



VPD SCHOOL LIAISON UNIT

The need for SLOs in our schools

History and Current Practice – An Overview of the School Liaison Program in Vancouver

The Vancouver Police Department's (VPD) School Liaison Unit (SLU) was established in 1972, with the primary aim of addressing the safety and diverse needs of students, families, educators and staff within the school community, which totals an estimated 65,000 people at present. With an established unit of 15 police constables, who serve as School Liaison Officers (SLOs), and 2 supervising police sergeants, the VPD's SLU provides representation at each of the schools within the Vancouver School Board (VSB), while also serving the private schools operating within the CoV. While School Liaison Officer programs differ across the country according to the specific needs of each school and policing jurisdiction (Muench, 2019), the VPD's SLU adheres to the unifying goals of the Canadian School Liaison Programs, which are:

- prevention of crime and the enhancement of community safety through education
- promotion of the police as an accessible community service
- elimination of barriers between youth and police
- investigation of offences and enforcement of laws
- promotion of policing as a career

Given the dynamic nature of the role of an SLO, researchers have historically had difficulty solidifying a typology through which to study the effectiveness of SLO programs across police organizations; however, three meta-categories of SLO function were identified as being universal across SLO programs – (1) relationship building (2) safety/security, and (3) enforcement of laws within a school setting (Muench, 2019). The aim of the VPD's SLO program ascribes to these same meta-categories and the objectives are to approach crime prevention and safety from a proactive, community-based standpoint. Through the integration of relationship building and community relations, education, counselling, as well as investigation and law enforcement when deemed necessary, the VPD's SLO program seeks to serve as a resource for all individuals within the school community. The specific functions of the SLOs in Vancouver are as follows:

- deliver safety and crime prevention lessons to students, staff and parents
- act as a legal resource to students, administrators and staff
- counsel and talk informally with students
- work to enhance the safety and security of the school
- coach teams, join clubs and escort field trips
- investigate criminal offences relating to the school and its population
- serve as a liaison between the school and the criminal justice system

Throughout the school year, SLOs provide numerous presentations to improve learning and education surrounding safety and crime prevention topics. For example, Halloween Safety and Pedestrian Safety presentations are conducted by SLOs in the fall to younger elementary school

students, as well as anti-bullying presentations and online safety presentations using Canadian Centre for Child Protection materials. SLOs frequently co-present with the Youth Justice Referral Coordinator to provide TROO (Total Respect for Ourselves and Others), which is an educational presentation for students in Grades 6 & 7 with regards to sexting, healthy/unhealthy relationships, boundaries, and online predatory behaviour against youth. Many SLOs also conduct general policing and informational presentations to secondary school students in order to answer any questions with regards to the law and the Criminal Justice System. In this manner, SLOs are able to effectively prevent crime by providing youth with the knowledge, awareness and education necessary to stay safe.

In addition to the presentations conducted throughout the school year, VPD SLOs work to ensure the safety and security of all by serving as a resource for students, families and staff within the school community. SLOs seek to provide guidance and assistance wherever possible, and in addition to being a physical presence on school premises as a deterrent to crime, SLOs spend a large portion of their day engaging and interacting with students. Whether this is done informally in hallways between classes or in more structured youth outreach/crime prevention programming, the objective is the same – to establish connection so that youth feel safe in their schools.

Inevitably, as the first point of contact, and the formal liaison between schools and the Criminal Justice System, SLOs are required to investigate any reported/observed criminal offences with relation to the student population. As a result of their vested interest in their school communities and their collaborative approach when working with other staff members within the school system, VPD SLOs have been extraordinarily successful in disproving the notion that having police presence in schools automatically results in a higher arrest rate for minor offences (Kupchik, Curran, Fisher, & Viano , 2020; Muench, 2019). On the contrary, through ongoing participation in existing extracurricular programs within the school community and through new youth outreach, crime prevention and targeted interventions for at-risk youth, SLOs in the CoV have mitigated the dreaded “school-to-prison pipeline” (Muench, 2019, p. 32) that, unfortunately, may still be found elsewhere in North America.

The VPD SLOs are proud to be actively involved in their various school environments and when they are not coaching school hockey teams or providing transportation supports for field trips, SLOs can also be found assisting with the planning, recruitment, administration, coordination and/or facilitation of numerous VPD-led youth engagement events, such as the VPD Cadet program, Youth Connect, Paul Sanghera Soccer Tournament, Gang Tackle, Kops for Kids etc. Other youth outreach programs operate throughout the year and require an ongoing commitment from SLOs to engage with students through recreation, sports and leadership development activities. The Police Athletic League, for example, facilitates an annual average of 25 noon-hour sports games, where SLOs and other police officers play a recreational game of basketball or volleyball against students in Grades 6 & 7. This popular event is typically watched by a gymnasium full of cheering students in younger grades, and fosters an opportunity for youth to interact informally with SLOs outside of a call/intervention. The Here4Peers peer mental health program and the VPD Cadet program both rely on SLOs for recruitment and additional supports throughout the year, while many schools have girls/boys clubs that also count on SLOs for support, including Get R.E.A.L. and the Boy’s Club at John Oliver Secondary.

In addition to these collaborative school-based, community and VPD-led programs, there are a number of youth crime prevention programs that began as new SLO initiatives – started through identified needs observed by SLOs through the course of their day-to-day duties at each of their respective schools. At present, many of the SLO-run programs focus on educating youth to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle and include programs such as Rise Basketball, Windermere Running Club, Churchill Strong and others. A popular, longstanding VPD SLO initiative is the annual Student Challenge, a mini police academy for 48 secondary school students, which takes place over Spring Break and features presentations from VPD’s various specialty sections, as well as personal development, team building, leadership capacity building, and fitness challenges. For students in the CoV, whether they are program participants in VPD initiatives or youth caught up in poor choices, the SLOs represent not just members of law enforcement, but mentors, leaders, and social support systems that are ready to listen and lend a helping hand at a moment’s notice.

A Review of Similar SLO Programs

Since the 1950s, the presence of police officers in schools has become increasingly prevalent, however, there currently lacks sufficient research-based consensus on whether SLO programs are effective in reducing criminal and/or delinquent behaviour across school communities (Javdani, 2019; Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2014). One of the primary reasons for this lack of consensus is that it has been found that policing objectives vary widely across countries and policing organizations, with significant differences in philosophies, range of intervention and policing style, all of which impact the established relationships between the policing organization and the schools in which they police (Shaw, 2004). Proponents of SLO programs tout the perceptions of students, parents, and educators as being positive and supportive of SLO programs (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018; Kelly & Swezey, 2015), while critics argue that there is not enough empirical evidence to support these findings, and that the variation in responsibilities, training and function of SLOs across schools require further research (Javdani, 2019; Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2014).

A common issue of research in this area is that many of the existing studies are focused on the functions of SLOs in the United States, and as such, cannot be generalized to other countries and policing agencies given the disparities that exist in both philosophy and practice. Recently, a 3-year longitudinal study was conducted in the Peel School District in Ontario, Canada in order to assess the value of their School Resource Officer (SRO) program. This was conducted in attempt to measure the success of the SRO Program through quantitative, qualitative and ethnographic analysis, as well as through a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). While differences in policing practices between Peel and Vancouver inevitably exist, the similarities that can be drawn between the two policing jurisdictions determined that there is value in examining this study in closer detail, in order to ascertain whether the VPD’s SLO program is of comparable value.

Within the Peel Regional Police SRO program, officers place the most emphasis and effort in relationship building, proactive policing, and crime prevention activities, with information gathering, law enforcement, calls for service and administrative duties secondary in terms of time spent during the course of their duties (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). This is comparable to the VPD's SLO program theory and approach, suggesting that there may be additional parallels that can be drawn with regards to the value of Vancouver's SLO program. The SROI analysis of Peel's SRO program demonstrated that proactive, crime prevention activities yielded more than 2 times the value for key stakeholders, including students, families and the broader school community, as compared to enforcement activities. Similarly, this philosophy has been successfully applied within the VPD and while SLOs do spend time responding to police calls and conducting investigations, a substantially more significant amount of time and effort is spent on establishing and maintaining positive, collaborative relationships within school communities.

In examining the data collected across 5 Peel Secondary Schools, it was found that the Peel SRO program was successful in establishing positive relationships between police and the school community, increased the overall sense of security and safety for students, while the physical presence of officers in school also served as a deterrence of crime. SROs were able to achieve a faster response time to developing police calls in schools, de-escalate problematic situations before they became unsafe, and were more successful in the diversion of youth from the Criminal Justice System. This, in turn, helped to enhance police effectiveness while also increasing the efficacy of school administrators in their roles (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). The SROI was assessed at 11 times higher with regards to the extensive social and economic benefits reaped, as compared to the annual cost to run the SRO program, and students reported that their fears of being bullied or physically harmed decreased while in a school with an SRO attending (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). The findings from this particular study are noteworthy and when translated to other Canadian policing agencies with a similar policing philosophy, such as the VPD, demonstrates the effectiveness in which SLO programs help to improve safety for students and staff, while reducing crime and bullying.

Demonstrated Effectiveness of the VPD's SLO program – Processes and Statistics

The positive and/or negative implications of having police presence in schools is a widely debated topic, with proponents and advocates touting the effectiveness of such programs in de-escalating situations and prevention of criminal activity through outreach and education (Kelly & Swezey, 2015), while critics argue that an SLO's role is too diverse and exhaustive to truly be effective (Javdani, 2019). With the sudden international spotlight on policing and the near constant media coverage and imagery of riot police responding to protesters, it can be easy to surmise that children in schools are subjected to similar circumstances when policed by SLOs.

At the VPD, this simply could not be further from the truth. SLOs do not operate in silos within the Criminal Justice System and instead, work in close proximity to, and in collaboration with, school

administrators, educators, counsellors and community organizations with regards to any reported and/or observed incidents within the school setting. Every effort is made to resolve a situation through restorative justice practices and to divert students from entry into the formal Criminal Justice System. A Youth Justice Referral Coordinator at the Youth Services Section with the VPD works closely with the SLOs to determine whether extrajudicial measures, such as a warning or caution, may be sufficient to address any low-level offences including vandalism, property theft, simple assaults and mischief. In most instances, no further action is deemed necessary and the SLO works in tandem with school staff to support the youth in question with relation to other personal and community needs, such as physical and mental health, access to resources, engagement with pro-social role models, as well as participation in school and/or community programs. Having a personal, first-hand knowledge of the case, the SLO is then able to build rapport and increase relationship building capacities with the youth, in hopes of deterring said individual from ongoing mischievous, anti-social and/or criminal behaviours.

In the event that further action is required, most scenarios involve SLOs and the Youth Justice Referral Coordinator working closely with a community organization so that the student can be diverted from the court system, while simultaneously maintaining accountability for their actions. This restorative justice practice may require the young person to take any number of the following actions: make a personal apology, spend time with a mentor, participate in an extra-curricular school/community program, attend counselling, repair any damages caused and/or pay for damages if appropriate. In this manner, reparations can be made by the young person without punitive measures being implemented, and diversion from the formal Criminal Justice System prevents a further risk of recidivism and criminality in the future.

The significance and impact of the relationships built between SLOs and the student population cannot be understated, and in many instances, it is this preventative, pro-active approach to crime prevention that becomes a primary deterrent in youth criminality. Despite the successes that the VPD SLO program has seen in this regard, the difficulty in quantifying this qualitative measure is one of the reasons why it can be complicated to ascertain the true effectiveness of the SLO program within the Vancouver school community based solely on statistics. However, while the number of relationships built between SLOs and students may be immeasurable, the statistics involving youth criminal charges vs. youth police encounters are clear. In the 5 years spanning 2015 – 2019, a total of 7,025 youth encounters were recorded in the VPD's records system, between members of the SLU and youth within both the Vancouver School Board and other private schools in the CoV.

Of these encounters, only 3.19% or 224 cases resulted in any form of recommendation within the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Within this 3.19%, 197 cases or 87.95% were successfully resolved through Alternative Measures or other similar means, whereby the youth involved were not criminally charged and instead, supports were put in place so that the situation could be addressed outside of court processes. In these instances, the students involved do not possess a criminal record once the measures are completed. These numbers directly correlate with the positive impact of having SLOs in schools, as they are better able to ascertain the need, or lack thereof, for criminal charges with regards

to a young person, and are better able to redirect these students towards services which will help them, rather than penalize them.

Between the years of 2015 – 2019, a total of 27 youth (out of 7,025 youth encounters) were charged with a criminal offence through the SLO program in Vancouver, 6 of which were later dropped by Crown counsel. In essence, this means that only 0.29% of youth were formally charged with a crime and only 21 individuals over the span of 5 years formally entered the Criminal Justice System as a result of the SLO program. To provide some context, between 2017 – 2019 alone, there were 124 assaults, 11 crimes against persons, 8 robberies, 17 serious offences, 70 sex offences and 92 incidents of threats/harassment documented by VPD SLOs, totaling 322 serious offences against others, not to mention the myriad of other minor offences committed.

Of the total number of youth charged, including those charges dropped by the Crown, the SLO program formally charged 3 Indigenous youth and 2 Black youth with a crime, over the course of 5 years. Given this information, it simply cannot be said that the VPD SLO program is complicit in any level of racial profiling and on that basis alone the removal of the popular and successful SLO program from Vancouver schools would not be justified. The statistics from the VPD's SLO program prove that the benefits of taking a preventative, pro-active approach to policing, with a foundation of relationship and community-building, is one that, in actuality, deters youth criminalization and unnecessary entry into the Criminal Justice System.

In other words, despite the complex nature and severity of these crimes, VPD SLOs were successful in their restorative justice efforts to divert youth from the Criminal Justice System. Some researchers have argued that the presence of SLOs in schools inevitably results in "heightened criminalization of student behavior" (Javdani, 2019, p. 15), thereby resulting in arrest and discipline, with a school-to-prison pipeline established (Muench, 2019). While this may be the unfortunate case in other schools in other jurisdictions and/or countries, the training, expertise and knowledge of the VPD's SLO program prevent this "zero tolerance policy" from becoming an established reality (Muench, 2019, p. 33). The statistics from the VPD's SLO program prove that the benefits of taking a preventative, pro-active approach to policing, with a foundation of relationship- and community-building, is one that, in actuality, deters youth criminalization and unnecessary entry into the Criminal Justice System.

Summary

The present, uncomfortable truth that Canadians are now facing is that systemic racism persists, not just within the Criminal Justice System, but it is pervasive throughout our healthcare systems, social welfare networks, and educational systems. Dismantling this will require coordinated and concerted efforts to understanding just some of the injustices faced by Black and Indigenous populations in Canada. Having said that, complete disintegration of successful, supportive and pro-active crime prevention programs, such as the VPD's SLO program, are not the right steps to be taken in support of Black and Indigenous lives. There is undoubtedly a demonstrable need for further funding and resources in the areas of mental health, housing, healthcare and education to address some of the existing gaps in

our current Criminal Justice System, but the removal of the SLO program from the VPD would be a detriment to the safety of youth in the CoV. This would be a significant loss to our public safety network and would negate many of the advances made to improve the security and well-being for students in their school communities. Without the pre-established relationships built by the SLOs with the student bodies within each respective school and the diversion measures employed to reduce involvement in the Criminal Justice System, the risk of youth criminalization and recidivism may further increase.

There is much more that needs to be done by way of addressing the ongoing overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous populations in the Criminal Justice System but the removal of the SLO program with the CoV is not the appropriate response to achieve this measure. Instead, it is only through ongoing dialogues and the increased centering of youth Black, Indigenous and Persons of Colour voices that SLOs can continue to adapt their learning to increase safety for students, families and staff. There is so much learning that still needs to take place with policing agencies across the country and the VPD acknowledges and recognizes that more work needs to be done to achieve an anti-racist, anti-oppression and anti-colonial framework from which to operate all social systems. The VPD SLO team is proud to be a part of the larger conversation surrounding this work, with an acknowledgement that marginalized voices are instrumental in achieving these goals of equity and equality.

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