School Resource Officers (SROs)

What are SROs?
School Resource Officers (SROs) are sworn, licensed career peace officers with arrest powers who work full- or part-time in Minnesota public schools. SROs can help schools and community-based organizations prevent crime, gangs, and drug activities affecting schools, educate students about school safety, promote community justice initiatives, and train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime awareness. Most SROs carry a firearm, badge, cell phone, and handcuffs, and about half dress in full uniform.

Who oversees SROs?
The Minnesota Peace Officers Standards and Training Board licenses peace officers. However, no state agency specifically evaluates SROs or the impact of SROs on students or the school environment. In 2014, the Department of Public Safety conducted a statewide survey of SROs entitled *Law Enforcement in Minnesota Schools: A Statewide Survey of School Resource Officers*. Information from that survey appears in this publication.

How many public schools have SROs?
The DPS survey showed Minnesota had about 315 full- or part-time SROs who generally are assigned to two or more public schools. SROs serve about 28 percent of all Minnesota public elementary, middle, and high schools. About half the SROs are assigned in the Twin Cities, serving larger numbers of students in fewer schools, and about half are assigned in Greater Minnesota, serving more schools with fewer students. SROs spend much of their time in high schools where more students are disciplined, often for “disruptive or disorderly conduct” or fighting and less often for drugs, alcohol, or weapons. The DPS survey reported the racial composition of Minnesota’s student body was considerably more diverse than the SRO population.

Who employs SROs?
Many SROs are employed by municipal police departments and some are employed in sheriffs’ offices. The relationship between a district or school and a law enforcement agency is defined locally and varies by community and the grade levels in the school. The National Association of School Resource Officers recommends schools and law enforcement agencies use a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to clearly define SRO roles and responsibilities in schools.

Who pays for SROs?
Several federal and state laws help school districts and law enforcement agencies share the cost of SROs. For example, the safe schools levy under *Minnesota Statutes*, section 126C.44, allows districts to levy resident property owners for the costs of peace officer and sheriff resource services within district schools. School violence prevention program providers under *Minnesota Statutes*, section 145.958, may develop initiatives with police resource officers to reduce and prevent violence among at-risk youth. Federal grants to local law enforcement agencies also help fund SROs.
**What is the role of SROs?**

School districts, in order to provide a safe learning environment, may use an SRO to help investigate serious forms of student misconduct, maintain order in schools, and conduct student and teacher training on safety issues. In investigations, school officials and SROs must distinguish between disciplinary matters within the purview of the school, where school-based discipline or sanctions are appropriate, and criminal conduct within the purview of a law enforcement agency. For instance, a school disciplinary matter may involve disruptive or disorderly conduct or fighting, whereas criminal conduct may involve illegal use or possession of drugs, alcohol, or weapons.

**What are the training requirements for SROs?**

There are no national or state standards for SRO training, and school-related training hours for SROs can vary greatly. While peace officers must complete a certain number of training hours to maintain their license, no specific training is required for SRO assignments. The DPS survey showed that SRO training programs in Minnesota cover topics such as school law, active shooters, threat assessment, emergency planning, working with school administrators, combatting drugs and gangs, and data practices. A federal community policing program recommends SRO training in teaching, mentoring and counseling, managing time, child development and adolescent psychology, and working effectively with diverse groups of students, among other topics.

**How do SROs affect student discipline?**

Legal issues related to student search and seizure, parental notification, student confidentiality, and data practices affecting student records, among other topics, are more complex when an SRO is present. For example, the legal standard for a student search depends upon the specific circumstance. A “reasonable suspicion” standard applies when school officials search a student on school grounds. A higher “probable cause” standard applies when a law enforcement search occurs on school grounds. The type of search also dictates the type of warning a student receives. School officials must give students a Tennessen warning if they are investigating a disciplinary matter. Law enforcement officials must give students a Miranda warning if they are collecting criminal investigative data as part of a custodial interrogation.

**What are the pros and cons of having SROs in schools?**

Minnesota, like other states, has experienced school violence. High-profile school and other shootings, “zero tolerance” school discipline policies, juvenile crime, federal funding for community policing services, and terrorist attacks have increased the police presence in Minnesota public schools and led to a recurring debate about how best to protect students and schools. Proponents of the increased police presence argue SROs help protect students and educators, making schools a safe learning environment, and help reduce the presence of drugs, alcohol, weapons, gangs, and violence in schools, including fights, threats, and bullying. Opponents argue the increased police presence can negatively affect the school climate and student learning and, by criminalizing certain behaviors, compromise students’ civil rights. They also argue the combination of SROs and harsh school discipline policies leads to processing students through the juvenile justice system for relatively minor offenses, which can result in a criminal delinquency record and contribute to the “school-to-prison pipeline.”