

SCHOOL ISSUES ARTICLE



School Resource Officers Seeing Results

A survey of almost 700 school resource officers includes sobering statistics about the high number of crimes and assaults prevented by school-based police officers. A high school principal who lived through a school shooting told Education World that such officers not only help students feel safe but also give them someone in whom to confide. Included: Data showing how school resource officers have affected school

safety.

The first nationwide survey of school resource officers (SROs) published in 2001 indicated that many spend about half their time preventing crime and violence. More than 90 percent of the officers avert between one and 25 violent acts in an average school year.

Related -- and striking -- statistics indicate that 24 percent of officers reported taking a loaded firearm from a student or another person on campus, and 87 percent confiscated knives or other weapons with blades. Sixty-seven percent reported preventing a school faculty or staff member from being assaulted, either by a student or someone else on campus.

"The survey provides substantial data to dispel the misconception that police officers assigned to schools are reactive and primarily focus on making arrests," says Kenneth S. Trump. He is president of [National School Safety and Security Services](#), the school security consulting firm that conducted the [2001 NASRO School Resource Officer Survey](#). "The description of preventive tasks performed and the number of violent incidents prevented by officers says to me that SRO programs must be viewed as prevention programs, not as punitive or reactionary strategies. The data also clearly indicates that students are comfortable in reporting threats and concerns to SROs."

At the same time, about 84 percent of SROs think that crimes on school grounds are underreported to police, but 86 percent think the presence of an officer on campus results in more crimes being reported.

The survey includes responses from 689 officers, or about 10 percent of the 7,000 members of the [National Association of School Resource Officers \(NASRO\)](#). Some of the questions asked for the officers' opinions or perceptions; others requested data.

NASRO trains school resource officers at centers throughout the nation. School resource officers are commissioned law enforcement officers assigned to schools. In addition to responding to incidents on school grounds, they often work closely with students and staff to prevent crime and violence. Sometimes the position is at least partially funded by federal grants.

The survey results also support the view that SROs contribute significantly to school safety, Curt Lavarello, executive director of the NASRO, told Education World. "We always have had a hard job of substantiating the prevention part of our job, especially when it comes to crime and violence. Although we are not the answer to school violence, we are an important part of the overall solution."

BLENDING INTO THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Lavarello was also heartened by the higher-than-anticipated number of violent acts SROs reported preventing. Ninety-two percent reported thwarting between one and 25 violent acts in a year. More than 94 percent of officers said that students had told them about threats of violence or other safety hazards.

"This shows that officers are communicating effectively with students to prevent incidents," Lavarello said. "A lot of officers are taking weapons from kids."

About 70 percent of the SROs participating in the survey reported having direct contact with 31 or more students each school day; 39 percent reported contact with more than 100 students. Ninety-three percent indicated they spent time counseling individual students.

Bill Bond, the resident practitioner for safe and orderly schools for the [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#), said SROs not only provide students with a sense of security but also serve as confidantes. In 2001, Bond was on a two-year leave of absence from his job as principal of Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, where a student shot and killed three students December 1, 1997. The school has had a resource officer since the incident.

"I think they [SROs] are an excellent tool to have in schools for students to communicate to," Bond tells Education World. "Students will want to confide in them and get information from them. Very often, students put a lot of trust in officers to keep that secret."

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS DISAPPOINTING

Both Lavarello and Trump, though, said they were discouraged to read that a large percentage of SROs think people in schools and communities do not understand their jobs.

Seventy percent of SROs responded that they think elected officials do not understand their roles, 71 percent said the same about the media, and 69 percent said other police officers are not clear about their assignment.

"I am particularly concerned that officers so strongly feel that the individuals who shape public awareness and public policy --- elected officials, the media, and school violence researchers -- do not fully understand the role of the SRO," Trump told Education World. "These individuals shape public opinion, set public policy, and make funding decisions about school safety programs, yet the data suggests they do not fully understand what SROs do and how they prevent school violence."

NUMBERS COULD BE GROWING, ROLES CHANGING

About 14,000 SROs worked in schools around the country four years ago, according to Lavarello. Although most are assigned to middle and high schools, more elementary schools are requesting SROs.

Selecting the right person to be an SRO is critical, said Lavarello. The officer has to want to interact with students and know that he or she will be working in a more-restrictive environment than the streets. Many departments provide SROs with one to five days of training with organizations such as NASRO, although the majority of states still do not require training for SROs.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., may have shifted the focus of school security plans from individual buildings to whole school systems, according to Lavarello. "This incident sent a message to us in school safety," he said. "We have to be prepared as a district. Although many schools have safety plans, there will be more emphasis on making sure that schools, police departments, fire departments, and communities are on the same [emergency-response] page. I think we are going to see more of that in the coming months."

Bond, however, said he does not think the terrorist attacks will shape school security policies. He added that one key to stopping school shootings and terrorism is understanding the source of the attackers' anger. "There are parallels between terrorists and school shooters." Individuals in both categories are angry enough to kill people indiscriminately, and both expect to die doing it, according to Bond. "In both cases, we have to try to understand why these people feel so hurt that they are willing to kill other people and die," he said.

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