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School Resource Officer Programs

Engin Gulen

Introduction

Over the past three decades, a safe learning environment has become a key issue in the United States. Especially after the school shootings that occurred in the late 1990s, security among educational institutions has gained momentum. Even prior to the shootings, however, the presence of police officers had become common primarily due to an increase in drugs, alcohol, and gang-related activities occurring on school campuses. According to Alderson (1980), police involvement in the nation's schools was "due to prevention of offenses and particularly those offenses concerning drugs, sexual matters, and alcohol and monitoring all likely traps for naïve or daring youth" (p. 227).

Although Brown (2006) stated that the origin of police presence in public schools is difficult to ascertain, Scheffer (1987) claimed that its beginnings date back to as early as 1918 in New York when police officers were assigned to implement preventive programs including "supervising playgrounds, maintaining liaison with schools, interviewing with parents, and admonishing predelinquent children" (p. 5). While Brown (2006) noted that the history of the Indianapolis Public School Police Department began in 1939 followed by Los Angeles in 1948, it is commonly agreed that the first School Resource Officer (SRO) program in the United States was implemented in Flint, Michigan, in 1958 (Center for the Prevention of School Violence [CPSV], 2001; Scheffer, 1987).

As described by Huffman (1995) in a previous *TELEMASP Bulletin*, SRO programs may provide police with an opportunity to intervene during the early stages of youth problems and to counsel with youth and clarify any misconceptions they might have concerning law enforcement. Alderson (1980) also maintained that law enforcement may well create a healthier understanding of young people and the problems they commonly face.

According to Phaneuf (2009), although isolated events, school shootings became a major focus of concern through media dramatization. The media heightened society's fear of victimization, a concern that directed researchers and organizations to determine the real causes of school disruption; however, the roots of these incidents were considered to extend out of the school yard and into the community (CPVS, 2001). Under this rationale, school boards and law enforcement agencies collectively intensified their efforts to combat these disorders in an attempt to enhance school safety. Thus, an array of security tactics, strategies, and practices were developed (e.g., the use of metal detectors, video surveillance systems, strict rules on carrying translucent backpacks or bags, student identification cards, school uniforms, "zero tolerance" security policies, security guards, intervention programs, and the employment of sworn police officers). Among all of these safety precautions, none have been challenged more than the SRO program due to the potential risk that police may create negative outcomes if their presence is viewed as a "new authoritative agent" by school administrators (Brown, 2006).

According to Brown (2006), the new "public servant" role of police in schools is "a hybrid of educational, correctional, and law enforcement" oriented community policing, and it requires a multifaceted responsibility of "acting as a liaison officer between the school, community, and law enforcement while teaching law related education classes, counseling students, and performing law enforcement duties" (Brown, 2006, p. 593; National Association of School Resource Officers [NASRO], 2003). Moreover, teaching law related education classes, counseling students, and performing law enforcement duties are commonly known as a "triad" approach that focuses on establishing a positive bond with students, preventing school violence, and addressing legal questions (Huffman, 1995).

Sam Houston State University
A Member of The Texas State University System

Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Literature Review

During the early stages of SRO programs, law enforcement agencies were expected to “promote positive relationships with students and to cope proactively with the advancing spectra of juvenile crime” (Alderson, 1980, p. 227). As a proactive model derived from community policing, the program’s intent was to attack problems by dividing resources as “upstream” prevention and “downstream” intervention work (Clark, 1994). Critics tended to agree that the visible presence of police officers had a positive impact on the program’s effectiveness; on the other hand, they argued that the objectives and role of the program needed to be more clearly defined (Girouard, 2001) given that the police and school cultures are inherently opposed to each other. In other words, the presence of police may harm rather than benefit schools (Brown, 2006).

Research findings have established that SRO programs are successful and have a positive impact on students, staff, and administration in addition to reducing school violence, drop-out rates, disciplinary problems, and creating role models (CPSV, 2001; Johnson, 1999; May, Fessel, & Means, 2004; Scheffer, 1987). For example, Johnson (1999) found that SRO programs serve to reduce violence, improve counseling services, and offer support from school administrators and teachers. Conversely, critics were not satisfied with these findings based on the lack of standardization and clarification of the program’s role and definition, challenges between school versus law enforcement agency authority, and the legal status of juveniles and their rights under the Fourth Amendment.

In short, Girouard (2001) maintained that the concept of an SRO program is not clearly defined, and although there are many school programs in which police are involved, they all differ in some respects. According to Brown (2006), it would be naïve for one to believe that SROs could be expected to fulfill such a wide diversity of duties. Another critique involved the open or complex school structure consisting of various social relationship networks that differ from the dominant closed culture of policing (Jackson, 2002). Thus, the probability that SROs might create role conflicts is inevitable. For example, Finn, McDevitt, Lassiter, Shively, and Rich (2005) argued that collaboration between SROs and school staff is considered to be the single most troublesome area in establishing productive relationships due to the fundamental differences in terms of goals, strategies, and methods.

Lambert and McGinty (2002) examined the types of personal characteristics, skills, and job tasks deemed to be important from the perspective of principals, law enforcement administrators, and school resource officers. They found significant differences between school administrators and resource officers. However, the researchers did not indicate if the differences were serious or how they affected the program’s success. Despite this lack of evidence, Lambert and McGinty underscored the existence of “potential conflict” between principals and SROs that could possibly harm the program.

Finally, the legal status of juveniles under the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable search and seizures is an issue that must be taken into consideration. Because the courts awarded school administrators the right and responsibility to act in the place of a parent on the

basis of *loco parentis*, they thus have the power to reduce a student’s individual rights in order to provide a safe learning environment. Therefore, the risk of potential lawsuits and public outcry are involved regarding police contact with students (Brown, 2006). Law enforcement agencies as well as school districts should carefully consider legal issues in their interaction with students.

The Survey

The current survey instrument included questions pertaining to SRO program specifics, personnel, training, and funding patterned after the previous *TELEMASP* survey conducted by Huffman (1995). In addition, the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.®) program was included in order to determine whether agencies had an imbedded or independent program in their curriculum.

Results

In contrast to Huffman’s earlier survey (1995) that was based on 21 Texas law enforcement agencies, in this updated bulletin, 96 Texas police departments, sheriffs’ offices, and the Texas Department of Public Safety were mailed a survey to determine how the implementation of SRO programs had changed over time. Out of the 96 agencies, 71 surveys were completed and returned. Of those participating agencies, 43 (61%) currently employ school resource officers, 23 (32%) no longer use them, and 5 (7%) have deactivated the program for various reasons (see Figure 1).

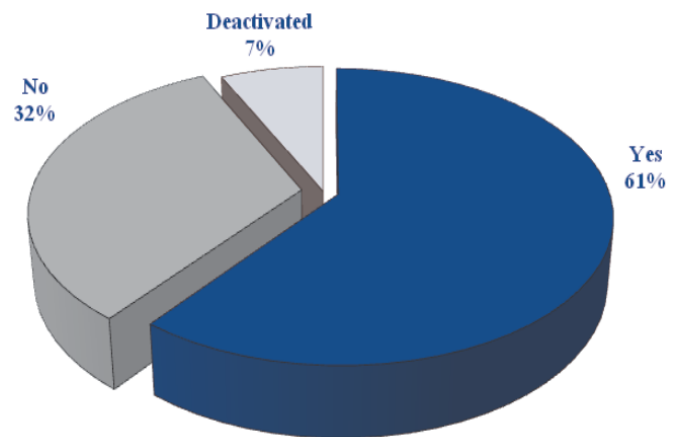


Figure 1. Distribution of SRO programs

As shown in Figure 2, when respondents were asked if their agencies initiated an SRO program at the elementary, middle, high school, or a combination of the three levels, 39 (91%) implement the program at high schools, 37 (86%) at middle schools, and 15 (35%) at elementary schools.

Duration of the Program

As indicated in Huffman’s (1995) earlier bulletin, SRO programs have existed in Texas schools for over 40 years. According to the current survey, duration in years varied as depicted in Figure 3. For example, while 3 agencies (7%) have implemented this program for 30 or more years, 7 (16%) between 20 to 29 years, 22 (51%) have employed school resource officers between 10 to 19 years, followed by 9 (21%) between 1 to 9 years.

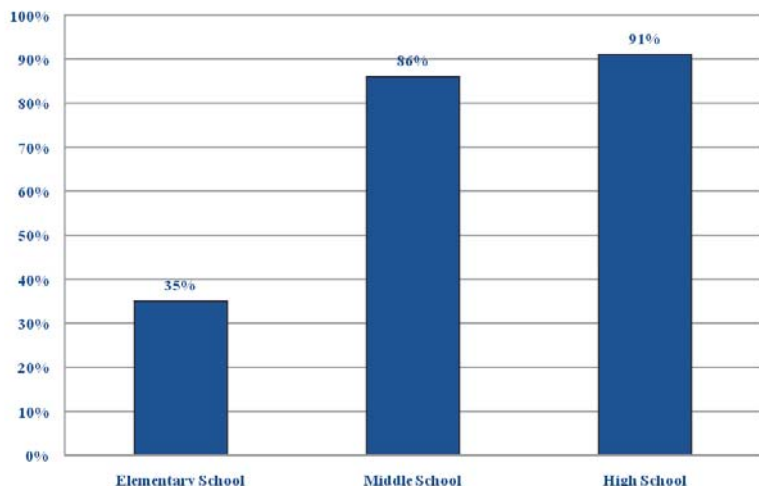


Figure 2. Distribution of SRO program at each school level

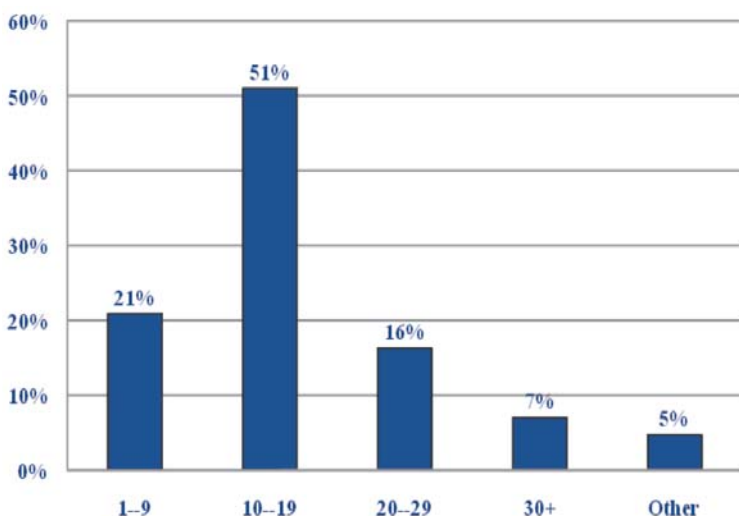


Figure 3. Duration of SRO program in years

Characteristics of the SRO Program

Mitchell (2000) found that the number of SRO programs began to show an increase during the 1990s primarily to provide a safe school learning environment “free from threat, assault, and intimidation” (p.13). As shown in Figure 4, the distribution of SROs’ duty assignments in Texas vary at each school level, or in a sense, there is no standardization in the program. The current study differed from Huffman (1995) who found that SROs’ assignments were most usually equally “divided among schools” and “only one school.” Conversely, the current survey findings revealed that almost one-half (47%), or 20 agencies, assign SROs to “only one school,” 9 agencies (21%) have SROs “divided among same level schools,” and 14 (33%) to “mixed” schools.

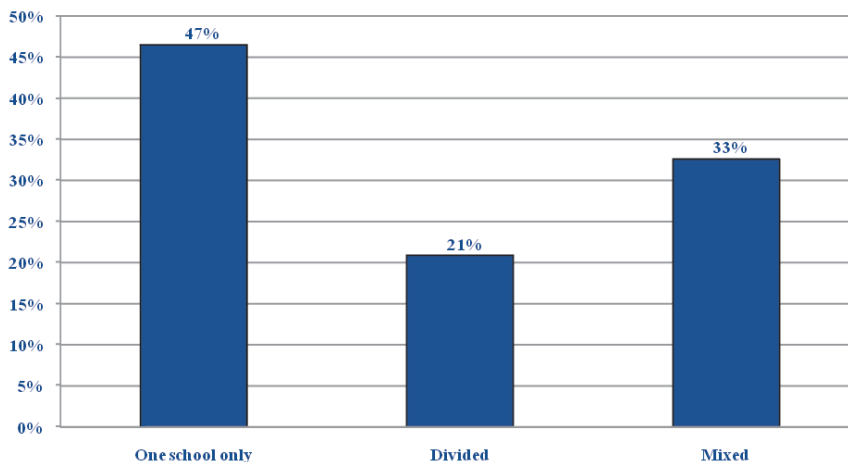


Figure 4. Assignment of school resource officers

Time spent per week at each school level. Typically, SROs have three primary responsibilities: “teaching law enforcement classes, acting as a counselor, and handling criminal investigations on the school campus” (Huffman, 1995, p. 2). In order to maintain a safe school learning environment in terms of educator and communicator, it is expected that SROs “prevent antisocial behavior of juveniles” and thus “build a positive relationship between law enforcement agencies and youth” (Huffman, p. 2). From this perspective, SROs address issues of alcohol, drugs, gangs, and the law through lectures and class presentations. As illustrated in Figure 5, the weekly plan distribution indicates that SROs’ responsibilities and duties vary as to how much time they spend per week depending on each school level. For example, all SROs engage primarily in preventative duties such as parking lot patrol, traffic control, and routine school safety at each school level. However, the same situation does not apply for other responsibilities. Specifically, classroom presentations make up the second largest proportion of time spent at elementary schools, whereas casework takes up a larger percentage of time in middle and high schools. The duties and responsibilities listed under the “other” category include patrolling outlying school areas in response to violence occurring after school hours, internal and external assistance from other law enforcement officers regarding investigations involving juveniles, and exercising other intervention programs such as Law Enforcement Teaching Students (LETS), Get Real About Violence (GRAV), Senior High-Street Law Program, and School Campus Lock Down Drills and In-service Training.

Selection process. In the selection process, 22 (51%) agency respondents stated that they select SROs jointly with school officials through interviews or oral boards. When compared to the previous survey, the joint selection process rate showed an increase compared to 43% indicated by Huffman (1995). Additionally, one agency respondent reported that survey feedback is informally shared with school administrators.

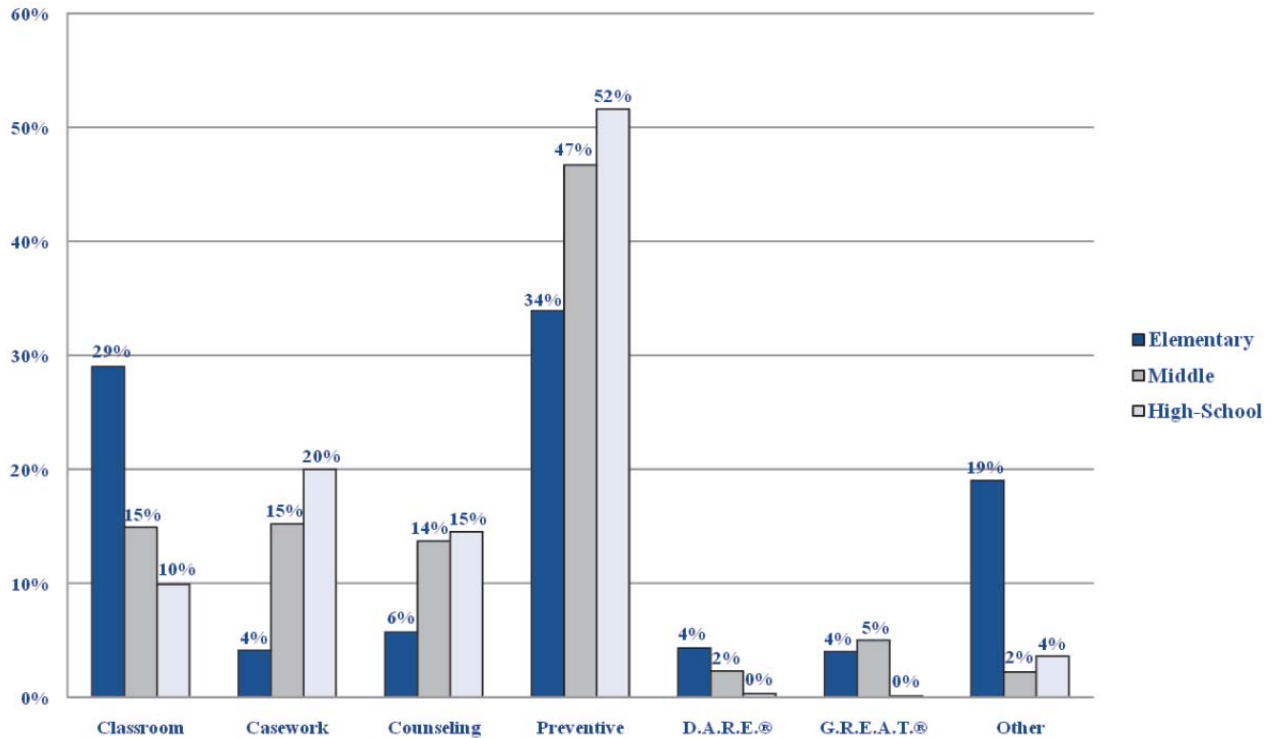


Figure 5. Weekly time distribution spent per week at each school level

Because school resource officers play an important role in the program, the quality of their experience, level of education, training, and personal characteristics are in direct proportion to the program’s effectiveness and success. When considered as a different policing duty, the SRO’s role as educator, counselor, and law enforcement agent completely differs from regular police work and requires a great effort of collective cooperation with school officials in providing a safe learning environment.

Survey responses indicated that in order to become qualified as a school resource officer, candidates must have graduated from college, high school, or possess an equivalent degree. In addition to being considered for selection, they are required to have worked as a police officer in the field. As shown in Figure 6, more than one-half or 27 (63%) of the respondents stated that their agencies require SROs to complete a minimum number of 2 years police experience followed by 7 agencies (16%) requiring 1 year and 6 (14%) requiring 3 years or more with one respondent stating that 5 years or more are necessary. Conversely, under the “other” category, 3 respondents (7%) stated that their agency did not require a specific number of years in police work, and 2 agencies did not designate a precise number.

Personal characteristics are another significant factor to ensure a successful SRO program, particularly in regard to the officer’s image as perceived by

the juveniles. Agency respondents pointed out that school resource officers should represent an effective role model and be able to enhance communication with juveniles and prevent criminal activities. Through good communication skills, SROs can provide positive impressions to students and “clarify any misconception they may have about law enforcement” (Huffman, 1995, p. 5). Other personal characteristics noted included willingness to work with juveniles, being proactive, socially mature, flexible, keeping a positive attitude, being independent, hardworking, courteous, patient and adaptive, ability to work with minimal supervision, and good organizational skills.

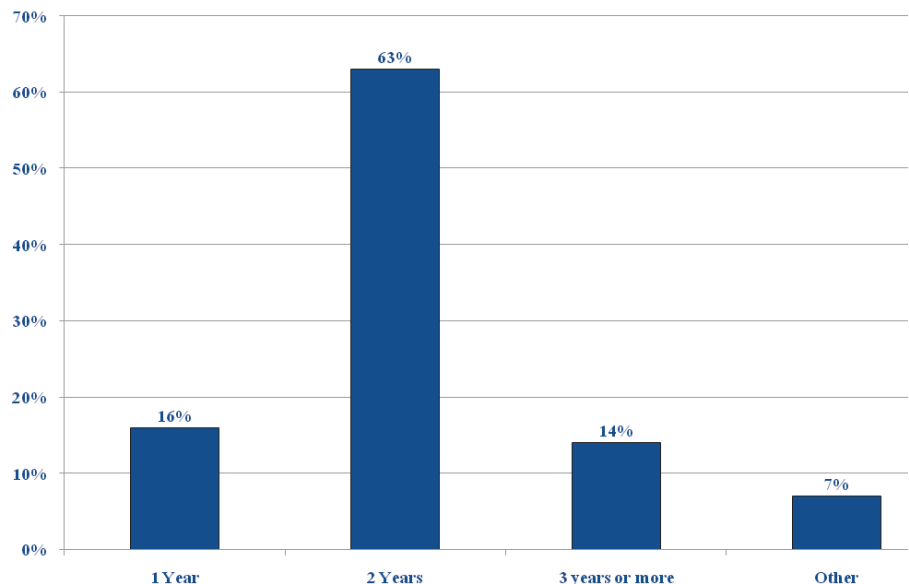


Figure 6. Required years of police experience

Training. Training is another distinctive characteristic of a successful SRO program, especially for the education and counseling roles that are specific to the school environment. Two decades ago, Scheffer (1987) emphasized that “the caliber of officer education and training is critically important in producing professional methods and values which are most likely to be compatible with tasks” (p. 85).

All of the participating agencies, with the exception of only one, provide training for SROs. Each agency representative stated that various training programs are offered from diverse sources, including inter-departmental and outside resources, namely the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), Texas Association of School Resource Officers (TASRO), Texas School Safety Center, and Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE). For example, 17 agencies provide basic and advanced training courses arranged by NASRO, and school resource officers also attend annual conferences. In reviewing some of the training courses necessary to respond to critical situations, SROs are also provided with special techniques including active shooting skills, tactical training, and defensive tactic courses.

Examples of Training Programs

- Field Training
- Basic School Resource Officer Course
- Advanced SRO Classes
- Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.®)
- Instructor Training
- Law Enforcement Teaching Students (LETS)
- Get Real About Violence (GRAV)
- Senior High-Street Law Program,
- School Campus Lock Down Drills and In-service Training
- Tactical Training
- Rapid Rescue-Response Tactical Training
- Active Shooter Training
- Defensive Tactics
- State School Based Law Enforcement Annual Conferences

Apart from having some similarity with Huffman’s (1995) previous survey findings, one agency respondent noted that especially following shooting incidents post-Columbine, school safety became an issue of special concern for law enforcement.

The duration of SRO training programs that are generally held in the summer varies from 8 to 40 and even 120 hours; thus, the average length of time is difficult to estimate. School resource officers are supervised by various law enforcement ranks from different units or divisions including sergeants, lieutenants, and captains. Twenty-eight agencies (65.1%) employ sergeant supervisors followed by lieutenants in 10 agencies (23.3%), and captains in 5 agencies (11.6%). One agency representative did not respond to this question.

Drug Abuse Resistance Education Program

Beginning with its founding in 1983, the D.A.R.E.® program, has expanded and become widely used throughout the world. As a drug control strategy, the program was initially designed to teach fifth and sixth grade elementary school

students to avoid drug, tobacco, and alcohol use or join gangs as these children are believed to be more vulnerable to peer pressure (Schmallegger & Bartollas, 2008).

The surveyed Texas law enforcement agencies were asked to respond whether they had a D.A.R.E.® program, and if so to indicate if the program is imbedded or independent. Of the 43 (81.4%) agencies that have implemented the SRO program, 8 also (18.6%) have a D.A.R.E.® program. Three agencies, respectively, have either an imbedded middle school D.A.R.E.® program or an independent D.A.R.E.® program with one located at an elementary school, one at a middle school, and one at both the elementary and middle school levels. Two agency representatives stated that they have both independent and imbedded D.A.R.E.® programs with one imbedded at the middle school level, two at the high school level, and one each as an independent elementary or middle school level program.

Budget

Law enforcement agencies encourage public school districts to contribute financial support to the SRO program for improved safety, increased perception of safety, and quick response time (Finn, 2006). Nevertheless, one of the main issues faced is lack of funding that is the primary factor resulting in termination of the programs. Contrary to Huffman’s (1995) survey that found school funded contributions totaled 71% to the program’s costs, the current survey revealed that this rate decreased to 44%. However, law enforcement agencies’ contributions showed an increase from 28% to 48%. Besides these two major sources as depicted in Figure 7 under the “other” category, 8% is funded by contributions consisting of various organizations or programs, including federal grants, police general funds, and crime district taxes.

The current survey also included a question asking respondents to indicate whether their agency had any problem with funding that necessitated either curtailing or ending the SRO program. Out of the 43 participating agencies, only 6 representatives (14%) stated that their agency had a problem whereas 37 agencies (86%) did not face any problematic issues. Through either curtailing the program by reducing the number of officers assigned to each school level or terminating the program altogether, the reasons given were

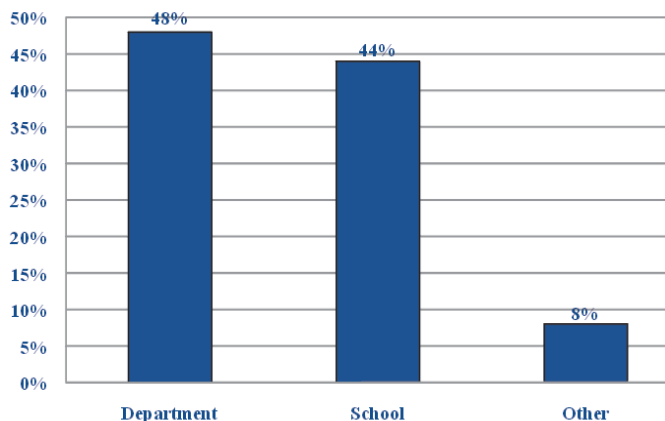


Figure 7. Funding distribution rounded to the nearest percent

primarily due to lack of funding or budget shortfalls. On the other hand, two agencies terminated their program either because their contract expired or the school district furnished their own campus policing.

Conflicting Roles of SRO

One of the issues surrounding the SRO program is considered to be as to whether two totally different cultures can consistently and cooperatively work together. In Huffman's (1995) earlier survey, potential problems encountered by resource officers included the lack of a clear program objective and officers' roles, poor training, misconceptions by school administration and staff concerning the program's mission, and lack of cooperation between school administrators and law enforcement agencies.

In the current survey findings, 43 participating agencies, 27 (63%) have not encountered any problems specific to the scope of roles held by resource officers, whereas the remaining 16 agencies (37%) did have problems. A successful SRO program can only be achieved through healthy collaboration between law enforcement agencies and school boards. Although there are some cases in which SROs have difficulty in satisfying their department's expectations while maintaining strong relationships with school personnel, one should keep in mind that SROs are primarily law enforcement personnel; however, due to the sensitivity of their presence in schools, they are also required to take on the role of educator and counselor. According to survey responses, problems encountered by resource officers include enforcement of school policies and rules consisting of dress codes, use of cell phones, locker searches, hall and lunch room monitoring, and issuance of citations for various classroom disruptions.

Responses to the survey also revealed that complaints by school resource officers are often the result of conflicts between administrators that arise when they are asked to enforce school policies or rules that are not within their assigned duties. Further, enforcement of school policies by SROs can bring lawsuits against law enforcement agencies and may also harm their image. As stated earlier, there are risks involved that can bring about more harm than good through the SRO program (Brown, 2006). Furthermore, survey respondents stated that SROs are sometimes treated like school staff. Finally, one respondent stated that in an effort to avoid a scandal, some school administrators attempt to direct the SROs' actions and prefer that their cases are handled by the school's administration.

Conclusion

When responses were compared between Huffman's (1995) survey and the current one, it can be affirmed that the SRO program has progressed and that the number of agencies that have problems with the scope of school resource officers' roles are fewer than in the past. Therefore, it is probable that the program's objective and the officers' roles are better understood by both law enforcement and educational organizations. Although it is difficult to standardize the SRO program at all levels due to flexibility needs depending on each school, it can be concluded that the program is currently more widely accepted than other safety precautions taken by non-SRO schools. However, a successful program can only be achieved through continuous funding and a healthy collaboration between communities, school administrators, staff, school resource officers, and agencies.

From the selection process to the training, supervision, and evaluation of SROs, law enforcement agencies play an important role in the program's implementation. While school resource officers' broad and disparate roles and the program's flexibility are taken into consideration, agencies are required to apply higher and stricter selection standards. In addition, they should offer participation of school administrators in the selection of SROs, clearly define their scope and role, and provide various training programs.

School administrators should be open to communicating with and understanding resource officers' involvement in schools. According to Alderson (1980), without neglecting their separate roles, school administrators and resource officers should develop a mutual trust and understanding. Additionally, school authorities should provide integration of SROs in order to produce the best results and enhance the safety image of law enforcement as perceived by juveniles and staff. By doing so, rather than implementing SROs to enforce school rules, they should be considered as law enforcement officers, educators, and counselors.

Given that the safety of students should not be restricted by financial matters, another important issue is funding. The presence of resource officers in schools has proven to be more valuable than other safety precautions. Law enforcement agencies need to establish long-term plans to achieve program goals including the assignment of an adequate number of SROs and providing them with training that will better prepare them to respond to critical situations. As one agency representative suggested, schools should at least share together with the agencies in funding the SRO program.

In conclusion, it is possible to reduce violence in schools, prevent juveniles from engaging antisocial behaviors, and gain increased understanding of law enforcement. This can be accomplished through implementing the correct program, collective collaboration between school administrators and law enforcement personnel, adequate funding and support from the community at large, and well-educated, trained police officers.

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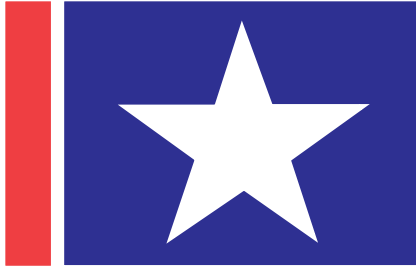
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Engin Gulen is currently a doctoral criminal justice student at Sam Houston State University and serves as superintendent in the Turkish National Police Organization.

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