follows.

Conditions of employment and chain of command:

- Law enforcement agency has authority to hire, assign, and train SRO
- Law enforcement agency provides salary and employment benefits
- SRO is employee of the law enforcement agency and follows agency policies/procedures and chain of command
- SRO coordinates and communicates with principal/designee to which assigned
- School leadership is given a voice in assignment of SRO to ensure a “good fit” at the school.

Duty hours and uniform:

- Duty hours are consistent with agency policy.
- Arrival and departure times are established to provide coverage throughout the school day including peak arrival and departure times. For situations where a single SRO is shared by two or more schools, coordination between schools is necessary to provide maximum coverage for each school.
- After-hour duties may be performed but must be remunerated by the school or other sponsoring organization at a standard rate established by the law enforcement agency.



- Time spent in court, attending interagency meetings, and investigating school-related crimes are within the scope of SRO duties and are considered duty hours.
- SRO shall wear a regulation uniform during the assignment unless otherwise authorized for a specific purpose; the uniform is an important element in providing a visible deterrence to crime.

Communications:

- SRO shall meet at least weekly with the principal for purposes of exchanging information about current crimes, problem areas, or other concerns that may cause disruption in the school or community.
- SRO shall be advised of all investigations that involve students from his/her assigned school and other police activities related to the school.
- The SRO supervisor shall meet at least once each semester with the school principal. Upon request, the school shall provide information to the department to assist in the personnel evaluation of the assigned SRO.

Police investigation and questioning:

- The SRO has authority to stop, question, interview, and take police action without prior authorization of the principal.
- The investigation and questioning of students during school hours and at school events shall be limited to situations where the investigation is related to the school or where delay might result in danger to any person or flight from the jurisdiction.
- The principal shall be notified as soon as practical of any significant enforcement events.
- The SRO shall coordinate activities to be in the best interests of the school and public safety.



Arrest:

- The arrest of a student or employee of the school with a warrant or petition should be coordinated through the principal and accomplished after school hours whenever practical.
- Persons whose presence on school grounds has been restricted or forbidden or whose presence is in violation of the law shall be arrested for trespassing.
- Arrest of students or staff during school hours or on school grounds shall be reported to the principal as soon as practical.

Search and seizure:

- School officials may conduct searches of student property and persons under their jurisdiction when reasonable suspicion exists that the search will reveal evidence that the student has violated or is violating either the law or the rules of the school.
- The standard for the search is reasonable suspicion.
- Any search by a law enforcement officer shall be based on probable cause and, when required, a search warrant should be obtained.
- “Stop and frisk” will remain an option when there is reasonable suspicion that a criminal offense has been committed or may be committed.
- The SRO shall not become involved in administrative (school-related) searches unless specifically requested by the school to provide security or protection, or for the handling of contraband.
- At no time shall the SRO request that an administrative search be conducted for law enforcement purposes or have the administrator act as his/her agent.



Release of student information:

State statutes also must be considered. Each agency group interested in establishing this type of network will need to identify state laws that govern the collection, use, and dissemination of juvenile records by juvenile justice and other juvenile-related agencies. Specifically, these laws will include but may not be limited to those governing law enforcement records, school records (a state-level codification of FERPA), juvenile court records (legal and social), child protective services and other youth-serving agency records, and mental health records.



Endnotes

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- ² Brown (2006).
- ³ Travis and Coon (2005).
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (1999); Benigni (2004a, 2004b).
- ⁵ Atkinson (2002).
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (1999).
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (1999).
- ⁸ Atkinson (2002).
- ⁹ Finn and McDevitt (2005).
- ¹⁰ Lambert and McGinty (2002); Travis and Coon (2005).
- ¹¹ Travis and Coon (2005).
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- ¹⁴ Finn and McDevitt (2005); Travis and Coon (2005); McKay, Covell and McNeil (2006).
- ¹⁵ Travis and Coon (2005).
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- ¹⁷ Hossack et al. (2006).
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- ¹⁹ Toronto Police Service, Toronto District School Board and Toronto Catholic District School Board (2009).
- ²⁰ Toronto Police Service, Toronto District School Board and Toronto Catholic District School Board (2009).
- ²¹ Begnini (2004); Center for the Prevention of School Violence (2001).



- ²² Lester (1999).
- ²³ Johnson (2002).
- ²⁴ Johnson (2002).
- ²⁵ Begnini (2004).
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- ²⁷ Kenney and Watson (1998).
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- ²⁹ Patterson (2007).
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- ³⁵ Glover (2002).
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- ³⁸ Briers (2003).
- ³⁹ Kenney and Watson (1998).
- ⁴⁰ Adapted from Atkinson (2002).
- ⁴¹ Finn et al. (2005).
- ⁴² Hossack et al. (2006).
- ⁴³ Glover (2002).
- ⁴⁴ Gittins (2005).
- ⁴⁵ Griffin and Higgins (2004).
- ⁴⁶ Bowermaster (2007).
- ⁴⁷ General Accounting Office (2003).
- ⁴⁸ Hossack et al. (2006).



⁴⁹ Finn et al. (2005).

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2006).

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2001).

⁵² Atkinson (2002).



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