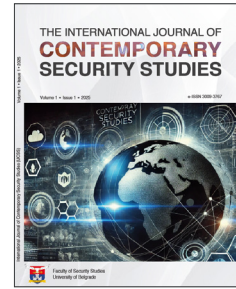Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade

International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies (IJCSS)

Review article

The Significance and Role of Police Officers in Building the School as a Safe Environment for All Students

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ABSTRACT

The school, as an institution for upbringing and education, represents an essential foundation for the development of children and young people. It provides a learning environment designed to foster the development of each student's personality and self-awareness. The primary responsibility of the school is to educate and nurture children. The school endeavours to provide children with ample time in the classroom, secure free time for rest, and protection from aggressive behaviour among students. The issue of school security is a fundamental condition for fulfilling its educational functions. The most common definition of school security, a complex phenomenon, refers to the condition in which the school is safeguarded from all security threats, meaning there is no danger to the life and health of students or the integrity of school property. Violence, which can manifest in various forms in modern society, is one of the predominant security threats that schools confront. To ensure a safe environment, it is crucial to have a police officer present. The concept of police work within the local community in the area of prevention encompasses the efforts of police officers to prevent and suppress incidents in the community that may endanger the safety of schools, students, and teachers. Following the cooperation programmes of the Ministries of Science and Education and Internal Affairs, school police officers are assigned to all cities across the Republic of Serbia, where they work to ensure our collective safety.

1. Introduction

After the family, the school is the most important factor in the socialisation of students. To develop a versatile young person, modern society assigns schools various responsibilities. Students must acquire both broad theoretical knowledge and specific attitudes and standards. The school system, along with the education system, is part of a wider framework. Today, it is often assumed that every country's school operates within a solid framework.

First and foremost, teaching, student work, and social activities are our top priorities. Teaching activity, occurring at all stages of education from primary school to the end of an individual's learning journey, is paramount in the structure of educational activities. This represents the most structured method of work in schools, enabling students to gain knowledge in a systematic and planned manner, irrespective of their educational level (Krneta, 2016). Teaching is an essential component of the school system, as it possesses clearly

defined goals that connect and coordinate all educational elements to foster a quality personality in students. It is vital to emphasise the significance of student education to cultivate free, capable individuals who will be responsible and actively engaged in the community. The role of the school is to provide a systematic approach to student education that instructs and fosters the development of each student's objectives. The quality of work of all professional bodies within the school reflects its overall role. These entities should be of high calibre and well-organised, supported by laws that facilitate their functions.

The school has a wide range of different roles, the most important of which are:

1. 1. Her social role is related to her social function. Qualifying, religious, legitimising, eutactic, sociopolitical, privileged, traditional, propaedeutic, immunising, contemporary, temporal and institutional are some of them.

2. 2. *The role of religion*. This refers to a school where children can learn about other religions and civilisations. Most students are interested in religious studies. Since the goals of education are determined by society, it is seen as a social phenomenon.

3. 3. *Traditional role*. It refers to a school that is both traditional and forward-looking. Futurological thinking of the school and its position in the future are the focus of contemporary perspectives.

4. 4. *Based on its legal jurisdiction, it plays a legitimising function.*

5. 5. *Propedeutic function*. The institution is continuously receptive to new technological developments in its field. Preparations and education are conducted before introducing innovations in the workplace.

6. 6. *The Institution's Role*. The school is a state institution that serves as the country's primary educational institution. The work of the school as an institution is regulated by law.

7. 7. *Communicative function*. Knowledge is acquired, solidarity is established, one's own identity is formed, and through communication, one learns to live in society and community. The educational system has created functionally integrated strategies. In school, communication links preserve the identities of students and teachers while also aiding in their progress and development (Ajanović & Stevanović, 1998).

The school should be an institution that is open to educational innovations, interested in supporting individual changes within its system, and willing to engage in the process of self-education, as reflected in modifications to the school system. In today's world, it is a common consensus that every country's school has a solid framework within which it operates. Teaching comes first, followed by student-free activities, productive work, student social groups, and cultural and civic activities. Although every school is unique, it still shares basic characteristics. Each school has its students (legislation specifies the minimum and maximum number of students per school and class), teaching, collaborative and technical staff, as well as special school and professional accreditation. The school has enough space for students to work (the necessary number of classrooms, offices, halls, sports fields, library, school supplies and furniture, etc.). The school offers a pedagogical and psychological service, as well as the support of other professionals (pedagogue, psychologist, speech therapist, paediatrician, dentist, social worker, etc.) and the school administration (for the needs of the school administration, students, teachers, and parents) (Previšić, 2017). The school organises its annual work by legal restrictions, plans, and programs. All activities are clearly defined, including regular work, school holidays, festivals, and celebrations, as well as the responsibilities of staff, particularly students and teachers. Specific disciplinary methods and a system of praise and rewards are also specified.

2. Safety risks at school

The unpredictability of events significantly impacts the organisation's goals and determines risk in the broadest sense (Renner et al., 2025; Cvetković, 2016). The London-based International Risk Management Institute defines risk as the probability of an unknown event occurring along with its effects. Simultaneously, the effects on the organisation can be both beneficial and harmful, ranging from positive to negative (Institute for Risk Management, 2002). An unknown event is characterised by uncertainty regarding whether it will produce positive outcomes, represent an opportunity, present a danger, or encompass both. If it has adverse effects or deviates from expectations, it is labelled as a hazard. Consequently, it can be concluded that a distinction exists

between risk and uncertainty, both of which can have positive and negative effects. On the other hand, in the face of uncertainty, one can identify various scenarios for a future event but not its probability.

Uncertainty is characterised as an event for which there are several options with unknown solutions, whereas risk pertains to a prospective phenomenon for which multiple known responses can be identified (Pojasek, 2017). Along with the concepts of threat (danger) and vulnerability, the topic of security risks is often studied. A threat or danger is typically defined as the probability of an unwanted event that could jeopardise individuals' health, lead to their death, cause material damage, or result in the loss of organisational resources. When this possibility materialises, the threat is transformed into a security risk. The competent authority within the organisation then endeavours to address it by mobilising the organisation's members and all available material resources (Putnik, 2009). Any threat or source of danger is considered a hazard.

When it comes to schools as organisations, the relationship between the aforementioned concepts can be illustrated as follows: a hazard may be the introduction of weapons into the school; the threat, or security risk, could be the possibility of adverse consequences such as killing or injuring students or school staff, while vulnerability implies that students and school staff are susceptible to these consequences due to a lack of an appropriate system for access control, inadequate performance by the school police officer or physical security measures, as well as the absence of suitable procedures for responding to unwanted events (Keković, Milošević, Putnik, 2012). Security risks can be divided into general and specific risks based on the different outcomes they can precipitate. Public safety risks encompass those whose occurrence adversely affects virtually every aspect of society. These risks are often associated with war, poverty, economic crises, natural disasters, and diseases. Conversely, specialised security risks are those whose effects impact only a specific group of individuals or organisations.

2.1. Concept and types of security risks at school

Special security threats that the school as a whole must manage include all imaginable phenomena and circumstances that can threaten: 1) the physical or psychological well-being of students, teachers and other school personnel; 2) destruction or damage to material resources of the school. Safety risks in schools can be divided into two categories, depending on the origin and type of manifestation: 1) technological and physical safety risks and 2) socio-psychological security risks. Physical and technological security risks include the possibility of the school being at risk due to 1) natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, heavy rain and strong winds; 2) technical-technological hazards including fires and chemical pollution (Popović-Ćitić, Đurić, Lipovac, 2012). Recognising risks of a physical and technical nature requires knowledge and analysis of environmental factors, such as seismological characteristics, proximity to the river and the presence of groundwater, hygienic, sanitary and ecological conditions of the environment, proximity to main roads and the type of traffic that passes by the school, as well as proximity to industrial plants, warehouses and types of products. In this regard, four key aspects of the school area are analysed to determine how vulnerable the school is.

The first parameter refers to the architectural characteristics and construction of the school building, which includes structural characteristics, the number and size of windows, the number of entrance and exit doors, the condition of the installations, the existence of exits in case of emergency or some situation, the existence of shelters inside the school building, the dimensions of corridors and stairs, as well as the existence of appropriate access for disabled children (Popović-Ćitić, Đurić, Lipovac, 2012). Another criterion is the quality of the schoolyard and the immediate surroundings of the building. This parameter includes the enclosure of the schoolyard, visibility from the school building, the presence of video surveillance, the possibility of restricting access to strangers, and the efficiency of lighting the yard. On the other hand, the presence of appropriate traffic signals, as well as the proximity of health institutions, police stations and fire departments, are also taken into account. The general level of hygiene and air cleanliness is the third factor related to the school environment (Popović-Ćitić, Đurić, Lipovac, 2012). The possibility of natural and artificial ventilation in the school building, the standard of toilets, their number and quality, the presence of noise sources inside the school, and the proximity of such sources in the environment, such as traffic, catering facilities, and production facilities, are evaluated within this parameter.

The fourth factor consists of the following qualities and potentials of current safety measures: 1) building characteristics, such as fire alarm systems, fire extinguishers and first aid; 2) training school staff for adequate

response in emergencies, such as knowledge of safety measures and rules of behaviour in case of danger, knowledge of handling protective equipment and knowledge of first aid procedures; 3) scope of use of professional security and protection services (Popović-Ćitić, Đurić, Lipovac, 2012). Socio-psychological safety risks, also known as "school climate," refer to the standard of social atmosphere in a school and are part of another category of specific school safety concerns. Risks of a socio-psychological nature include various circumstances caused by the human factor that can harm the supportive social atmosphere in the school and, as a result, the effective functioning of the educational process. The biggest social-psychological problem of safety in schools is student violence, especially peer violence, which is its special type (Dotson, 2016). The three main characteristics of violence as a social-psychological security risk are that it is widespread, that it often occurs in schools, and that it has serious long-term adverse effects on children.

3. The importance and role of police officers in maintaining safety in schools

The employment of police officers, i.e. police officers in charge of school security, as is known around the world, represents a police activity within the concept of police work in the local community and a form of problem-oriented police work based on engagement in preventive activities, i.e. prevention of various forms of disorder, in order to protect the safety of students and teachers, as well as to eliminate dangers to the work of the school system and the entire local community (Janković, Cvetković, 2020). Within their competence, police officers in charge of school security provide various services. These services depend on the local community, its characteristics and the expectations that the community has of the police, among other things. Among the most important functions of school police officers is that they serve as both security and law enforcement experts, tasked with solving community problems and connecting community resources. Additionally, they should also act as teachers and educators in schools (Đurić, Popović-Ćitić, 2007). Police officers play a crucial role in maintaining law and order and promoting safety in schools, as they are experts in security and law enforcement (Janković et al., 2023).

Police officers must be the first to respond in crises in schools, such as fires, explosions, and other events that pose a danger to the life and health of students and school employees, within the framework of both preventive and repressive activities (Janković et al., 2021). They also participate in the creation of crisis management plans, such as incident response systems and emergency response plans, and engaging and preparing school teams for crisis management activities. Additionally, they develop management protocols for special crises, practice protocols and conduct mock evacuations (Cvetković et al., 2024).

Police personnel in schools are needed to help address issues that are not necessarily criminal in origin but are safety concerns that have the potential to lead to significant criminal incidents, as well as to connect community resources on that front. It is often necessary to combine the resources of the local community and the school to address such issues (Finn & McDevitt, 2005). The task of organising lectures for students, school staff and parents through educational school programs, i.e. presenting the principles and skills of "responsible citizenship", as well as other teaching topics related to police work in the local community, is one of the tasks and duties of police officers who deal with school security protection (Cvetković et al., 2024). Most of the topics covered in school police training relate to policing, criminal investigations, drug and alcohol abuse, school and street gang issues, crime prevention and suppression, non-violent conflict resolution, and crimes that pose a risk to students, such as theft and vandalism.

3.1. Ways and models of engagement of police officers

There are various approaches and strategies for school police involvement, which are also influenced by safety plans, predetermined goals, the specifics of the school, requests made to police departments, and other factors. There is no single solution or proposal that guarantees or establishes prerequisites for the successful implementation of this type of school security protection (Cvetković et al., 2024). Of course, factors that are necessary for effective problem-solving in schools should be taken into account, such as making a formal decision to work with the police, setting common goals, defining a memorandum of understanding, maintaining relationships and improving cooperation through routine conversations, and creating protocols for the cooperation of school security teams and police departments from which school police officers are recruited (Glover, 2002a).

Theorists and analysts of this approach to school policing, however, also highlight significant issues and dangers. Philosophical barriers stem from the differing organisational cultures of police departments and schools, where police prioritise public safety, while schools focus on education (Cvetković et al., 2024). School police officers must play a dual role, adopting both police and school culture patterns due to the different perspectives of the school security system (Cvetković et al., 2024). Deficiencies in police resources, such as long deployment times or inadequate training, are examples of operational barriers. Memoranda of understanding are usually entered into to address these issues. The process of selecting and training police officers for school security is incredibly essential, demanding, and responsible. Due to their visibility, transparency in their work, and regular contact with children, teachers and parents, as well as police officers and other civil servants, are subject to criticism and peer review by the general public (Glover, 2002a). They can serve as role models for students and influence how parents perceive the police. The unique personality traits, necessary abilities, and practical knowledge of a police officer are a reliable indicator of their successful engagement, although there are no studies that have identified which aspects of selection and training are most important (Molnár, 2024).

The following desirable features could be highlighted:

- Ability to cooperate with parents,
- The ability to work well with students of different age groups,
- Capacity to cooperate with school administrators, including principals,
- Knowledge of legal issues related to the work of schools,
- Understanding of developmental child psychology,
- Understanding of social service resources,
- Knowledge of crime prevention,
- Teaching skills (including the ability to teach and lecture),
- Public speaking skills;
- Knowledge of school security technology (Benigni, 2004b).

Community policing, legal issues surrounding school status, general culture, non-violent problem-solving, child psychology, mental health, and solutions, as well as teaching and working with children's methodologies, are just some of the topics covered (Marceta, Jurišic, 2024). The school administration and the so-called security team should conduct a thorough examination of the school's security status to identify current and potential problems before making the final decision to hire school police officers. Establishing a security plan and utilising the appropriate personnel and material resources will be necessary to define alternative responses and solutions (Janković et al., 2023). Safety plans should consider site-specific elements, local community characteristics, demographic groups, and the physical and social makeup of the school environment. The authors of the plan should determine what is best in the particular case, as the police are not the only aspect of school security (Đurić, Popović-Ćitić, 2007). The security team should also collect the necessary information on the overall state of school security, which includes issues related to identified forms of criminality and socio-pathological disorders, physical and ecological characteristics, hazard assessment, and disaster planning. This information will be used to develop a safety plan and determine whether to hire school police officers (Jovičić et al., 2024; Adamović et al., 2021). Such data are collected through statistical analysis of disciplinary records from schools, information on the types and dynamics of crime and violence in the community, and by creating various forums, surveys, and interviews with influential community members.

3.2. The "School Policeman" project in Serbia

The first "School Policeman" project was launched in Serbia in 2002. It is based on an assessment by the joint work of two Ministries, namely the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), that there is a serious security compromise in most schools in urban areas of Serbia. Several problems and events that have, over time, affected order in some schools and, in some cases, put children, teachers and school staff at risk of losing their lives or being seriously injured have been identified by examining the security situation in schools. Events and phenomena that pose a threat to the safety and security of educational institutions, the school yard and the surrounding area are:

- Group fights between students, individual classes, as well as between individual schools,
- Individual fights between students,
- Verbal abuse, attempts and physical attacks on teaching staff,
- Acts of vandalism by individuals and groups,
- Disruption of classes caused by claims that a bomb was planted in the building, vandalism by people or groups,
- Bringing weapons, knives and other potentially deadly objects into the school,
- Use of narcotics, alcohol and cigarettes on the school grounds and certain parts of the yard,
- Allowing visitors who are not members of the school to enter the building and its space,
- Engaging in criminal activities with other persons or other students (stealing money, clothes and other things during recess and from the locker rooms during sports),
- Using firecrackers and spray painting the school building,
- Operation of catering facilities, proximity to bus and train stations, markets and entertainment facilities where a large number of people prone to deviance gather behaviour, which adversely affects both students and everyone else, especially those who are already inclined towards deviant and socially unacceptable behaviour,
- Shops, kiosks and other businesses that provide services near schools and offer alcohol and smoking,
- Committing violent crimes against children near school and on the way home,
- Disturbing the peace and maintaining public order and peace near schools, as well as other behaviours (Nikač, 2012).

Following the identified safety concerns, school police officers are assigned specific jobs:

- That he is acquainted with the issues in the school where he works,
- Establishing relationships with students, parents, teachers, psychologists, pedagogues, school management, and residents in the school's surroundings,
- Being present in the school and its vicinity during student arrival, the start of lessons, and the duration of lessons, with particular attention to extended breaks, transitional periods, etc.,
- Identifying criminal acts, misdemeanours, and other forms of antisocial behaviour within the school and its vicinity and taking appropriate measures by the relevant police authorities, school administration, and teaching staff,
- Prompt detection and prevention of unauthorised individuals, the sale and use of illegal narcotic drugs, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages in the vicinity of schools through independent efforts or collaboration with other police units,
- Reaching out to the owners of catering and entertainment venues located near schools to prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and other related products,
- Rapid detection and prevention of actions that disrupt teaching, alongside the initiation of responses by the police, school administration, and teaching staff,
- Assisting the school administration in designing and implementing legally prescribed safety measures while refraining from undertaking tasks that are solely the responsibility of the school or other authorities,
- Proposing potential solutions to current issues and timely submission of reports, information, and other written materials regarding phenomena and events at school (Nikač, 2012).

The criteria for selecting school police officers focused on a specific set of skills and knowledge needed to perform the planned tasks. The following requirements have been established, including specific personality traits and personal characteristics such as self-control, verbal and written communication skills, morality, responsibility, and conscientiousness. As a fundamental characteristic of a school police officer, it was pointed out that he knows how to recognise and identify criminal, delinquent, and antisocial behaviour of individuals and groups. An adequate level of education and skills for the job, an understanding of the school as an organisation and the educational process itself, as well as knowledge and respect for human rights and personality, are among the prerequisites. In unusual circumstances, it was specified that a police officer should not work at

the school attended by his children but that he may have his children of a comparable age. Individual qualities such as humanism, tolerance, generosity, a willingness to work and help children, parents, teachers, and other school staff, respect, moderation, and a good attitude stand out as personal examples. The specific tasks and responsibilities of the school police officer were determined following the project's set goals, the preventive emphasis of police action, and problem-solving work. The following tasks were chosen: gathering information about phenomena that threaten the safety of the educational process, analysing that information, alerting officials from the school and settlement and taking actions to eliminate the cause of the danger (Nikač, 2012). It is a common belief that a school police officer should act only when necessary and solely to protect children and school property. When performing assigned duties, the police officer respects the concept of school autonomy as an educational institution and a special entity.

4. Conclusion

The increasing number of safety risks in our neighbourhood and community will undoubtedly affect the school. Security threats in schools are a reflection of much larger social issues, and their proper identification and resolution require the coordinated cooperation of all key parties. Evaluation of school vulnerability is made possible by recognising different forms of risk manifestation and current security mechanisms. The basic criteria for successful safety management in schools are a precisely developed risk scale and a detailed vulnerability assessment. Police officers working in schools frequently interact with children and their environment. Any security incident that occurs in their area, whether criminal or misdemeanour, requires them to take precautions and react in a preventive manner. The primary responsibility of school police officers is to proactively respond to potential offenders committing acts that could constitute a misdemeanour or criminal offence simply by being in the school environment. They take measures to prevent and suppress such behaviour as soon as they become aware of non-school staff behaving in an antisocial manner in the school zone. In addition, they play a role as school partners in minimising problems, crimes, and misdemeanours. By talking to children and teenagers, they build trust and help them find solutions to problems. The focus of school police officers is especially on schools that represent greater security threats due to the proximity of catering facilities or places where dangerous and suspicious behaviour often gathers.

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