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# School Safety in Jeopardy

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## Issue

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The School Resource Officer (SRO) is a program in middle and high schools serving students within Sacramento County. The Grand Jury wishes to determine the effectiveness of the SRO program in enhancing school safety.

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## Method of Investigation

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Interviews were conducted with the following jurisdictions.

- The San Juan Unified School District
- The Sacramento City Unified School District
- The Elk Grove Unified School District
- The Center Unified School District
- The Roseville Joint Union High School District
- The Sacramento Police Department
- The Sacramento County Sheriff's Department

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## Background and Facts

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For the past 30 years there has been a growing concern in the community regarding student safety in secondary and intermediate schools. The days when schools were seen as safe havens have gone. The turmoil in society has moved into our schools. Gangs, drugs, bullying, violence have intruded, and the result is a deep concern over the safety of young people.

The tragedy of Columbine High School brutally focused attention on the need to seek solutions for establishing schools as islands of safety and to return them to their main goal of educating the next generation of adults. In an ironic way Columbine forced school officials to think deeply about what could be done to improve school safety.

The School Resource Officer program was one way to approach the problem. How good is it? Does it work? Should it be maintained and enriched? That is the focus of this report.

The School Resource Officer program is approximately four years old, and its purpose is to place a sworn police officer or sheriff's deputy at each of the comprehensive high schools<sup>1</sup> serving students in Sacramento County.

From its inception in 1998-1999, it has been funded through the Universal Hiring Programs (UHP) of the federal government, making it possible to grant monies for police officers over a three year period. The grant time limitation is four years. The first three, federal monies paid a major share of the costs. The final year the law enforcement agencies and the school districts pick up 100 percent of the cost or pay back what had been spent over the prior three years. This year is crunch time financially. Can the local agencies bear the burden? The safety of young people is the issue.

A brief review of the school districts and the inter-relationship of law enforcement agencies will help in understanding the SRO program.

The Sheriff's Department has the largest number of officers in schools (approximately 24). They are assigned to schools in the unincorporated areas which are served by the San Juan Unified School District and the Grant Union High School District, and to incorporated areas such as Elk Grove and Citrus Heights, where the Sheriff has supplied officers on a contractual basis. The Sheriff's Department also pays 100 percent of the funding of the SROs and their equipment in the unincorporated areas. Presently the Sacramento City Police Department is funding the SROs entirely from grants and the Sacramento City Unified School District has also spent grant and general fund monies for Sacramento City police officers to be assigned to the comprehensive high schools (McClatchy, Sacramento, Johnson and Luther Burbank). In addition, there is one officer for the continuation schools and one for the six middle schools.

The Roseville Joint Union High School District, which serves students from the Antelope area of Sacramento County, and the Roseville Police Department have agreed to share costs of assigning an officer to Woodcreek High School. Unlike Sacramento County, the cost of an officer is not defrayed by a grant.

With the grant money running out, the financial liability to the local agencies will be great. The cost for a SRO ranges between \$115,000 and \$150,000 which includes a patrol car and related equipment.

The future of the SRO is in jeopardy. Who pays? The City of Sacramento? The County of Sacramento? The school districts? The taxpaying residents of Sacramento County, the Board of Supervisors, the City Councils, the Boards of Education must weigh how important is the safety of young people.

Presently the Sheriff's Department will continue through 2002-2003 to assist in the funding in association with the county school districts. The funding at the city level is less clear. At this time the UHP grants are phasing out, and the City of Sacramento and the Sacramento Police Department may not be funding SROs, leaving the Sacramento City Unified School District to support the program.

Is the SRO program worth continuing? The Grand Jury says YES in capital letters. We spoke to over 25 SRO officers, school officials and students, police and sheriff's deputies. To a person, they related it works!

How does it work? What does it do? What are the results?

There are several themes that came from the conversations we held with our interviewees:

1. Kids want to feel safe at school. They deserve the inner comfort and can focus on their education.
2. It is the responsibility of the schools and law enforcement agencies to work together for safe schools.
3. The SRO program requires a different police presence than on the streets.

The officers are assigned to a specific school. It is their beat. They know the school. They know the students. They know their names. They know those who are not a threat to society, and they know those who are.

They work closely with the school administration to form a cohesive team. They are role models. They establish a bond of trust with the students. Some examples demonstrate the effectiveness of the program: 1) Students at a large local high school told the SRO that a violent altercation involving students was going to take place near the school. The SRO informed the Sheriff's Department. The deputies arrived, and the potential fight never took place; 2) In a suburban school, the SRO learned of an outside drug dealer who was peddling ecstasy. He was caught and received a long prison sentence. 3) There was word that an outside interloper was coming to campus to settle a grudge. The SRO learned of this and stopped a car in the parking lot. On the seat was a loaded gun, and two young men in the back seat with baseball bats. What would have been the result if the officer was not at the school? 4) In South Sacramento, expulsions in a large high school dropped from 53 to 22 after the advent of an SRO. 5) In the Sacramento City Unified School District there was dramatic improvement regarding the number of school related police reports. In 1999, the year prior to the SRO program there were 1447 reports. In the three years following, police reports were:

Year	Number of Reports
2000	600
2001	300
2002	300

On a regular basis SROs:

- Meet with students
- Speak in class
- Help with conflict resolution
- Maintain a suicide watch
- Work with counselors
- Coordinate with law enforcement
- Patrol the neighborhood
- Meet with parents
- Control rumors
- Present a positive law enforcement presence
- Identify gang members

Therefore, the results have been significant, especially effective in pre-emptive prevention: the weapon not brought to school; the gang retaliation that doesn't take place; the drugs that are not on campus; the bullying that doesn't occur; the outsider who does not come inside. These results bring a sense of calmness, a feeling of psychological safety.

As a result, the SRO becomes a positive police figure who has high visibility and can summon his colleagues at a moment's notice.

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## Findings and Recommendations

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**Finding #1.** The School Resource Officer is essential to the safety of students at school.

**Recommendation #1.** That all comprehensive high schools which serve Sacramento County students have on campus a school resource officer.

**Recommendation #2.** That intermediate schools have a school resource officer.

**Recommendation #3.** That continuation high schools have access to a school resource officer.

**Recommendation #4.** That the safety of students be recognized by including the school resource officers program in the budgets of the Sheriff's Department and the school districts serving the unincorporated areas of the county for 2003-2004.

**Recommendation #5.** That the safety of students be recognized by including the school resource officers program in the budgets of the Sacramento Police Department and the Sacramento Unified School District for 2003-2004.

**Recommendation #6.** That the safety of students be recognized by including the school resource officers program in the budgets of the San Juan Unified School District, the Elk Grove Unified School District and the Center Unified School District for 2003-2004.

## Commendation

The Sheriff's Department's fiscal support of the SRO program in 2002-2003 in the unincorporated areas is recognized as positive and necessary.

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## Response Required

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**Penal Code Section 933.05 requires that specific responses to both the findings and recommendations contained in this report be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento Superior Court by September 30, 2003 from:**

- The San Juan Unified School District
- The Sacramento City Unified School District
- The Elk Grove Unified School District
- The Center Unified School District
- The Sacramento Police Department
- The Sacramento County Sheriff's Department

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive school is a regular 4-year school that offers a full range of curriculum.