



Trauma-Informed School Security in Edgecombe County



Rural
Opportunity
Institute



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Background	7
Methodology	9
Summary of Results	11
QUICK SUMMARY: Ideas for Setting SROs up for Success	19
What Do These Results Mean for Trauma-Informed SRO Training?	21
Next Steps	22
Conclusion	24
Thank You	25
Appendix A: Extended Research Methodology	26
Appendix B: Interview Guides	27

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Executive Summary

Since 2021, Rural Opportunity Institute (ROI) has held monthly policy listening sessions with members of the Edgecombe and Nash County communities in eastern North Carolina. These sessions are the backbone of a community-led policy creation process. Community members identified disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline¹ as a priority issue. Then, they identified and developed an innovative approach to this issue: engaging School Resource Officers (SROs) with a trauma-informed training. The training was designed by ROI resilience trainers in partnership with the Edgecombe County Sheriff's SRO coordinator and trainer. It aimed to better inform SROs about the traumas that students could be dealing with inside and outside of school, how these traumas could manifest in their behavior within school, and how SROs could approach these behaviors in more restorative, and less punitive, ways.

This report is a continuation of ROI's partnership with the Edgecombe County Sheriff's Office (ECSO). It details our joint efforts to create trauma-informed security in schools, evaluating both our work so far and prospects for the future.

This report is primarily based on ROI's qualitative baseline assessment of the existing relationship between students and administrators in two Edgecombe County Public Schools and their SROs. This assessment was conducted in the summer of 2023 and consisted of 10 interviews with students, teachers and school administrators at a middle school and a high school that were open for summer sessions. The research focused on participants' perceptions of SROs' roles in their school, their personal experiences with SROs, and how they felt the role of an SRO could be improved in their communities. In total, 25 people were interviewed over three weeks.

Overall, all participants agreed that an SRO's role is to protect the school from external threats. Participants had different perspectives on the further responsibilities of an SRO. Some school

¹The "school-to-prison pipeline" is a term for the criminalization of misbehavior in school that leads to youth becoming involved in the criminal justice system. This can include arresting students in school, but it can also include harsh penalties like suspension and expulsion, which have been linked to higher rates of incarceration later in life. For more information, see: [Study Confirms School-to-Prison Pipeline \(usnews.com\)](https://www.usnews.com/story/news/education/2023/07/11/what-is-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-1), [What Is The School-to-Prison Pipeline? | American Civil Liberties Union \(aclu.org\)](https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/what-is-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-1).

[SROs] can make us feel secure and safe...in the United States, it can be scary going to school. You don't know... if you're gonna walk into school and leave out the same way, if you get what I'm trying to say. [There is] gun violence and just violence in general. So...[SROs] make us feel secure.

- *Student*

administrators and teachers also utilized their SRO as support in disciplinary situations, some utilized their SRO as emotional support for students, and some utilized their SRO as a general additional "resource."

Further, in nine out of the 10 interviews, the current SRO's practices at each school were well received by participants. This is largely because the SROs make a point to personally connect with the students. Some of the practices that SROs used to connect with students include:

- Greeting each classroom every morning
- Refereeing sports events
- Mediating conflicts between students
- Giving presentations about their previous work, life, and law enforcement experiences to students

Participants in our research suggested several ideas for how the SRO program could be more successful, including:

- Having more than one SRO at a school
- Having consistent SROs at each school (instead of a rotating system)
- Employing SROs who are not active-duty police officers
- Asking SROs to participate in school events outside of disciplinary settings
- Creating regular feedback loops between SROs, parents, teachers, and students
- Ensuring SROs and school administrators work as a team when addressing students

Interviewees spoke highly of their current SROs. Yet a majority of the participants acknowledged that they have had previous experiences with other SROs who exhibited more aggressive and/or punitive behavior. Their accounts support the concerns of the Edgecombe County community members who identified the school-to-prison pipeline as a priority issue for the county.

Participants' experiences also underline the importance of ROI and ECSO's joint work in creating trauma-informed school security solutions. For example, interviewees agreed that it is important for SROs to build relationships with students at their schools. ROI's trauma-informed trainings help SROs better understand student experiences within and outside of their schools, which can help them connect more with students.

The interviews also provided insights that can be incorporated into future trainings. For example, the SROs at the two schools were often referred to as "model SROs", with some suggesting that these two SROs could teach others about ideal behavior and practices.

After completing the interviews, ROI has identified next steps to move the SRO project forward. Short-term next steps include conducting further interviews with parents of students at the two schools, as well as with SROs in Edgecombe County. Since the initial research was conducted, ROI has also completed trauma-informed training for all Edgecombe County SROs.

Mid to long-term next steps include advocating for local policies that have been recommended by participants and community members, such as keeping one consistent SRO at each school. Further, ROI recommends that schools incorporate best practices to support SROs in their role. This includes having school administrators outline the role and responsibilities of an SRO in their school as clearly as possible and sharing this information with all school staff, so that there is alignment across the school.

Community members in Edgecombe County identified the school-to-prison pipeline as a major local challenge in 2022, and sought avenues for change. Working with SROs and training them on trauma-informed practices is one important step. As ROI's interviews and focus groups suggest, there is more that can be done to ensure all SROs in the county are prepared to work with students through more restorative, and less punitive, practices. The perspectives identified through this qualitative assessment can be used to advocate for trauma-informed training for Edgecombe County SROs, and SROs across the country.

Background

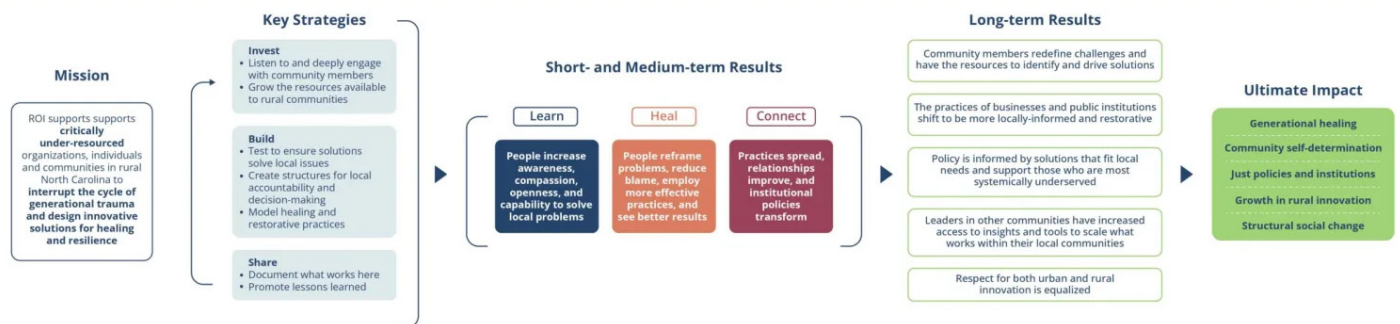
The School Resource Officer (SRO) Project first came to life through Rural Opportunity Institute (ROI)'s policy process with the Edgecombe County community in 2022. Edgecombe community members joined virtual listening sessions facilitated by an ROI team member and answered questions about community challenges they felt needed to be prioritized. When ROI asked participants which issues were policy priorities for the health and well-being of Edgecombe County, multiple community members identified the school-to-prison pipeline as a top issue.

This pipeline, as outlined by the [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#), describes a trend where “youth are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems.” According to the [North Carolina Commission on Racial & Ethnic Disparities in the Criminal Justice System](#) (NC CRED), about 40% of referrals to the juvenile justice system come from school-based cases, with a majority of these referrals being for minor, nonviolent offenses. The pipeline is especially relevant for youth of color, youth who have disabilities, or those who have experienced poverty, abuse, or neglect. The [Carolina Justice Policy Center](#) notes that in North Carolina schools, Black students are six times more likely to get arrested when compared with their White peers. The pipeline is, therefore, especially pertinent in Edgecombe County, because the county has a majority Black population. [57.3% of residents identify as Black or African American.](#)

ROI prioritized the pipeline as an issue based on two factors: high community demand for addressing the issue, and clear paths to a solution. One such path was to engage the SROs in Edgecombe County with a trauma-informed training. This training would highlight the traumas that students could be dealing with inside and outside of school, how these traumas could manifest in their behavior within school, and how SROs could approach these behaviors in more restorative, and less punitive, ways. The training would also illustrate how trauma might play a role in the reactions of SROs themselves, including their nervous system response to stimuli that they might encounter in their role. ROI resilience trainers and the Edgecombe County Sheriff's SRO coordinator and trainer worked together to design this training specifically for law enforcement officers who serve as SROs. As of September 2023, all 16 Edgecombe County SROs have received

the training.

The SRO project aligns with ROI's theory of change, encompassing many of the key strategies, near and long-term results, and impacts that ROI aims to achieve through its projects. Within ROI's key strategies, the SRO project works to create effective solutions by listening to the needs of community members, integrating local knowledge with cutting-edge practices, and testing ideas to ensure solutions successfully address local needs and desires. This evaluation and report also aim to address another key strategy, exchange & build knowledge, by documenting and sharing which practices are effective.



[View online](#)

Additionally, the SRO project addresses several of the near, mid and long-term results that ROI seeks to achieve within local communities. These include: increasing awareness of trauma and how it shows up in communities, increasing compassion, and allowing community members to learn and practice healing responses to trauma. In the long term, ROI is working to shift public institutions to use more restorative practices. One goal of the SRO project is to change SRO practices and policies to be more trauma-informed. The project will also equip the Edgecombe community with the tools, knowledge, and resources to innovate and create solutions for other social challenges, which is one of ROI's long-term goals.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the trauma-informed training for SROs, ROI conducted a qualitative assessment with two Edgecombe County schools during the summer of 2023. ROI chose to work with these two schools because of their existing relationships with the schools and because both schools were hosting summer sessions for students. Thirteen students, eight teachers, and four school administrators from a middle school and high school in Edgecombe County participated in a total of 10 interviews and focus groups across three weeks. The middle School had an SRO that had participated in the trauma-informed training, while the high school's SRO had not yet participated in the training. Due to time and capacity constraints, ROI was unable to interview SROs for this research, but hopes to do so in the future (see next steps).

ROI SRO Focus Group Logic Model

What is Needed?		What is Created?		What is Sustained?	
Resources	Activities	Outputs	SHORT TERM Outcomes 1-3 YEARS	LONG TERM Outcomes 4-6 YEARS	Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship with Sherriff's Office SROs Students School Administrators Trauma-informed trainers Teachers ROI focus group facilitator ROI focus group support Qualitative data analysis tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement trauma-informed training amongst 16 Edgecombe County SROs Provide surveys at the end of trainings to SRO Conduct focus groups amongst students, teachers, school administrators, SROs, and parents (if possible) to evaluate impacts of trauma-informed training Put together final report of findings Follow-up evaluation community meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained at least 12 total SROs by end of 2023 Post-training survey for SROs Focus group interview guides for evaluations Final report of SRO Training Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% of trained SROs indicate having increased awareness of trauma and the way it shows up in their lives and society (e.g. students' lives) 88% (14/16) of trained SROs indicate they feel more compassion for/will reduce blame when they encounter students 100% of trained SROs agree to practice healing responses, instead of punitive responses, with students who receive discipline referrals 70% of students interviewed/surveyed say their relationships and connections with SROs have improved meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school-to-prison pipeline in Edgecombe County is considered dismantled by 75% of community members in evaluation community meetings Local policies regarding SROs incorporate trauma-informed practices SROs are more responsive to community needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Edgecombe County schools are hubs for lasting educational improvement, and they provide students with helpful tools, knowledge, and resources to cope through trauma, stress, and difficult situations. Other communities are inspired by and adopt ROI's approach with implementing trauma-informed training amongst SROs

ROI also developed a logic model for this evaluation, which outlined what resources would be needed for the evaluation's success, as well as the outcomes that ROI hoped to achieve. The logic model helped ROI create a specific path forward, and was used to create the interview guides for the various interviews and focus groups. (See Appendix B for interview guides.) While developing specific questions for each group, ROI referred back to the logic model to ensure that questions were investigating their specific areas of interest.

Next Steps

In the future, ROI would like to implement further steps in the SRO project to holistically address the school-to-prison pipeline. This includes:

- Making SROs more consistent in each school (e.g. one per school)
- Having SROs interact with students outside of disciplinary settings (e.g. attend sporting events)
- Creating an application process for the SRO position so schools have more say in the selection process and the position is seen as more desirable
- Opening the SRO position to people with other backgrounds besides retired policemen
- Having a yearly review process for SROs
- Establishing a consistent feedback loop for SROs, parents, and schools
- Having SROs be involved in students' summers

NOTE: After analyzing, understanding, and synthesizing the results from this project, ROI would eventually like to disseminate findings to the Edgecombe County community and beyond, letting it inform future work with SROs in Edgecombe and other counties in NC

Summary of Results

These 10 conversations with students, administrators, and teachers revealed several insights about the relationship between Edgecombe County SROs and their schools:

- 1** Students, teachers, and school administrators hold multiple views on the role and responsibilities of SROs, including: protector, disciplinary support, resource, and emotional support.
- 2** Many of the current SRO practices at these two schools are working well.
- 3** There are other practices that can be implemented in schools which would set SROs up for further success.
- 4** Many of the participants have encountered other SROs who have used more aggressive practices, supporting the concerns of the Edgecombe community members who identified the school-to-prison pipeline as a priority issue.

Each of these insights is analyzed in more detail in the sections that follow.



Multiple Viewpoints on Role of an SRO

SRO as Protector

Across both schools, the students, teachers, and school administrators agree it is the SRO's role to protect the school from external threats. The perception of SROs as protectors can be tied to the current climate in the United States, where gun violence has become a bigger threat in schools. Students, teachers, and school administrators acknowledge concern about such threats in their community and the important role SROs play in making them feel protected.

“[SROs] can make us feel secure and safe...in the United States, it can be scary going to school. You don't know...if you're gonna walk into school and leave out the same way, if you get what I'm trying to say. [There is] gun violence and just violence in general. So...[SROs]make us feel secure.”

- Student

“I definitely feel safer when [SROs] are around...if something were to happen, I'm okay... I have somebody here, he can get other people or they can get help.”

- Student

“Safety [is my biggest worry]. I would say safety of staff too, with the climate of school shootings.”

- Teacher

SRO as Disciplinary Support

Participants also saw SROs filling three additional roles: disciplinary support, a “resource” for the school, and emotional support.

Both schools utilize their SROs in disciplinary situations, though the middle school's administration is very clear about making sure that SROs remain physically separate from students while any discipline is being implemented. This is to avoid creating strained relationships between students and SROs. According to the middle school's administration, SROs would only really come face-to-face with students in a disciplinary manner in extreme situations. Otherwise, the administrative team handles a student's discipline.

“If discipline has to [happen], it comes from me and the administrative team. So the law enforcement officer is never involved in that. And again, that's also a way of avoiding him from being perceived as the bad guy. I mean, our students literally see him as their protector here.”

- Middle School Administrator

Even with this practice in place from the school administration, teachers at the middle school still use their SRO as support when working with students who are acting up. Teachers indicated that their SRO is successful in handling these specific situations because he has built rapport with the students and does not approach them in an aggressive manner. Because of the relationship the SRO has built with them, students understand that the SRO is an authority figure who they should not disobey, and most times his presence alone signals that they should stop misbehaving.

“Just his [the SRO’s] presence into the room [will help]. I remember that one day I was trying to get a kid to move seats and he wouldn’t. And then he [the SRO]...just happened to be walking by and I said ‘good morning [SRO].’ So he stepped into my room. The kid got up and moved...It was just his presence. It’s not like I really called him in there, but he kind of got the clue with it right away.”

- Teacher

The high school uses their current SRO in disciplinary settings, and his involvement in these settings mirrors the role of school administrators. As one high school administrator explained, if a fight were to break out in their school and an SRO was nearby, he would respond in the same non-aggressive way that an administrator would.

But an SRO is not necessarily needed in these situations. One high school student described how he disagreed with the use of SROs in any disciplinary setting, because discipline had previously been handled solely by school administrators. He thought that SROs should only focus on protecting the school and students’ physical safety, rather than getting involved in disciplinary details.

“I think [SROs] are here to protect us. ...It seems like a lot of time what they think is they’re dealing with the students when it comes to punishing the students. Let’s say you did get in a fight, there’s gonna be an officer there. Or like [other student] said, where his friend had been accused of stealing something. That’s not what you’ [the SRO] are here for. You’re here for something else entirely. All these other matters before [SROs] were required were handled by the principal or the vice principal. So let them continue to deal with it and you just stay here specifically for what you’re here for.”

- Student

SRO as Resource and Emotional Support

The high school SRO's other main roles fall under "resource" and "emotional support." For example, the SRO's previous professional experiences allow him to be a resource for the school through supporting victims of abuse, including both students and teachers, by informing them of their rights. He provides the school administration with guidance when the school, a student, or staff member is being threatened. The SRO at the high school is also someone who students feel comfortable turning to for emotional support when they are in distress. As one student put it:

"I would come to him [the SRO] if my anger got up there... 'cause I get mad easily. So I would come to him if I feel some type of way. I'll be like, can I go to [the SRO]? I either to go to him so he can calm me down or he would just walk around the school with me and just talk."

- Student

The role of emotional support was more common in interviews about the high school SRO. It may be more necessary for SROs to provide emotional support for students in high school, who may be generally experiencing more intense emotional experiences with their peers. However, it is also possible that the high school SRO had a better skillset for offering emotional support - our sample size is too small to draw a definitive conclusion.

SRO as an Opportunity for Positive Interactions with Law Enforcement

Further, a common theme across interviews at both the high school and middle school was that having SROs in schools provides the opportunity for students to have positive interactions with law enforcement. A majority of participants indicated that they see law enforcement and SROs as linked. Therefore, any preconceived ideas a student may have about law enforcement may influence their perception of SROs.

"Street cops, they have a gun, they have a taser - here, they have a gun, they have a taser. They all rule underneath the same government. So they [SROs and law enforcement] are the same in my eyes."

- High School Student

However, when most students get to know their SROs more personally, they like having them in their environment because they feel more protected.

[SRO] should be the mascot of the school...he should get a medal. We should make a day off for [him].
Student resource officer appreciation day.”

- High School Student

[SRO], I know he’s doing his job. I know he is being serious about it, but for some reason it just doesn’t
feel like he’s so... uptight.”

- High School Student

Everybody knows [SRO]... I’m talking about he’ll buy you breakfast in the morning.”

- High School Student

Three of the thirteen students interviewed did not have an interest in getting to know their SRO personally, though, and just wanted to know that their SRO was going to protect them.

Current Practices That Are Working Well

In nine out of the ten interviews, the current SRO’s practices at each school were well received by participants. This is largely because the SROs make it a point to personally connect with the students. Students at the middle school highlighted their SRO’s practice of going around the school each morning and greeting every classroom.

Interviewer: “So what’s your relationship like with [SRO]?”

Student: “He’s... my friend. He always comes in in the morning and he makes sure he goes to every classroom and says—:

All students in the focus group chime in: “Good morning!”

They also see their SRO in different capacities outside of his daily role, as he has previously refereed for school sporting events. As one middle school teacher said:

I think it helps too that they see him in different capacities. Like he is a referee for sports. So they see him out on the sports field, within the school building, out in the community. They see him in his different realms, which is really neat to help them build that rapport.”

- Middle School Student

Additionally, one teacher at the middle school invited the SRO to give a presentation to students about his past professional experiences. Both the teacher and students who saw this presentation were impressed by the work he had done prior to his role in the school, and this helped students feel more connected to him. In this same session, the SRO talked with students about the importance of understanding their digital footprint and safe practices on the internet. This topic resonated with the students who were interviewed for this project, as they are aware of online bullying. Because they know their SRO is very knowledgeable in this space, students and teachers said they feel comfortable turning to him for help if, and when, they experience concerning situations online.

The desire to better understand SROs' previous professional experiences came up in a conversation with students at the high school, as well. One group of students indicated that they would feel more comfortable if they somehow knew their SRO has had previous experiences protecting people in dangerous situations and could apply the same practices at their school. The high school could hold a similar session to the one held at the middle school, where their SRO can speak about their previous professional experiences. This could help build trust amongst students about their SRO's ability to protect them and their school.

As previously mentioned, the high school SRO is also seen as an emotional support for many students. Students feel comfortable turning to him when they are distressed. He talks to them, calms them down, and makes them feel safe. One student recalled him saying that "everybody always needs somebody to talk to." Based on student, teacher, and school administrator accounts, he applies this saying in his day-to-day work by making himself available for students. One student described how the SRO supported her after she had been in a physical incident with other students at the school, and how speaking with the SRO helped make her feel safe while also stopping her from retaliating against the other students:

“He stepped in and he made me feel secure. I used to be very hotheaded, but I'm now grown, so I changed my ways to be more responsible...and just stopped with all the childish stuff. He talked to me about it all and he told me it's okay to forgive and forget. Just focus, get your education and I have your back. As long as you do that, I'll make sure no one harms you. No one messes with you. I want you to stay out of drama because you have so much potential...So I feel like he really stepped in a lot in that situation, where it actually calmed me down from retaliating.”

– Student

The SRO provides this support while mediating conflicts between students. The high school administration utilizes him in leading “circles.” These are opportunities for students who are in conflict to sit at a table and talk to each other, share their perceptions of the situation,

express their feelings, and identify harm that may need healing. One school administrator explained that in other schools with more resources, the responsibility of leading circles may be held by a restorative justice facilitator. However, this is not possible at all schools due to limited resources, and the high school's SRO has proved to excel in this role.

“I think he's very talented, and the other thing is that in this building we all work, and so we try to extract every possible resource from every human...Because human capital is just something we don't have a lot of, and so when we do have [it], we like really tap into them and try to exhaust their strengths while they're here.”

- School Administrator

Another administrator at the high school spoke about the importance of the school administration and the SROs working together as a team. Often, one staff member's approach with students may resonate with some, but not all, so it is important that the team remain adaptable in situations and offer students what they may need in that moment.

“If [there are] some students that [are] not really conforming to [the SRO] or what we are asking, [we say], 'Hey, let us know. Allow us to help you out. Don't just try to take it all and do it all yourself. Let's form that team. Let's communicate. Let's see how we all can do this thing together.' The best thing about us all [is] us working together as a team... And making it work.”

- School Administrator

The way in which SROs fill unmet needs is a critical practice in under-resourced school systems in rural America. In an ideal world, all school systems would be able to fully deliver on all their responsibilities with dedicated staff. In the present world, however, SROs are able to fill a crucial gap. The fact that SROs are filling in where schools do not have capacity also further emphasizes the need for trauma-informed, restorative trainings for SROs.

Many Ideas for Setting SROs Up For Success

Throughout the interviews, participants had a variety of suggestions for practices that could support SROs in their schools.

⊙ Consistent Support

Both the middle school and high school recently transitioned to having one consistent SRO at their schools. Previously, they operated on a rotating system, where different SROs would work at their schools throughout the year based on their availability. This made it more difficult for them to form meaningful connections with students. All school administrators and teachers indicated they preferred having one consistent SRO at their school.

⊙ Additional SROs

Many interviewees and focus group participants agreed that they would prefer to have more than one SRO at their school. This would help students, teachers, and the administration feel more protected, which would support SROs in fulfilling their main responsibility at the schools. New SROs, however, would need to also use restorative practices, similar to the approaches of the two current SROs at these schools.

⊙ SROs who aren't active duty officers

A few school administrators talked about the importance of having SROs who are retired officers, not active duty police officers. They felt that a law enforcement background is essential for anyone working as an SRO, but shared that they've seen some problems occur when SROs are also active police officers in the community. For example, some SROs come to school with knowledge about students' law enforcement history, or their family's history, which can then bias their approach towards these students within the school. One school administrator talked about how she has seen these SROs share stories with teachers, which can then bias teachers against these students.

"I'll hear officers talk about kids or share things that are going on in the community and, as a teacher, a lot of our teachers drive into the community that they're serving. They're not necessarily living in it. So they wouldn't know that about the child if you didn't share that information. And so to me that's fearmongering, that doesn't help the adult know the child any better. It just actually makes them see them in a deficit light."

– School Administrator

This school administrator continued to say that as long as the student is leaving any crime-related activity at the door when they enter school, they deserve to be given grace. SROs who are retired law enforcement and do not encounter students outside school can work with students with a more unbiased lens.

⊙ **Extracurricular Involvement**

Many teachers and school administrators responded positively when a community member suggested that SROs attend school activities outside of the typical “disciplinary” setting. By having SROs attend graduations, award ceremonies and sporting events, students can see their SRO as someone who supports them in the community.

⊙ **Feedback Sessions**

Community members suggested regular feedback loops with SROs, parents, teachers and students. School administrators and teachers responded well to this suggestion. It could provide the chance for SROs to more clearly understand what is expected of them in the schools and understand what they are doing well.

⊙ **SRO Presentations**

As previously mentioned, students and teachers at the middle school found it helpful to hear about their SRO’s previous professional experiences and learn more about his knowledge in other spaces, such as digital security. SRO presentations in classrooms could help students feel more connected to and protected by their SRO.

⊙ **Elementary School Programming**

A few teachers also spoke about the positive results of the D.A.R.E. program in elementary schools. Though this is outside the purpose and scope of the SRO project, it speaks to the importance of positive student interactions with law enforcement. Teachers felt that this would provide students the chance to build a relationship with officers at an early age, and they might be able to then recognize these same officers as they continue through school.

⊙ **Working as a Team**

School administrators spoke about their best practice of working with SROs as a team to address students. By doing so, they can approach challenging situations with students in a more flexible way and adapt as needed by calling on each person’s expertise.

Quick Summary Ideas for Setting SROs up for Success

- Consistent SRO in each school (remove rotating system)
- More than one SRO in schools
- SROs who are not active-duty police officers (e.g., retired officers)
- SROs attend school events to support students
- Regular feedback loops with SROs, parents, teachers, and students
- SROs give presentation to students about their previous experiences
- SROs and school administration work together as a team

Accounts of Previous Punitive Actions Demonstrate Need for Trauma-Informed Practices

Though the interviewees from the middle school and high school had positive relationships with their current SROs, many students, teachers, and school administrators also spoke about previous experiences with former SROs at these schools or at previous schools where SROs demonstrated much more punitive behavior. These accounts support the concerns of the community members who identified the school-to-prison pipeline as a priority issue for Edgecombe County.

Two students shared their experiences with aggressive SROs. One high school student recounted being handcuffed by an SRO at a previous school and held in juvenile detention. Another described being called to the school office for liking a meme on social media. When the student got to the office, he was surrounded by school administrators and four SROs who “had their hand on their pistol while they were talking” to him. He felt this was excessive, especially given the situation.

Teachers and administrators also shared their experiences. A teacher at the high school remembered an incident where she heard a lot of yelling outside of her classroom. She looked into the hallway and saw an SRO had pinned a student to the floor. A school administrator recalled working at an elementary school years ago, where a second-grade student threw a tantrum, and a police officer was called. The officer dragged the student out and restrained him, which the school administrator felt was not helpful and “definitely traumatized that student.” The school administrator said the student’s behavior did not change, and even escalated more over the years after the incident.

Another school administrator spoke about her concerns with an SRO who relied too heavily on his gun in tense situations.

“There’s a couple [of SROs] that are completely inefficient to the point that we were on a lockdown and the officer was pacing, and literally I was like, ‘Sir do you need me to hold that gun?’ I was worried to be in a room with him because he was worried...and so he would actually do more harm than good.”

– School Administrator

These accounts and others that came up throughout the interviews demonstrate how aggressive behavior from SROs does exist. Training and support for SROs is essential so that they can work with students in more restorative, and less punitive, ways. The Edgecombe County Sheriff’s Office has been an essential partner in moving the SRO project forward and ensuring that SROs implement restorative practices in their work.

What Do These Results Mean for Trauma-Informed SRO Training?

The learnings from these interviews highlight the importance of continuing to train SROs in trauma-informed practices and build on the project's success so far. Interviewees agreed that it is important for SROs to build relationships with students at their schools. Trauma-informed trainings help SROs better understand student experiences within and outside of the schools, which can allow them to connect more with students. Stronger connections and relationships can help SROs increase their restorative and empathetic practices with students, which could even lead to a decrease in formal charges against students. One high school administrator talked about the differences he's seen in disciplinary records since their current SRO joined the team.

“I promise you disciplinary records are totally different. As far as who was written up, arguments, fights, it'll be totally different...I am serious. He made that much of a difference. You compare the same timeframes just a year apart from each other. And I promise you that the discipline is totally different. He's made a difference. He really has.”

– School Administrator

The interviews also provided insights that can be incorporated in future trainings. For example, the SROs at both schools were often referred to as “model SROs,” with some suggesting that these two SROs could teach other SROs about ideal behavior and practices. This idea could come to fruition by having both SROs speak to their colleagues at the remaining trainings this year. By doing so, the other SROs in the county could hear first-hand stories about successful restorative practices.

Next Steps

After completing the interviews with participants from the middle and high schools, ROI has identified the following steps to move the SRO project forward.

Short Term Next Steps

First, ROI would like to interview parents of students at the two schools to understand their perspectives on SRO practices. ROI was not able to interview SROs as part of this research due to time and capacity constraints, but doing so is another important next step. Their perspectives will provide a more holistic understanding of the relationship between SROs and students.

Medium to Long-Term Next Steps

ROI plans to continue to advocate for and implement policies that have been recommended by community members and research participants, in partnership with the ECSO. These include requiring SROs to go through a trauma-informed training before working with students, as well as having each school maintain one consistent SRO.

ROI plans to work with the sheriff's office to increase SRO involvement in student activities outside of disciplinary settings. This includes having SROs attend sporting events, award ceremonies, and graduations outside of a "discipliner" role.

ROI recommends that school administrators clarify the role and responsibilities of an SRO in their school and disseminate this information to teachers so that all faculty and staff are aligned on how and when they should turn to SROs for support. In many cases, SRO roles are governed by a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the school and sheriff's office, but these MOUs are not widely publicized. ROI plans to work with the sheriff's Office and Edgecombe County Public Schools to formalize and publicize these MOUs. As seen through the interviews, teachers and school administrators often have different perspectives on the role of an SRO in their school. These varying definitions can cause confusion about each person's relationship with their SRO, and when to call on the SRO for help. Aligning on a clear statement of an SRO's role and responsibilities would help address this issue.

ROI also hopes to work with ECPS and the Sheriff's Office to move towards more restorative,

rather than punitive, discipline responses. A study of data from 2015-18 in Edgecombe County schools found that 90% of discipline responses given in those years were punitive. Studying whether this number has changed was outside the scope of this report, but we hope to conduct more detailed research on disciplinary policies in the future.

Finally, a community member suggested exploring trauma-informed training for students. ROI discussed this idea with students during focus groups. Students in one high school focus group were hesitant, because they felt that not all students cope with trauma and stress in the same way, so a training might not resonate with everyone. However, students in the other high school focus group and the middle school focus group were interested in this idea, and discussed how they would find such tools useful for themselves in stressful situations. One student recommended that this training be held during the school hours, as students would be far less likely to attend a training if it were out of school hours.

Conclusion

Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline in Edgecombe County continues to be a priority issue for ROI and community members. The students, teachers and school administrators who participated in this qualitative assessment provided important insight for how the SRO project can continue to move forward, so that SROs are equipped with the most effective tools to support school communities. As the interviews with these two Edgecombe County schools suggest, SROs who form relationships with students can have a significant, positive impact in their communities.

However, there is still more that can be done to ensure all SROs in the county are prepared to work with students using restorative practices. ROI will use this research to advocate for implementing trauma-informed training for SROs in the county and across North Carolina. ROI will also advocate for developing new practices and policies that positively shift the way that all SROs engage with Edgecombe County schools. Working in collaboration with rural eastern North Carolina communities, ROI will build a model for ending the school-to-prison pipeline.

THANK YOU

ROI thanks every student, teacher and school administrator at both the middle and high school who participated in interviews and focus groups for this project. Your perspectives shape our understanding of how SROs work in your schools and inform our next steps for this project. We are especially grateful to the school administrators at both schools for organizing these interviews and working diligently with us to ensure we could hear as many perspectives as possible.

This project would not have been developed without the important perspectives of the Edgecombe County community members who attend ROI's policy listening sessions. We appreciate your insights and your collaboration in creating solutions for the community.

Finally, we're grateful to Sheriff Atkinson and the Edgecombe County Sheriff's Office for your ongoing partnership, especially over the past year while we've worked to implement the trauma-informed training. We appreciate your collaboration to ensure we continue to move this project forward for the Edgecombe County community.



APPENDIX A:

Extended Research Methodology

ROI contacted administrators at both the middle and high school to ask if they would be comfortable with their schools participating in the SRO project evaluation. The school administrators then agreed to distribute permission slips to students attending the summer sessions. These slips detailed the purpose of the interviews. Students under 18 needed a parent signature in order to participate in the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees could end their participation at any time. School administrators also asked teachers who were working during the summer sessions if they wanted to participate in the interviews. School administrators were also directly asked by ROI if they would like to be interviewed. Teachers and school administrators received gift cards between \$15 - \$25, depending on time spent in their interviews, as a thank you for participating, while students received snacks as a thank you once their interviews were complete.

Of the 10 interviews and focus groups conducted, four were with students (one middle student focus group, two high school student focus groups, and one 1:1 high school student interview). Two focus groups were conducted with teachers (one at each school), and four 1:1 interviews were conducted with school administrators (two at each school).

Since the middle school SRO had participated in a trauma-informed training but the high school SRO had not, ROI decided it would not be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the trauma-informed training due to the small sample size. As a result, this evaluation focused on a qualitative baseline assessment of these two schools' existing relationships with their SROs. The interviews focused on the communities' perception of SROs' roles in their schools, their personal accounts with current and previous SROs, and how they felt the role of SROs could be improved in their communities.

APPENDIX B:

Interview Guides

Hello! Thanks for being here with me today. My name is [Interviewer Name], and I'm part of a group called the Rural Opportunity Institute, or ROI. We've worked with the Edgecombe community over the years to identify challenges and opportunities to support the community. A few years ago, we held a community meeting with Edgecombe County, in which community members identified that they wanted to better understand the relationship between School Resource Officers and students in Edgecombe County schools. Since then, ROI has worked with Edgecombe County to brainstorm ideas related to the relationship between SROs and students.

The goal of this session is to better understand your experiences with School Resource Officers. This information will help us understand how to continue to approach our work in this space and to evaluate some of the projects we have already implemented.

I'll be asking you some questions over the next hour about this topic. As mentioned in the consent form, I'll need to record this session so that we can keep track of your responses and use this conversation to help shape our future projects. I will remove any personal identifying information when we turn these recordings into transcripts, so there will be no way to link you to the information that you share here today.

Please know that your participation in this session is completely voluntary and not required. You also have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this project. If you have questions, or concerns, you should let me know.

There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. We really just value hearing your opinions and learning about your experiences.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Guide Questions – Middle School

• Demographic Questions

- o IQ1: What grades are you in?
- o IQ3: How long have you lived in Edgecombe County?

• Learning Objective 1: What is the community's current perception of SROs before and after the trauma-informed training?

- o IQ1: How do you and your classmates feel about School Resource Officers being in your school?
 - Probe: What do you all like about having SROs in your school? What do you all dislike?
 - Probe: Can you tell me about a time when you had a positive interaction with an SRO? What did you like about that experience?
 - Probe (if not talked about before): Can you tell me about a time when you had a negative experience with your SRO? What happened?
 - Probe: What comes to mind for you when you think of law enforcement?

• Learning Objective 2: How has the trauma-informed training changed the way SROs interact with students in school?

- Probe (if answer is "no" to previous question): When was the last time you interacted with an SRO?
 - Probe: How was that interaction? What happened? What caused it?
 - Probe: Have your interactions with them always been like that?
 - Probe: In what situations have you turned to School Resource Officers for help?
- o IQ2: Can you think of any interactions you had with them in previous years? Have you noticed if anything has changed over time? (NOTE: If they are talking about a specific SRO, could ask about if they've noticed changes in this specific SRO over time?)
- o IQ3: Can you think of anyone who has had a different experience from what you're describing? What was that situation?

• Learning Objective 3: In an ideal world, what would the community like to change about their relationships and interactions with SROs?

- o IQ1: If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about the role of SROs in your school? (OR: If you could give feedback to SROs, what would you like to say?)
 - Probe: Can you describe what you would like your relationship with SROs to look like in the future?
- o IQ3: We're hoping to offer a training for all SROs to help them better support students. What do you wish SROs knew about working with you and your classmates? This information could help us with the training.

• Wrap Up: I think those are all my questions for today.

- o Do you have anything else you'd like to share with me about this topic that we didn't cover today?
- o Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?
- o Thanks so much again for participating and talking with me today!

Interview Guide Questions – High School

- **Demographic Questions**

- o IQ1: What grades are you in?
- o IQ3: How long have you lived in Edgecombe County?

- **Learning Objective 1:** What is the community's current perception of SROs?

- o IQ1: How do you and your classmates feel about School Resource Officers being in your school?
 - Probe: What do you all like about having SROs in your school? What do you all dislike?
 - Probe: Can you tell me about a time when you had a positive interaction with an SRO? What did you like about that experience?
 - Probe (if not talked about before): Can you tell me about a time when you had a negative experience with your SRO? What happened?
 - Probe: What comes to mind for you when you think of law enforcement?

- **Learning Objective 2:** How do SROs interact with students in school?

- o IQ1: Can you tell me about a recent interaction you or a classmate had with an SRO?
 - Probe (if answer is "no" to previous question): When was the last time you interacted with an SRO?
 - Probe: How was that interaction? What happened? What caused it?
 - Probe: Have your interactions with them always been like that?
 - Probe: In what situations have you turned to School Resource Officers for help?
- o IQ2: Can you think of any interactions you had with them in previous years? Have you noticed if anything has changed over time? (NOTE: If they are talking about a specific SRO, could ask about if they've noticed changes in this specific SRO over time?)
- o IQ3: Can you think of anyone who has had a different experience from what you're describing? What was that situation?

- **Learning Objective 3:** In an ideal world, what would the community like to change about their relationships and interactions with SROs?

- o IQ1: If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about the role of SROs in your school? (OR: If you could give feedback to SROs, what would you like to say?)
 - Probe: Can you describe what you would like your relationship with SROs to look like in the future?
- o IQ3: We're hoping to offer a training for all SROs to help them better support students. What do you wish SROs knew about working with you and your classmates? This information could help us with the training.

- **Wrap Up:** I think those are all my questions for today.

- o Do you have anything else you'd like to share with me about this topic that we didn't cover today?
- o Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?
- o Thanks so much again for participating and talking with me today!

Interview Guide Questions – Teachers

• Demographic Questions

- o IQ1: What grades do you teach?
- o IQ2: What subjects do you teach?
- o IQ2: How long have you worked at _____?

• Learning Objective 1: What is the community's current perception of SROs before and after the trauma-informed training?

- o IQ1: How do you feel about School Resource Officers being in your school?
 - Probe: Can you describe the relationship between SROs and your school?
 - Probe: As far as you can tell, how does your school community feel about having SROs in the school? Can you describe some incidents or experiences you've had with SROs that make you feel this way?
 - Probe: How might Edgecombe County's relationship and history with law enforcement (e.g. the police) influence your community's perception of SROs, if at all? (dig deeper if stories come up)

• Learning Objective 2: How has the trauma-informed training changed the way SROs interact with students in school?

- o IQ1: How would you describe the relationship between the SROs and your students?
 - Probe: How do they interact with each other?
 - Probe: What is like to have SROs sit in the classrooms with you and your students?
 - Probe: In what situations would you call an SRO to your classroom? Can you describe a time when you did that? Was the outcome what you had hoped for? How could it have gone better?
- o IQ2: In the time you've known these SROs at your school, have you seen any changes in their approach with students over time? What changes have you noticed?

• Learning Objective 3: In an ideal world, what would the community like to change about their relationships and interactions with SROs?

- o IQ1: What would you like your relationship with SROs to look like in the future?
- o IQ2: What would you like your students' relationships with SROs to look like in the future?
 - Probe: Can you tell me about a time when you saw students have a positive interaction with SROs? What was positive about that experience?
 - Probe: Can you also tell me about interactions you've seen between students and SROs that didn't go as well? What was that like? Why do you think that happened?
- o IQ3 [If time permits]: ROI is exploring other ways to improve the relationship between SROs and students in Edgecombe County. Do you have any thoughts, comments, or concerns about the following ideas? Please rank your top two choices and we will discuss them further.
 - Making SROs more consistent in each school (e.g. one per school)
 - Having SROs interact with students outside of disciplinary settings (e.g. attend sporting events)
 - Creating an application process for the SRO position so schools have more say in the selection process and the position is seen as more desirable
 - Opening the SRO position to people with other backgrounds besides retired policemen
 - Having a yearly review process for SROs
 - Establishing a consistent feedback loop for SROs, parents, and schools
 - Having SROs be involved in students' summers
 - Probe: If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about the role of SROs in your school?
- o IQ3: We're hoping to offer a training for all SROs to help them better support students. What do you wish SROs knew about working with your students? This information could help us with the training.

• Wrap Up: I think those are all my questions for today.

- o Do you have anything else you'd like to share with me about this topic that we didn't cover today?
- o Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?
- o Thanks so much again for participating and talking with me today!
- o [Next steps for this project and how the community might be able to hear about report]

Interview Guide Questions – School Admins

• Demographic Questions

- o IQ1: What is your role at _____?
- o IQ2: How long have you worked at _____?

• Learning Objective 1: What is the community's current perception of SROs before and after the trauma-informed training?

- o IQ1: How do you feel about School Resource Officers being in your school?
 - Probe: Can you describe the relationship between SROs and your school?
 - Probe: Can you describe some incidents or experiences you've had with SROs that make you feel this way?
 - Probe: As far as you can tell, how does your school community feel about having SROs in the school?
 - Probe: How might Edgecombe County's relationship and history with law enforcement (e.g. the police) influence your community's perception of SROs, if at all? (dig deeper if stories come up)

• Learning Objective 2: How has the trauma-informed training changed the way SROs interact with students in school?

- o IQ1: How would you describe the relationship between the SROs and students in your school?
 - Probe: How do they interact with each other?
 - Probe: In what situations would you turn to the SRO for help? Can you describe a time when you did that? Was the outcome what you had hoped for? How could it have gone better?
- o IQ2: In the time you've known these SROs at your school, have you seen any changes in their approach with students over time? What changes have you noticed?

• Learning Objective 3: In an ideal world, what would the community like to change about their relationships and interactions with SROs?

- o IQ1: What would you like your relationship with SROs to look like in the future?
- o IQ2: What would you like students' relationships with SROs to look like in the future?
 - Probe: Can you tell me about a time when you saw students have a positive interaction with SROs? What was positive about that experience?
 - Probe: Can you also tell me about interactions you've seen between students and SROs that didn't go as well? What was that like? Why do you think that happened?
- o IQ3 [If time permits]: ROI is exploring other ways to improve the relationship between SROs and students in Edgecombe County. Do you have any thoughts, comments, or concerns about the following ideas? Please rank your top two choices and we will discuss them further.
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 - Having SROs interact with students outside of disciplinary settings (e.g. attend sporting events)
 - Creating an application process for the SRO position so schools have more say in the selection process and the position is seen as more desirable
 - Opening the SRO position to people with other backgrounds besides retired policemen
 - Having a yearly review process for SROs
 - Establishing a consistent feedback loop for SROs, parents, and schools
 - Having SROs be involved in students' summers[1]
- Probe: If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about the role of SROs in your school?
- o IQ3: We're hoping to offer a training for all SROs to help them better support students. What do you wish SROs knew about working with the students in your school? This information could help us with the training.

• Wrap Up: I think those are all my questions for today.

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- o Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?
- o Thanks so much again for participating and talking with me today!
- o [Next steps for this project and how the community might be able to hear about report]



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