

THE PERCEPTION OF THE SCHOOL POLICE OFFICER REGARDING THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ENTITIES IN THE SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the increased number of scientific studies that indicate that the presence of the police does not affect the reduction of crime in schools, the opposite is happening in the field, which is reflected in the increased presence of the police in schools (Fisher, McKenna, Higgins, Maguire, & Homer, 2022; Milojević, Janković, Milojković, & Djukanović, 2017; Montes et al., 2021). School policing in the USA is one of the fastest growing areas of policing (Scheuermann, Billingsley, Dede-Bamfo, Martinez-Prather, & White, 2021). The media certainly contributed to such a situation by publishing sensational headlines, which contribute to the creation of the public's belief that violence in schools is widespread and that it happens every day. (Brown, 2006).

The public in Serbia is probably of the same opinion after the mass shooting that took place on May 3, 2023 in the "Vladislav Ribnikar" elementary school in Belgrade, in which eight children and a security guard were killed, while six children and one school teacher were wounded (Janković et al., 2023). This was the first mass shooting in Serbian schools, and the fact that the perpetrator of this massacre was a thirteen-year-old student caused an even greater shock.

Greater police presence in Serbian schools was first noted in 2002 when the "School Police officer" program was launched, when 185 school police officers were hired (Bošković & Simić, 2004). Until the aforementioned mass shooting, 381 school police officers were deployed in schools in Serbia (Kekić & Spasić, 2018), but not in all schools. Some of them were in charge of several schools, and some visited certain schools only occasionally, which was also the case with the school where the mass shooting took place. After the mentioned event, 3,448 police officers are currently taking care of security in Serbian schools (Janković et al., 2023).

From the above, it can be concluded that the public, both at the global level and in Serbia, is of the opinion that the presence of the police in schools is necessary. However, it would be interesting to hear the other party – police officers in schools. Good interpersonal relations are a prerequisite for doing any job. The aim of this research was to determine whether school police officers are accepted in the environment where they work, whether they have a good relationship with employees, parents and children, whether they themselves consider that they are needed in the said environment, as well as whether their presence has increased safety in schools. School safety is not only the sole responsibility of the police, but must be based on the principle of partnership between the police and schools (Fisher

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et al., 2022). To make that partnership successful, it is also necessary for the students to be informed about all safety incidents that may occur at school and how to behave when they happen (Cvetković et al., 2016; Đurđević et al., 2019; Milojević et al., 2019; Milojević et al., 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

When the topic of police presence in schools is discussed in literature, it is viewed from several angles. The first topic to be considered is the role and tasks of the police in schools. In the USA, school-based police officers engage in law enforcement, education, and mentoring (the triad model), at which they are mostly dedicated to law enforcement (Brown, 2006; Gill et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017), and the least to education (Ivey, 2012). Fisher et al. (2022) state in their research that in practice it has been observed that the three roles are often opposed to each other. Therefore, as a solution, they propose the concept of police work in the community, which can offer a perspective in overcoming the mentioned opposites. This study indicates that the mentioned concept, with its three dimensions (community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational adaptation), can be a strong model for organizing police work in schools. Unlike the USA, in Serbia school police officers are exclusively dedicated to law enforcement (Janković et al., 2023; Milojević et al., 2017).

Another topic that is more extensively discussed in literature is whether the presence of the police in schools affects the reduction of crime in them, that is, whether the presence of the police in schools is effective or not. The largest number of studies indicate that the presence of police officers in schools does not affect the reduction of crime in schools (Fisher et al., 2022), while some studies indicate that since the introduction of the police in schools there has even been an increase in criminal offenses (Gottfredson et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2011; Stevenson, 2011). A smaller number of studies have found that the presence of police in schools has positive effects, in terms of reducing the fear of crime and increasing the safety of students while at school (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Milojević et al., 2017; Spasić & Kekić, 2012).

The training of police officers for working in schools is a topic that has recently been very prominent in literature, because it has been noticed that police officers are not well prepared to work in them. Despite being in constant contact with adolescents, surprisingly, most police officers receive minimal training on how to understand and communicate with adolescents (Counts et al., 2018; Fix et al., 2021). Training that focuses on providing police officers with better understanding of the developmental characteristics of children and youth can reduce instances where they overuse intense or harsh responses to typical behaviour of children and youth, especially those with developmental disabilities (Scheuermann et al., 2021). The role of the police in schools is changing, and therefore the education and training of police officers should be adapted in order to improve various skills, which are not only required for law enforcement, but also for new roles of police officers (Trotman & Thomas, 2016). Even more worrying is the fact that police officers in schools do not receive any form of specialized training for working in schools, as is the case in Serbia (Janković et al., 2023; Milojević et al., 2017), or Texas (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016).

A group of studies examines the perception of employees, children, parents and police officers about policing in schools. Typical studies on school policing tend to point to their positive impact on participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of such programs, rather than studying objective records (James & McCallion, 2013). For example, Theriot (2016) indicated that students who had a greater number of interactions (five or more) with police officers in schools had more positive attitudes about them than students with fewer interactions. A number of studies have indicated that school employees,



principals and teachers have a positive opinion of the presence of the police in schools, believing that their presence deters students from bad behaviour and contributes to reducing crime (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Kekić & Spasić, 2018; Öğülmüş, & Kumandaş, 2011; Spasić & Kekić, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2017). In the research conducted in Serbia by Janković et al. (2023), 8,617 respondents took part, who expressed their views on the role and effectiveness of police work in schools. In general, all respondents, school employees, police officers, parents and children, had a positive attitude towards the work of police officers in schools.

METHOD

The results presented in this paper are part of a larger study (Janković et al., 2023) that was conducted in the period September 2021 – June 2022. The research used batteries of online questionnaires for seven categories of respondents: students, parents, teaching staff, principals, professional associates, teams for protection against violence and a questionnaire for police officers. 8,167 respondents were included in all surveys. In this paper, only the results from the questionnaire for school police officers are presented. The questionnaire for police officers included 308 school police officers. The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Basic Socio-Economic and Demographic Information about Police Officers*

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	218 (70.6)
	Female	90 (29.1)
Age	≥25	22 (7.1)
	26-35	78 (25.2)
	36-45	99 (32)
	46-55	109 (35.3)
Education	High school	249 (80.6)
	College	27 (8.7)
	University	32 (10.4)
Years of work experience	Up to 2 years	13 (4.2)
	Up to 10 years	12 (3.9)
	Up to 20 years	94 (30.4)
	Up to 30 years	83 (26.9)
	Up to 40 years	12 (3.9)
Years of work experience as a school police officer	Up to 1 year	25 (8.1)
	Up to 2 years	37 (12)
	Up to 10 years	14 (4.5)
	Up to 20 years	65 (21)



Type of school	Elementary	2225 (96)
	High	91 (3.9)
The length of presence of the school police officer in your school	Up to 5 years	62 (7.52)
	6-10 years	212 (25.7)
	11-15	228 (27.6)
	Over 16 years	323 (39.15)
Perception of how they feel in school	1	18 (0.8)
	2	10 (0.4)
	3	468 (20.2)
	4	40 (1.7)
	5	1752 (75.6)
Number of students in school	Up to 50	144 (6.2)
	51-200	549 (23.7)
	201-500	706 (30.5)
	501-1000	735 (31.7)
	Over 1000	182 (7.9)
The presence of the school police officer in the school	Yes	849 (38.7)
	No	1299 (59.2)

In preparing the questionnaire for this study, several studies were considered (Chrusciel et al., 2015; May, Rice, & Minor, 2012; Milojević et al., 2017; T. Rhodes, 2019; Theriot, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2017), and the questionnaires were carefully prepared for online use. After conducting an online survey, using the Survey Monkey software solution, the obtained data were statistically processed. An initial invitation to participate in the online survey was made on social media, and participants were selected using a convenience sampling strategy.

RESULTS

In order to determine the quality of the relationship between the school police officers and other subjects in school, the police officers were asked questions related to the quality of the information received by the school administration. The first question was about whether the schools made them familiar with their procedures and the ways to act in order to achieve the security protection of students and schools. Most school police officers, specifically about 89.6%, reported that the schools made them familiar with the mentioned procedures, whereas 7.8% of the respondents indicated that they were not informed. The next question was about whether schools notified them about incidents that had happened at school in their absence. The majority of respondents, approximately 73.8%, reported that schools provided notifications and additionally submitted reports to the relevant police stations. A smaller number of respondents (16.8%) declared that they informed only them, and 6.8% declared that they were not aware of other security incidents. Since in other countries police officers



in schools, in addition to security tasks, are often involved in teaching, the authors were interested in whether they are also involved in some other school activities. In accordance with the above, the authors were interested in whether school police officers know exactly what their tasks are. While 79% of respondents stated that the school police officer's goals and tasks were clearly planned, 12% said they were not clearly defined. The majority of respondents, 84.1%, felt they had adequate time to finish their tasks, whereas 10.7% said they did not have enough time. The next question was about whether they were involved in other school activities, at the request of the principal, employees or parents and children. About 42.7% of respondents declared that they participated in such activities, 45.6% of respondents declared that there were no such requests, and 8.7% of school police officers stated that there were such requests, but that they did not accept participation in them because they were not in the description of their tasks. The following questions were asked to the respondents in order to determine the perception of school police officers about their relationship with principals, children, parents and employees. School police officers mostly rated their relationship as excellent or very good, with employees – 89.6% of respondents, with principals – 85.8% of respondents, with parents and children – 82.9% of respondents. A large number of respondents (84.8%) were satisfied with the attitude that the school staff had towards them and that they had no suggestion for improving cooperation between them and the school staff. As many as 83.2% of the respondents believed that their involvement improved safety in the school they were deployed at. The above results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Perception of school police officers on relationship with other subjects

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
The school made me familiar with its procedures and the ways to act in order to achieve security protection of students and the school.	Yes	277 (89.6)
	No	24 (7.8)
The school notifies me on security incidents that happen in my absence.	Yes, but the school also submits a report to the police station when necessary.	228 (73.8)
	Yes, they inform only me.	52 (16.8)
	No, I have not been informed that there had been other security incidents.	21 (6.8)
There are clearly planned goals and tasks of the school police officer.	Yes	244 (79.0)
	No	37 (12.0)
	I do not know	20 (6.5)
I have enough time to finish all predefined tasks.	Yes	260 (84.1)
	No	33 (10.7)
	I do not know	8 (2.6)



I am also involved in other activities that are not a part of my tasks at the request of the principal, school staff or parents and children.	Yes	132 (42.7)
	No, there were not such requests.	141 (45.6)
	No, I haven't accepted other activities because they were not in the descriptions of my tasks.	27 (8.7)
The assessment of the relationship with the principal / principals of schools.	1	1 (0.3)
	2	4 (1.3)
	3	31 (10.0)
	4	66 (21.4)
	5	199 (64.4)
The assessment of the relationship with children and parents in schools I am assigned to.	1	-
	2	3 (1.0)
	3	42 (13.6)
	4	96 (31.1)
	5	160 (51.8)
The assessment of the relationship with employees in the school / schools I am assigned to.	1	-
	2	2 (0.6)
	3	21 (6.8)
	4	76 (24.6)
	5	201 (65.0)
Suggestions for improvement of cooperation with the school staff (principal, employees, parents, students)?	Yes	10 (3.2)
	I do not believe that the cooperation could be improved.	28 (9.1)
	No, I am satisfied with the relationship between me and the school staff.	262 (84.8)
My engagement has contributed to the improvement of security in the school.	Yes	257 (83.2)
	No	7 (2.3)
	I do not know	31 (10.0)

DISCUSSION

A prerequisite for the quality performance of school police officers is their good cooperation and good relationship with other subjects in the school. The first indicator of whether the cooperation is good is



if the schools exchange data with the school police about the security measures they take in school and about the security incidents that happen there. For both groups of data, most of school police officers declared that schools delivered the said information to them.

The second group of questions related to the tasks performed by school police officers. Unlike School Resource Officers in the USA, who have a triple role determined through the “triad model” (law enforcement, education and mentoring), the role of a school police officer in Serbia is exclusively law enforcement (Milojević et al., 2017). In the USA research (Fisher et al., 2022; T. Rhodes, 2019; T. N. Rhodes, 2015), it was indicated that the tasks of police officers in schools are not clearly defined within the aforementioned roles. Unless tasks are clearly defined, one of the consequences is that individuals, who perceive their work tasks as unclear or conflicting, report lower levels of job satisfaction (T. N. Rhodes, 2015; Tubre & Collins, 2000), which leads to further reduction of the quality of completed tasks. School police officers in Serbia, in the survey, largely stated that their goals and tasks are clearly planned, which can be the first step towards better performance of their duties. The fact that the tasks are clear indicates that the vast majority of respondents declared that they have enough time to complete the set tasks. Although school police officers stated in the previous answers that the tasks were clearly defined, almost equal number of them stated that they are involved, or are not involved in other activities that are not part of their work tasks, at the request of the principal, employees or parents and children. In other studies, as well (Fisher et al., 2022), it was observed that police officers in schools participate in various activities, which do not fall into the category of law enforcement. It is obvious that in Serbia there is no document (Janković et al., 2023) which defines the duties and tasks of a school police officer in the entire territory of Serbia, but they are defined individually, by managers in police stations. When defining tasks, the specifics of a particular school should be considered, but since the Ministry of Interior (MoI) of the Republic of Serbia is responsible for the security of the entire territory of Serbia, there should be a document that defines the role, goals, and general tasks that apply to every school police officer. Such a document does not exist at present. If there is no such document, a situation may arise, as Fisher et al. stated in their research (2022), that school police officers may believe that school safety solely depends on their ability, and even to state this: “My boundaries are ultimately determined by me”.

Respondents were asked a number of questions to determine the perception of school police officers about their relationship with principals, employees, children and parents. School police officers mostly rated their relationship with employees as excellent or very good – 89.6% of respondents, with principals – 85.8% of respondents, with parents and children – 82.9% of respondents. The said results are somewhat weaker than in Canada, for example, where police officers in schools declared that their relationship with students, staff and school administration was excellent or very good (95%, 94% and 95%, respectively) (Toronto, 2009). Although the results in Serbia are at a high level, the results from Canada indicate that there is room for improving the relationship between school police officers and other entities in school, which is something that should be worked on.

In a study in the USA (Chrusciel et al., 2015), as many as 99% of police officers engaged in schools declared that their engagement improved school safety. The vast majority of school police officers expressed a positive attitude on this issue in Serbia as well, but the percentage is smaller than in the USA. This difference can be explained by two facts. The first is that the presence of police officers in the USA schools has been much longer than in Serbia, they have been present in some areas since 1939 (Brown, 2006), that is, the presence of police officers has a long tradition. Another fact is that in Serbia school police officers are more focused on preventive work (Milojević et al., 2017), which is less visible, in contrast to the USA, where they are more focused on repressive work, which is more visible. Repressive work is particularly evident in the USA, because the crime rate is much higher than in Ser-



bia (Crawford & Burns, 2016; Katsiyannis et al., 2018; Stevanović & Zečević, 2020), therefore the presence of the police in schools is also far more necessary than in Serbia. Almost the same results as in Serbia were found in Turkey (Serbia 82.18 – Turkey 83.2%), because, as in Serbia, there is no tradition of police work in schools, and the crime rate is much lower than in the USA (Öğülmüş et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that the school police program is accepted in Serbia, both by the school police officers themselves, and by school employees, parents and children. School police officers have become an integral part of the school environment. However, after the mass shooting at a school in Belgrade, school police officers were implemented in all schools in Serbia. The question arises whether they should be in every school, or in those schools which, after a risk analysis, are determined to be there?

One of the problems that has been observed and which can be a “stumbling block” is that the tasks of school police officers are not clearly defined, and sometimes there can be a misunderstanding between school police officers and employees about what the police officers should do. The Ministry of the Interior should draft a single act (rule book, regulation) that will clearly define the work of school police officers: the selection of school police officers, their tasks, training, criteria for selecting the schools where they should work, and the like.

In order to improve the relationship between the MoI and schools, that is, school police officers and school employees, a memorandum of understanding should be drawn up, which should be jointly signed by police representatives and school principals. It would be drawn up on the basis of the aforementioned act previously drawn up by the MoI, and this would be a legal agreement that would define the roles and responsibilities of school police officers.

Adequate training of school police officers, which currently does not exist, would certainly help them improve the quality of relations between school police officers and other entities in the school. In planning future trainings, it should be considered that the training of school police officers is not traditional police training, focused only on law enforcement, but also on the implementation of tasks in a specific environment. In school institutions, it is equally important, on the one hand, to build good relations between school police officers and the school staff, and on the other hand, to monitor school safety.

It should be noted that this research was done before the mass shooting at the school in Belgrade. A new research should be done in order to determine what the situation is like now, after the mass shooting. Certainly, this research is the basis for similar future studies.

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