# ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF SCHOOL LIASION OFFICERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA - A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL LIASION OFFICERS AND SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

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## The Crime Reduction Research Program

The Crime Reduction Research Program (CRRP) is the joint-research model in British Columbia between academics, the provincial government, and police agencies operated by the Office of Crime Reduction – Gang Outreach. The CRRP is supported and informed by a Crime Reduction Research Working Group which includes representation from the Ministry of Public Safety Solicitor General (represented by Community Safety and Crime Prevention Branch and Police Services Branch), the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit of British Columbia and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police "E" Division.

The CRRP focuses on investing in research that can be applied to support policing operations and informing evidence-based decisions on policies and programs related to public safety in British Columbia. Each year, the CRRP reviews submissions of research proposals in support of this mandate. The CRRP Working Group supports successful proposals by working with researchers to refine the study design as necessary, provide or acquire necessary data for projects, and advise on the validity of data interpretation and the practicality of recommendations.

The CRRP operates a $1M annual funding allocation in the form of grants that are dedicated to support university-led research at Canadian institutions. This project was supported through the 2017/18 CRRP funding allotment.

## Executive Summary

Police officers have served in schools since as early as the 1930s in the United States with the first widely publicized school liaison program in Flint, Michigan starting in 1958 (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). A comprehensive review of the existing literature revealed that very few systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of School Liaison Officer (SLO) programs exist. The research tends to focus on the levels of satisfaction felt by students, school administrators, and parents about the presence of police officers in the schools. Other research has examined the daily activities and responsibilities of SLOs, and the typical traits of SLOs without any quantitative or evaluative frameworks to determine or define success in achieving the program's stated objectives. There exist numerous process evaluations, but these are often methodologically limited, such as partial or internal evaluations, thereby limiting the degree to which the conclusions can be considered valid and generalizable.

In consultation with OCR-GO, the authors of this report identified five RCMP detachments that have SLOs or youth officers assigned or responsible for the schools in their jurisdiction. The authors of this report conducted interviews with the SLOs and youth officers from these detachments, as well as school district administrators from the jurisdictions these officers worked in. The objectives of these interviews were to obtain the views of both the police and the schools about the mandate, roles, model of deployment, experiences, strengths, successes, and challenges of the SLO program.

Although all participants in this study were either RCMP members or school district administrators of schools in RCMP jurisdictions, there were two main models or approaches that represented the SLO or youth officer relationship between the schools and the police. While some participants functioned under a formal SLO approach, either with or without a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a school district to provide SLOs, others relied on the detachment's youth officers to respond to criminal incidents at a school.

Participants indicated that while there were elements of community policing in the way the SLOs operated, there is also a focus on being response-oriented to school and community needs. In effect, participants spoke in terms of two distinct mandates and roles for SLOs. One was to be part of the school community and to have informal interactions with staff and students, while the second role was to investigate criminal behaviour in or around schools and to respond formally or informally to incidents. Participants spoke about how the role of the SLO or youth officer was both proactive, in that it was focused on building rapport and positive interactions with students, and how it was also reactive in that SLOs or youth officers were responsible for investigating crimes. School district administrators indicated that it was important for SLOs or youth officers to be visibly present in schools, walk the hallways, and interact informally with students. They also recognized that this role could be challenging and confusing for students because these officers were also the ones conducting criminal investigations when an incident occurred in or around a school. It was interesting to note that school district administrators recognized that the presence of SLOs or youth officers in schools served less of a deterrent value than a relationship-building function. Many school district administrators believed that this aspect of the mandate and role for an SLO or youth officer was very successful.

There are typically two approaches used when assigning SLOs or youth officers to schools. One approach is to have the officer assigned to a high school or high schools in a jurisdiction and to have all the elementary or middle schools that fed into this high school or high schools assigned to the same SLOs or youth officers. The other approach is to assign an SLO or youth officer to a number of schools in an area regardless of which schools fed into others, or to assign SLOs or youth officers exclusively to elementary, middle, or high schools. Participants in this study represented both of these two general approaches.

There were three areas where SLOs or youth officers felt that they needed more targeted training. These areas were mental health, social media, and conflict resolution. Many participants spoke about the role SLOs and youth officers played in delivering educational presentations on a range of public safety issues, so it is critical that these officers have the necessary training and skills to deliver presentations effectively. Related to this point, it should be common practice for SLOs and youth officers to evaluate the value of their presentations with students.

Many participants spoke extremely positively about the relationship they had with their school district administrators and with the senior management team of their respective detachments. All participants felt that there was a genuine partnership between the police and the school district and that school district administrators were in support of the SLO program.

Participants were very vocal about the most important characteristics of an SLO or youth officer. It was not surprising that several participants spoke about the need to have good investigative skills because this was a necessary part of the job. Related to being a good investigator, participants mentioned that SLOs and youth officers needed excellent networking skills because much of the work they did with youth required strong partnerships with the school and the community. In addition to the mandatory desire and interest in working with youth, participants spoke of the need to be compassionate, empathetic, patient, nurturing, and caring. Successful SLOs or youth officers were viewed as those who were proactive, comfortable initiating interactions with youth, genuinely interested in the lives of youth, focused on making a positive difference in youth, school, and the broader community, and believed in the value of prevention and education. Another important ability identified as necessary for the SLO position is conflict management skills. It was felt by some participants that SLOs and youth officers needed to be able to resolve conflict and a range of social issues both informally as a person of trust among youth, but also formally in their role as a police officer.

There was some general consistency in what participants reported spending most of their time on and the issues that confronted them most often in their roles as an SLO or youth officer. Overwhelmingly, SLOs and youth officers reported that bullying and threats was the most common issues they dealt with. More specifically, it was bullying or threats over the internet or social media platforms that were most common. Some participants indicated that theft of property, such as laptops, mobile phones, or headphones, was another issue that they commonly encountered. Some participants also reported that consensual fights were a concern. Finally, some SLOs and youth officers indicated that responding more generally to youth experiencing a mental health crisis was a common issue. In contrast to the perspective of the SLOs and youth officers, school district

administrators did not identify social media as the primary issue, but rather assaults, controlled substances, and mental health concerns.

The most common elements identified as being foundational to a positive SLO/youth officer – school relationship was trust and open communication. Participants also indicated that a clear understanding of the SLO or youth officer mandate and what the schools can expect from their SLOs or youth officers was very important. It was viewed as necessary that the police and school district be committed to the program, understand and support each other's roles and responsibilities, and work collaboratively for the benefit of the students, their families, the schools, and the communities. All participants reported having well-established partnerships with a variety of organizations and agencies to assist them with their responsibilities. Many SLOs and youth officers reported that the most successful strategies involved collaborations with schools, parents, and community partners. When there is communication between the school district, members, and community agencies, and a commitment to providing "a multi-pronged approach" to services, it was the view of most participants that youth are better served and the underlying issues at the root of the incident(s) can be addressed.

All school district administrators spoke highly about their positive relationships with their SLOs and youth officers and the commitment that these members showed to students and youth. This strong relationship was the primary factor that contributed to the perceived success of the SLO program and explained why, in their view, the program worked so well. The majority of SLOs and youth officers reported strong support from their superintendent's office and felt that everyone worked cooperatively towards the common goal of keeping youth and their schools safe. All school districts that participated in this study would welcome more SLOs or youth officers, and some districts noted that there were simply not enough SLOs or youth officers given the number of schools they needed to serve.

The interviews identified that SLOs and youth officers were integrated well into their schools and that these officers engaged in a wide array of duties aimed at education, support, and crime prevention. Still, there are several recommendations that would strengthen the role that these officers play in schools. Moreover, there are several options and strategies for those school districts considering implementing an SLO program. The recommendations focused on the issues of developing a formal MOU between the school district and the police, defining clearly the roles and responsibilities of the SLOs or youth officers, the scheduling and distribution of SLOs and youth officers, and the training and education of SLOs and youth officers.

## Introduction

Police officers have served in schools since as early as the 1930s in the United States with the first widely publicized school liaison program in Flint, Michigan starting in 1958 (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). At that time, the responsibilities for police officers assigned to schools included observing student behaviour, identifying delinquent or pre-delinquent behaviour, and serving in a counselling capacity. Na and Gottfredson (2011) noted that, in 1999, in the wake of the shooting at Columbine High School, the US Department of Justice Office of Community Policing Services (COPS) initiated the "COPS in Schools" grant program that awarded more than $750 million dollars to increase the number of police officers deployed in schools. In 2009, there were more than 17,000 school liaison officers (SLOs) in the United States (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). The federal "COPS in Schools" program offered two primary objectives: to "encourage working relationships between police and schools, thus bringing the principles and philosophy of community policing directly into the school environment," and to "assist communities in focusing leadership and resources on the issues related to creating and maintaining a safe school environment" (Girouard, 2001 cited in Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 2). Proponents believe that SLOs are able to contribute to school safety through the creation of bonds with students, who are then more likely to report delinquency to them. Additionally, the capacity for surveillance and enforcement functions, and the physical presence of police in schools provides readily available first responders in the case of an emergency (Na & Gottfredson, 2011).

While some police forces have developed and maintained specific initiatives and protocols, the lack of a clear theoretical framework and defined objectives for many police-school programs is problematic. A comprehensive review of the existing literature revealed that very few systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of SLO programs exist. This is particularly surprising given that SLOs have been deployed in schools across Canada and the United States dating back to the mid-1950s. Instead of systematic or quantitative evaluations of the value of SLOs, the research tends to focus on the levels of satisfaction felt by students, school administrators, and parents about the presence of police officers in the schools. Other research has examined the daily activities and responsibilities of SLOs, and the typical traits of SLOs without any quantitative or evaluative frameworks to determine or define success in achieving the program's stated objectives. There exist numerous process evaluations, but these are often methodologically limited, such as partial or internal evaluations, thereby limiting the degree to which the conclusions can be considered valid and generalizable. There also seems to be a fundamental lack of recognition within the research community that SLOs are producing outcomes that can be assessed and evaluated. Given this, the current state of the literature does not indicate what should be considered best practices in SLO programs.

When attempting to identify promising or common practices, it is important to consider that much of the SLO research comes from the United States. Based on the different cultural and political contexts of Canada and the United States, it is ill-advised to simply transfer a program that may work in a completely different context and expect similar results. It is also important to note that in Public Safety Canada's Crime Prevention Inventory, the SLO program is only one of six crime prevention programs listed as having three or more evaluations in Canada. To that end, three police departments in Canada have undergone reviews of their SLO program. Winnipeg Police Service

completed four exploratory/qualitative evaluations in 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2014. The Toronto Police Service conducted an internal evaluation of their SLO program in 2012, and the Peel Regional Police Service completed one in 2018 (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). The Peel Regional Police Service study noted that Canadians had only a limited knowledge of what SLOs actually did and that a review of the job descriptions of the SLO position from across Canada indicated that they were expected to be familiar with the law, solve unique problems, serve as the school's public safety specialist, act as a community liaison, educate students on the law, and be a positive role model for students (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). Given the changing nature of the policing environment, it is essential to recognize that the lack of empirical research on the outcomes of SLO programs can have significant consequences. Given this, the main objectives of the report are to identify 'what works', 'what is promising', and 'what doesn't work' with respect to SLO programs in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia from the perspective of those delivering the program and those receiving it. To that end, this report will examine the various mandates for SLO programs, review SLO delivery models, and the various ways these programs do and do not meet the needs of the schools they serve through qualitative interviews with a sample of SLOs, youth officers, and school district administrators from a number of municipalities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

## Literature Review

The presence of police in schools began as early as the 1930s in the United States with the first widely publicized school liaison[1] program starting in 1958 in Flint, Michigan (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). In Canada, this trend started in the 1970s when police officers were first assigned to schools though the proliferation of formalized programs (Shaw, 1994). At that time, the responsibilities and mandate for police officers assigned to schools included observing student behaviour, identifying delinquent or pre-delinquent behaviour, and serving in a counselling capacity. Na and Gottfredson (2011) noted that, in the wake of the tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999, the US Department of Justice Office of Community Policing Services (COPS) initiated the "COPS in Schools" grant program and awarded more than $750 million dollars to increase the presence of police officers in schools. In 2009, there were more than 17,000 School Resources Officers in the United States (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). By 2015, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that there were more than 30,000 law enforcement officers posted in public school across the United States, with an additional 13,000 Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) assigned for at least a portion of their shifts in schools (Gray & Lewis, 2015). Nearly half of all public schools in the United States have a regular police presence (Ryan et al., 2015). The U.S. federal "COPS in Schools" program offered two primary mandates, "encourage working relationships between police and schools, thus bringing the principles and philosophy of community policing directly into the school environment," and "assist

[1] The terms School Liaison Officer (SLO), School Resource Officer (SRO), and School Police Officer (SPO) are often used interchangeably in research, policy, and practice. Broadly speaking, police officers in school are called SROs or SPOs in the United States, and known as SLOs in Canada. For clarity, the term SLO will be used throughout this report even when the initial research used the terms SPO or SRO.

communities in focusing leadership and resources on the issues related to creating and maintaining a safe school environment" (Girouard, 2001 cited in Na & Gottfredson, 2011, p. 2).

SLOs presently serve three primary roles in schools, with a guiding philosophy known as 'the triad,' meaning the officers serve as counselor, educator and law enforcement officer (NASRO, 2012; Zhang, 2019). The first of these roles is as a uniformed law enforcement officer and safety expert responsible for responding to calls for service, handling reports of crime or incidents in schools, and conducting criminal investigations. Additionally, the functions of surveillance, enforcement, and physical presence in schools provides the police with the ability to respond immediately in the case of an emergency (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). The second role is as a liaison for students requiring resources in the community with SLOs expected to offer services as a problem solver and counselor (NASRO, 2012). These functions may include addressing non-criminal behaviours in schools, including bullying or disorderly behavior, referring students to professionals in the community, and developing crime prevention efforts, including the identification of and recommendations for reducing or removing environmental influences, such as target hardening efforts, including increasing surveillance practices, to reduce crime (Crawford & Burns, 2016; Zhang, 2019). The final role is as an educator engaged in conducting presentations and teaching classes on topics broadly related to policing and crime for students, parent groups, and teachers (Zhang, 2019). Despite this description of SLOs occupying three broad roles, there exists many different types of SLO programs with officers receiving various levels or types of training and varying expectations with little consistency across schools and districts (Montes et al., 2020). Because the mandate, roles, and responsibilities are often only vaguely defined and can differ considerably, this can present challenges for SLOs who have to alternate between nurturing and authoritative approaches (NASRO, 2012)[2]. In attempting to determine a model of program delivery identified as best practice, it became quickly apparent that there remains a dearth of data and the absence of systematic documentation on SLO models in Canada and the United States with varied implementation and little research to indicate what types of approaches are most effective based on how different police departments, schools, and jurisdictions use police in schools (Montes et al., 2020). Corrado, Cohen, and Davies (2005) noted that SLO programs are believed to offer inherent social capital functions by providing informal networks among victims, high-risk students, teachers, administrators, and affected parents. They further posited that given the reported widespread fear of bullying and intimidation in schools, SLOs are well positioned in middle schools to provide early intervention assistance. It is at this juncture that the absence of positive peer and family networks are associated with increased criminality. Their research noted that this form of social capital will become more important given the trend toward increased ethnic/racial diversity, one-parent families, and the apparent negative effect of popular media and social media (Corrado, Cohen, & Davies, 2005).

Given the dynamic characteristics of the policing environment, it is essential to recognize that the lack of empirical research on the outcomes of SLO programs had substantial consequences for the

[2] For a comprehensive review of the diversity of the roles and responsibilities of SLOs in the United States, see Montes et al., 2020.

Toronto Police Service when, in November 2017, the Toronto School Board passed a motion to remove police officers from all schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The research found there was no differences in feelings of safety at school between students in SLO schools and students in non-SLO schools, and that the majority of students in both groups felt safe in school (Toronto Police Service, 2011). The remainder of the findings about SLO programs were generally positive. Students in schools with a dedicated SLO were more likely than those in non-SLO schools to say they felt comfortable talking to police about crime and other school-related problems, were more likely to contact police if they were the victim of a crime, and more likely to report that the relationship between students and the police was either good or excellent. Still, approximately 10% of students said that the mere presence of police officers in schools made them feel intimidated, uncomfortable, or that they were being watched in school (Toronto Police Service, 2011). It was ultimately determined by the School Board Trustees that they needed to mitigate any discriminatory effect of the SLO program, so the program was abolished. The Peel Regional review conducted by Duxbury and Bennell (2018) might have offered an effective counter-argument in support of the continued presence of SLOs in schools, but was published well after the decision had already been made by the Toronto School Board.

Duxbury and Bennell (2018) noted that knowledge about 'what works', 'what is promising' and 'what doesn't' related to school liaison programs has not been collected, and important information related to outcomes remains elusive. Given this, the question becomes what measures the success of an SLO program? Some research has considered student reports related to feelings of safety in schools. Other research solicited the views of parents, teachers, and administrators about their perceptions of the SLO program as a measure of success. In the review of the SLO program in Peel Region, Duxbury and Bennell (2018) noted that the vast majority of students in grade nine reported feeling safer at school because of the presence of a police officer at school. Moreover, school administrators believed that the presence of SLOs deterred or prevented some students from engaging in criminal behaviour and making poor choices, and provided greater opportunities for a police officer to proactively intervene with rebellious students. In addition, school administrators felt that the SLO program made the school and school community safer, and that the SLO program bridged the gap, in part, between the community and the school because things that occurred at school affected the community and vice versa. The research concluded that all students, irrespective of whether they had been victimized previously, reported increased perceptions of school safety and decreased feelings of anxiety and/or stress after the implementation of an SLO program. This finding reinforced the conclusion that the SLO program benefited all students and not just those that had some interaction with an SLO (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018).

Duxbury and Bennell (2018) also evaluated school administrators' perceptions of the value of SLOs in schools. Their findings suggested that having a dedicated SLO assigned to work in partnership with school administrators provided a deterrent effect because students were not deterred by school suspensions. Similarly, parents were more appreciative and receptive to the severity of the issue when the police were involved instead of the school. The partnership between the police and the school was also perceived as increasing police effectiveness because of the view that students, parents, and school administrators were more likely to communicate with the SLO than to reach out to a police officer they did not know. There was also a perceived improvement in information

sharing as SLOs had access to important information that the school administrators might not around issues of assaults that occurred on or off school grounds and more minor issues, such as graffiti and gang-tagging. Moreover, the information might be timelier when there was an SLO in the schools resulting in more opportunities for prevention and intervention, rather than suppression or enforcement. School administrators also acknowledged the SLOs often offered a different perspective of school issues that could result in the development and implementation of alternative solutions. As mentioned above, there was an element of enhanced perceptions of safety with the presence of an SLO, and there was the belief that familiarity with students and community increased police effectiveness (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018).

Kaplan's (2014) review of the Winnipeg SLO program involved surveys in both 2012 and 2013, students in grades 3 to 6 and grades 7 to 9, and parents, school staff, and school administrators about the degree to which SLOs met the aforementioned primary and secondary objectives (Kaplan Research Associates, 2014). While most of the conclusions were positive, of particular interest was the conclusion that,

> They [SLOs] are also involved in a broad range of community-based and extra-curricular activities, and spend a notable amount of time casually interacting with students and school staff, and consulting with students, their parents, school staff and, in particular, the school administrators. They also provide standard police services, such as intelligence gathering and law enforcement, and support during lockdown situations. As such, it is commendable that they are still able to devote and dedicate a significant amount of time providing presentations and information sessions on a school-wide and classroom basis (Kaplan Research Associates, 2014, p. 165).

Several of the research studies on SLOs in Canada indicated that an SLO model based on continuity is a recommended or promising practice (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018; Kaplan, 2014; TPS, 2011).

In a review of their SLO program prior to its disbandment, the Toronto Police Service (2011) recommended that an SLO should commit to the position for a minimum of two years, and SLOs should remain assigned to a particular school throughout that entire time. Kaplan Research Associates' (2014) review of the Winnipeg SLO program discussed how students highlighted the level of trust they had with their SLO based, in part, on the amount of time they had to establish a relationship with their SLO. Of note, half of the Staff Sergeants interviewed in the Peel study indicated that the presence of a consistent SLO in the school strengthened relationships and partnerships, and enhanced collaboration between the students and their families, the school, and the police. The Staff Sergeants contended that if this consistency was not present, the value and impact of the program would be substantially reduced (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018).

In reviewing the literature, other policing organizations have made adjustments to the schedules of SLOs to ensure that they are able to participate in all school activities, including after-school programming. The Toronto Police Service (TPS) recommended shifting the schedule of SLOs to allow them to participate in programming both before and after school when students were not in classes (TPS, 2011). In their review of the Peel Regional Police SLO program, Duxbury and Bennell (2018) noted that this approach facilitated SLOs to become entrenched in the school community and establish relationships and enhance trust with the school's administration, teachers, and students. The results of the research indicated that, from the students' perspective, the relationship

they formed with their SLOs increased their level of trust in the police and provided a valuable resource that students could access when they needed information, advice, or help. In Peel, school administrators indicated that it was necessary to keep their SLOs assigned to their schools for several consecutive years because of the difficulty in building relationships and trust with constantly changing or new SLOs (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). The Peel Regional Police Report on SLOs is quite comprehensive and used social return on investment (SROI) techniques to measure the program's value. The elements of their model, methods of evaluation, and assignment of proxy values are extensively detailed in their report, but there are two relevant takeaways to highlight here. The first has to do with the theory of change. The authors of the report stated that,

> if secondary schools that have safety concerns due to issues, such as drug dealing, bullying/cyberbullying, assault, and theft, are offered the services of a skilled full-time police officer who engages in prevention and enforcement related activities in and around the school, THEN students will feel safe, be engaged, have a positive educational/academic/school experience, will be deterred from crime, and will not be victimized. They will embark in their young adulthood successfully, while the community surrounding the school will feel safer and the police and criminal justice system will be able to re-allocate resources for other priorities (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018, p. 228).

This theory of change statement articulates the measures of success being assessed through the SROI model. The SROI was calculated by considering the resources from the criminal justice system reallocated for a youth probation officer, the reduction in calls for service by Peel Regional Police, increased job satisfaction for school administrators, reduced fear of victimization among students, and increased employability of SLOs as a result of skills gained during their tenure (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018). The cost of running the SLO program in five schools was $660,289.00. This investment yielded social and economic returns valued at $7,349,301.00. In effect, based on this study, for every one dollar invested to fund the Peel SLO program, $11.13 (minimum) of social and economic value was created (Duxbury & Bennell, 2018).

Despite the research indicating the program was having a positive effect, in September of 2020, the Peel Regional Police Service announced it was pausing the program to "engage in meaningful dialogue with diverse stakeholders and to consult with community members regarding the efficacy of such programming." (Argyle, 2021, p. 21). This reflects a wider trend across Canada, with numerous school districts moving towards reviewing, pausing, or altogether cancelling SLO programs. In September 2020, the Hamilton Wentworth School Board in Ontario cancelled their SLO program after having paused it three months prior (Argyle, 2021). That month, the Edmonton Police Service also cancelled its SLO program in public schools, though it remains in place in Catholic and independent schools in the city. In lieu of the SLO program, Edmonton has developed a new program called the Youth Enhancement Deployment (YED) Model featuring police officers who are trained to respond to issues related to youth and geographically assigned to districts across the city and responsible for responding to school calls in those areas, but without a formal presence in schools (Argyle, 2021). In effect, Edmonton has switched from a proactive way of interacting with youth to a reactive model focused on suppression and enforcement.

In June of 2020, The Vancouver School Board (VSB) passed a motion to hire an independent consulting firm to review the Vancouver Police Department's SLO Program. Similarly, the Calgary

Police Service recently hired a consultant to conduct an independent evaluation of their school-related programming (Argyle, 2021). In British Columbia, there are currently reviews being conducted of the SLO program in Delta, New Westminster, and Victoria (Argyle, 2021). In November of 2020, the Winnipeg School Division board of trustees voted to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of their SLO program (Argyle, 2021). The Winnipeg School Resource Officer program has been evaluated numerous times, most recently in 2014 (Kaplan Research Associates, 2014). This evaluation made clear that the primary objectives of the Winnipeg Police Department's SLO program was to make schools safer, help students solve their problems, educate students about the law, and improve relationships between the police and students (Kaplan Research Associates, 2014). The secondary objectives for Winnipeg Police Department SLOs included reducing bullying and other forms of violence at school, reducing gang activity at school, reducing graffiti/damage to school property and in the community, improving students' behaviour at school and in the community, and reducing students' alcohol and drug use (Kaplan Research Associates, 2014).

The independent evaluation of Vancouver's SLO program was released to the public in March of 2021. One of the modes of data collection deployed in that research was the use of an online survey. Argyle (2021) noted that the survey was completed by 1,489 BC respondents. The survey asked: "Please indicate your agreement with this statement: I think the SLO program contributes to a sense of safety in schools" (Argyle, 2021, p. 30). There was a total of 1,483 respondents that answered this question. Of those, 657 identified as students in the Vancouver School Board, 20 of whom identified as Black and 34 self-identified as Indigenous (Argyle, 2021). Argyle (2021) ran cross-tabulations and noted that of the students who identified as Black (n = 20), only 15% (n = 3) stated that they strongly agreed or agreed, whereas 60% (n = 12) of Black students indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Of the respondents that were VSB students and who identified as Indigenous (n = 34), 47% (n = 16) reported that they strongly agreed or agreed, while 33% (n = 11) strongly disagreed or disagreed that the SLO program contributed to a sense of safety in schools (Argyle, 2021).

When considering the responses of all respondents (n = 1,483), 61% said they strongly agreed or agreed that the SLO program contributed to a sense of safety in schools, while 22% reported that they strongly disagreed or disagreed. When only VSB students were included in the sample (n = 657), 53% of respondent stated that they strongly agreed or agreed, while 20% responded they either strongly disagreed or disagreed. In their conclusions, Argyle (2021) noted,

> With the Board's direction to centre voices of students who self-identified as BIPOC, we heard notable themes from these populations which should be brought to the forefront for Trustees' consideration:
>
> > • Students who identified as Black and Indigenous were more likely to express both positive and negative feelings connected to safety in schools, with comments reflecting their lived experience with SLOs and policing in their communities.
> >
> > • Compared to the overall student population, students who identified as Black and Indigenous were less likely to refer to positive relationships with SLOs (e.g. mentorship, guidance, and support) and were more likely to reference negative feelings of fear, anxiety, and mistrust in the presence of officers. Similarly, those students were more likely to use

words like 'uncomfortable, scared, anxious and less likely to use words like 'safe, supported, caring' than students at large.

• Students who identified as Black were more likely to mention police as symbols of larger societal concerns, including systemic racism, oppression, and abuses of power which affected their perceptions of the SLO program.

• For students who identified as Indigenous, feelings of discomfort connected to being in a school environment where there were uniformed and armed officers were more prominent than for the overall population.

• Students who identified as POC often expressed a personal connection to SLOs with whom they related (for example, being from the same ethnocultural background) and appreciated having a trusted figure to go to for guidance, support, and conversation.

The specific conclusions cited above from this study must be tempered as a result of the extremely small sample size of students who identify as Black (n = 20) and who identify as Indigenous (n = 34). Without diminishing the lived experiences of these students, the sample size puts into question the generalizability of the findings or how to use the results for policy development or decisions. Again, the perspectives and experiences of these students are important and should be given due consideration, but the Vancouver School Board notes on its website that it serves more than 50,000 enrolled students annually. Therefore, caution in the interpretation of these findings should be taken given that significant policy change is being considered, and the bulk of these conclusions relied on the perspectives of 54 survey respondents, rather than a representative sample of Vancouver students.

Proponents of the SLO program believe that SLOs are able to contribute to school safety through the creation of bonds with students, who, by virtue of that relationship, are more likely to approach them to report delinquency. Brown (2006) found that SLOs served to make schools seem safer, which was positively related to improved student engagement and academic achievement. Despite the perceived advantages and potential benefits of SLO programs, the body of research examining perceived and actual effects on various school safety outcomes has often revealed largely conflicting findings rendering it difficult to reach any reasonable consensus about their efficiency or effectiveness (Zhang, 2019). In the past 20 years, studies have reported expected, null, and opposite effects of SLOs in schools for a variety of outcomes, including levels of crime, perceptions of safety, discipline, and arrest (Finn et al., 2005; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Theriot, 2009). Therefore, research studies using more rigorous designs, including longitudinal, experimental, or quasi-experimental methods, would offer greater methodological rigour thereby increasing confidence in the results.

Though the utility of evaluations is hindered by differing objectives and definitions of success, the literature on SLOs clearly points to the notion that they provide an inherent value for students, parents, teachers, school administrators, the community, and the police (Duxbury & Bennel, 2018). What does emerge from the literature suggests that SLOs face numerous challenges related to the trifurcated nature of their role in schools, as counselor, educator, and police officer. The role of youth counselor is outside the purview of standard police training, with little preparation offered to SLOs to act as mentors for young people. The same concerns apply to their ability to respond to youth experiencing mental health crises. Though SLOs are expected to develop and implement

educational programming in schools, few have experience in instructional design or how to develop program goals to achieve effective outcomes resulting in intended behavioral change. Finally, there are significant challenges for SLOs in effectively serving their dual role as nurturer and enforcer (NASRO, 2012). Ryan et al. (2018) noted that numerous incidents have highlighted several critical issues related to SLOs, such as a lack of training, the absence of clear policy outlining their roles and responsibilities, and the expectation that SLOs will manage student misconduct. There is also the concern, primarily out of the United States that police officers in schools perpetuates and reinforces the 'school to prison pipeline' (Hirschfield, 2008; Gebhardt, 2013; Nogueira, 2003).

Despite the fact that mentorship and playing the role of counselor, problem solver, or parent is idealized and emphasized as an important aspect of being an SLO, much of the research suggests that there little to no training offered to SLOs to equip them to play this role effectively and efficiently. Moreover, performing this role can send conflicting messages to youth when the SLO is called upon in their role as a law enforcement officer (Javdani, 2019). Because there is no national data available on SLOs in Canada, it is impossible to determine whether SLOs have received the training they need to effectively fulfill their roles, responsibilities, and mandate. Moreover, the research suggests that, on a broad level, the efforts of SLOs are negatively affected by a lack of training to fulfill the roles of educator and counselor (Javdani, 2019; NASRO, 2012).

Given the expectation that police will fulfill a counseling role, training specific to adolescent mental health issues also seems necessary. Muller, Morabito and Green (2021) noted that, worldwide, approximately 10% to 20% of children and adolescents will experience serious issues related to mental health. The presence of mental health problems among children and adolescents renders them at-risk for poor outcomes, both short and long-term, across numerous domains, including individual, social, family, and, in particular, school situations where mental health concerns increase the risk for academic failure, suspension, and expulsion from school (Muller et al., 2021). Police who are present in schools often interact with or respond to students in mental health crises situations, particularly when there is physical aggression or the situation requires de-escalation (Eklund et al., 2018).

Muller et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework[3] in an effort to identify the body of literature that describes the role and responsibilities of SLOs in responding to mental health crises that occur in schools. They sought to understand the ways in which SLOs were integrated in service provision and partnerships for students during mental health crises and to understand their role in decision-making. They were only able to find six empirical, peer-reviewed studies published during the past 20 years that focused on the topic of police involvement in school-based mental health response; four of these studies were from the United States, one from Sweden, and one from Finland. This suggested that the role of SLOs in supporting and responding to the mental health needs of students remains largely unexamined (Muller et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that their review identified

[3] Muller et al. (2021) noted that the PRISMA framework operates as a 27-item checklist and four-phase flow diagram used to analyze the results of a systematic literature review. Employing the PRISMA framework results in a refined list of included and excluded articles in a systematic literature review.

descriptions of examples of police–school collaborative efforts in supporting children and adolescents and their mental health needs. These models emphasized the critical importance of explicit training for police officers working in school settings on how to effectively support students experiencing mental health crises, emphasizing de-escalation strategies and non-violent interventions, as well as education to assist police in recognizing and understanding the etiology and symptoms of mental health issues (James et al., 2011; Muller et al., 2021). Moreover, their findings identified the need for SLOs to be well-integrated into school-based crisis intervention response teams (Gill et al., 2016; James et al., 2011). In one study included in the final review, an evaluation of a collaborative team, including mental health providers, school officials, and police, measured the outcomes of arrests and mental health referrals. Barrett and Janopaul-Nayor (2016) found that through this collaboration, arrests decreased and referrals to mental health service providers increased.

Shaw (2004) noted that the police officers as 'teachers' approach is the oldest model of cooperation between police and schools. Initially, this model involved police officers developing and delivering presentations on road safety, bicycle safety, and the prevention of child abuse. Next came the development, implementation, and delivery of the D.A.R.E. and G.R.E.A.T. programs in schools across the United States, and D.A.R.E into Canada. Today, the breadth and scope of those presentations has evolved to include presentations on the perils of gang life, drug use, interpersonal relationship violence, and cyberbullying.

In the United States, the G.R.E.A.T. prevention program is a middle-school classroom-based curriculum delivered by trained law enforcement officers (Esbensen et al., 2001). First started in 1991 by police officers in Phoenix, Arizona, it was offered in a series of one-hour sessions over nine weeks focusing on the effects of drugs, cultural sensitivity and racism, interpersonal and conflict resolution skills and strategies, and decision-making skills. The initial G.R.E.A.T. program underwent frequent and rigorous program evaluation with consistent results indicating that the program was failing to produce its intended outcomes (Esbensen et al., 2001). That said, one benefit of the program was that it created positive interactions between youth and law enforcement, rather than interactions or contacts as a result of suppression efforts (Esbensen et al., 2001; Petersen, 2000). In their evaluation of G.R.E.A.T., Esbensen et al. (2001) cautioned not to be overly dismissive of prevention strategies because, given the low dosage and the general audience targeted by prevention programs, it was important not be overly critical of the effect size necessary to justify the continuance of a program that required limited investment. From the origins of G.R.E.A.T., researchers and practitioners combined efforts to develop G.R.E.A.T. II, a nationwide school-based gang prevention program with three identified goals; "to reduce gang membership, to reduce violence and criminal activity in schools, and to increase positive relationships between youth and law enforcement officers" (Esbensen, 2015, p. 380). The number of sessions was increased from nine to 13, and the program was modified to address risk factors, including "school commitment, school performance, association with conventional and/or delinquent peers, susceptibility to peer influence, involvement in conventional activities, empathy, self-control, perceived guilt, neutralization techniques, and moral disengagement" (Esbensen, 2015, p. 380).

An evaluation of G.R.E.A.T. II that included a four year follow up concluded that the program was successful in achieving two of its three stated goals. Esbensen (2015) found that participation in the

program generated more negative perceptions of gangs, produced improvements in relations between youth and police by contributing to more positive perceptions of police, and reduced the odds of youth joining a gang across racially/ethnically diverse groups of students by 24%. This effect remained four years post-treatment (Howell, 2019). Wong et al. (2016) found that G.R.E.A.T. II was the most successful gang prevention program. G.R.E.A.T. II is the only universal, broad-based prevention program in the United States that has met the criteria to be considered 'effective' and 'evidence-based' (Howell, 2019). Despite its success, G.R.E.A.T. II has its critics, with some scholars concluding that, although the program has demonstrated success in achieving two of its three (modified) goals, there has been no demonstrable success in reducing violence or other forms of crime in schools (Maxson, 2013). As a prevention program, given that G.R.E.A.T. II has not been able to successfully reduce violence and other forms of criminality, ongoing and continued improvement of the program is necessary (Wong et al., 2016).

One of the primary critiques of all school-based prevention programming has been the potential that they target the wrong population (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Maxson, 2013). Given the sociological evidence that low school commitment and poor school performance are significant risk factors for adolescent youth, the fact that the G.R.E.A.T. II program is delivered only in the school environment and does not engage with adolescents who are not in school is problematic. Klein and Maxson (2006) argued that the majority of students that participated in G.R.E.A.T. II would likely not have joined a gang even in the absence of the intervention. This issue of sampling continues to raise doubts about the validity of the program's ability to decrease gang membership (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Despite this, Maxson (2013) posited that given the cost-effectiveness of the program, any positive and significant effect should serve as a degree of evidence that the G.R.E.A.T. II program had an effect on reducing gang membership.

Though these programs for youth are, by their very nature, well intentioned, what is often overlooked is the potential for unintended, negative outcomes. Beyond the general inability of prevention programs to empirically establish success, broad prevention programs have also demonstrated negative effects. An example of this is the D.A.R.E program, where after 20 years of police delivering this program, none of the numerous methodologically rigorous evaluations have found any significant reduction in drug use among participants. In fact, there is some indication that participation in the D.A.R.E program may have iatrogenic effects, in that students in suburban schools who completed the D.A.R.E program experienced a slight increase in drug use compared with non-program students (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2001; Rosenbaum & Hanson, 1998). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that grouping adolescents that are high-risk together, even where there is adult supervision, has the potential to exacerbate antisocial behaviour. This can occur because when delinquent youth are grouped together, delinquent behaviour is reinforced more frequently than it is with non-antisocial children, leading to maintenance and potential proliferation of delinquent behaviour (Handwerk, Field, & Friman, 2000; McCord, 1992).

In prevention programming, there may be iatrogenic effects when youth who are at lower risk are placed in a program with aggressive or antisocial youth and subsequently demonstrate increased aggression and deviancy; a phenomenon called deviancy training (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Given the ever-increasing expectations of fiscal accountability in policing, it is essential to

understand which programs do not work, so that investments of time and money are not wasted, and the potential for iatrogenic effects are mitigated. Strategies that have been found to be ineffective and sometimes even harmful, include counselling students, particularly in peer groups, the delivery of instructional programs that focus on information dissemination and fear arousal, and after-school programs combining groups of at-risk youth that allow for deviancy training (Dishion et al., 1999; Rorie et al., 2011).) Even when evaluations reveal the absence of negative effects in programs with police as educators, the evaluated programs have failed to demonstrate long-term changes to attitudes and behavior (Shaw, 2004). It is important to consider whether additional training to fulfill the roles of counselor and educator are necessary for SLOs in Canada. Javdani (2019) concluded that SLOs in the United States had high levels of authority and discretion in responding to behavioral issues among students, but were relatively ill-prepared to achieve the identified goals of their position due to a lack of systematic training necessary to fulfill the roles they had been assigned.

In 2005, a study prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice noted that across SLO programs, a frequent mistake was that they lacked a clear mandate, such as a detailed definition of the roles and responsibilities to guide SLOs in their duties (Finn et al., 2005). While some police forces have developed and maintained specific initiatives and protocols, the absence of clearly defined goals and objectives for many police-school programs remains problematic. Shaw (2004) noted that it was challenging to monitor the effectiveness of SLO programs if the goals of the program were not established at the onset. Montes et al. (2020) suggested that, despite the proliferation of police in schools, their precise role and the confusing implications of this role in a setting that was traditionally occupied by trained educators remains understudied.

In recent years, scholars have suggested that the shift towards police presence as a regular part of the school environment has resulted in the criminalization of a wide array of behaviors that would have traditionally been considered youth misconduct handled by educators rather than police officers (Montes et al., 2020). The concern here is that the escalation of conduct traditionally considered disorderly by virtue of police involvement may have long-term negative outcomes for adolescents. Research has demonstrated that harsh discipline is related to lower levels of school belonging (Swartz et al., 2016), linked with student feelings of isolation (Mallett, 2016), and negatively influences the relationship between SLOs and students (Theriot & Orme, 2016). As such, Fischer and Hennessy (2016) suggested that it was important to minimize the risks of increased exclusionary discipline associated with police in schools.

There is a growing concern that the presence of SLOs in school will result in an increase in the criminalization of students. Researchers in the United States have attempted to validate whether the presence of SLOs in schools has had an effect on levels of exclusionary discipline. Rich-Shea (2010) compared 14 randomly selected public high schools with SLOs to 11 high schools without SLOs in Massachusetts and found that exclusionary discipline, including out-of-school suspension rates, were higher in the schools with SLOs, although over the duration of the study, rates in both groups declined. Petteruti (2011) found that in schools with SLOs, criminal sanctions for disorderly conduct (a circumstantial offense that often serves as a catch-all for a range of traditionally delinquent behaviours) were more than five times greater in schools with an SLO than those without one. Brady et al. (2007) studied ten schools in one city and found that schools with SLO

programs had significantly higher rates of school discipline compared to non-SLO schools in the same city. Fisher and Hennessy (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of seven quasi-experimental studies. Their findings suggested that the presence of SLOs in high schools is related to higher rates of exclusionary discipline in schools and, over time, reporting one additional out of school disciplinary exclusion per week in a school of 1,500 students. Theriot (2009) used data from three consecutive school years and compared the arrests of students at 15 schools without an SLO to 13 schools with a dedicated SLO in the same school district and found that, while police presence in schools reduced arrests for violent offenses, such as those that are weapons-related and assault, it increased arrests for disorderly conduct. This provides some support for the argument that the presence of SLOs might criminalize student behavior leading to a significant increase in the incidents of school-based criminal investigations and enforcement. In another study conducted by Devlin and Gottfredson (2018), schools with SLOs reported more crime to the police, but the extent of that reporting was found to be dependent on whether the SLO had a primary role of law enforcement or whether their role also included teaching and mentoring.

Moreover, Curran (2016) examined the U.S. Department of Education biennial Civil Rights Data Collection survey and noted that Black students were 2.6 times more likely to receive suspensions and represented the largest percentage of suspensions in the dataset for subjective offenses. However, Zhang (2019) used a quasi-experimental design using three years of data to study whether the presence and extent of police officers in middle and high schools in West Virginia affected reports of drug-related incidents and exclusionary out of school suspensions. The results found that schools that had an SLOs for three or more years experienced lower rates of violent crime than schools that did not have an SLO, suggesting that SLOs may have a deterrent effect on these kinds of incidents. This effect was not observed in schools that only had an SLO for one or two years indicating that such an effect takes time to manifest. Zhang (2019) concluded that the presence of police officers can improve safety and increase the probability that crime will be detected.

It is important to note that all of these studies were conducted in the United States where youth criminal justice is handled very differently than in Canada. Despite this, it is important to consider the potential negative effects of the presence of SLOs in schools. Javdani (2019) noted that there was an obligation to understand whether the presence of police in schools had adverse effects, particularly on marginalized students. In 2010, the United Nations conducted a review of Canada and found that Black Canadians, despite being the third largest racialized population in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), collectively experienced a lack of socio-economic and political inclusion as a result of poverty, poor education, working in precarious labour, and being largely underrepresented in political, professional, and leadership positions. In 2017, the UN conducted a follow up study essentially scolding Canada for its failure to address ongoing systemic racism and citing educational marginalization as a persistent area of racialized inequality disproportionately affecting Black people in the GTA. In Ontario, Rankin (2009) noted that there was a shift in the early 2000s towards a zero-tolerance scheme of discipline by comparing the rates of discipline and expulsion between the 1999/2000 and 2002/2003 school years. The number of school suspensions across the province increased by nearly 50,000 and school expulsions increased from 106 to 1,786 (Rankin, 2009). The Toronto District School Board (2017) found that 48% of school expulsions

involved Black students, approximately triple their representation in Toronto schools, and noted that of those students who were expelled, more than one-half did not return to school. Also, in Canada, Gebhard (2013) suggested the existence of a school-to-prison nexus for Indigenous youth, arguing that schooling practices rooted in Canada's colonial history of residential schools blurred the line between contemporary schools and the carceral system, suggesting that the ever-increasing overrepresentation of Canada's Indigenous population in prison was evidence of this nexus.

Hirschfield (2008) theorized the relationship between schools and the criminal justice system in Canada by highlighting the detrimental consequences for marginalized youth and suggesting that individual police officers, instead of maintaining the role of law enforcer in schools, should adopt a model of building mentoring relationships with students. Hirschfield (2008) also concluded that individual SLOs were "prone to accept, but capable of resisting the imperatives of criminalization," (p. 94). He qualified this recommendation by stating that "whether some progressive schools are capable of co-opting criminal justice tools and agents to the extent that they no longer qualify as agents of criminalization is an open theoretical and empirical question" (Hirschfield, 2008, p. 94). Whether the presence of SLOs in schools increases marginalized or non-marginalized student contact with the criminal justice system remains an important and understudied question. Concerns about the potential negative effects for minority and marginalized youth as a result of police officers in schools remains at the forefront of political and policy considerations, but, to date, there simply is not sufficient evidence to indicate whether these issues are empirically validated.

**Meaningful review of the expectations and mandate, the development of clear objectives, implementation of the training necessary to be effective, along with a consideration of the most effective resourcing, deployment, and implementation models for SLO programs is required**. Best practices from the research literature indicate that this process is most effective when undertaken as a collaborative process involving relevant stakeholders, including both SLOs and school district administrators, a process that we undertake through qualitative interviews and focus groups conducted for this research project.

## Methodology

In consultation with OCR-GO, the authors of this report identified five RCMP detachments that have SLOs or youth officers assigned or responsible for the schools in their jurisdiction. The authors of this report conducted interviews with the SLOs and youth officers from these detachments, as well as school district administrators from the jurisdictions these officers worked in. The objectives of these interviews were to obtain the views of both the police and the schools about the mandate, roles, model of deployment, experiences, strengths, successes, and challenges of the SLO program.

All interviews were conducted by the authors of this report. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via online conferencing. The ethics of the research project, including the interview schedule and project methodology, were approved by the University of the Fraser Valley's Human Research Ethics Board.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary and those willing to participate were informed of the purpose of their interview and the research project. Of note, the interviews were not recorded

using video or audio recording devices and all information provided by participants was anonymized prior to analysis.

Once the interviews were completed, all of the anonymized information was collated into a Microsoft Word document and qualitatively analysed for common themes. The analyses focused on the themes that emerged from the specific content provided by participants during their interviews, in addition to latent content demonstrating any underlying themes.

In total, 21 SLOs or youth officers from five RCMP detachments and six school district administrators from five school districts participated in interviews for this project.

## Results and Discussion

### MANDATE, ROLE, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Although all participants in this study were either RCMP members or school district administrators of schools in RCMP jurisdictions, there were two main models or approaches that represented the SLO or youth officer relationship between the schools and the police. While some participants functioned under a formal SLO approach, either with or without a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a school district to provide SLOs, others relied on the detachment's youth officers to respond to criminal incidents at a school. As a result, there were some interesting differences based on jurisdiction in the mandate, role, and responsibilities of SLOs and youth officers, both during the school year and over the summer.

In those jurisdictions that relied on youth officers, there were no identified SLOs. Instead, youth officers would address a range of criminal issues that came to their attention at the request of a school administrator, if something happened in the community that had a connection to a school or a student, or if a general duty officer determined that a crime has been committed by a youth at a school or on school grounds and transferred the file over to a youth officer. One of the ways that youth officers and the school connected was that the school district administrators, principals and vice-principals, and school counsellors had the phone numbers of the youth officers in their areas that they could reach out to as needed. Similarly, students were informed that they could contact a youth officer if they felt they needed or wanted to report something. It should be noted that participants reported that it was very uncommon for a school or a youth to contact a youth officer directly. Instead, youth officers mostly got involved in an incident that occurred at a school or on school grounds because of a 9-1-1 call and a file transfer from the general duty officer that initially attended the call.

Still, in jurisdictions without a formal SLO program, youth officers reported having an opportunity to develop proactive strategies designed to assist at-risk youth, those youth engaged in criminality, or repeat young offenders. Some of the more common efforts of these youth officers were designed to keep youth connected to and attending school, assist those who were not in school but wished to return to classes, and to build a greater sense of trust and understanding between the school, the youth, their families, and the police. While one of the features of an SLO program is the delivery of educational and prosocial presentations to students, some jurisdictions without a formal SLO program did not have youth officers deliver these types of presentations to students, as this role

was not part of their mandate. Still, other detachments without formal SLO programs did use their youth officers to deliver presentations on a range of issues that the officers had expertise in and also had youth officers attend school meetings to provide police-based information or to show support for school initiatives and programs.

Other participants in this study operated under a more 'traditional' SLO model. Again, this sometimes took the form of the RCMP and the school district developing and signing a formal MOU that outlined the roles and responsibilities of each party, while others developed a structure, practice, and meaningful partnership without a formal MOU in place. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, regardless of whether an MOU was in place, in general, the mandate of the SLOs was understood as responding to the specific and unique issues or challenges facing schools in the first instance by allocating dedicated policing resources to schools, providing specific programs to students attending school, and delivering presentations designed to educate and inform youth on a range of issues that could serve to prevent or reduce deviant, anti-social, and criminal behaviour. Moreover, part of the responsibilities of an SLO, from the perspective of both the RCMP and the school district, was that members attend and participate in school district meetings and engage directly with the schools and the community on the criminal and non-criminal issues facing youth. While it appeared to not be entirely necessary for the perceived success and effectiveness of having SLOs and youth officers in schools, **having a formal MOU in place is a good idea to clearly outline the expectations, responsibilities, and working relationship of all parties**.

Participants indicated that while there were elements of community policing in the way the SLOs operated, there is also a focus on being response-oriented to school and community needs. In effect, participants spoke in terms of two distinct mandates and roles for SLOs. One was to be part of the school community and to have informal interactions with staff and students, while the second role was to investigate criminal behaviour in or around schools and to respond formally or informally to incidents. Being part of the school community was understood by many to include mentoring youth, organizing and running programs and events for students, connecting with high-risk youth, and being in high-risk areas before and after school. While all participants acknowledged this important role, they were all very cognizant of the fact that the primary role of the SLOs was to contribute to the overall safety at and around the school and dealing with any criminal activities involving students or the school. Given this, **it is important that all parties understand these two roles and develop strategies to allow SLOs or youth officers the ability to ensure their enforcement role does not compromise their ability to engage proactively and effectively with students**.

Participants spoke about how the role of the SLO or youth officer was both proactive, in that it was focused on building rapport and positive interactions with students, and how it was also reactive in that SLOs or youth officers were responsible for investigating crimes. Moreover, it was somewhat common for the SLOs and youth officers to state that their responsibilities were not limited exclusively to the school and their students. Instead, participants from several detachments spoke about how their role as an SLO or youth officer has expanded beyond the school to focus on all youth in the community. However, for some, there were limits to this approach. For example, some SLOs and youth officers spoke about how their role focused on anything that happened on the way to school, at school, or on the way home from school. However, if an incident occurred at a party

over the weekend that involved a student, this police file would not necessarily be the responsibility of the SLO or youth officer.

It was recognized by school administrators that SLOs or youth officers also have a public relations role within the schools. School district administrators indicated that it was important for SLOs or youth officers to be visibly present in schools, walk the hallways, and interact informally with students. They also recognized that this role could be challenging and confusing for students because these officers were also the ones conducting criminal investigations when an incident occurred in or around a school. It was interesting to note that school district administrators recognized that the presence of SLOs or youth officers in schools served less of a deterrent value than a relationship-building function. Many school district administrators believed that this aspect of the mandate and role for an SLO or youth officer was very successful. In other words, while the presentations and general presence of SLOs or youth officers in schools was viewed as a good thing, the real benefit was the informal interactions, the rapport building, and the positive and trusting relationships that were built between the student body and the police officers. School district administrators spoke of the inherent value of students not being worried or afraid when they saw a police car at the school because of the relationships that the school, the students, and the police, especially at the elementary school level, had built over time. Several school district administrators highlighted the positive reception that officers receive at elementary schools, which they believed made the messages that the police delivered to the students more effective. They also believed that the regular presence of SLOs or youth officers in the school promoted the notion that police were approachable and regular people, like teachers or counselors, that all students could talk to about any issues or concerns they had.

In terms of what responsibilities SLOs and youth officers have over the summer when schools are not in session, SLOs and youth officers spoke about how they continued to provide similar services for those schools running a summer semester that they provided during the regular school year. However, they also worked on investigations that were not completed during the school year because they typically had more time to devote to completing files. For the most part, participants spoke of the summer as providing an opportunity to run structured classes, programs, or activities in the community to keep young people engaged in prosocial behaviors. They also mentioned that the summer provided an opportunity to focus on community engagement by going to locations where youth hung out, such as parks and community centres, with the intent to develop opportunities to interact with youth in a positive way.

Some participants spoke about contributing to community programs or camps run by other organizations by delivering safety presentations or demonstrating some of the tasks that police officers do, such as having youth participate in officer physical fitness drills or learning basic police tasks like fingerprinting. Some SLOs and youth officers spoke about running or participating in youth or cadet programs designed to introduce youth interested in policing as a possible career to some of the physical and mental skills necessary to be a police officer. Others spoke of the summer as an opportunity to visit the homes of at-risk youth to check in with them and their parents to ensure their well-being. Still, some participants spoke of being assigned to other units or other duties over the summer. While this is understandable given the resource crunch facing most police detachments, disconnecting SLOs or youth officers from the youth and communities they have been

engaging with for an extended period of time can undermine some of the work and successes that these officers have achieved over the school year. Whenever possible, **it is recommended that SLOs and youth officers remain engaged with their youth over the summer when there is possibly less supervision and structure over a young person's time**. This recommendation is reinforced by the comment from some SLOs and youth officers that the summer months provide them with a greater opportunity to engage with prosocial youth and a way to remain connected to at-risk youth.

## FUNDING MODEL AND SELECTION OF SLOS OR YOUTH OFFICERS

All of the participants in this study indicated that the funding for SLOs or youth officers came directly from the police budget. Some participants mentioned that their SLOs or youth officers were funded like any other officer or unit in the police force. While there were some differences with respect to what part of the police budget the funding derived from, none of the RCMP detachments that participated in this project received any funding from the school district to support the SLO program. Some SLO and youth officer participants, as well as some school district administrators, were concerned that, as other policing priorities took precedence or as more jurisdictions abandoned their SLO programs, there was the risk that some school districts in this study could also lose their SLOs or youth officers.

While the number of SLOs or youth officers is a function of police budget, like all other police units, there was a concern in the amount of turnover among SLOs, or how long officers remained SLOs or part of a youth section. This is an very important issue because, as mentioned above, one of the important mandates and responsibilities of SLOs and youth officers is to establish and maintain a positive relationship with youth, especially those youth who are at-risk or without a positive adult role model. Achieving this goal can be very challenging if there is frequent turnover among SLOs or youth officers because it takes time to establish and develop a trusting, positive relationship with youth. Given this, it was positive to note that some SLOs or youth officers do not have a tenure system in place that requires them to leave their position as an SLO or youth officer after a certain amount of service time. While some SLOs and youth officers indicated that they would be able to stay in their position for as long as they were doing a good job, were effective, and wanted to remain, others indicated that there was an expectation that they would rotate out of their position after a period of between three to six years. It was also interesting to note that while some of the detachments ask for a minimum of a three year commitment when becoming an SLO or a youth officer, some participants recognized that the school district would like a longer commitment, particularly because of their interest in rapport building between the school, its students, and the police officers.

Police officer participants were asked about the processes used to select an individual to become an SLO or a youth officer. As a result of all police participants being RCMP officers, all participants outlined the standard RCMP process for either promotion or a lateral move into a new position. However, it was interesting to note that some participants indicated that these positions were coveted with many applicants and a competitive process, while others indicated that, at times, some people were assigned the duties of an SLO or youth officer because a spot needed to be filled and

there were no applications to fill the vacancy. Some participants spoke about being consulted about potential new applicants, in terms of the candidate's suitability for the duties of an SLO or youth officer, which they appreciated because it gave them some input into the selection process that ensured suitable people were joining the team.

Participants were also keenly aware that being an SLO or a youth officer, while very appealing to some, was not always perceived by others to be a desired posting. There were several reasons provided for this from an understanding that the role was not 'action-based' like some of the other units in the detachment, the perception that the knowledge, skills, and experience required for promotion could not be obtained from the SLO position, as well as the historical trend of placing duty-to-accommodate officers or those with other limitations in a youth section. Of note, several participants stated that placing officers who either did not fit in anywhere else or needed to be accommodated in the youth section was no longer the case, and that senior management often emphasized through their words and actions the importance and value of SLOs or youth officers to the police detachment and the community.

It was also reported that because the work was typically dayshift, Monday to Friday, it was more common to see police officers with children applying to become SLOs or youth officers. This was viewed as a positive development as it was felt that those with children would be more understanding, compassionate, and empathic towards students. Moreover, while participants indicated that officers with children might be more drawn to this kind of police work and to see the value in it, police organizations with a larger proportion of younger officers may have more challenges getting members to apply or be recruited for this type of police work. In part, it was viewed that the military-style training that new officers received was not well suited to the nuances of working with children and youth with a variety of needs or challenges where diversion from enforcement through alternative measures is a primary goal. Participants also expressed concerns that media reports about school districts cancelling their SLO programs would negatively affect recruitment. So, while there was no distinct process for becoming an SLO or youth officer that was any different than joining any other team, unit, or section in the detachment, the current process of selecting SLOs or youth officers was seen as an improvement over the past.

## STRUCTURE OF THE SLO OR YOUTH OFFICER PROGRAM

To avoid providing specific information that might identify a particular detachment or school district, this report will not describe in detail the structure of each participating detachment's SLO program or youth section. However, in general, those school districts that participated in this project were served by at least eight constables and two corporals. For the most part, SLOs or youth officers would be divided into two teams that worked Monday to Thursday or Tuesday to Friday. Shifts would typically cover school hours and one or two hours before and after school; typically, 07:00 to 17:00. Some SLOs or youth officers also worked a rotating evening shift. This was also more common over the summer when there would be more evening shifts, such as 14:00 to 24:00. Of note, smaller units with fewer SLOs or youth officers might work Monday to Friday and their hours of operation might be slightly different as a result of limitations in capacity and the need for coverage.

There are typically two approaches used when assigning SLOs or youth officers to schools. One approach is to have the officer assigned to a high school or high schools in a jurisdiction and to have all the elementary or middle schools that fed into this high school or high schools assigned to the same SLOs or youth officers. The purpose behind this approach is to maintain a degree of familiarity between the students and the officers, especially in the challenging school years of moving to a new school as children graduate from elementary or middle school. The other approach is to assign an SLO or youth officer to a number of schools in an area regardless of which schools fed into others, or to assign SLOs or youth officers exclusively to elementary, middle, or high schools. Participants in this study represented both of these two general approaches. For example, some participants indicated that they were not assigned a specific school or schools. Instead, SLOs or youth officers were assigned a geographical area that included a group of schools. In these cases, the creation of these geographical jurisdictions was not based on police or general duty jurisdictions, but based on the location, type, and number of schools. The idea was to assign one SLO or youth officer to a school jurisdiction. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the decision about which SLO or youth officer would be assigned to which jurisdiction was reported to be based on the personality of the officer, their ability to connect with the students and staff of the schools in the jurisdiction, the characteristics of the schools, the most common issues presented in these schools, and the interest, ability, and skillset of the officer to address those concerns.

Some SLOs or youth officers reported that they were assigned specific high schools, but not any elementary or middle schools. In this approach, if a request was made by an elementary school or there was a call for service that derived from an elementary school, whomever was available from the youth section would respond to the request for service. Participants did mention that they tried to be proactive in going to elementary schools whenever they had an opportunity, even though they were not formally assigned any particular elementary schools. These participants also suggested that there was a general commitment from the entire police organization to be involved in elementary schools. So, rather than these schools being assigned to a particular SLO or youth officer or being an afterthought, general duty members would also visit elementary schools when they had the time to build rapport with the students. The notion was that this would enhance the police-school relationship, while reducing the burden on SLOs or youth officers to allow them to focus their attention on the high schools. These participants also indicated that the volume of work for SLOs or youth officers was not evenly distributed across the school district, so it made sense to have SLOs or youth officers concentrated in schools that had more challenges and to allow general duty officers to serve a pseudo-SLO or youth officer role in elementary and middle schools that had few concerns or issues. It was felt that this was effective and utilized officers more efficiently, while still allowing for the development of positive interactions between the police, students, and school staff.

Some participants spoke of a third approach that is a blend of the previous two approaches. In this model, some SLOs or youth officers were assigned to one high school and all the elementary and middle schools that fed into that high school, while others were assigned to schools based on the location of the school. In this model, some elementary or middle schools would be assigned to an officer based on their location rather than the high schools they fed into. It would appear that this approach was based on the nature and location of the school, rather than the types of issues that

were most commonly found in the schools. Of note, regardless of the model or approach used, the SLO and youth officer participants felt that the way they were assigned schools did not hinder their ability to be effective in their jobs, and the school district administrator participants, regardless of the model they operated under, did not express any concerns about how SLOs or youth officers were assigned to their schools. Unsurprisingly, the main concern from the school district administrators were the number of SLOs or youth officers available to them. Without exception, these participants wanted to see an increase in the number of SLOs or youth officers available to work with their schools.

### TRAINING, EXPERIENCE, AND SUPPORT OF SLOS AND YOUTH OFFICERS

For the most part, police participants reported that their general training was sufficient for their responsibilities and duties. Some spoke of their experiences being mentored by more senior SLOs or youth officers as being valuable, while others spoke of the availability of additional educational or training courses that benefited their roles. In this way, some participants spoke of the ability to augment their training through opportunities provided to them by the school district, for example being able to participate in school district risk assessment training. However, none of the participants spoke about any specific training they received prior to becoming an SLO or a youth officer targeted at their duties. As mentioned above, all participants indicated that a number of years of police experience was required before an officer could move from general duty to a specialized unit or team. So, rather than a training program that needed to be completed to apply for the role of a youth officer or an SLO, the typical promotion or lateral movement process of the RCMP was used. In other words, rather than being trained for the job they might have as an SLO or youth officer, officers received training on-the-job or while they were serving in the role. And, while there were training and education opportunities provided to SLOs or youth officers, the process of obtaining any training or education classes was the same for them as for members of any other team or unit. In effect, from the interviews, it did not appear that there was any particular training or additional courses or education that was required to become an SLO or a youth officer or an expectation that an officer participate in a specific training or educational course once becoming an SLO or a youth officer. As will be discussed below, given the nature of what SLOs or youth officers are expected to do, **it is recommended that training and education opportunities be provided to those interested in the job or to those soon after moving into the position**.

Of note, there were three areas where SLOs or youth officers felt that they needed more targeted training. These areas were mental health, social media, and conflict resolution. Participants spoke about the range and frequency of mental health issues that they commonly faced and that additional training would be helpful. The lack of mental health training affected the SLO or youth officer's ability to recognize mental health issues or to understand how best to assist a youth with a mental health crisis or issue. With respect to social media, some participants indicated that it was very challenging to keep up to date with the various social media apps and programs that youth were using. The concern was that the landscape of social media platforms continues to evolve very quickly and that SLOs and youth officers find themselves either not familiar with the applications or do not have access to the apps that youth are using. In part, the consequence of this is that SLOs and

youth officers find that they are not in the digital spaces that youth are engaged in. While a small number of participants indicated that they had been invited to participate in social media training with their school district, it is clear that **all SLOs and youth officers need specific training on social media**. Moreover, some participants mentioned that conflict resolution is a critical skill for an SLO or youth officer to have and that training in this area was not always available. While the authors of this report understand the challenges in providing up-to-date training and work-specific educational classes to all of its members, again, given the frequency of interactions that SLOs and youth officers have with youth, **conflict resolution training is critical**. While not mentioned as a specific concern by any of the participants in this study, given the calls for defunding the police and concerns around discrimination and bias among police officers, **diversity training should be provided to all police officers, especially those who interact daily with youth who come from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds**. It is also recommended that **all SLOs and youth officers be provided training on how to develop and deliver age-appropriate presentations**. Many participants spoke about role SLOs and youth officers played in delivering educational presentations on a range of public safety issues, so it is critical that these officers have the necessary training and skills to deliver presentations effectively. Related to this point, it should be common practice for SLOs and youth officers to evaluate the value of their presentations with students.

In terms of their perception of the level of support they received from the school district and their detachment, the SLOs and youth officers unanimously agreed that their level of support was excellent. Many participants spoke extremely positively about the relationship they had with their school district administrators and with the senior management team of their respective detachments. All participants felt that there was a genuine partnership between the police and the school district and that school district administrators were in support of the SLO program. It should be noted that some participants indicated that the nature of their relationship with their school district has changed somewhat since the Black Lives Matter Movement in that stakeholders and senior officials have not always spoken up in support of the SLO program when there was an opportunity to do so. However, for the most part, participants believed that they still had the support of the teachers and principals, even if there appeared to be less support at the level of Mayor and Council.

With respect to resources, it was generally felt that there was sufficient support from the detachment. While some school district administrators indicated a desire for more SLOs or youth officers, none of the SLOs and youth officers reported that there were insufficient members to achieve the mandate. Instead, participants spoke of the importance of having access to open-source computers and mobile phones with the necessary social media apps installed. They also identified the importance of being integrated or connected to some of the other police units or teams in the detachment that might share the same youth clients, their ability to share information across the detachment, and the need for adequate technological resources to conduct their investigations, particularly when it involved the internet or social media. Of note, with the exception of being able to conduct investigations that involved the use of certain social media apps and the limitations set in policy about accessing certain websites or applications, there were virtually no other main complaints reported by participants on the issue of resourcing. In effect, participants felt they were

properly resourced and supported by their detachment and had a very good relationship with their respective school districts.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL SLO OR YOUTH OFFICER

Participants were very vocal about the most important characteristics of an SLO or youth officer. It was not surprising that several participants spoke about the need to have good investigative skills because this was a necessary part of the job. SLOs and youth officers need to be able to conduct a range of investigations from assault and bullying to sexual assaults and weapon charges. So, being a good police officer with strong investigative skills was seen as a pre-requisite. Related to being a good investigator, participants mentioned that SLOs and youth officers needed excellent networking skills because much of the work they did with youth required strong partnerships with the school and the community. As will be outlined in greater detail below, participants spoke of the need for SLOs and youth officers to liaise and work with restorative justice agencies, victim services, school staff, counselors, and school board members. In effect, it was felt that, given that the client was a young person, investigation and networking skills went together. Participants indicated that because there were potentially more options in dealing with a youth who has committed an offence than an adult, it was critical for an SLO or youth officer to have a good and trusting relationship with students, their families, the school, and the extra-judicial options available in the broader community. Being able to develop and maintain rapport with all of these different groups of people was seen as necessary and critical among participants to achieve the goal of assisting youth to be and remain prosocial and to prevent delinquent, deviant, and criminal behaviour.

In addition to these 'traditional' policing skills, all participants also focused on the 'softer' skills required to be a successful SLO or youth officer. In addition to the mandatory desire and interest in working with youth, participants spoke of the need to be compassionate, empathetic, patient, nurturing, and caring. Successful SLOs or youth officers were viewed as those who were proactive, comfortable initiating interactions with youth, genuinely interested in the lives of youth, focused on making a positive difference in youth, school, and the broader community, and believed in the value of prevention and education.

It was common for participants to indicate that one of the most important skills was the ability to connect with youth, which some stated that no amount of training could assist with. In effect, it was believed that some people had an ability to connect with youth while others did not and **being able to relate and make a genuine connection with youth was a necessary characteristic of a successful SLO or youth officer**. Participants spoke about the need to give youth more chances than one might give to an adult and the willingness to talk with a youth again and again to achieve meaningful change. Being approachable and relatable to youth was also viewed as very important. SLOs and youth officers were keenly aware that dealing with a young person in their role as a police officer was very different than dealing with an adult. With youth, officers have to initiate contact or interactions much more often, and it frequently took much longer for a youth to open up to an adult. Another key characteristic was having the necessary drive or motivation to understand what was going on in the lives of youth. In effect, some participants spoke of their role as being similar to that of a parent; stern, but fair and accessible. While it was important to maintain the reality that

the SLO or youth officer was a police officer and might have to act in their role as a police officer, some participants felt that when they suspected that something was wrong with a youth, it was important to be proactive and engage with the youth because youth would often not open up immediately about their lives, challenges, struggles, concerns, and issues.

Another important ability identified as necessary for the SLO position is conflict management skills. It was felt by some participants that SLOs and youth officers needed to be able to resolve conflict and a range of social issues both informally as a person of trust among youth, but also formally in their role as a police officer. On this issue, participants spoke of the need to be non-threatening and authentic, but to also be able to assert their authority as police officers when necessary. This suggested an understanding of the need for an SLO or youth officer to balance the needs of the youth, their families, victims, the school, and the community. One way of thinking about this is that when dealing with an adult, it is common to just focus on that adult; however, when an incident involves a young person, the SLO or youth officer must deal with the youth, their parent(s), primary caregiver, or legal guardian(s), the school, and the community. So, conflict management and, again, rapport building and trust are extremely important.

Participants also spoke of the need to have a range of diverse interests among SLOs and youth officers. For example, participants indicated that it was important to have those who were interested and capable of delivering effective educational and public safety presentations in class, but that it was also important to have SLOs or youth officers who were interested in playing sports with youth, coaching and mentoring youth, or engaging in a wide range of other activities that interested young people. The ability to manage their time effectively was also seen as an important skill. Participants indicated that the role of an SLO or youth officer was different from that of a general duty officer, not just because one might work on some serious files, but because of the need to balance police office time with school time. Spending proactive, intentional, and engaged time with young people was viewed by many to be as important as spending time at the office with other police officers.

In effect, the selection of an SLO or youth officer was viewed as extremely important. SLOs and youth officers suggested that they were similar to community police officers in that the end goal was not measured in the number of successfully laid criminal charges, but the development of prosocial youth and safe schools. To that end, participants indicated that successful SLOs and youth officers were team players, focused on the needs and interests of youth, were engaged and present with youth, outgoing, and demonstrated commitment to young people. Because the role of an SLO or youth officer involves being proactive and reactive, **SLOs and youth officers must have the ability and skills to take a preventative, education approach and switch to their investigative skills when necessary in responding to an incident**.

### MOST COMMON SLO OR YOUTH OFFICER ACTIVITIES

The characteristics mentioned above tended to align quite well with what participants reported were the most common activities that they engaged in as an SLO or youth officer. As expected, these activities can be divided into proactive or preventative actions and reactive or investigative actions. In terms of proactive activities, SLOs and youth officers spoke of trying to attend school every day

to greet and interact with students, delivering presentations on topics ranging from drug use and internet safety to any topic requested of them by the school. In addition, participants indicated that they spent a lot of their time walking the school grounds and hallways talking with and interacting with students. The intent of simply being in the school was to establish that having a police officer, in uniform, in a school was not an indication that something was wrong or that something bad or illegal had occurred. Instead of using their presence exclusively as a deterrent, some participants indicated that their presence was designed to establish the police as another part of the school community that are there, like other staff members, to keep students safe and to assist them as required. As part of this strategy, some participants spoke of attending student drop-off and pick-up times, especially at the elementary schools, so that the students and parents got to see, meet, and know the SLOs or youth officers and begin to establish positive interactions and attitudes about the police.

Participants reported that they commonly had meetings and discussions with school principals, vice-principals, student counselors, and teachers to better understand what was happening at the school and what was going on with the students. Of note, most SLOs and youth officers reported having most of their interactions with school principals and vice-principals, and much fewer interactions with teachers. Still, participants indicated how important it was to meet with school counselors each week to understand what was happening with students, when necessary. Obtaining this information allowed the SLOs and youth officers to interact with students or their families who were at-risk or having challenges before things escalated to the point where an official police intervention was required.

In terms of investigative or reactive activities, participants discussed their role in investigations, which were done on a case-by-case basis. If a school principal called 9-1-1 or called the mobile phone of an SLO or youth officer, participants stated that they would typically speak first with the school principal or counselor to gather all the necessary information before discussing the issue with the youth involved. Participants indicated that this process allowed the SLO or youth officer to make an initial assessment of the situation and decide whether there was a need for a formal intervention, such as charges, or whether some other approach, such as diversion, a restorative justice process, or some other informal intervention might be more appropriate.

## COMMON ISSUES FACING SLOS OR YOUTH OFFICERS

There was some general consistency in what participants reported spending most of their time on and the issues that confronted them most often in their roles as an SLO or youth officer. Overwhelmingly, SLO and youth officers reported that bullying and threats was the most common issues they dealt with. More specifically, it was bullying or threats over the internet or social media platforms that were most common. Participants spoke of issues involving the sharing of inappropriate photos that resulted in these photos being posted on the internet and the subject of the photos being bullied or threatened. In addition to inappropriate photos, SLOs and youth officers reported that there were a lot of threats being made and posted on social media sites. Sexting or sending a trusted person, such as a boyfriend or girlfriend, a nude photo was also a substantial concern. This was a concern only because the photos are frequently of minors and, therefore, may

be considered child pornography, but, as mentioned above, also because the photos were often shared with others against the intent or wishes of the subject of the photos.

Some participants indicated that theft of property, such as laptops, mobile phones, or headphones, was another issue that they commonly encountered. Some participants also reported that consensual fights were a concern. When asked specifically about drug issues, gangs, and human trafficking, participants indicated that drugs were the most common issue of the three. Finally, some participants indicated that responding more generally to youth experiencing a mental health crisis was a common issue SLOs and youth officers dealt with.

In contrast to the perspective of the SLOs and youth officers, school district administrators did not identify social media as the primary issue, but rather assaults, controlled substances, and mental health concerns. The preferred method reported by all participants, including those from the school districts, to address common issues was to be proactive and adopt a preventative approach. This typically involved SLOs and youth officers coming into classrooms to conduct presentations or workshops to educate youth, as well as conducting parent information sessions. One district also reported that they invited their SLOs to have conversations with youth who started exhibiting signs that their behaviours may escalate in nature or severity. These conversations were confidential and non-punitive, with the goal of guiding the youth back onto a prosocial path. All school district participants noted that they consulted with their SLOs or youth officers when they were required to conduct a violence threat risk assessment (VTRA) protocol, typically in response to threats, assaults, or bullying. When SLOs or youth officers were required to respond to an incident, they reported typically taking a holistic approach that involved a consideration of all relevant factors, such as the nature of the incident, the level of harm, previous history, and diversion options, as well as taking a collaborative approach to collect as much information as possible to support the involved youth. Many SLOs and youth officers reported that they commonly have conversations with parents, schools, and community resources. The relationships and partnerships that they have established with community agencies also allows them to make referrals when diversion is determined to be in the best interests of the youth.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A GOOD SLO/YOUTH OFFICER AND SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Given what has been discussed to this point in this report, it should not be surprising that the most common elements identified as being foundational to a positive SLO/youth officer – school relationship were trust and open communication. The notion of trust included a belief that the SLO or youth officer would not be 'heavy handed' in their approach to youth in conflict with the law, but that they would focus on the needs of the youth, the victim, the school, and the broader community. Trust was also developed over time and through experiences. Spending time with the students, their parents, and school staff, administrators, teachers, and counselors allowed all parties to get to know each other, develop rapport, build meaningful relationships, and establish trust. Trust was further developed by SLOs and youth officers through demonstrating their desire to listen, learn, and assist schools and their students. Trust was built by the SLOs and youth officers discussing their investigations with school administrators when possible and soliciting their advice on how best to proceed when options were available. In effect, working cooperatively and collaboratively

with the school was important in establishing trust, as was understanding that school administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff likely know the young people involved in an incident better than the police, understood what has happening at home with their students, and were likely more aware of whether there were mental health issues involved. Given this, **soliciting the input of those who know the parties involved best and working with them to develop effective interventions can, over time, solidify trust between the school community and the police**.

Participants also indicated that a clear understanding of the SLO or youth officer mandate and what the schools can expect from their SLOs or youth officers was very important. Some participants spoke of how a disconnect between what SLOs or youth officers could do and what they did do eroded trust. In other words, it was viewed as important that **the RCMP be able to deliver on the expectations they set out with the schools**. Of note, on this issue, it was common for the officers and the school district administrators to both indicate that they had expectations of themselves and each other and that, much more often than not, these expectations were successfully met and enhanced the level of trust between the two organizations. This is critical because it is very easy to establish MOUs or partnerships that do not result in any action; however, in this case, all parties indicated that their partnerships and relationships were meaningful because there were clear expectations that were consistently met.

Related to an issue discussed above, some participants indicated that strong leadership from the police and the school district was a critical component of a successful SLO program. It was viewed as necessary that **the police and school district be committed to the program, understand and support each other's roles and responsibilities, and work collaboratively for the benefit of the students, their families, the schools, and the communities**. It was sensed that, even if this was felt among school administrators, school staff, teachers, and the SLOs or youth officers, it was perhaps even more important that this was a commitment made and supported at the school district level and police senior management level. While some participants suggested that this had not always been the case, given the current community, municipal, provincial, and federal conversations around SLOs and the role of the police in schools, **public expressions of support and a commitment in the form of adequate resources and meaningful partnerships between the school district and the police is paramount for an SLO program to succeed.**

All participants reported having well-established partnerships with a variety of organizations and agencies to assist them with their responsibilities. These partnerships included the school districts that they serve, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, youth probation, youth mental health services, and community agencies that serve the needs of youth. One of the challenges with establishing partnerships is being aware of all the various community services that are available, as these change over time with the creation of new services and shifts in agency mandates. It is worthwhile to note that some participants raised the need for more communication between themselves and the SLOs and youth officers from other police detachments or departments. Although there is an annual conference whereby SLOs and youth officers can connect with each other, **there may be a need to develop a schedule of regular meetings throughout the school year because some issues will cross jurisdictional boundaries**.

When asked for their perceptions of which strategies worked well, many SLOs and youth officers reported that the most successful strategies involved collaborations with schools, parents, and community partners. When there is communication between the school district, members, and community agencies, and a commitment to providing "a multi-pronged approach" to services, it was the view of most participants that youth are better served and the underlying issues at the root of the incident(s) can be addressed. For example, some participants reported that they referred youth to specific community resources and conducted follow ups and check ins with the youth's parents. Of importance, these strategies are more effective when SLOs and youth officers first established a trusting relationship with youth. Some participants reported that having many different members interact with youth informally at the elementary school level provides the foundation for positive relationships. However, at the secondary school level, it was viewed as more important to have consistency whereby one or two SLOs and youth officers are assigned to a particular school as this helps with rapport building and establishing a trusting relationship with youth.

As mentioned above, one of the more challenging aspects of being a SLO or youth officer is balancing the needs and constraints of youth, parents, schools, and community partners. For example, SLOs or youth officers can only do so much when a youth has multiple risk factors and little parental support. Schools and SLOs and youth officers reported working together well to provide what supports they can through the school and community agencies, but, at times, this may not be sufficient to address the various individual, social, and familial risk factors that exist in the lives of young people, particularly those considered at risk.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF SLOS OR YOUTH OFFICERS

Overall, SLOs and youth officers reported that they were satisfied with their roles and responsibilities. There were no common or consistent concerns raised by participants about being asked to undertake tasks or responsibilities that were outside of their skillset or mandate. Rather, the issues that participants identified as challenging appeared to be specific to a school district's needs or reflected a particular school culture. For example, one detachment stated that conducting curfew checks can be difficult because of their hours of operation. They acknowledged that it would be beneficial to do more curfew checks, but that this would be very challenging to implement given the current level of resources available. In contrast, another detachment reported that they would like to take on extracurricular activities after school hours and more organized activities during the summer months but are unable to because of time and resource constraints. A few participants noted that, at times, there are internal disagreements within the detachment about who should be responsible for a particular file. For example, it was not clearly defined who should take on a sexual assault investigation that did not occur at the school but was reported by a school counsellor. As mentioned above, other participants noted that senior management reassigned their SLOs or youth officers to other units during the summer months. In this case, the SLOs or youth officers felt that their reassignment interfered with their ability to maintain relationships with youth in the community over the summer.

Most participants reported that having more SLOs or youth officers would allow them to engage in more proactive, preventative activities during the summer to connect with youth and maintain the

relationships established during the school year. Related to the issue of relationships, some participants raised the issue of whether it was better to have their SLOs or youth officers in full uniform or plain clothes when attending an elementary, middle, or high school. It was interesting to note that some SLO or youth officers and some school district participants felt that there was value in the uniform because interacting with youth while in uniform contributed to the development of a positive image of an authority figure. In contrast, others stated that schools are comprised of youth from many different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, not all of whom are comfortable with, in favour of, or have positive associations with uniformed police officers in schools. For some young people, as a result of their previous negative experiences with police, the image of the uniform does not facilitate rapport or help to establish a positive, trusting, or comfortable relationship. **School districts and SLOs or youth officers need to have regular discussions about the value and need for uniformed police officers in schools.** Lastly, some participants stated that they have ongoing discussions with their school district about what role they should play and how much time they should devote to violence threat risk assessments (VTRA). These participants noted that their current level of participation was not substantial, but depending on the nature of the case, it can be time consuming and can result in them being taken away from other duties.

Similar to the comments of the SLOs and youth officers, all school district administrators spoke highly about their positive relationships with their SLOs and youth officers and the commitment that these members showed to students and youth. This strong relationship was the primary factor that contributed to the perceived success of the SLO program and explained why, in their view, the program worked so well. Some of the essential elements that ensured this positive relationship included timely and open communication, and mutual respect and trust. As highlighted by one participant, the success is due to "collaboration, cooperation, [and] compromise. There is an understanding about a little bit of give and take in order to keep kids safe." This sentiment was also echoed by many SLOs and youth officers. **Not only does there need to be a level of trust established between the officers and school administrators, but trust must also be established and maintained between the SLOs and youth officers and the district superintendents**. The majority of SLOs and youth officers reported strong support from their superintendent's office and felt that everyone worked cooperatively towards the common goal of keeping youth and their schools safe. As one participant described it, there is a "ridiculous amount of support, trust, and faith" in our officers. Not surprisingly, this relationship can be weakened when there is a shortage of SLOs or youth officers, high turnover among officers, or turnover of school administrators. Another important factor for developing and maintaining strong relationships noted by some school districts was ensuring that there is a good fit between the personality and temperament of the SLO or youth officer and the requirements of being an SLO or youth officer. As mentioned above, successful SLO or youth officers were perceived to be those who wanted to be engaged and work with youth, understood the developmental issues facing youth, were knowledgeable about the issues facing the communities they served, and were aware of and sensitive to school culture.

Related to this, a few school districts brought up the issue of the type of officer that responds to calls for service. There was a strong preference for SLOs or youth officers to respond to calls

involving youth, rather than general duty officers. This desire for an SLO or youth officer was based on the relationships that had been established, the experience with policing youth that SLOs or youth officers had, and the accessibility of SLOs or youth officers. For example, one concern was that general duty members do not always consider the complexities of dealing with youth cases, such as notifying parents and the importance of relationship-building. In addition, general duty members' schedules may result in a lack of timely follow up on files, which can make it challenging for school districts to create school safety plans. Finally, many general duty officers do not have the years of experience to respond effectively to incidents that involve youth.

While not specifically mentioned by the SLOs and youth officers, one area for improvement that was noted by school districts was the number of SLOs or youth officers. All school districts that participated in this study would welcome more SLOs or youth officers, and some districts noted that there were simply not enough SLOs or youth officers given the number of schools they needed to serve. At the same time, it is important to consider how these members would be utilized. **Having more SLOs or youth officers might allow schools to take a more proactive approach to issues rather than a reactive approach**. For example, participants indicated that they felt classroom presentations conducted by SLOs or youth officers were received differently and were more effective than when similar messages were delivered by school staff. And, several participants indicated a desire to develop and engage in more extracurricular activities after school hours and arrange for structured activities during the summer. These types of activities take a lot of time, but also provide an additional opportunity for parents and the community to engage with SLOs and youth officers that can encourage and facilitate positive relationships. Some school district participants indicated that they would like to see more information sharing between the SLO or youth officer and school administrators. It was felt that this situation was improving and there was an acknowledgement that SLOs and youth officers could not always share all the information they had about a youth or a situation for legal reasons. Ultimately, **school districts and SLOs or youth officers need to have regular discussions about how to foster and maintain positive relationships between the police and schools, parents, and youth**.

Given the climate in some jurisdictions with respect to conversations around defunding the police, systemic racism among police, and whether to continue with an SLO program, it is important to note that none of the school district participants, when asked if there was anything they would like their SLO or youth officers to stop doing, mentioned any instances of an SLO or youth officer being biased, culturally insensitive, or racist against anyone in the school. Again, some questioned the need for the officers to be in uniform, others indicated that it was important when dealing with youth to not be so 'black and white' in terms of how SLOs or youth officers respond to situations, while still others mentioned the challenge of responding to students who engaged in delinquent, deviant, or criminal behaviour during their non-school hours. To reiterate, the authors of this report received no information from school district administrators that they were concerned with SLOs or youth officers who were racist or discriminatory or who acted in that way.

## Recommendations

This report identified several benefits and challenges associated with the SLO program. The interviews identified that SLOs and youth officers were integrated well into their schools and that these officers engaged in a wide array of duties aimed at education, support, and crime prevention. Still, there are several recommendations that would strengthen the role that these officers play in schools. Moreover, there are several options and strategies for those school districts considering implementing an SLO program. This report does not make a specific recommendation on whether school districts should or should not incorporate an SLO program into their schools. There are many things to consider in adopting an SLO program, including the delicate balance between some students and their families feeling uncomfortable with police officers in schools and the value of SLOs or youth officers in enhancing school safety. This will likely become more critical given the trend toward increased ethnic/racial diversity in schools and communities, the growing number of one-parent families that can result in a reduction of supervision of children, adolescents, and youth, and the aforementioned negative effects of the internet and social media for some students. As a result, the recommendations presented below are focused on how to best design and implement an SLO program if a school district wishes to go in that direction. While there were several suggestions highlighted throughout the report, this section focuses on a few key recommendations.

### MANDATE OF SLOS AND YOUTH OFFICERS

School districts and police agencies should develop an MOU that clearly outlines the expectations, responsibilities, and working relationships of all parties. This MOU should explicitly note the dual responsibilities of SLOs and youth officers as individuals who address issues proactively and reactively. It may also be helpful to establish guidelines for when a proactive approach is necessary versus when a reactive approach is warranted. Similarly, there should be agreement concerning what proactive strategies should be implemented, taking into consideration the amount of time needed, the skillsets and abilities of SLOs and youth officers, and whether the approaches are evidence-based. Importantly, school districts should consult with school administrators, parents, and youth to solicit feedback concerning the expectations of SLOs and youth officers during and outside school hours and during the summer months. It is recommended that each school district, in partnership with their police agency, conduct a collaborative review of the SLO program to establish clear objectives and outcomes for the program. In effect, a strong MOU will ensure that police are able to deliver on the expectations set out by the schools they serve (i.e., ensure accountability) and provide the foundation for a positive, trusting relationship with school districts, schools, parents, and youth.

### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The literature review and interviews indicated that there is an inherent value in having well-trained police officers in school to undertake a wide range of role and responsibilities. The two main roles are as a law enforcement officer and the second role is as an educator, mentor, coach, counselor, or someone to talk to. The research and interviews also supported the notion that SLOs

or youth officers can contribute to a sense of safety in schools and create a greater sense of trust and respect between the police and young people. To achieve both outcomes, it is recommended that SLOs or youth officers proactively engage with students in school, in part because it serves to create a positive image of police officers in the minds of students and also reinforces their dual role in schools. It is also recommended that SLOs and youth officers develop structured and evidence-based interactions with youth as the need for them to respond reactively to incidents will likely decrease as the use of effective proactive strategies, in partnership with the schools, families, and the community, increases.

### SCHEDULING OF SLOS AND YOUTH OFFICERS

To be most effective, SLOs and youth officers need to be in schools when students are there and on school grounds before and after school. Given this, the scheduling of SLOs and youth officers should reflect the time that students are in and around their schools. As there are many different schools that an SLO or youth officer may be assigned to, it is important to prioritize their schedule, but to also ensure that members stop by the schools to do a check in with the principal and to walk the halls to normalize their presence. In effect, it is recommended that each school district and police detachment review their SLOs scheduling to maximize their capacity to be present as often as possible in schools and to contribute to crime prevention activities and participate in evidence-based programs. Again, research has identified an element of enhanced perceptions of safety with the presence of an SLO, and there was the belief that familiarity with students and community increased police effectiveness, so it is important to schedule SLOs and youth officers in such a way as to maximize their structured and unstructured interactions with staff and students. This may require policing agencies to make further adjustments to the schedules of SLOs to ensure that they are able to contribute to school activities, including before and after-school programming.

### ASSIGNMENT OF SLOS OR YOUTH OFFICERS

While there are several different approaches taken to how to assign and allocate SLOs or youth officers, and some aspect of this decision is driven by the number of schools, their geographic location, the particular concerns and issues of the school, their demographics, and the overall number of SLOs or youth officers available, whenever possible, it is recommended that SLOs be assigned to one high school and have them responsible for the elementary and middle schools that feed into this high school. The basis for this recommendation is that deploying SLOs or youth officers in this manner ensures as much continuity in the relationship between the officer with students, teachers, and administrators as possible. While it is recognized that SLOs and youth officers are unlikely to remain in this role for a long period of time, from the perspective of the youth, it takes time to develop a trusting relationship with an adult and having the same officer present in their schools as they progress from elementary to middle to high school provides the necessary time, interactions, and experiences to develop this relationship as opposed to a young person being exposed to many different police officers every few years requiring them to go through the process of developing a relationship again and again.

### TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Training and education opportunities should be provided to SLOs and youth officers shortly after entering into their position. In particular, there are five areas of training that appear to be important in the current climate: social media, mental health, delivering effective presentations, conflict resolution, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. These skills are essential if SLOs and youth officers are to conduct thorough investigations, effectively navigate their roles as educators and counsellors, and maintain positive, trusting relationships with the students, staff, and communities they serve. SLOs and youth officers should be provided with opportunities to upgrade and practice their training in all five of these areas regularly. While investigating crimes is a critical skill for SLOs and youth officers, given the expectation that police will fulfill a counseling role, training specific to youth and adolescent mental health issues also is critical, but in some RCMP jurisdictions, this type of training may not be routine. It is recommended though that police leaders emphasize and support this training for all SLOs or youth officers at the beginning of their assignment and consistently throughout their deployment to ensure that they are confident in their abilities to interact with youth and equipped with the necessary tools and skills to address the myriad of problems and challenges that youth face and experience. Many participants spoke about role SLOs and youth officers played in delivering educational presentations on a range of public safety issues, so it is critical that these officers have the necessary training and skills to deliver presentations effectively. All SLOs and youth officers should be educated and trained on how to identify suitable topics for presentations, how to create age-appropriate and compelling presentations, how to alter one's method of delivery based on the age and knowledge of the audience, and how to implement a basic evaluation process so that school administrators and SLOs and youth officers can determine what students take away from the presentations and the overall value of their presentations to students.

Related to this point and the concern expressed in some communities about systemic racism, discrimination, or cultural/ethic biases among police officers, it is recommended that the police and school district administrators ensure that wherever possible there is an appropriate match between the needs of the student body and the SLOs or youth officers assigned to the school. Critically, all SLOs and youth officers must have diversity and inclusion training. This approach might contribute to fostering mutual respect with the students and their families and provide for a better understanding, on the part of both parties, as to the root causes of certain behaviours and viable solutions to address concerns.

## Conclusion

The philosophy of any SLO program is to promote police-school collaborative efforts to prevent and respond to crime, to educate young people about public safety issues, and to enhance the level of trust and positive interactions between police and young people. The presence of a consistent SLO in the school can strengthen relationships, partnerships, and enhanced collaboration between the students and their families, the school, and the police. If this consistency is not present, the value and impact of the program can be substantially reduced. However, as mentioned above, it is important to balance this against the concern expressed by some students and families that the

presence of police officers in schools is a negative experience due to general attitudes that some may have about the police in general or as a result of personal and direct experience with the police.

Given this, it is possible that the public would be equally satisfied and feel similarly safe from crime by allocating police resources away from SLOs generally and more specifically into activities that directly increased the police's presence in their neighbourhoods. Although we were unable to test this hypothesis in the current study, the researchers speculate that it is unlikely that this re-allocation would have the desired effect. First, the feedback from school district administrators and the officers spoke to the importance of knowing that the SLOs or youth officers were in schools, available to them as needed, and had developed a good working relationship with the students and staff, as opposed to having to call 9-1-1 and possibly have a general duty (GD) member with little to no experience with the school or students attend the call. Second, relying on GD members to find the time to consistently attend schools when not performing their other duties would likely be a challenge as previous studies indicate that GD members typically have very little discretionary time during their shifts (Plecas, McCormick, & Cohen, 2010, 2011). Short of assigning members exclusively to schools, it is not clear that relying on GD members to have the time to proactively attend schools would result in a consistent police presence in and around schools that was observable and felt by school staff, students, and the community. Related to this, the SLO program builds on the notion of problem-oriented policing, the strategies of which focus on responding to the underlying causes of crime problems, as opposed to simply reacting and responding to it. GD officers are likely too busy responding to calls for service to engage with schools and their students to address the underlying issues related to delinquency, deviance, anti-social behaviour, and crime problems in schools and among youth. Moreover, when illegal behavior is detected in schools, in the absence of the SLO program, school administrators would be required to call the non-emergency police line and be added to the queue of lower priority calls for service that is likely to result in lengthy waits for police response. In contrast, SLOs and youth officers are strategically positioned to engage in problem-oriented policing, as they build relationships with staff and students, increase their familiarity with the concerns or challenges facing schools and students, and can work with staff and students to develop evidence-based solutions to these issues.

If schools have public safety concerns, it seems that one part of the solution may be the services of a skilled full-time police officer who engages in prevention and enforcement related activities in and around the school. The research undertaken for this report suggests that, for the most part with the understanding that there will be exceptions, students will feel safe, be engaged, have a positive educational/academic/school experience, will be more likely to be deterred from crime, and will not be victimized. However, decisions about the utility and value of SLOs or youth officers should not be based exclusively on the traditional return on investment calculation.

In some places, SLOs and youth officers are part of the fabric of a school community. The community, school district administrators, and police leaders must also consider that when an SLO or youth officer interacts with a student, that person is generally quite pleased with the interaction, which not only achieves the goal of satisfying the student, but also contributing, in some way, to enhancing the relationship between the police and the public, and the way the public perceives their police. In other words, it is not sufficient to decide the utility of an SLO program exclusively on

crime statistics or the number of people who have direct contact with an SLO. There is the more difficult to measure elements of the degree to which SLOs and youth officers contribute to an increase in students' and staffs' feelings of safety at and around school, an increase in the sense of partnership between the school and the police, and a sense that the police positively contribute to young people's quality of life.

This is not to say that there is not more that SLOs can and should do to ensure that they are an asset to the police organizations and the schools they serve, and worth the money and resources spent on them. The research suggests that if SLOs make the community more aware of their contributions to public safety and the development of prosocial youth, it might result in the public placing a greater value on the work done by SLOs and youth officers, and, ultimately, having the schools and community use them more and for more important public safety and crime prevention activities. Likewise, if SLOs and youth officers can create more school-oriented crime prevention strategies, developed in conjunction with the school district, SLOs and youth officers would be closer to achieving the goals of community policing and increasing their value to the community. In effect, if the police more fully committed to the principles of community policing and problem-oriented policing through their SLOs and youth officers, have their SLOs and youth officers working with and in the schools more consistently and collaboratively, the value of SLOs and youth officers to their schools, communities, and to the goals of public engagement, partnerships, and the development of strategic and targeted solutions to crime prevention and crime reduction could be achieved.

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