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"Relationship-building" and the Normalization of Police in Schools

The Emergence of School Resource Officer Programs in Canada

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Abstract

The earliest School Resource Officer Programs in Canada date back to the 1970s. This study examines how police officers, teachers, school administrators, students, and journalists use a discourse of relationship-building between police and youth to frame School Resource Officers (SROs): who they are, the work they do, their roles in students' lives, and their value to the school community. Analyzing this discourse during the emergence of SRO Programs in Edmonton and Calgary, the study illustrates how relationship-building positions SROs positively within the school community, helping normalize police presence in schools. The findings help inform critical understanding of the contemporary persistence of the relationship-building discourse as justification for SRO programs, which often eclipses consideration of program ineffectiveness and harmful effects. Overall, the relationship-building discourse remains an institutional ruse that elides the key question: what do police in schools actually do to support the education of youth and to create equitable schools?

The corridors and classrooms constable's beat. – *Edmonton Journal,* April 4, 1981

Introduction

On April 4, 1981, the *Edmonton Journal* article "The corridors and classrooms constable's beat" was the first to depict in detail School Resource Officers (or SROs) to the larger public in Edmonton, Canada. Framing this new figure – the SRO – the title summons a chain of meaning through its imagery: an officer patrols a beat; the officer now patrols a new beat of corridors and classrooms; schools are spaces for police to patrol; the police officer is now part of the school community. Naming corridors and classrooms as a new beat discursively brings school spaces into the everyday jurisdiction of policing. This news article, as in others at the time, depicts the SRO less as a law enforcer and more as a friend, mentor, counselor, teacher, and helpful individual. These matter-of-fact representations leave a fundamental question unasked: should corridors, classrooms, and schools come under direct, daily police jurisdiction at all?

Police weren't always stationed within schools nor seen as necessary members of school communities. In fact, much of the history of modern policing has involved fraught relationships with youth and communities (especially Indigenous, Black, working-class, racialized, queer, and immigrant) who experience policing as oppressive (Marquis, 2016; Maynard, 2017; Myers, 2019). This historical reality contradicts popular images of friendly, reliable officers walking the beat, playfully joking with children and welcomed by the community (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; Myers, 2019). Police agency public image-management strategies have often emphasized such representations, focusing on positive relationships officers build with youth (Onion, 2020). Community-Oriented Policing (CP) philosophies and strategies, which emerged in North America in the 1960s, mobilized these images alongside new policing techniques that engaged the public in order to alter understandings of police, expand what counts as police work, and regain legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; Lyons, 2007; Rutland, 2021).

Since their origins in the 1950s (United States) and 1970s (Canada), School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs mobilized parallel ideas about police as friendly helpers, mentors, and counselors; emphasizing building relationships with youth was characterized as a means to change perceptions of law enforcement and prevent crime. Focusing on these discourses, this study analyzes early representations of School Resource Officers in newspaper coverage from the mid-1970s to early 1980s in the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. The historical formation of relationship-building discourses during the emergence of SRO programs in North America has not been addressed in detail by researchers. Moreover, the early development of police-in-schools programs in Canada more generally remains under-researched. This study analyzes the role of the relationship-building discourse in representations of SROs and SRO Programs, arguing that it both legitimates the establishment of SRO Programs and normalizes police as appropriately resourceful, indispensable members who belong in the school community. The study situates the early usage of the relationship-building discourse within the larger strategy of Community-Oriented Policing (CP), demonstrating the ways it helped cultivate a social and institutional terrain for police to expand their authority and further insert themselves into school spaces and the lives of youth.

Critical study of the relationship-building discourse can help understand as well as contest its persistence in contemporary justifications for SRO Programs put forth by school boards, school administrators, and police agencies. Police agencies and school district websites today contain descriptions and videos advertising the bonds officers develop with students (especially non-white), the non-law enforcement (NLE) roles they play, the support of school staff for programs,

and in some cases SRO contributions to school safety.[1] These representations of SRO programs tell a particular, very partial story privileging perspectives of powerful institutions, and those school staff and students who positively assess experiences with police. In contrast, a growing literature (primarily on the United States) raises critical questions about program impacts. Overall, US-based studies are inconclusive as to whether police in schools actually enhance safety (Javdani, 2019; Layton and Addo, 2021). Moreover, despite claims to the contrary, SROs involve themselves in enforcing school rules, which contributes to an increase in punitive, exclusionary forms of discipline (Javdani, 2019; Layton and Addo, 2021; Nolan, 2011; Petteruti, 2011; Ryan, et. al., 2018). As shown in the US literature as well as in community-led research initiatives in Canadian contexts, these impacts disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, South Asian, Arab, Latinx, LGBTQ2s+, disabled, and low-income students, increasing their criminalization and feelings of alienation from school (Asilu Collective, 2021; Ennab, 2022). Due to these experiences, Canadian youth harmed by police in schools, their families, and allies have increasingly challenged SRO Programs, achieving program termination in various school boards in the past 5 years (Bindi, 2022). A critical historical examination of discourses that normalize police in schools furthers understanding of a broader, longer, contested political-cultural struggle over the meaning and role of policing in society.

Following Gita Rao Madan's approach in her analysis of the SRO Program in Toronto (2019), this study explores the productive function of the relationship-building discourse to illuminate how it legitimizes SRO programs. The analysis identifies the ways journalists, SROs, police personnel, school staff, and students expressed relationship-building in four key ways: the need to change youth attitudes toward police; SROs as friends; SROs as mentors, counselors, and teachers; and SRO individualization and differentiation from other forms of policing. The analysis deconstructs the suppositions and elisions shaping the discourse to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions that relationship-building between youth and police is a positive development for students and schools.

Community Policing, "Relationship-building," and SROs

Emerging in the 1960s, community-oriented policing (CP) in North America sought to shift policing from reactive enforcement to collaborative, proactive crime prevention as well as to improve the public image of police due to a crisis of legitimacy. While the theory of CP "has been used to cover a variety of unrelated procedures and practices" (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005, p. 50) and its practice "usually refers to a package of organizational and tactical elements" (Rutland, 2021, p. 180), several key aspects exist. Rutland (2021) concisely summarizes: organizationally, CP develops "closer relationships between the police and non-police institutions, community organizations, and everyday citizens," while tactically it involves initiatives like foot and bicycle patrols, increased venues for police-citizen interaction (consultations, community forums, community events), and "greater attention to citizen-defined security problems" (p. 180; see also Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; Manning, 1984; Marquis, 2016; Lyons, 2002). Through diverse organizational and tactical arrangements CP both multiplies police contacts with the public and expands police presence in public life beyond strict law-enforcement.

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[1] For example, see the Edmonton Police Services website: https://www.edmontonpolice.ca/CommunityPolicing/CommunityInitiatives/YouthSupportBranch/SchoolResourceOfficers, and the Edmonton Catholic School District website: https://www.ecsd.net/school-resource-officers

Various scholars critique CP philosophy and practice questioning its representations of how police and policing function, its definitions of "community," its expansion of police mandates, and how crime prevention remains secondary to more aggressive forms of law-enforcement. All these aspects of CP to some degree or another mobilize a relationship-building discourse. First, police agencies and other proponents often argue the CP will help return policing to a past era where relations between the police officer and the community were favorable, where police were accountable to the public, and where police were effective at crime control (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; Manning 1984; Myers, 2019). However, such an era is actually a romanticized myth central to police public relations tactics focused on shifting their negative image from citizen control to community care-taker (Kappeler and Kraska, 1998; Madan, 2019; Manning, 1984). Second, CP presents a vision of police as "problem-solvers" for complex social issues communities face. This "increases the non-expert and non-legal mandate of police intervention into social life" including in spheres where they have no substantial professional expertise (e.g. youth counseling, social work, mental health crisis intervention) (Brogden and Nijhar 2005, p. 59; see also Higgins et al., 2020). This expanded intervention can siphon time and resources from other community institutions and initiatives that could more capably exert these functions (Brodgen and Nijhar, 2005; Layton and Addo, 2021; Petteruti, 2011; Ryan, et. al., 2018). Third, while police agencies and CP proponents represent the "community" as self-evident and having unified interests, in fact, socio-spatial racial, class, and other hierarchies deeply shape the nature of any community (diverse interests, needs, and experiences with policing exist) (Rutland, 2021; Brogden and Nijhar, 2005). Here, police and powerful local actors (middle class and elites) mobilize institutional power to shape definitions of "community" and issues like "safety" in their interest, making them *the* definitions guiding the processes and goals of CP (Lyons, 2002; Marquis, 2016; Rutland, 2021).

While SRO Programs emerged in the 1950s (U.S.) and 1970s (Canada) and fall within a CP framework, they also extend a longer history of youth-oriented policing strategies. Police departments have used youth-oriented strategies since the early 1900s (with a proliferation mid-century), foregrounding crime prevention and the diversion of youth from the criminal legal system through activities like sport and clubs that "keep [youth] off the street" and under the watchful eye of helpful/caring officers (Myers, 2019). These strategies, like SRO Programs, also serve a pedagogical function to socialize youth into particular conceptions of citizenship, inculcate respect for authority, and normalize police presence in spaces like schools and community centers.[2] Like CP would later do in a wider, more systematic manner, youth-oriented strategies sought to foster police-youth relationships and extend the spatial reach of policing in the lives of youth.

Since their beginnings, formal SRO programs have foregrounded the rationale of "forming positive relationships between police, students, and communities" (ACLU, 2017, cited in Turner and Beneke, 2020, p. 223). SRO programs fall within CP because officers exert a triad of responsibilities where teaching (about law, drugs and alcohol, etc.) and counseling happen in addition to strict law enforcement (Broll and Howells, 2021; Javdani, 2019). SROs prioritize fostering positive relationships with members of the school community (students, teachers, school admin, and families), claiming these facilitate crime prevention and make schools safer. Some scholars argue that expanded roles for police in schools can support various needs that students

[2] The "Officer Friendly" program, for example, started in 1966 in the US and was present later in Canada. Focusing on safety, it was used as propaganda to improve police public image among children and their families and help fabricate the "lost utopia of community policing" mentioned earlier, creating nostalgia for that fictitious era and the figure of "good cop" (Onion, 2020).

and school administrators might have (Broll and Howells, 2021; Higgins et al., 2020). For example, Broll and Howells (2021) discuss how SROs in a large metropolitan area in Ontario, Canada, spend considerable time counselling school administrators. Higgins, Overstreet, Coffey, and Fisher (2020) explore how SROs describe themselves as "bridge builders" or people who could "bridge the gap" between members of the school community in ways they believe others cannot.

However, while school-police partnerships have historically promised various resources and implementation of diverse non-law enforcement efforts to address youth needs, the strengthening of law-enforcement functions has often taken precedence (ACLU, 2017; Felker-Kantor, 2022; Madan, 2019). This reveals the fundamental role conflict that SROs embody: law enforcer *versus* trustworthy mentor, counselor, and teacher. Higgins et al. (2020) demonstrate, for example, how SROs are mainly motivated to use non-law enforcement (NLE) roles that improve communication and relationships *in order to facilitate* the role they see as paramount—that of law enforcer (emphasis mine; See also Schlosser, 2014). Additionally, SRO Programs involve a "mission creep," where officers' roles expand beyond the original intent of the specific position, for example, going from school safety to involvement in school discipline and enforcement of school policy (Ryan et al., 2018). Mission creep emerges in part from "a lack of precision or clear policy guidelines for defining [SRO] roles" like mentoring, counseling, and crime prevention (Na and Gottfredson, 2013, cited in Ryan et al., 2018, p. 188). However, SROs lack training to exert NLE roles like counseling and teaching (cf. Javdani, 2019). Research also shows how the most marginalized students suffer the consequences of SRO law-enforcement presence in schools and the mission creep into punitive, disciplinary functions (Maynard, 2017; Salole and Abdulle, 2015).

The blurred boundaries around the SRO triad of responsibilities (including the relationships between responsibilities) articulate well with the ubiquity, vagueness, and malleability of the goal of relationship-building. Moreover, because relationship-building involves typical school activities (field trips, sports, classroom lectures, after school clubs, hanging out with students in the hallways, etc.), SROs insinuate themselves into the everyday rituals of schooling. Insinuation can obscure "mission creep" and the extension of policing in education systems. This raises key questions: what forms of relationships are police building with students, to what ends, and with what consequences for school communities? And, what specifically does the relationship-building discourse involve as it shapes these processes?

My exploration of these questions aligns with Gita Rao Madan's (2019) work focused on the self-serving nature of the relationship-building discourse used by the Toronto Police Department as SRO program rationale in the late 2000s and 2010s. This discourse, she argues, inserted CP models into schools, bolstered city-wide police public relations and surveillance gathering strategies in schools, and constructed SROs as indispensable because of the roles they fill in an increasingly underfunded school system. The analysis below identifies similar features in the discourse, specifying several discursive frames used for SROs and SRO programs. However, I do this in the context of Alberta in the 1970s and early 1980s. Today, Alberta and cities like Edmonton and Calgary are major sites of police violence (Lambert, 2023; Francoeur and Uppal, 2020), notwithstanding the existence of official crime prevention and people-oriented CP approaches since the late 1980s and early 1970s, respectively. CP thus provides a form of cover for ongoing physical, mental, and symbolic violence by police, with the relationship-building discourse specifically assisting the normalization of police in schools.

SRO Programs in Canada and Alberta

The earliest formal SRO programs in Canada started in Vancouver (1972), Calgary (1974) and Edmonton (1979). In Montreal, an earlier *policiers-éducateurs* (police-educators) pilot program started in 1966 by Sargeant Claude Labelle, emerging out of youth-focused crime prevention efforts and his vision to "make the police-educators as fundamental to the school system as the school nurse service, career counselors, and school chaplains" (Myers, 2019, p. 173). In downtown Edmonton in 1974, 5 years prior to the city's formal SRO program, the principal of Alex Taylor Elementary School employed a part-time Edmonton Police Service officer as one of several initiatives focused on youth and families in that neighborhood. The media at the time described the neighborhood, which had a large immigrant and urban Indigenous population, as "economically depressed" (Francis, 1975; Gunion, 1974).

Discussion in the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) about a formal program starts in fall 1978. The Association of Parents of ME Lazerte High School requested the EPSB place an officer in the school focused on safety and crime prevention (Collins, 1978). The request came after the Calgary Police Department (CPD) presented about their SRO Program to the parent association, school board members, principals, and members of the Edmonton Police Service and Police Commission (M.E. Lazerte Association of Parents, 1978). The Edmonton program officially started in September 1979. Calgary's program started in September 1974 in collaboration with the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) and the separate Catholic school board. It was an extension of then Police Chief Brian Sawyer's CP-inspired zone policing plan (School Accepts Resident Cop, *Calgary Herald*, May 20, 1975), which "attempted to decentralize and localize policing in distinguishable communities" to enhance crime prevention and become people oriented (Morris and Forcese, 2002, p. 20). The Calgary PD would produce a 4-page pamphlet on the SRO program in the following years, listing objectives reflecting CP philosophy and practice, including: "to get to know the officer as a person and a helper," delinquency prevention, counsel and referrals for "maladjusted youth," to act "as a liaison between parents and the community," and "to improve police community relations and create a better police image" (Calgary Police Department, n.d.).

The Calgary SRO program started with 2 officers at 2 different high schools. The Edmonton program started with 6 officers, 4 stationed at specific schools and 2 rotating locations (Programs called key factor in decline of juvenile crime. *Edmonton Journal*, September 25, 1979). Neither the first SRO in Calgary nor Edmonton carried a sidearm/handgun. By 2019-2020, the Edmonton program would have 29 armed officers working in 36 schools, with 19 in the public school district (CBC News, 2020), while Calgary currently has 38 armed SROs with 23 deployed to schools (Toy, 2021). At the time of this writing, the SRO Program operates in Edmonton Catholic Schools, and after a 3-year suspension for a program review, the Edmonton Public School Board voted in April 2024 to re-establish a formal relationship with EPS, likely through a revamped SRO Program. The Edmonton School Board had reviewed the program in response to testimony given at two June 2020 meetings by community members, former students, researchers, and activists who spoke about negative outcomes of police in schools. One school board trustee was fundamental to moving this issue forward and requesting the review, given that the program had not been independently reviewed since its inception 40 years earlier (Edmonton school trustee calls for review of school resource officer program, June 23, 2020).

The 1970s origins of Canadian SRO programs in CP-related goals mirrors the 1950s and 60s context of program emergence in the U.S., which also emphasized forming positive relationships between police, students, and communities. (cf. ACLU, 2017, cited in Turner and

Beneke, 2020, p. 223). This earlier time period differs from the much-studied 1990s proliferation of police-in-schools programs in the US. Here, a "get tough on crime ethos," federal government investment, and neoliberal education reforms (high stakes testing, budget cuts) combined to shape school disciplinary policies and push racialized and disabled students out of schools (Vitale, 2018; See also Nolan, 2011). School shootings and the threat of gun violence (now seen as seeping into predominantly white communities) also shaped fears about school safety, allowing "zero-tolerance" discipline approaches to proliferate (Madan, 2019; Vitale, 2018). Mainstream normalization of schools as securitized spaces (armed officers, metal detectors) occurred.

While informed by CP practices, SRO programs in Canada have also practiced population surveillance and management. Created in 2008, the Toronto SRO Program was a partnership between the Toronto Police Service (TPS), the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) in response to growing public concerns about school safety due to the 2007 killing of student Jordan Manners. Twenty-nine uniformed police officers were placed inside TDSB schools (Madan, 2019; Salole and Abdulle, 2015). But, rather than a "tough on crime" narrative like the US, the program was constructed as different than "zero-tolerance" through a "public and institutional narrative of relationship-building" (Madan 2019, pp. 24-25). Nonetheless, focused on predominantly non-white, immigrant and working class "priority neighborhoods" and youth deemed "at-risk," the Toronto Program extended CP techniques, surveillance, and information gathering into schools (Madan 2019, p. 29; For the U.S., see Turner and Beneke, 2020).

Methodology: Sample and Analysis

Twelve news articles mentioning SROs in the *Edmonton Journal* between 1978-1981 and 3 articles and 2 youth forum columns in the *Calgary Herald* between 1975-1977 (17 Articles total) were examined. These newspapers are the largest Alberta newspapers. The chosen time frame covers the creation of programs and emergent public discussions on SROs in each city. The discourses analyzed include quoted and/or written perspectives of police representatives, SROs themselves, school leadership, teachers, and students regarding SROs and SRO programs as well as the visual and textual elements chosen by journalists to represent SROs. Two articles were chosen for more in-depth analysis – a half-page *Calgary Herald* (September 1977) and full-page *Edmonton Journal* (April 1981) article – due to pictures and detailed profiles of the first SROs: who they are, their work, and reception among members of the school community. The two "Youth Forum" columns in the *Calgary Herald* were analyzed for their presentation of student perspectives. Overall, the analysis focuses on statements and quotes from people expressing their understandings of the role SROs and police play in schools.

I analyze discourses about SROs as productive, framing practices that position them within the school community in particular ways. Framing is an "action or operation" that organizes discourse "according to a certain point of view or perspective" and involves social agents in various roles and with different levels of power (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169). Discursive framings work – intentionally and unintentionally – to legitimize certain meanings, actions, and forms of institutional power. A critical analysis of the discourse of relationship-building can reveal ideologies shaping the representations and constructions of the social world by actors and institutions, allowing examination of how they reproduce (or transform) unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak, 2011, para 46). More broadly, the struggle over discourse stems from the fact that discourses not only construct knowledge about a particular topic (e.g., the SRO). Situated historically and within

unequal power relations, discourses also identify, regulate, and construct social groups as well as delimit what can and cannot be said, what is and is not appropriate, and what (or whose) knowledge is relevant or useful about a topic (Tator and Henry, 2006, p. 34-35).

The analysis in this paper centers on ways the discourse of relationship-building frames, positions, and legitimates SRO programs and SROs. Diverse actors frame who SROs are and why their presence is a benefit to schools. Because *positioning* is part of the "wider process of constitution of the subject through discourse" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169; Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak, 2011), the study examines how actors position the SRO in particular relationships to students, teachers, administrators, and the larger community. The study also examines how SROs position themselves in relation to students and other forms of policing. The examination of *legitimation*, which involves the justification and sanctioning for a certain action or power (Carvalho, 2008, 169), focuses on rationales used to assert why SROs are beneficial members of the school community. Lastly, an examination of *rhetoric* identifies the relationship of key concepts "to wider cultural and ideological frameworks" and pays attention to the "vocabulary used for representing a certain reality (e.g. verbs, adjectives, adverbs) and the writing style (e.g. formal/informal, technical, conversational) [which] are important dimensions of the constitution of meanings" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 168). I examine the vocabulary attached to SROs, in particular the constitution of the figure of the SRO through positive associations, familiarity, and convivial meanings.

Because of the temporally and locally circumscribed focus of the study, findings may not be generalizable to the emergence of SRO programs in other contexts given specific contextual spatial and political articulations (cf. Rutland, 2021). However, the study of relationship-building discourse helps elaborate its centrality to the CP logics and practices of police-in-school programs across time and location; it also demonstrates an ongoing contradiction in an Albertan context where relationship-building persists as justification for police-in-schools programs alongside problematic frequent use of force by police services in major cities. Deepening understanding of the relationship-building discourse provides an important tool to deconstruct and challenge the key framings, positionings, rhetoric, and legitimation proponents of SRO programs use across Canada to normalize police presence in schools despite lack of evidence of their effectiveness in crime prevention or relationship to student learning.

Normalizing Police in Schools: Key Representations of SROs

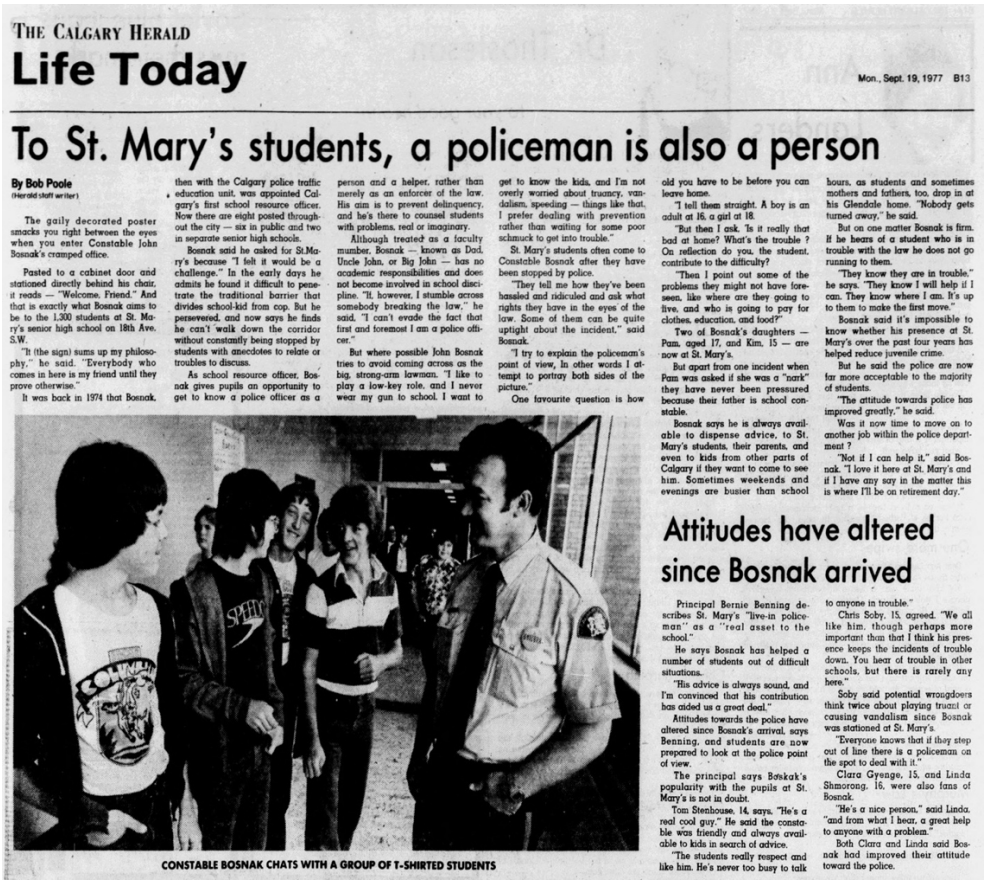
Newspaper articles introducing SROs to the public frequently expressed the relationship-building discourse, which to produces particular representations of SRO Programs and attributes particular roles to SROs. Relationship-building has thus long constructed a discursive terrain establishing SROs as legitimate members of the school community. I examine four key discursive representations:

- The need to change youth attitudes toward and perception of police
- SROs as friends
- SROs as mentors, counselors, and teachers
- SROs as Individuals and as different from other forms of policing

Overall, composition, text, and imagery frame SROs as ordinary people trusted by students and who change youth attitudes. The two in-depth articles encompass this framing: the *Calgary Herald* story "To St. Mary's students, a policeman is also a person," with subsection "Attitudes have altered since Bosnak [the SRO] arrived" (Figure 1). The *Edmonton Journal* story is titled "The

corridors and classrooms constable's beat" with a subheading "The students would come up and ask her things they wouldn't ask their teachers" (Figure 2).

Each article presents images of the SRO interacting with students in the hallway. The *Journal* article includes various pictures with different activities—physical education, counseling, being greeted by students, and teaching "rape-prevention" [sic] classes to girls in junior high school. The visual composition encourages the reader to picture the officer variously within the school setting. With sizeable articles and prominent images, the newspapers gave significance to these SRO stories. The *Journal* edition also contains a picture on the front page next to the masthead pointing the reader to the full-page article. In it, the SRO talks to a group of students. The caption, "A friend: police officers finding acceptance in high schools – Page J16," frames the story as one of friendship and acceptance. I now analyze the different representations.



THE CALGARY HERALD

Life Today

Mon., Sept. 19, 1977 B13

To St. Mary's students, a policeman is also a person

By Bob Poole
(Herald staff writer)

The gaily decorated poster smacks you right between the eyes when you enter Constable John Bosnak's cramped office.

Pasted to a cabinet door and stationed directly behind his chair, it reads — "Welcome, Friend." And that is exactly what Bosnak aims to be to the 1,300 students at St. Mary's senior high school on 18th Ave. S.W.

"It (the sign) sums up my philosophy," he said. "Everybody who comes in here is my friend until they prove otherwise."

It was back in 1974 that Bosnak, then with the Calgary police traffic education unit, was appointed Calgary's first school resource officer. Now there are eight posted throughout the city — six in public and two in separate senior high schools.

Bosnak said he asked for St.Mary's because "I felt it would be a challenge." In the early days he admits he found it difficult to penetrate the traditional barrier that divides school-kid from cop. But he persevered, and now says he finds he can't walk down the corridor without constantly being stopped by students with anecdotes to relate or troubles to discuss.

As school resource officer, Bosnak gives pupils an opportunity to get to know a police officer as a person and a helper, rather than merely as an enforcer of the law. His aim is to prevent delinquency, and he's there to counsel students with problems, real or imaginary.

Although treated as a faculty member, Bosnak — known as Dad, Uncle John, or Big John — has no academic responsibilities and does not become involved in school discipline. "It, however, I stumble across somebody breaking the law," he said. "I can't evade the fact that first and foremost I am a police officer."

But where possible John Bosnak tries to avoid coming across as the big, strong-arm lawman. "I like to play a low-key role, and I never wear my gun to school. I want to get to know the kids, and I'm not overly worried about truancy, vandalism, speeding — things like that. I prefer dealing with prevention rather than waiting for some poor schmuck to get into trouble."

St. Mary's students often come to Constable Bosnak after they have been stopped by police.

"They tell me how they've been hassled and ridiculed and ask what rights they have in the eyes of the law. Some of them can be quite uptight about the incident," said Bosnak.

"I try to explain the policeman's point of view, in other words I attempt to portray both sides of the picture."

One favourite question is how old you have to be before you can leave home.

"I tell them straight. A boy is an adult at 16, a girl at 18.

"But then I ask, 'Is it really that bad at home? What's the trouble? On reflection do you, the student, contribute to the difficulty?

"Then I point out some of the problems they might not have foreseen, like where are they going to live, and who is going to pay for clothes, education, and food?"

Two of Bosnak's daughters — Pam, aged 17, and Kim, 15 — are now at St. Mary's.

But apart from one incident when Pam was asked if she was a "nark" they have never been pressured because their father is school constable.

Bosnak says he is always available to dispense advice, to St. Mary's students, their parents, and even to kids from other parts of Calgary if they want to come to see him. Sometimes weekends and evenings are busier than school hours, as students and sometimes mothers and fathers, too, drop in at his Glendale home. "Nobody gets turned away," he said.

But on one matter Bosnak is firm. If he hears of a student who is in trouble with the law he does not go running to them.

"They know they are in trouble," he says. "They know I will help if I can. They know where I am. It's up to them to make the first move."

Bosnak said it's impossible to know whether his presence at St. Mary's over the past four years has helped reduce juvenile crime.

But he said the police are now far more acceptable to the majority of students.

"The attitude towards police has improved greatly," he said.

Was it now time to move on to another job within the police department?

"Not if I can help it," said Bosnak. "I love it here at St. Mary's and if I have any say in the matter this is where I'll be on retirement day."

CONSTABLE BOSNAK CHATS WITH A GROUP OF T-SHIRTED STUDENTS

Attitudes have altered since Bosnak arrived

Principal Bernie Benning describes St. Mary's "live-in policeman" as a "real asset to the school."

He says Bosnak has helped a number of students out of difficult situations.

"His advice is always sound, and I'm convinced that his contribution has aided us a great deal."

Attitudes towards the police have altered since Bosnak's arrival, says Benning, and students are now prepared to look at the police point of view.

The principal says Bosnak's popularity with the pupils at St. Mary's is not in doubt.

Tom Stenhouse, 14, says, "He's a real cool guy." He said the constable was friendly and always available to kids in search of advice.

"The students really respect and like him. He's never too busy to talk to anyone in trouble."

Chris Soby, 15, agreed. "We all like him, though perhaps more important than that I think his presence keeps the incidents of trouble down. You hear of trouble in other schools, but there is rarely any here."

Soby said potential wrongdoers think twice about playing truant or causing vandalism since Bosnak was stationed at St. Mary's.

"Everyone knows that if they step out of line there is a policeman on the spot to deal with it."

Clara Gyenge, 15, and Linda Shmorang, 16, were also fans of Bosnak.

"He's a nice person," said Linda, "and from what I hear, a great help to anyone with a problem."

Both Clara and Linda said Bosnak had improved their attitude toward the police.

Figure 1. Calgary Herald article on School Resource Officer, September 19, 1977. (Material republished with express permission of: *Edmonton Journal*/*Calgary Herald*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.)

J16 EDMONTON JOURNAL, Saturday, April 4, 1981

'The students will come up and ask her things they won't ask their teachers'

The corridors and classrooms constable's beat

Constable Cindy Hreczuch works where other policemen fear to tread.

Armed with only her wit and a charming smile, she walks the halls of city schools where many of her colleagues are reluctant to go.

She's one of a new breed of city policemen which doesn't chase bad guys or patrol the streets.

After three years on the street, the 25-year-old policeman traded her revolver for an armful of books and now hands out advice instead of tickets.

Classrooms, field trips and basketball games are her beat.

Constable Hreczuch is one of six school resource officers who began working out of six city high schools after the program began in August, 1979.

Youth Section S.Sgt. Harold Ditty said the police department started the program to detect and prevent juvenile delinquency and to develop a better relationship between students, teachers and police.

"It gives the students a different perspective altogether of what the police role is in the community," he said. "It shows them the police are there to help them and not just throw them in jail."

The program appealed to Constable Hreczuch and she applied for the job. The students like her, and more importantly, respect her.

In the schools, she's known as Constable Cindy.

Whether in uniform or blue jeans and cowboy boots, she's beseiged with greetings and smiles as she strides through the hallways of M.E. LaZerte and its "feeder" junior high schools.

"She's sort of an authority figure-friend," says Marilyn Robb, a teacher in Killarney Junior High.

"The students will come up and ask her things they won't ask their teachers," she says.

The questions cover everything from restricted weapons and automobile accidents to where to go for a pregnancy test and what happens to prostitutes when they decide to quit hooking.

"There's no way I could summarize what they ask me because they ask me everything," Constable Hreczuch says.

The students didn't learn to trust her overnight.

"I did get called a lot of names by the students before they knew me. It wasn't directed at me, it was directed at the uniform.

"The uniform still seems to be a barrier for some of them, even though we're not wearing a side-arm and handcuffs."

The effects of having police resource officers in schools is being noticed by officers on the streets.

Police say students from the resource officers' schools are more co-operative than others they stop.

"I talk a lot about their rights with the law," Constable Hreczuch says.

About half her job consists of classroom lectures and films on topics ranging from impaired driving and its effects, and rape prevention to court etiquette and police career opportunities.

Then there's staff and students' union meetings, dances and parent-teacher nights.

But some of the most valuable work with the students is done during the unstructured, extra-curricular activities, Constable Hreczuch says.

Whenever she can she plays basketball, softball and volleyball with the students and joins them on field trips.

"The students approach me on a one-to-one basis and they are more open because it's very casual."

During those activities the students gradually lose their stereotyped images of policeman.

Says Constable Hreczuch: "They realize we're human, after all."

Story **Darcy Henton**

Pictures **Michael Dean**

After some badminton with a phys-ed class at M.E. LaZerte, Constable Cindy helps counsel a student. 'They ask me everything,' she says.

When she arrives at Killarney Junior High, Constable Hrezuch has a welcoming committee. At the school she conducts a class on rape prevention for the junior high girls.

Figure 2. Full-page article on School Resource Officer, Edmonton Journal, April 4, 1981. (Material republished with the express permission of: *Edmonton Journal*/*Calgary Herald*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.)

Representation 1: The Need to Change Attitudes and Youth Perceptions

> Before the year started you probably know what many of the students thought in St. Mary's about police… they were simply thought of as good for nothing pigs that were against all young people. Now there is a general attitude of respect and

> understanding that a police officer is a human being just like the rest of us. (Letter from St. Mary's High School students to Calgary Police Department. School Accepts Resident Cop, *Calgary Herald*, May 20, 1975.)

Across the articles examined, police departments, their representatives, SROs, and school principals consistently cite the need to improve relationships with youth as a key reason to place officers in schools. These actors usually frame this improvement as located in changing youth attitudes *toward* police and perceptions about police *in the eyes of* youth. However, the larger context shaping youth sentiments – previous interactions or police practices in communities that create fear or animosity – remains unexplored. What is both present *and* absent in this framing directs the audience to youth attitudes as the problem in need of correction. Because "silence can be as performative as discourse" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 171), that left unsaid also discursively constructs the figure of the SRO.

The focus on relationships exemplifies how police define issues that SROs seek to resolve: youth simply need more exposure to police to understand who they are as people and to improve attitudes toward authority. The discursive construction of the problem (youth attitudes) elicits a solution of increased police presence in the lives of youth to build relationships without exploring what shapes the stated youth-police disconnect. Moreover, the benefit of changing youth perceptions of police is taken-for-granted as a normative good, rather than substantiated. Importantly, no significant discussion is present regarding how education—the central role of schools—improves due to police presence. The links police representatives and SROs often make between changing youth attitudes and improved knowledge of laws and respect for authority indicates habituating youth to police (and state) authority as one goal of relationship-building. The focus on socialization and respect for authority fits well within the history of public education, where policy-makers viewed schools as spaces to inculcate nationalism, citizenship, and produce productive citizens accepting of the inequitable social organization of society and capitalist discipline (Sears, 2003).

The student letter quoted above, among others, suggests that after several years the program might be accomplishing its goal to change (some) youth perceptions in a positive direction. Various actors make this discursive emphasis, which coupled with journalistic choice to foreground growing acceptance, shapes a vision of the "student community" as homogenous in their feelings about SROs. This representation suggests dissent, questioning, fear, or animosity are waning in police-youth relationships, something contradicted by the *Youth Forums* (discussed below). Discursive emphasis on acceptance excludes those with negative perceptions and/or experiences of policing from the formation of the emerging school "community" built through positive relationships with law enforcement. This sets the stage to frame dissenters as ongoing "problems" or "threats" to building things like school safety.

Despite a few police assertions, news coverage fails to explore links between relationship-building and crime prevention, a key rationale for SRO Programs. Even the Calgary SRO is explicitly uncertain about the linkage,

> Bosnak said it's impossible to know whether his presence at St. Mary's over the past four years has helped reduce juvenile crime. But he said the police are now far more acceptable to the majority of students. "The attitude towards police has improved greatly," he said. (Poole, 1977).

While an *impression* exists that incidents are less frequent and letters from school officials and police to the Calgary Police Commission assert "delinquency prevention qualities" of the SRO program (Sterling, 1977), the SRO chooses not to convey these claims to bolster his own legitimacy. Notably, he focuses on youth attitudes and relationship-building.

The representation that "the police are far more acceptable to the majority of students" captures some students' sentiments while downplaying critical perspectives. For example, two *Youth Forums* in the *Calgary Herald* in May 1977 asked "What is the teenage attitude toward School Resource Officers?" Here, students articulated seven critical comments alongside twenty-one positive and 4 neutral comments.

> I do not think there should be police in the high schools. Although intentions are good, they tend to cause a feeling of nervousness. – B.S. (*Youth Forum*, May 7, 1977)

> My opinion of having resource officers in high schools is that we are here to learn to be grown-ups. How would the police be adding to this? They would be there to watch over us like we were juvenile delinquents. The school would no longer remain the funhouse that we love coming to everyday but a jailhouse. In our school we have friends and experienced teachers called counselors. That's what they are here for – to counsel us. We trust these people and I don't think that any of us would let the police take their place. – K. M. (*Youth Forum*, May 14, 1977)

Negative perspectives among students show rejection and raise important questions regarding police in schools, challenging key foundations of the relationship-building discourse. Some stated that programs are useless, while others objected to the fear and tension caused by police in schools. Neutral comments express ambivalence, while even those making positive comments qualify answers stating that outcomes depend on the officer – for example, that programs won't work if SROs harass students and police them rather than be helpful. This mixture of opinion contrasts the larger narratives in the SRO profile pieces and other articles, which exclude alternative perspectives.

Overall, police and school officials' perspectives in the data are unclear on whether relationship-building or preventing juvenile delinquency and crime (or both) is the SRO's priority. Sometimes they minimize youth behavior as an issue. At others, it is a concern. Unclear messaging is not indicative of a weakness of meaning construction through the discourse. Rather, vagueness around goals and contradictions around roles help conceal intent and power behind police in schools, while facilitating normalization.

Representation 2: Officer as "a Friend"

Both the *Herald* and *Journal* stories include pictures of the SRO standing and smiling among students, engaged in casual conversation in the hallway. The portrayal of positive interactions suggests friendly relationships. The *Journal* coverage includes two pictures of this nature. The first photograph (not reproduced) on the front page is captioned: "A Friend: Police Resource officers finding acceptance in high schools." This shows how the framing of SRO as "a friend" to students, which persists in contemporary police and school officials' discourse (Madan, 2019; Edmonton Police Service, n.d.), has existed since the origins of such programs. Additionally,

journalistic framing of the outcome of "gaining acceptance" conveys a positive process where the school community agreeably welcomes the officer as a member.

A second photograph in the full-page *Journal* article also connects hallway conversations to friendship and acceptance. The SRO smiles surrounded by students who are also smiling, some holding binders (Figure 2, bottom left). The caption reads: "When she arrives at Killarney Junior High, Constable Hreczuch has a welcoming committee." This emphasizes excited anticipation among students for her arrival. Acceptance is reinforced in the article text, "Whether in uniform or blue jeans and cowboy boots, she's [the SRO] besieged with greetings and smiles as she strides through the hallways...". The officer thus "fits in," whether in uniform or plainclothes.

The idea of officers as "a friend" establishes a close connection between SROs and students. It simultaneously minimizes and disguises power and authority hierarchies between students and police, given an SROs primary responsibility remains law enforcement. Take, for example, this passage on the Edmonton SRO:

> In the schools she's known as Constable Cindy…
>
> "She's sort of an authority figure-friend," says Marilyn [R.], a teacher in Killarney Junior High. "The students will come up and ask her things they won't ask their teacher," she says.
>
> The questions cover everything from restricted weapons and automobile accidents to where to go for a pregnancy test and what happens to prostitutes [sic] when they decide to quit hooking [sic].
>
> "There's no way I could summarize what they ask me because they ask me everything," Constable Hreczuch says. (Henton, 1981)

Using nicknames (e.g. "Constie") or calling SROs by title and first name (e.g. Constable Cindy) happens frequently. Media, school staff, and/or police point out how students use these terms to convey that familiarity, connection, and care exist between officers and students. Nicknames not only also suggest informality, they denote belonging. The *Herald* article describes how the Calgary SRO is also known as "Dad," "Uncle John," or "Big John." The SRO is portrayed as a (male) elder in a larger school family where caring adults help educate, mentor, and take care of students. As Myers' (2019) historical analysis shows, youth-oriented policing strategies have long operated with a paternalism of protection, reinforcing police power by representing state care as benevolent.

A second significant aspect in the passage is the teacher's description of the Constable as "sort of an authority figure-friend" and saying students will ask the SRO "things they won't ask their teacher." SROs thus may receive or extract information teachers do not have (e.g. regarding weapons). At the same time, the linkage between friend, counselor, and asking questions that students will not ask teachers, conveys student trust in the SRO, which contrasts an implied lack of trust in teachers for certain conversations. Yet, we return here to the "role conflict" between SRO non-law enforcement (NLE) and law enforcement duties (Higgins et al., 2020; Javdani, 2019; Schlosser, 2014), where they gather information on students (Madan, 2019), and in some cases, even seek to deceive them in order to make arrests.[3] Thus, this slippage between "authority figure/police officer" and "friend" evades the central question of "trust" when someone holds both

[3] For an example, see the Bait Phone Program briefly used by Edmonton Police Services at https://www.sroresearchproject.ca/research/survellience.

roles. Administrators, teachers, and media trade in this evasion in their representations of the SRO. In contrast, one could more explicitly ask: Can your friends kill/cage/detain you or do they hold a monopoly on the use of force over your body that can be legally justified by the state? The discursive positioning of SROs as friends obscures the violence, power differentials, and coercive nature of policing, including its racist and colonial histories.

Despite focusing on NLE tasks and student trust, media coverage discourses do not actually hide a depiction of SROs *as* police (or law enforcement), which demonstrates SROs do enact their authority. Take for example, the *Herald* article introduction of the Constable:

> [In the constable's cramped office], [p]asted to a cabinet door and stationed directly behind his chair, it reads – "Welcome Friend." And that is exactly what Bosnak aims to be to the 1300 students… "It (the sign) sums up my philosophy," he said. "Everybody who comes in here is my friend *until they prove otherwise*" (Poole, 1977, emphasis mine).

The ability to revoke friendship demonstrates a hierarchical power-relation that can have consequences for students. However, in setting up his office as a welcoming place (for friends), the SRO softens perception of this structurally inequitable relation. Doing so reveals the coercive, power-laden nature of a relationship-building discourse that foregrounds NLE interactions while threatening law enforcement authority over those who "prove otherwise." Discourses representing officers as "a friend" thus reframe the youth-police relationship as a horizontal and amicable one, focusing on things like building trust that help change youth and societal perceptions of policing (See also Felker-Kantor 2022). This framing normalizes a tolerance for role conflict, even as examples from the discourse like the one above show that ultimately, a cop is not your friend.

Representation 3: SRO as Helper, Mentor, Counselor, Teacher, and Coach

The discourse of relationship-building includes other NLE roles, where SROs act as teachers, chaperones, coaches, and counsellors. Take the montage of pictures in the *Edmonton Journal* story (Figure 2). The Constable appears hanging out with students in the hallway (in uniform), in a classroom (in plain clothes) looking at a book together with a student ("helps counsel a student"), in uniform teaching a class on "rape prevention" [sic] to junior high girls, and in gym attire playing badminton with a phys-ed class. "Half her job consists of classroom lectures and films," which includes topics like sexual health, traffic/driving safety, and alcohol/drug consumption. But, as the Constable shares, the "unstructured extracurricular activities" are the most valuable time spent with students. The textual and visual montage discursively establishes SRO belonging and service to students through participation in everyday rituals of schooling. Varied roles and everyday participation normalize the officer as school personnel, as a problem-solving mentor, teacher, and/or counsellor.[4]

The question of trust and understanding is fundamental to the relationships mentors and counsellors have with students. By legitimating these roles for SROs, the discourse and range of SRO activities blur the boundaries around police work in schools, seeking to build trust and elide law-enforcement functions while obscuring police power. Actively immersed in the school in various roles, early discursive positionings of SROs as helpers, mentors, counselors, teachers, and

[4] For analysis of treating SROs as social workers, mentors, or counselors shaped by a "neoliberal therapeutic discourse," see Turner and Beneke (2020). For more on the "friend" discourse, see Madan (2019).

coaches framed their place in the school community. This leaves unaddressed key questions about whether police officers are the preferred or best people to take up these roles.[5] However, as the Youth Forum comment from K.M. quoted above illustrates, "we [already] have friends and experienced teachers called counselors… We trust these people and I don't think that any of us would let the police take their place." Some students thus feel other trusted people already fulfill these roles and reject the idea that police should replace them.

The multiplication of SRO roles expresses the logics and goals of community and youth-oriented policing. Officers use extracurricular activities to create good relationships with students and solidify a perceived indispensability of their services (Madan, 2019). Relationship-building has thus helped set the stage for the ways today's ballooning police budgets across Canada (Kinney, 2020) and concurrent underfunding of public education in places like Alberta (Riep, 2021) sets up police as people who can fulfill school personnel needs. School boards cannot hire sufficient counsellors, nurses, or educational assistants who are professionally trained in mental health, engaging students with disabilities, and working with youth. Class sizes also grow, while resources for after school programs and extracurricular activities like clubs and sports that increase student engagement disappear. As Madan (2019) shows, students in Toronto felt pushed to choose an SRO to coach a sports team or have no team at all. The effect is structurally produced: education funding decreases as school-police partnerships persist to implant police in schools because admin, staff, and students see SROs as meeting significant needs.

Representation 4: Individualization, humanization, and differentiation

Discourses about SROs as friends, mentors, teachers, and counselors position them as *different* from other police officers and types of policing; this reflects larger representations of CP as substantially unlike "zero tolerance" or "tough on crime" approaches (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005; Madan, 2019). This differentiation also fundamentally relies on contrasting SRO policing, with its triad of responsibilities of teaching, counseling, and law enforcement, to policing done outside the school where people imply more aggressive strategies exist (See also Madan, 2019; Turner and Beneke, 2020, pp. 229-234). This discursive differentiation appears mainly through individualization of the officer and the humanization of police. For example, in the discussion of the SRO in Edmonton, the article states,

> The students didn't learn to trust her overnight.
>
> > "I did get called a lot of names by the students before they knew me. It wasn't directed at me, it was directed at the uniform. *The uniform still seems to be a barrier for some of them*, even though we're not carrying a side-arm and handcuffs." (Henton, 1981, emphasis mine)

The Constable locates student distrust in the uniform to position herself as an individual disconnected from her embodiment of the police institution within the school. Naming the uniform as barrier acknowledges how many students might fear or distrust police. However, framing concerns as "not directed at me" displaces attention from her embodiment (the person who is the

[5] For analysis of police agency rationales for why police are good mentors, teachers, and friends to students, see Felker-Kantor (2022), whose findings on D.A.R.E. in 1980s Los Angeles show integration in schools as a means to legitimate police power.

SRO) onto the symbol (the uniform), which (a) distances the Constable as the applied node of institutional police power that some students do in fact recognize, and (b) ignores reasons why students express anger towards police. By suggesting that once they get to know her, students will look past the uniform to see the person underneath, the SRO explains away students' critical capacity to scrutinize police presence in their school. By personalizing connection beyond the uniform, the Constable's links to institutionalized police power recede into the background, and for many, even go unnoticed.

The SRO also deflects the violence of being policed and/or experiencing police violence by pointing out that students see a barrier even though she does not carry a side-arm and handcuffs. This positions policing done by SROs (weaponless at that time) as non-violent. Implicitly, the Constable discursively differentiates SRO policing from more obvious signs of police power/violence and coercion. This contradictorily separates SRO work from commonsense understandings of what constitutes policing while also cultivating consent for a seemingly "gentler" policing involving the triad of responsibilities. Problematically, the SRO also positions "some" who still see the uniform as a barrier as either unable to see her for who she really is or as those who will eventually change their perceptions. Distrust and anger become incidental problems of perception rather than structural questions related to police power. The CP triad of SRO programs becomes a form of counter-insurgency (Rutland, 2021) that involves selective inclusion and exclusion (Schrader 2016): those who continue to distrust SROs become disloyal and/or outsiders to the mission of forming a community that feels positively about police in schools. Student disloyalty (i.e. Bosnak's "proving otherwise") could further mark them as suspect, potentially alienating working class, disabled, and racialized students who already deviate from hegemonic school and societal norms and whose insider status in "the community" is already under question.

Officers also differentiate the school space from the street in ways that strengthen the positioning of SROs as distinct from other police work. The following passage about the Edmonton Constable illustrates this:

> The effect of having police in schools is being noticed by officers on the streets.
>
> Police say that students from resource officers' schools are more cooperative than others they stop.
>
> "I talk a lot about their rights with the law," Constable Hreczuch says. (Henton, 1981).

This text conveys a positive implication of *the effect of having police in schools* – increased cooperation of youth when stopped by police *outside of schools*. However, the article does not elaborate the content of conversations, interactions, and forms of cooperation between students and police outside the school. Here, based on police statements, the journalist encourages readers to see youth cooperation as positive change. Media thus privileges police representations over exploring divergent student experiences. By linking positive change to the Constable teaching about rights and the law, the text also implicitly reveals a fundamental pedagogical function of SROs: they educate students to respect and cooperate with authority. Additionally, the text represents the change (i.e. cooperation and compliance) as *moving outward from the school into the broader community*. Focus on this direction delimits scrutiny of SROs as *the movement of policing into schools*. The discourse treats school space and neighborhood space as separate, rather than newly linked through SRO programs.

One other example from the *Herald* SRO profile article also illustrates this discursive strategy of individualization and differentiation,

> Although treated as a faculty member, Bosnak – known as Dad, Uncle John, or Big John – has no academic responsibilities and does not become involved in school discipline. "If, however, I stumble across somebody breaking the law," he said, "I can't evade the fact that first and foremost I am a police officer." … But where possible, John Bosnak tries to avoid coming off as the big, strong-arm lawman. (Poole, 1977)

The use of family metaphors (Dad, Uncle) presents a familiarity and trust, individualizing the officer and masking role conflict. "Big John" asserts he is not involved in school discipline, but then discusses "stumbling" across somebody breaking the law. This implies he is not looking for wrongdoing, but accidentally comes upon it (passive, rather than active), and then is forced to ultimately exert his law-enforcement duties. While he states acting as an authority is not his intention, he raises the always present possibility the school context will compel him to become the "big, strong-arm lawman."

This contradictory messaging in the discourse reveals two things. First, an anxiety exists among SROs: they do not want to be seen as involving themselves in school discipline. Importantly, while SRO Programs assert that SROs do not involve themselves in school discipline, they often do involve whether directly or through advising principals in ways that exacerbate student punishment (cf. Javdani, 2019; Layton and Addo, 2021; Ryan et al., 2018). Second, SRO programs want to not "come off" as just like neighborhood policing, which involves surveillance, invasive street stops and searches, and brutality, despite SRO programs originating from CP practices that extended policing into new spaces and relationships. As with the pairing "authority-friend" discussed earlier, this messaging diverts attention from the always present, yet mostly elided authority SROs have to commit physical and/or symbolic violence and influence punitive school discipline practices. This in turn minimizes consequences where an alienating space for students they target is created.

Conclusion: Relationships Can End

This article examined the discourse of relationship-building among SROs, principals, teachers, students, and journalists, revealing its significance in the emergence of SRO Programs in Alberta and Canada in the 1970s and early 1980s. After linking SRO Programs as one strategy within the larger historical development of Community Policing, the study analyzed key aspects of the relationship-building discourse that normalize and legitimate police presence in schools: (1) the need to change youth attitudes and perceptions of police; (2) SRO as a friend; (3) SRO as helper, mentor, teacher, and counselor; and (4) individualization, humanization, and differentiation. Through stories of nice, helpful individuals who can enrich students' lives, these discursive representations evade histories of policing as coercive racial-colonial and class-based population management, violence, and control. These representations also normalize the taken-for-grantedness that relationship-building between youth and police is beneficial to school communities, and that in order to achieve this goal police should have increased access to students in school spaces.

These representations by police organizations and officers, school personnel, students, and journalists all help (re)frame what police do. They build legitimacy for the expansion of police power by positioning SROs as a friendly, versatile form of policing that exerts helpful non-law

enforcement roles. The relationship-building discourse thus blurs the boundaries of policing and state rule, bringing youth and schooling further within their domain.

In terms of larger research on School Resource Officer Programs, the analysis reveals a relationship-building discourse that dates back half a century in Canada. The study also illuminates key elisions in discursive representations of SROs, especially the deep, intractable conflict between non-law enforcement and law enforcement roles. Framing, positioning, legitimation, and rhetoric normalize a tolerance for role conflict among school community members. This creates a truth regime that disavows asking for alternative possibilities: what else, other than police, would foster connection, trust, and strong relationships that serve the needs of children and youth?

Unfortunately, the troubling trend of relationship-building discourse to justify SRO programs continues, making the analysis in this paper deeply relevant to current public debates. School districts must confront the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the dominant claim that SRO programs build friendly relationships and trust: youth are always susceptible to police surveillance, violence and authority by those portrayed as their teachers, mentors, and friends – something that policy, law, and public culture might be much less tolerant of if it came from teachers, counselors, or other youth. School districts must take seriously the irreconcilable role conflict embodied by SROs *as structural to policing itself* and as *something that cannot be addressed through reforms* like more training or ethnically and racially diversifying police personnel.

Ample academic research and community-generated counter-evidence exists illustrating harms SROs inflict on students (especially Indigenous, racialized, and disabled) (e.g., Asilu Collective, 2021; Bindi, 2022; Ennab, 2022). Many also argue that other personnel would better fulfill most (if not all) of the roles SROs claim as their work (e.g., Asilu Collective, 2021, Da Costa, 2022; Salole and Abdulle, 2015). In contrast, contemporary official discourse and decision-making, as well as police-friendly SRO program reviews, continue to minimize negative perceptions of and experiences with SROs of those most vulnerable to state violence (See for example Wortley, Bucerius, and Samuels, 2022 and Bucerius, Samuels, and Wortley, 2023). This minimization of systemic harms sustains policing as a normative good; it engages in majoritarianism and reproduces hegemonic ideas about "safety" by valuing numerical support for programs. This runs roughshod over equity arguments that counter SRO Programs.

Developing real ways to build healthy, caring, and equitable schools for *all* youth necessitates an abolitionist perspective that centers the experiences of those harmed by police in schools in our thinking on SRO Programs as legitimate educational policy. Anything else fundamentally contradicts our commitment as educators and school districts to the well-being of all children and youth.

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