Understanding and assessing school police officers: A conceptual and methodological comment

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Abstract

Although law enforcement officials have been involved in the provision of school security services for the past half century, prior to the 1990s the practice of assigning sworn police officers to serve in schools on a full-time basis was uncommon. Over the past decade the number of police officers serving in schools increased substantially, but few studies of school police officers were conducted and little attention was devoted to understanding the role of school police officers. This article contributes to the literature on school police officers by providing an overview of the development of school police officers, an outline of issues which should be considered in conceptualizing school police officers, and a discussion of methodological issues pertaining to the assessment of school police officers. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Although school crime has historically generated little concern among the public or policymakers, over the past couple of decades the situation has changed. In the 1970s and 1980s there were reports of an increase in disorder in the schools (Toby, 1980), and in the 1990s there were several school shootings which generated enormous media coverage (Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002). As a result, educational and criminal justice officials intensified their efforts to enhance school safety and implemented a plethora of security tactics such as the use of metal detectors to screen students for weapons, the use of video surveillance to monitor students, the creation of security policies which require that all backpacks and bookbags be made of translucent plastic or mesh, the implementation of “zero tolerance” security policies which mandate suspension or expulsion for any violent behavior, and the assignment of sworn police officials to patrol schools (for compendiums and discussions of school security measures, see Barrios et al., 2000; Garcia, 2003; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Lawrence, 1998). Among the new security measures, the placement of sworn police officials in schools is arguably the most significant because the officers are new authoritative agents in the school environment.

Whereas student misbehavior has traditionally been handled by teachers and administrators who hold advanced academic credentials and are accountable to local school boards, school police officers are trained in law enforcement and often answer to a municipal police chief or county sheriff. Hence, because the officers have little or no training in fields such as education and developmental psychology and because the officers may be evaluated by supervisors who have little knowledge of educational theory and practice, it is possible that the officers’ discretionary actions (e.g., whether to arrest a student) will be based on criteria which do not include the students’ educational attainment, an issue which has been raised by national policymakers. In fact, concerns about the qualifications and training of school police...
officers were so great that the U.S. Congress authorized $5 million in fiscal year 2000 and $3 million in fiscal year 2001 to provide training and technical assistance to school police officials (Girouard, 2001; for a discussion of the training of school police officials, see Green, 2002).

Moreover, despite the increase in the placement of sworn law enforcement officers in schools and despite the millions of tax dollars spent hiring, training, and maintaining a police presence in schools, it is not clear whether school police officials enhance student safety and little attention has been afforded to measuring the impact the officers have on the school environment. It may be that millions of tax dollars are being spent on inappropriate training for school police officers, that school policing tactics are ineffective or, as a worst case scenario, that the presence of police officers in schools creates more harm than good. In an effort to focus greater attention on school police officers, this article provides an outline of the development of school police officers, a comment on the conceptualization of school police officers, and an overview of methodological issues associated with the study of school police officers.

School police officers: a brief overview

It is difficult to ascertain the origins of school police officers because over the past half century a number of school law enforcement programs have evolved. In some states, school district officials can make arrangements with local police and sheriffs’ departments to have officers assigned to serve as School Resource Officers (SROs) and provide law enforcement services in the schools, while in other states school district officials have the authority to create independent police departments. According to Burke (2001) and Girouard (2001), the concept of the SRO originated in Flint, Michigan during the 1950s, but it is clear that there were law enforcement officials (not necessarily SROs) serving in schools prior to 1950. The history of the Indianapolis Public School Police, for example, dates back to 1939 when the schools hired a “special investigator” who served in that role for more than a decade and became the “supervisor of special watchmen” in 1952. Then, in 1970, the agency was reorganized and became the Indianapolis Public School Police (Coy, 2004). To provide another example, the Los Angeles School Police Department was originally created as a security section in 1948 and metamorphasized into an independent police agency which, as of this writing, has more than three hundred sworn personnel who serve in a variety of positions ranging from campus police officer to members of the special response team.

While it is not clear when the practice of having sworn police officers patrol school grounds began, it is clear that prior to the 1990s there were relatively few sworn officers serving in schools and that, owing to the increase in public concern about school violence, the number of school police personnel increased throughout the 1990s (Beger, 2002; Girouard, 2001). As the number of school police officers increased, the officers formed associations to protect their professional interests such as the Arizona School Resource Officers Association, the Florida Association of School Resource Officers, the Texas Association of School District Police, the National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officers, and the National Association of School Resource Officers. A cursory examination of the last of the aforementioned organizations, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), serves as an example of the growth in the number of school police officials. Although NASRO is a relatively young organization, having been formed in 1991, in a decade and a half NASRO built a roster of more than 15,000 members.

As to estimates of the number of school police officers in the United States, analyses of Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) data show that more than a third of all sheriffs’ offices and almost half of all local police departments have assigned sworn officers to serve in schools, with a total of more than 17,000 officers serving in schools, and that public school districts employ more than 3,200 sworn officers (Hickman & Reaves, 2001, 2003; Reaves & Hickman, 2001, 2002). It must be noted, however, that because there are different types of school law enforcement programs and because there is no standard term for describing school police officers, it is difficult to obtain an accurate count (Girouard, 2001). The aforementioned figures should therefore be viewed as conservative estimates of the number of school police officers in the United States.

Moreover, many police agencies in the United Kingdom have created programs in which officers are designated as School Liaison Officers (SLOs). The Bedfordshire Police (2004), for example, has an SLO program which was designed to increase contact, cooperation, and communication between local youths and the police. The Avon and Somerset Constabulary (2002, p. 2) has also created an SLO program, the aim of which is “to improve community safety and reduce crime through enhanced working relationships with schools, their communities and the young people of the Avon and Somerset Constabulary area.” Many such programs are in the developmental stages, thus, it is not clear how many law enforcement
agencies in the United Kingdom have these programs or how many SLOs there are in the United Kingdom.

There is also evidence that school police programs are being developed beyond the Western Hemisphere. In the spring of 2005, an experimental school police program was launched in Pusan, South Korea, and by the end of the year the program had expanded and was in effect in roughly seventy schools throughout South Korea. The service was originally titled a “School Police” service, but during the initial year of operation the service changed titles to “School Guardians” or “School Protectors” (the Korean title “Paemoon Chikimi” cannot easily be translated). The school guardian system in South Korea was developed by the Korean National Police Agency, but it is not dependent on the national police force for human resources and relies largely on former educators and police officers who voluntarily patrol school grounds to deal with delinquents and provide a positive role model (Choi, 2006; Korean National Police Agency, 2005b).

As of this writing the school guardian system in South Korea was in its infancy, but in the fall of 2005 the Korean National Police Agency received top honors in the administrative services category of the Korean government’s annual innovative model reports for the creation of the school police/guardian program (Korean National Police Agency, 2005a, 2005b), an indicator that the program will expand in the years to come. The school guardian system in South Korea is a unique approach in that, rather than adopting a purely Western model of school policing whereby order is maintained by paid officials granted special legal powers, the Korean model builds on the sense of civic duty of the volunteer officials and much of the authority of the officials comes not from special legal status but from the respect for one’s elders embedded in Korean culture. The point here is not, however, to emphasize the differences between Eastern and Western models of school police services, but to make it clear that from the school police programs in the United States to the school liaison officer programs in the United Kingdom to the fledgling school guardian program in South Korea, school police services have evolved from a handful of experimental programs into a growing international practice.

Understanding school police officers

In terms of the historical development of criminal justice systems, school police officers are a new species of public servant: a hybrid of educational, correctional, and law enforcement official. As noted by Girouard (2001, p. 1), school police officers serve a multifaceted role which incorporates the duties of “law enforcement officer, counselor, teacher, and liaison between law enforcement, schools, families, and the community.” Similarly, NASRO has developed a “triad model” of the SRO which incorporates the duties of law enforcement officer, counselor, and educator (Burke, 2001). The term “triad model,” however, is not an adequate indicator of the duties of an SRO. The sample job description for an SRO (serving at the high school level) created by NASRO lists a variety of duties inclusive of, but not limited to: patrolling school grounds to maintain a visible law enforcement presence, traffic supervision at the beginning and end of the school day, assisting with the control of disruptive students, attending parent and faculty meetings, intelligence gathering for local criminal justice officials, giving presentations at faculty in-services, parent–teacher gatherings, and community meetings, assisting with delinquency prevention programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance and Education (D.A.R.E.), serving as a liaison between local law enforcement, parents, students, and schools, providing a positive role model for students, and traveling with athletic teams to away games.

Similarly, SLOs in the United Kingdom attend to a variety of duties. In contrast to school police officers in the United States, however, SLOs in the United Kingdom focus on social services rather than patrols and supervisory tasks. As described by a Bedfordshire SLO, the primary role of SLOs in “the schools is to provide support to the Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education programme” (E. Longstaff, personal communication, January 18, 2005). In addition, SLOs in Bedfordshire give presentations pertaining to drug abuse and provide input on “road safety, personal safety, emergency situations, consequences of criminal activity and the police service as a career” (E. Longstaff, personal communication, January 18, 2005). Another point worth mentioning is that SLOs in the United Kingdom work with public and private schools, whereas there is little evidence that SROs in the United States work with private schools. In short, in order to understand school police officers it is important to consider the numerous tasks which the officers have to fulfill.

Owing to the fact that different law enforcement agencies have different policies, procedures, and expectations of officers, it is impractical to attempt to describe a uniform set of duties required of school police officers. Nonetheless, there is no question that the tasks of school police officials are different than those of other law enforcement agents. For example, school police
officials may be required to enforce school policies which prohibit behaviors (e.g., the possession of cell phones, laser pointers, squirt guns, etc.) that would be permissible outside of a school setting. In addition, school police officials may carry out duties similar to the duties of security personnel and correctional officers such as searching individuals who enter the school or escorting an unruly student from a classroom to an administrator’s office. Next, school police officials in both the United States and the United Kingdom may be invited to programs designed to reduce delinquency—for example, the D.A.R.E. and Peer Court programs in the United States and the Lifebus program in the United Kingdom—and therefore must also serve in an educational role. Moreover, school police officers in the United States and the United Kingdom may be expected to serve as security analyst and trainers in terms of working with school officials to identify security weaknesses and giving presentations on crime-related issues to school personnel and parents. As though the list of duties expected of school police officers was not already perplexingly extensive, there are several additional issues which must be taken into account in the conceptualization of school police officers.

First, there is the fact that youths are required by law to attend school until they reach maturity (defined differently by different nations) and must therefore be considered as a partially institutionalized demographic group. While the restrictions on their liberties are not equivalent to those imposed on fully institutionalized groups (e.g., prison inmates, psychiatric patients in secure facilities, military recruits in basic training), juveniles are required to report to a designated facility at least five days a week throughout the bulk of the year where they are subject to a variety of rules and regulations. Although it could be argued that many adults have similar restrictions placed on them at their place of study (i.e., college/university) or place of work, adults have the option of resigning and finding a new place of study or work, whereas juveniles have little legal authority to determine where or when they will attend school.

Moreover, while youths are in school they may have limits imposed on their privacy such as having to be screened by metal detectors, having their persons and properties searched, and having their lockers searched (or being denied the opportunity to have a locker due to security concerns) and it is doubtful there will come a time when students are granted greater protection from search and seizure. For instance, although the U.S. Supreme Court has not yet heard a definitive case on the control of school crime, to date the high court and the lower courts have placed a greater emphasis on school authorities’ needs to provide a secure learning environment than on the individual rights of students (Yell & Rozalski, 2000).

Most importantly, in the case of New Jersey v. T.L.O. (469 U.S. 325, 1985), the Supreme Court ruled that although students do not forfeit all Fourth Amendment rights to be secure from unreasonable search and seizure at school, school officials do not need a search warrant to search a student or a student’s possessions. The high court established that school officials only need reasonable grounds to believe the search will produce evidence the student has violated a law or school policy. The provision that school officials can search students suspected of violating school policies is particularly important in that it dictates that a student may be searched based on the suspicion that the student is in possession of an item which the student would be legally entitled to possess when off school grounds such as a cell phone or a pocket knife. In sum, given that juveniles are legally required to attend school where they are granted fewer liberties and rights than adults, it is necessary to conceptualize school police officers as a hybrid of correctional and law enforcement agents who enforce a partially institutionalized populace which is subject to a number of rules and regulations and granted limited privacy rights.

The next issue to consider is the legal status and cultural concept of juveniles in the United States and other developed nations. Although students have numerous restrictions placed on their behaviors and basic rights while at school, juveniles are entitled to special legal status in terms of treatment by the courts. As evidenced by numerous statutes in nations around the planet which prohibit the maltreatment of juveniles, sexual activity with juveniles, and the sale of alcohol, tobacco, and pornography to juveniles, modern society views childhood and adolescence as a sensitive period of the lifespan and has established measures to protect juveniles from potentially deleterious experiences. Any conceptualization of school police officials must therefore account for the manner in which the officers’ treatment of students may be affected by the legal status of juveniles and the social construct of childhood and adolescence.

In light of the potential for lawsuits and public outcry about inappropriate contact with youths (especially in Western nations), school police officials must be especially cautious in terms of how they treat and interact with students. Consider the following hypothetical scenario. An adult male school police official sees an adolescent female student on an athletic field using
an illicit substance and begins to approach the girl. The
girl sees the officer and runs into the female locker room
to dispose of the substance. Should the officer pursue?
One can only imagine the immediate hullabaloo and
long-term legal and political fallout surrounding an
adult male law enforcement official entering a high
school girls’ locker room. To provide an example, on
one occasion a school police chief in Texas relayed a
vignette to the author about an encounter between a
male officer and a female student who was not in
compliance with a school policy that required all shirts
be tucked in. The officer noticed the violation, stopped
the girl, and asked the girl to tuck in her shirt. The girl
later claimed the officer stopped her in order to see her
undress. While nothing serious came of the incident, it
serves as a relevant example of the sensitive issues
surrounding the policing of a juvenile population.

School police officials must also be cautious about
aggressive tactics. Case in point, a 2003 search of
Stratford High School in Goose Creek, South Carolina
sparked a political debate of national interest in the
United States. The scenario involved a proactive drug
sweep in which local police officers (with the support of
school officials) entered the school, ordered students to
the ground at gunpoint, temporarily harnessed students
with plastic restraints, and led drug-sniffing canines
through the school. As a result, the internationally
known Reverend Jesse Jackson appeared on the scene to
question whether racism was a factor in the search, the
American Civil Liberties Union emerged to investigate
the matter, the state police were called in to investigate
and encountered a school police official who was hiding
behind some trees smoking a cigarette at which point the
official joked that he had been “caught in the act” (i.e.,
violating a policy which prohibits smoking on school
properties). While many law enforcement agencies may
have policies which prohibit officers from smoking in
the presence of witnesses, complainants, and suspects, it
is doubtful that the officers must be as cautious about
behaviors such as consuming tobacco or using profanity
as school police officials.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the fact that
adolescents and young adults are a particularly malfiaceous
demographic group. Research has shown that adolescents
and young adults are the demographic group most likely to
engage in crime (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Steffens-
meir, Allan, Harer, & Streifel, 1989), with young males
having greater criminal proclivities than any other
demographic group (Kanazawa & Still, 2000; Messersch-
midt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Concomitantly,
research conducted in the United States has shown that
drug use, theft, and weapon carrying are common in high
schools (DeVoe et al., 2002; Hanke, 1996; Hill & Drolet,
1999) and that crime rates are often high in the vicinity of
high schools (Ronseck & Lobosco, 1983). Thus, when
conceptualizing school police officers, it is necessary to
take into account the fact that the officers must contend
with the most unruly demographic group on the planet.

In sum, school police officers are a new form of
public servant who provide a variety of security, law
enforcement, correctional, and educational services to a
population of highly mischievous and partially institu-
tionalized juveniles who are granted fewer rights but
greater legal protections than the general adult popula-
tion. To date, however, little research on school police
officers has been conducted and there is no standard
methodology for evaluating the effectiveness of these
In light of the fact that the placement of sworn law enforcement agents in schools is a historically novel yet rapidly growing phenomenon, it is important that a methodology be developed for evaluating the impact the officers have on both the school environment and society as a whole.

**Assessing school police officers**

*Using official data on crime/delinquency to assess school police officers*

One option for evaluating school police officers is to look for fluctuations in the rates of reported crimes and disciplinary actions in schools where the officers are present (for an example, see Johnson, 1999). While official crime data may be of use in assessing school police officers, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of official data on school violence. Whereas some reports contain data collected during a calendar year, others contain data collected during a school year. Moreover, there are no standard indicators for describing school violence (DeVoe et al., 2002; Kenney & Watson, 1999; Small & Tetrick, 2001) and in countless instances both violent and nonviolent crimes committed against juveniles do not get reported, especially if the juvenile is unsupervised when the offense occurs (Snyder & Sickmund, 2000).

Given that the number of police officers serving in schools has increased over the past decade, it is probable that some of the aforementioned problems will abate. For example, assuming that law enforcement agencies in the United States which handle school security adhere to the FBI guidelines for reporting crimes for inclusion in the *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR), the quality and quantity of standardized data on school crime should increase. Even if the quality and quantity of standardized school crime data does increase, however, several studies have indicated that crime data obtained from law enforcement agencies are misleading and that official crime rates are determined not by the amount of crime in an area, but by police activities (Black, 1970; Kitsuse & Cicourel, 1963; O’Brien, 1996). Britt and Tittle’s (1975, p. 446) examination of arrest data from Florida, for instance, suggested that “increases in the number of police are positively associated with the number of arrests for minor crimes.”

Whereas delinquent activities on school properties have traditionally been handled by teachers and administrators, the introduction of law enforcement officers into schools has transformed student misconduct into a matter to be dealt with by the criminal justice system. If a pupil was threatened or attacked by a peer and reported the incident to a teacher, for example, it is doubtful that school officials would file a report with the police. In contrast, today there are police officers in many schools to deal with incidents of delinquency. What was once considered schoolyard bullying may now be treated as assault. Hence, the presence of officers in schools could lead to an increase in the rate of reported juvenile crime thereby creating the illusion that school violence has increased.

Another potential problem is that school police officials might manipulate crime reporting procedures to serve their own interests, an increase in school crime may be needed to justify requests for additional funding or a decrease in school crime may be needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of school police officers. Although it would be pleasant to believe that no law enforcement official would utilize such a disingenuous tactic to advance a private agenda, that is not the case (Loveday, 2000; Seidman & Couzens, 1974; Selke & Pepinsky, 1982); a contretemps which Baer and Chambliss (1997, p. 93) felicitously described as “law enforcement propaganda masquerading as fact.” Owing to the threat of lawsuits and public relations problems, school police officials probably face a greater temptation than other law enforcement agents to manipulate the fashion in which criminal offenses are reported.

To date there is no substantive evidence to suggest that school law enforcement authorities have misrepresented the extent of crime on school grounds, but there is proof that colleges and universities have massaged data pertaining to crimes on campus. The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990 requires institutions of higher learning in the United States to publish reports of crimes on campus, yet several investigations have shown that students often fail to report victimization to collegiate officials and that collegiate officials often underreport student victimization (Fisher, Sloan, Cullen, & Lu, 1998; Goldberg, 1997; Sloan, Fisher, & Cullen, 1997). The U.S. General Accounting Office (1997, p. 10), for instance, documented “a discrepancy in how colleges reported the number of murders.” Critics have alleged that college and university administrators intentionally underreport campus crimes because of concerns about public relations problems (Goldberg, 1997) and it would be naive to think that primary and secondary education officials have no such anxieties. As a case in point, in a study of SROs Jackson (2002, pp. 634–635) reported that one school board rejected an SRO program “due to territorial issues and the possibility that, by having a policing agency in the local schools, their presence may damage the reputation of the school district.”
To provide another example, a national study conducted by researchers with the Centers for Disease Control indicated that the majority of schools “almost always or always” report students caught using illegal drugs (75.4 percent) or carrying weapons (59.9 percent) to law enforcement authorities, but that substantially fewer schools routinely referred students to law enforcement for smoking cigarettes (25 percent), using smokeless tobacco (33.8 percent), consuming alcohol (35.9 percent), or fighting (8 percent) on school grounds (Small et al., 2001, pp. 331–332). In light of the facts that nearly a quarter of schools in the United States do not often report student drug offenses to law enforcement, that almost two-thirds of schools do not regularly report student alcohol use to law enforcement, and that an overwhelming majority do not report student fights (i.e., assaults) to law enforcement, it is reasonable to conclude that many education officials are hesitant to subject juveniles to the criminal justice system and, in the event that police officers were present in the schools, would discourage the officers from formally processing students caught engaging in delinquent acts such as using alcohol or carrying small weapons. Given the finding that student drug use and weapon carrying are more frequently reported to legal authorities than alcohol use, tobacco use, and fighting (Small et al., 2001), it is also reasonable to conclude that examinations of official data will provide a distorted picture of crime and delinquency on school grounds. In short, official data on school crime should not be the only data used in an evaluation of school police officers.

Using survey data to assess school police officers

As a supplementary or alternative source of data on school crime in studies of the effectiveness of school police officers, researchers should consider surveying students (for an example, see Jackson, 2002). Just as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) serves as a supplement to the UCR as a method for gauging the national rate of criminal victimization, surveys of students can provide data on crimes not reported to law enforcement agencies and serve as an alternative method of ascertaining the level of crime and delinquency among juveniles (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979). Federal researchers in the United States have recognized the value of student surveys and in 1989 the School Crime Supplement was added to the NCVS (Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998). Similarly, rather than relying on official reports of juvenile misconduct, researchers with the Centers for Disease Control conduct surveys as part of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System to obtain data on a variety of juvenile risk behaviors (for examples, see Kann et al., 2000, 1998, 1996). In short, survey data may be a quality component of assessments of the impact that school police officers have on school crime.

In addition, surveys can be used to obtain other measures of the effectiveness of school police officers. For instance, student survey respondents could be asked to evaluate the services provided by school law enforcement personnel. Researchers have demonstrated that surveys can be a quality means of assessing police services (Peak, Bradshaw, & Glensor, 1992; Thurman & Reisig, 1996), helping police departments identify vicinal problems (Benedict, Brown, & Bower, 2000; Marenin, 1989) and evaluating community-oriented police programs (Weisel, 1999). Concisely stated, surveys pertaining to police services can be customized to offer respondents the opportunity to evaluate “the way that police services are delivered, to identify sources of dissatisfaction and to identify areas for improvement” (Hesketh, 1992, p. 60). This is not to suggest, however, that survey research is perfect.

Survey research may be negatively impacted by a number of issues such as poor question wording, sampling problems, low response rates, over and under reporting of behaviors by survey respondents and other forms of inaccurate response behaviors (for a discussion of survey methodologies, see F.J. Fowler, 2002). To provide a couple of relevant examples, in a survey study of school security measures (including school police officers) Brown (2005) encountered numerous sampling problems, and in a national survey study conducted to ascertain what types of school security measures are utilized Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) reported low response rates from school administrators. Given that an analytic review of more than one hundred scholarly articles on perceptions of the police showed that adolescents and young adults consistently evaluate the police more negatively than mature adults (Brown & Benedict, 2002), another issue future researchers should consider is the possibility that secondary students may be unduly critical in their evaluations of school police officials. Researchers should thus consider using a combination of official crime data and survey data to assess the effectiveness of school police officials. In addition, researchers need to consider the facts that school police officers tend to a variety of duties, many of which have no direct impact on school crime (e.g., directing traffic), and that the benefits provided by school police officers may not be confined to crime control, issues which are discussed below.
Additional methodological considerations

Although the use of a combination of official and survey measures of school crime may prove to be a quality means of assessing whether school police officers reduce school crime and/or whether students are satisfied with school police services, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the police alone cannot control crime. Research has shown that criminal behavior is affected by a number of variables, the majority of which the police have no power to control (Ahern, 1972; Sherman, 1995; Walker, 2001). For example, several studies had indicated that the poverty rate impacts the level of criminal activity in communities (Bursik, 1988; Sampson, 1995; Shaw & McKay, 1942) and schools (Toby, 1995; Welsh, Stokes, & Greene, 2000; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). Moreover, research has suggested “that the rate of violent crime in an jurisdiction exerts a threshold effect on school crime and violence” (G.L. Bowen & Van Dorn, 2002, p. 96). In addition, consistent with studies which had shown that large schools provide a less hospitable learning environment than small schools (W.J. Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), Felson’s (1998) research showed a positive relationship between school size and school robbery with students attending large schools experiencing substantially more robberies than students attending small schools. When it comes to developing a methodology for assessing school police officers, researchers should thus incorporate a number of measures of police effectiveness to ascertain the effects of school police officers.

As originally demonstrated by Merton, most social institutions provide numerous functions, many of which are not easily discernable. Merton (1964, p. 51) used the adjectives “manifest” and “latent” to distinguish between two types of functions: manifest functions being the most commonly identified outcomes and purposes an institution strives to achieve, while latent functions are the largely unintentional and unrecognized roles fulfilled by an institution. Although it is commonly assumed that the primary role (i.e., manifest function) of the police is to reduce crime, criminal justice scholars have identified myriad services provided by the police (i.e., latent functions). Indeed, throughout history the police have been assigned a variety of duties ranging from operating soup kitchens to organizing community groups (Kelling & Moore, 1999; Uchida, 1997).

To provide a few examples of latent police functions, Bittner (1970) argued that the police serve as an organized means of distributing socially necessary coercive force. Similarly, Bittner (1967) and Manning (1978) argued that one of the primary benefits provided by the police is the maintenance of order. Moreover, in their influential “Broken Windows” article, Wilson and Kelling (1982) suggested that the enforcement of informal behavioral norms by police officers helps preserve a sense of neighborhood safety which prevents a breakdown of community controls thereby helping to keep street crime at a manageable level. Hence, any analysis of police officers, including an analysis of school police officers, should delve beyond the facade of the police as crime fighters and be grounded in a conceptual framework which integrates the numerous functions of the police.

To provide an example of a latent function served by the police with especial relevance to the role of school police officers, several studies indicated that an increase in police presence and positive police–citizen contacts adversely impact fear of crime (Kelling, 1981; Pate, Wycoff, Skogan, & Sherman, 1986; Silverman & Della-Giustina, 2001; Utne, Pate, Ferrara, & Kelling, 1981). As a case in point, one of the key findings from the Newark Foot Patrol Experiment was “that while foot patrol does not have a significant effect on crime, it does affect citizens’ fear of crime, the protective measures they take to avoid crime, and the perceived safety of their neighborhoods” (Kelling, 1981, p. 124). Thus, a relevant issue to consider in evaluations of school police officers is whether the officers enhance student feelings of safety while at school.

The reduction of student perception of danger at school should be viewed as an essential function of school police officials because perception of danger at school has consistently been shown to negatively impact students’ attendance, confidence, and academic performance (N.K. Bowen & G.L. Bowen, 1999; G.L. Bowen, Richman, Brewster, & N.K. Bowen, 1998; DuRant, Kahn, Beckford, & Woods, 1997; Everett & Price, 1995; Malek, Chang, & Davis, 1998; Martin, Sadowski, Cotten, & McCarragher, 1996). The students’ scholastic performance is important because, over the past century, criminologists have time and again documented an inverse relationship between educational attainment and criminal behavior (Duncan, 1931; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Thus, by enhancing students’ feelings of safety at school, school police officers may contribute to the students’ academic achievement thereby helping to prevent crime and delinquency in the schools, prevent crime and delinquency in the surrounding community, and enhance the greater good of society.

In sum, consistent with research which has shown that the police have a multitude of responsibilities and that
analyses of official crime data are a poor means of evaluating the police (Ahern, 1972; Alpert & Moore, 1997; Greene & Klockars, 1991; Loveday, 2000; Manning, 1978), the present study indicated that school police officers tend to a broad array of duties and that data pertaining to school crime should not be used as the sole indicator of the efficacy of school police officials. Rather, assessments of school police officers should incorporate various measures to ascertain the impact of the officers. For example, in addition to examining student victimization rates as an indicator of the efficacy of school police officers, researchers might examine student fear of victimization, student absenteeism, and graduation rates to help ascertain whether the officers contribute to the creation of a positive learning environment.

In addition, researchers may want to consider an evaluation of the impact the officers have on the safety of faculty and staff (DeVoe et al., 2002). It may be that the officers reduce victimization of school employees. Another possibility is that the officers contribute to the sense of safety experienced by school personnel which could affect absenteeism, turnover, and productivity. Conversely, it is also possible that school police officers do more harm than good. In accordance with Merton’s (1964, p. 30) theoretical framework, it is essential that an analysis of any social entity “expressly allow for a given item having diverse consequences, functional and dysfunctional, for individuals, subgroups, and for the more inclusive social structure and culture.” Therefore, researchers should consider the potentially negative outcomes of school police services.

A fundamental premise of labeling theory (Becker, 1973), reintegrative shaming theory (Braithwaite, 1989), and defiance theory (Sherman, 1993) is that harsh sanctions may increase criminal and delinquent behavior. In light of the increase in the number of schools served by police officers in the United States, it is conceivable (if not likely) that the introduction of police officials into schools has generated an increase in the number of students routed from the schools into the criminal justice system which, in turn, could lead to an increase in crime and delinquency (Li, 1999). As noted by Decker (2000, p. 6), the implementation of harsh security measures such as suspending or expelling students for minor transgressions “could have the unintended effect of diverting ‘marginal’ youth into street crime and involvement in the juvenile justice system.” Similarly, critics of zero tolerance school security policies have charged that some of the harsh “methods for responding to school violence may create a restrictive and unnecessarily intrusive atmosphere in an otherwise safe school setting” (Kenney & Watson, 1999, p. 1). There is no question that the placement of police officers in schools may contribute to the creation of a restrictive atmosphere. In light of the research which has indicated that negative police contact generates unfavorable attitudes toward the police among juveniles (Cox & Falkenberg, 1987; Griffiths & Winfree, 1982; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Jackson, 2002), it is also conceivable that the placement of police officers in the schools and the use of aggressive tactics may cause students to distrust educational and law enforcement authorities which could motivate students to engage in greater delinquency (Hyman & Perone, 1998).

Another possibility is that by placing police officers in schools and granting the officers substantial discretionary authority, the students may be conditioned to passively accept intrusions into their privacy, a trend which may have ramifications for civil liberties in the future. Taking into account the most fundamental premise of behaviorist psychology—that through a system of reward and punishment humans can be conditioned to behave in a specific pattern (Robinson, 1976; Skinner, 1972)—the conditioning effect that school law enforcement personnel may have on students’ cognitive and behavioral development is not an issue to be ignored. Consider the situation in the United States.

As already discussed, when it comes to the query of how much authority school officials have to search students and their belongings, the U.S. Supreme Court and the lower courts have emphasized school authorities’ needs to provide a secure learning environment rather than the individual rights of students (Yell & Rozalski, 2000). In the event that the number and discretionary authority of school law enforcement personnel continue to increase as has been the case in recent years (Beger, 2002), it is possible that adolescents in the United States will study the Constitution, yet graduate and enter society with no pragmatic understanding of the rights to which they are entitled. This is arguably an even more important issue today, in post-September 11th America where law enforcement agencies are being granted greater and greater investigative authority, than it was just a few years ago.3

As school police officers are a relatively new type of public servant and have yet to be thoroughly evaluated, it is impossible to determine which of the aforementioned methodological tactics will prove to be viable. For instance, evaluating productivity among school faculty and staff and determining whether school police officers enhance productivity is a daunting methodological challenge. The essential point here is that, rather than focusing exclusively on school crime and delinquency, studies of school police officials should incorporate a number of variables in order to better clarify the
role of school police officers and gauge the positive and negative impact which school police officers have on the school and larger social environment. The heretofore mentioned variables (e.g., student perceptions of safety, student absenteeism, faculty turnover) are merely suggestions which future researchers can consider. It is undoubtedly the case that in the years to come researchers will develop creative means of assessing school police officers which are superior to the methodological suggestions provided in this article.

Summary remarks

School police officers represent a new species of public servant who perform an amalgam of educational, correctional, law enforcement, and role modeling tasks while they oversee a partially institutionalized and highly unruly demographic group who are granted fewer rights than the general adult population yet are afforded greater legal protection from potentially deleterious behaviors and products than adults. Although the assignment of sworn law enforcement officials to serve in schools is not new, it was a relatively rare practice prior to the 1990s and since then the number of schools patrolled by sworn law enforcement officials throughout the world has increased considerably. It is therefore imperative that scholars develop an adequate understanding of the role school police officers play and that researchers devote greater attention to studying the impact the officers have on schools, communities, and society as a whole. It has been herein argued that researchers need to utilize methodologies which incorporate a variety of strategies and a number of measures of the potentially positive and negative impact the officers may have on schools, communities, and society. By means of quality research, future scholars will be able to better conceptualize and assess school police officers and (hopefully) through dialogue between researchers, educators, school police officials, and policymakers it will be possible to identify tasks for which school police officers are well suited, tasks which they are poorly suited for, effective means of training school police personnel, and effective means of routinely evaluating school police personnel.

As Manning (1978) so eloquently argued in his classic treatise on the police mandate, the police in democratic society have taken on such a broad array of incompatible and poorly defined duties, and the methods by which police officers are evaluated are so inadequate that the police often abandon the basic goal of enhancing public safety and concentrate on maintaining an image which satisfies the public’s notion of what a law enforcement agency should be. Unfortunately, it appears that the same social processes which snarled the basic concept and social responsibilities of the police have already taken root among school police administrators, officials, and policymakers. Specifically, as the number of school police officials has increased so too has the number of duties which the officers are expected to fulfill.

As previously discussed, NASRO’s job description for an SRO includes a host of duties such as providing a visible law enforcement presence in the schools, traffic direction, gathering intelligence on delinquent activities, traveling with school athletes to away games, and giving presentations on crime and security-related issues to school personnel. Even in the case that a school police officer was a highly trained and seasoned veteran, it would be naive to believe that the individual could adequately tend to such a diversity of duties. While it may be commonly assumed that the numerous tasks assigned to school police officers will be distributed among a large number of officers, the reality is that in most cases there will be far too few officers to handle such an array of chores.

For example, although the Los Angeles School Police Department is the largest school police agency in the United States and (as of this writing) has a force of between 300 and 350 sworn personnel, a number large enough to justify a division of labor and the assignment of officers to specialized roles, the officers must tend to approximately a million students, faculty, and staff which means there is a ratio of at least 2,850 individuals per officer and that an officer will be able to devote limited time to the numerous situations which the officer encounters. Moreover, many school districts rely on local law enforcement agencies to assign officers to serve as SROs which means the number of officers assigned to the schools will vary in accordance with the local agency’s resources. In light of the fact that few (if any) police agencies have resources adequate for tending to public safety, there is little doubt that many police agencies assign only a bare minimum of officers to serve in the schools.

In sum, it is important that school officials, school police officers and administrators, researchers, and public policymakers come together to adequately conceptualize school police officers, study the impact the officers have on school and society, and identify a clear set of reasonable duties and goals which the officers may be expected to fulfill. Although any such consensus must take into consideration the variant needs of different school systems (e.g., security issues in a rural school will be different than security issues in a metropolitan school), and although any such consensus must evolve over time as societies and public education systems evolve, it is better to address these issues now in order to lay a solid
foundation from which school law enforcement services may be prepared to proactively adapt than to assume a socially irresponsible attitude of complacent indifference through which each agency, school district, city, and/or state is expected to attend only to its immediate interests. Hopefully, this commentary will be of use to criminal justice and youth service scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in their efforts to enhance the well being of youths because there is no question that the quality of life provided to today’s children will impact the quality of life for countless generations to come.

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Notes

1. Owing to the diversity of school law enforcement programs and the diversity of terms used to describe police officers, deputy sheriffs, and former officers who serve in schools (e.g., school resource officer, school liaison officer, school guardian), the terms “school police officer” and “school police official” are used herein as a generic description of any law enforcement agent—regardless of whether the law enforcement agent is employed by a municipal police department, county sheriff agency, or school district police agency or (in the case of the officials in South Korea) is a volunteer school police person—who regularly provides law enforcement services in a school setting.

2. As to the extant research on school police officers, Goggin, Newman, Waechter, and Williams (1994) conducted a survey of students, faculty, staff, and officers who were involved in a program in Akron, Ohio, in which off-duty police officers were hired to patrol the public schools. They found that the majority of respondents believed the officers contributed to school security and concluded “that police cooperation within public schools can be perceived as beneficial by all stakeholders” (Goggin et al., 1994, p. 20). Johnson (1999) studied the impact of SROs in an unidentified southern city by analyzing the rates of reported offenses before and after the SROs were placed in the schools and found that the placement of the SROs in the schools contributed to a noticeable reduction in school crime and delinquency. In contrast, Jackson’s (2000) study of SROs in southeastern Missouri indicated that the placement of SROs in schools had no discernable effect on student perceptions of offending, student perceptions of the police, or student concerns about being apprehended while engaged in delinquency. Further complicating the inconsistent findings pertaining to school police, based on an analysis of survey data Brown (2005) found that student perceptions of school police officers were generally favorable but that the officers were unable to control school crime, with more than half of the students surveyed reporting having seen other students use drugs and carry weapons at school. As to studies conducted outside of the United States, researchers in the United Kingdom studied the effects of a police–schools liaison program and found that the students perceptually differentiated between the SLOs and the police in general and that the SLOs were viewed more favorably than the police in general (Hopkins, Hewstone, and Hantzi, 1992, p. 212). Their data, however, also indicated that students attending schools in which SLOs had been assigned developed more negative views toward the police than did students attending schools in which SLOs were not present (Hopkins et al., 1992; also see Hopkins, 1994).

3. A discussion of international differences in student rights is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to note that students’ right to privacy is not an issue of concern in South Korea. During a conversation about student delinquency and the authority of teachers which was conducted with a high school teacher in Anyang City (a suburb of Seoul) in the spring of 2006, the teacher noted that teachers do not need special permission to search a student or a student’s possessions if there is reason to suspect the student is in possession of contraband such as cigarettes or soju (a popular Korean liquor). The teacher also indicated having personally searched students, but clarified that such searches were not routine because juvenile delinquency is not a major problem in South Korea.

References


**Case cited**


**Statute cited**