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Police Presence in Schools

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ABSTRACT

In today's society, crime in the community and global threats to our nation, always seem to get one's attention. Media scrutiny regarding crime, gangs, drugs, and acts of violence in schools are always in the news. In some jurisdictions around the nation, partnerships between schools, law enforcement and local governments have been mobilized to address the school safety concern. As a result, police officers and security personnel now monitor the halls of school buildings. However, it is the presence of a police officer in a school setting that the community expects to see to deter any threats to the learning environment. A continued police presence in schools, whether by an independent school district police department or by school resource officers, must be maintained to safeguard the school setting.

The method or types of information used by the researcher includes articles, books, government and law enforcement journals, and internet sites. During the course of this paper, the researcher identified ideas or areas of interest that was not apparent at the beginning of the research. The perception of safety and security was identified as one major idea. This researcher discovered that when school staff and students observe a police officer walking the halls of their school, it made them feel safer. Another major idea that was found is the criminalization of students to the criminal justice system. Many advocates stress that police officers are aggressively arresting or citing (criminal citations for misdemeanor offenses) students. This course of action outweighs the benefits of a secure campus.

At the end of the research process, this researcher found that the role of law enforcement in schools is indispensable. Police officers monitoring the school setting

and protecting our children's learning environment is an important priority. School administrators and elected officials should maintain open dialogue with parents and law enforcement regarding school safety. Funding and fiscal budgetary matters should always include provisions to subsidize police positions at the school level. The children who attend public schools deserve a safe place to learn.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	4
Counter Position	5
Conclusion	9
References	12

INTRODUCTION

School districts nationwide have been subjected to violent crimes and criminal activity within the school halls and on school campus grounds. Some school boards have elected to employ peace officers and security officers to serve as a deterrent to counter this lawbreaking. Safety and the welfare of students and staff at the school setting has become a major issue in both suburban and urban school district administrators. To provide additional police presence at the school setting, fiscal incentives have been increased to hire more police officers and or security personnel (Balmer, Brady & Phenix, 2007). School districts have also established memorandums of understanding and strengthened ties with local law enforcement to provide a police presence at their schools (Raymond, 2010). Around the world, major disturbances at the school campus level have brought intense media coverage, especially when they are violent. School officials, faculty, parents, and the community expect that any school that their child attends should be crime free and safe. A police presence should be required in public schools due to the known and unknown dangers that are present in today's society.

School district police officers, school resource officers, college and university police officers, and law enforcement officers who are deployed at a school campus all have a general job description. In a primary and secondary public school setting, this job description is even more detailed. A campus school district police officer has many roles to perform. On any given day, he or she may be a safety inspector, law enforcer, mentor, monitor, role model, coach, liaison and a sheriff (Raymond, 2010). Their assigned campus is a truly unique "community with a community" (Sediak, 2010, para.

3). These campus officers are also the first line responders when a crisis occurs, and they also respond to normal calls service at their work location. Notable events like the Columbine High School shooting of April 1999, the Breslan Russia School Massacre of September 2004, and the Virginia Tech Massacre of April 2007, have focused the debate of whether schools are safe into the spotlight. However, due to the pending fiscal restraints from federal and state budgetary allocations to school districts in the state of Texas, all areas of school funding, including police and safety programs, are being re-examined for proposed budget cuts. This will have a direct impact on all school district police agencies. To deter crime and to quickly respond to a significant incident on campus, maintaining on-site police protection is vital.

In order to create safer schools, school boards and school district police departments have implemented strategies/partnerships to combat criminal activity at the campus based level (Balmer, Brady & Phenix, 2007). This includes such crime as bullying (assault by threats), harassment, and gang and narcotic related crimes. One such strategy is the Student Safety "Tip Line." The Tip Line is monitored by the school district and provides the student and or a faculty member a communication "hot line" to inform school administration and law enforcement of a dangerous situation or person on campus. In another crime fighting partnership, the Houston ISD Police Department has a Memorandum of Understanding with Crimes Stoppers of Harris County according to Sergeant Raymond Pena of the Houston ISD Police Department (personal communication, January 31, 2011). He stated that a student with information of a criminal or pending criminal act at the school setting can call and later receive monetary reward for the tip when a defendant is convicted. Sergeant Pena (personal

communication, January 31, 2011) stressed that the “Student Tip Line” and the Memorandum of Understanding with Crime Stoppers have aided his school district in making the schools safer. Both of these strategies, along with a police presence on campus, can influence a school setting by making it safe.

In addition to tip lines, school administrators and law enforcement must establish and maintain dialogue to achieve the goal of safe schools. The evidence for continued police presence in schools would be the lowering of crime statistics at the school level. However, “a determination of safe schools must go beyond statistics and government reports” (Bucher & Manning, 2005, p. 56). To solve this question, evidence must be gathered to support why a police presence is needed at schools. Today’s schools are a microcosm of the community and, as such, encounter the same problems as any community would. Many advocates believe that the mere presence of a police officer in uniform at a school can deter crime activity (Balmer, Brady, & Phenix, 2007). If a school has an assigned campus police officer, the likelihood of the faculty and student body perception of safety increases.

Due to the current awareness in American society regarding global terrorism, the drugs wars in Mexico, gang violence, school shootings, and the growing perception of violence in schools, the public has made school safety a top priority (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena & Baum, 2006). The safety of the students attending class in school is of the utmost importance. By maintaining a uniform police officer be assigned to a school or patrolling a school zone feeder pattern, a cluster of schools in a geographic area, the classroom environment and the school setting can become safer. The goal of school safety is a joint team effort by all stakeholders (Bucher & Manning, 2005). For this

reason and due to the potential dangers in and around the school setting, law enforcement should have a high presence in public schools.

POSITION

The primary reason that police officers are being assigned and being deployed in schools is that they deter crime. The majority of schools nationwide, especially at the high school and middle school level, have campus police officers and or school resource officers from a local police jurisdiction patrolling the hallways. The uniform presence of these officers can improve school safety regarding certain types of crimes especially thefts; crimes against property; truancy, which is the failure to attend classes; and bullying in schools (Raymond, 2010). The decrease of drug use in schools has also been observed (Price, 2009). Police officers, who are assigned to kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) schools, a school that has a combined kindergarten and middle school enrollment, and to elementary schools, also respond to child custody disputes between parents. The visibility that the campus police officer displays in a public school setting decreases the likelihood of a serious violent crime to occur and increases the perception of safety (Raymond, 2010).

In addition to deterring crimes, officers can achieve a good rapport with the student body by positive interactions with the students. These interactions may not fall under the normal job description of a police officer, but these interactions will lead the student to report crimes or any abnormal situation that he or she may be aware of (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). These interactions by law enforcement includes: mentoring at-risk students, volunteering in after-school programs, assisting in alcohol or drug awareness programs, and coaching (Raymond, 2010). Educators can and have

utilized police officers with teaching assignments in the classroom regarding the following subjects: gang and stranger awareness, gun safety awareness, railroad crossing safety, anti-bullying, and criminal justice topics (Raymond, 2010). Police officers at schools have an opportunity to make a positive impression in a student's life (Gurney, 2009). An officer should be able to establish a professional and friendly rapport with the students. A police officer provides an excellent example of leadership for the students (Chen, 2009).

Schools are generally considered safe environments in comparison to the community at large. However, a school with a police officer on-site further increases the sense of safety and security. When a student or teacher observes a police officer walking the hallways at their school, it makes them feel safer (Benedict & Brown, 2005). Parents also feel safe when they see an officer on campus where their child attends. Campus police officers, while on duty, constantly promote a safe environment at their work location. This preventive step may help to reduce students who feel it is necessary to carry and use weapons, such as knives, firearms, and other weapons, at school (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). A safer school environment leads to more conducive learning settings for students. This primary goal should be set and achieved by school board members, law enforcement officials, school administrators, faculty and staff, and the police officer.

COUNTER POSITION

The most compelling argument that faces law enforcement at the campus-based level is the criminalization of students. As more and more police officers and school resource officers are being assigned to schools nationwide, the view by some critics is

that “student behavior will be unnecessarily criminalized and school environments will become increasingly toxic” (Geronimo, Karpatkin & Kim, 2009, para 3). The fear of students of being entered into the criminal justice program at a young age, especially for misbehaving, like disruption of classes, has many civil rights and juvenile activists concern (Thurau & Wald, 2009). The Texas Apple Seed Foundation of Austin, Texas also concurs with this assessment (Aseltine, Fowler, Lightsey, & Monger, 2011). Traditionally, when a student got in trouble at school, the school administration would handle the incident by telephoning the parents on corrective measures. If corporal punishment was available to the school administrators, it was used. However, this option is no longer in wide-scale use by the public school systems.

Another term that has become widespread is called the “school to prison pipeline.” Advocates have made charges that police officers working out of school environments have actually increased the number of students being referred to the criminal justice system (Price, 2009). They argue that police officers are referring students to the criminal justice system, especially at the time when school violence has dropped nationally (Price, 2009). Another contention that advocates are concerned about is whether school administrators are relying too heavily on the campus police to maintain order and discipline within the schools (Geronimo, Karpatkin & Kim, 2009).

When a criminal complaint or report is received by an officer from school administration or by a teacher, the officer is duty-bound to investigate. During the course of the investigation, if the complainant, whether school administrator, teacher, or student, wishes to pursue criminal actions against the defendant, the officer will then proceed to the next stage of the investigation. The “school to prison pipeline” advocates

argue that police officers should know the difference between disciplinary misconduct and criminal offenses (Geronimo, Karpatkin & Kim, 2009). However, police officers are trained not to enforce school “house rules” but the law.

In defense of the law enforcement officers in schools, regarding the claims made by the juvenile advocates, noted juvenile violence and delinquency expert, Dr. Matthew T. Theriot, PhD of the University of Tennessee, conducted a three year study to determine the effectiveness of police officers in schools (Theriot, 2009). This study was conducted over a three year period at an undisclosed school district in southeastern United States. The study only yielded mixed results for the hypothesis that school district police officers criminalize student behavior (Theriot, 2009). However, the study did conclude that assault and weapon arrests were lower due to the officer’s presence assigned at the schools (Theriot, 2009).

Another concern for law enforcement in schools is that students may feel intimidated by campus-based police officers. Some students may feel threatened by police officers in general because of a history of mistrust with law enforcement. This concern does have merit, especially with immigrant families who have not fully assimilated into the American culture (Kercher & Kuo, 2008). In a study of Asian and Hispanic immigrants in the greater Houston-Harris County in 2008, these immigrant groups are less likely to report a crime due to language barriers and the lack of understanding of the criminal justice system (Kercher & Kuo, 2008). Also, another barrier of mistrust is that, “immigrants will remain apprehensive because they typically come from countries with rampant police and government abuse and corruption” (Walker, 2009, para. 6).

To remedy this issue, the State of Texas requires all peace officers in the State of Texas to receive mandatory training regarding cultural diversity. This type of training builds cultural awareness within police departments and instructs on how they can better serve all communities. Also, campus police officers should continuously strive to build bridges with these immigrant students and American born students. It is believed by many that “The presence of these officers shapes the school social climate and student’s legal socialization” (Chen, 2009, para. 2). What Chen (2009) implied is that officers assigned at schools can help students become more aware of the legal system. The perception of mistrust of the police can be broken by campus-based police officers.

The final concern facing police officers in schools, as well law enforcement in general, is smaller operating budgets. The present budget crisis of the current fiscal year 2010 through 2011 is affecting federal, state and local governmental agencies. In the state of Texas, the proposed budget cuts for the new Fiscal Year 2012, will affect public entities receiving state funding for pension, health care, protection, transportation, social services, regulatory agencies, and education programs (Mildenberg, 2011). School district police departments rely heavily on state educational funding. Nationwide, several school district police departments have laid-off police officers in 2009 and 2010 (Eisele-Dyrli, 2010). In one school district in the state of California, the Vallejo City Unified Schools, the police officers assigned to the school district were removed due to budgetary restraints by the City of Vallejo, California (Asimov, 2008). This prompted the school district’s spokesperson to remark, “Our schools can not get along without police services” (Asimov, 2008, para. 4). One possible solution to the

decreasing budgets that school district police departments in Texas face annually would be the establishment of a reserve police program. In 2007, the State of California amended Education Code 39670 to allow school district police departments to create their own reserve police programs ("San Bernardino City Unified," 2007). This idea, if implemented by state law makers, can assist school district police agencies in the state of Texas. In Texas, reserve deputies/police officers are non-paid, and this would benefit a school district police department in a budget short fall. The reserve program could assist in manpower shortages at the schools when required. At the time of this research, this author could not find a school district police department in Texas with a reserve police program.

Mr. William Modzeleski, Associate Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office Safe and Drug Free Schools, Department of Education stated, "Having no money should not be an excuse to do nothing. There are things that are not too costly that schools can and should do to maintain levels of security" (Eisele-Dyrli, 2010, p. 55). The children within schools deserve a school to be safe.

CONCLUSION

Having a police presence in schools is vital within the public school system. Police officers deter crime and criminal activity from occurring in the school setting. Officers assigned to schools give the faculty and the student body a sense of security. When they observe an officer patrolling the grounds or hallways of their school, it makes them feel better. The public expects elected officials to provide a plan that make public schools safe. By adding officers to a stand alone school district police department or obtaining a federal grant to gain school resource officers, elected officials are

maintaining the commitment for safe schools. Also, effective partnerships must be maintained by school officials and law enforcement (Hess, Miller, & Orthmann, 2011).

The two academic and social debates against the police presence in schools are the criminalization of students and the “school to prison pipeline” arguments. These arguments maintain that law enforcement in schools criminalizes student behavior regarding simple student infractions. To prove this, a three year study to determine their hypothesis was correct was conducted by Dr. M.T. Theriot (Theriot, 2009). However, this study yielded mixed results for their hypothesis. This study also determined that officers assigned at schools actually lower assaults and weapon offenses.

Juvenile advocates have argued that police officers in schools intimidate students. This concern does have merit due to cultural differences among native born and recent immigrant students. However, the State of Texas has mandated all peace officers to attend cultural diversity classes every four years to remedy this issue. This type of training is beneficial for State of Texas peace officers. As a result, officers assigned to school work hard to bridge the cultural gaps within the student body.

The current budget crisis facing law enforcement today can have a deep impact on the police presence in schools. With limited or no funding, some school district police departments in America have laid off police officers and security personnel (Eisele-Dyrli, 2010). In the state of California, several school district police departments have implemented a reserve program to assist with manpower. This concept, if implemented, could assist schools in the state of Texas with a police presence. All stakeholders in this issue must recognize the threat to schools that do not have a police

presence in their school halls. An official in the U.S. Department of Education stated, "Having no money should not be an excuse to do nothing. There are things that are not too costly that schools can and should do to maintain levels of security" (Eisele-Dyrli, 2010, p.55). Funding for continued police officers in schools must be maintained.

The importance of police officers in schools is vital. In a research study over a four year period in the Chicago Public Schools, it was shown that police officers deter crime, criminal activity and provide a safe environment for students, teachers, and staff (Balmer, S., Brady, K. & Phenix, D. 2007). Police officers assigned to schools have also been shown to monitor suspicious activities (Raymond, B. 2010). In another study has shown that students have a heightened sense of security when they know that a police officer is in their school (McDevitt, J., & Panniello, J. 2005). This makes the school a better environment for learning. Parents, above all else, expect elected school board members and law enforcement to take care of their children while they are in school

On September 14, 1959, the first known act of domestic terrorism within the state of Texas directed at a public elementary school occurred in Houston (Turner, 2009). This attack was directed at the Edgar Allen Poe Elementary school located in the neighborhood called the Rice University Village. In this bombing, six people were killed, including three children, and 18 people were injured (Turner, 2009). This school bombing stunned the greater Houston area and the nation; however, this act of violence directed at a school, has been largely forgotten now. Hopefully, it will not take another incident like this to make elected officials to make school safety a priority.

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