Safer Schools Partnerships

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Origins of Safer School Partnerships

Safer School Partnerships (SSPs) in the United Kingdom came about as part of a Street Crime Initiative launched in 2002, around schools located within one of the Home Office’s ten crime ‘hot spots’ (Bhabra et al., 2004). It should be said at the outset that the different jurisdictions within the United Kingdom mean that some of the work and evidence about how these SSPs work varies both between and within countries in the United Kingdom. A further complication is that from the start SSPs varied in the way they worked; some had a full-time police officer and support staff, others a lone police officer, whilst some officers worked with a group of schools. SSPs illustrate most clearly the more explicit end of the focus of this volume: they started in high crime areas because of concerns about young people’s behaviour in and around schools, but have since evolved towards a broader remit, as this chapter will detail. Comparison will be made with similar established programmes in the United States, which influenced developments in the United Kingdom.

In the United Kingdom, at the time that SSPs were launched, there was evidence of a rise in the number of street robberies, with offences doubling over a four-year period (HMICA, 2003, p. 8). There was also concern about the number of robberies committed by 11- to 15-year-olds; data from the Metropolitan Police demonstrated that between 1993 and 2001 the number of 11- to 15-year-olds charged with the offence of robbery increased five-fold (Simmons et al., 2002, p. 54). Responding to this, the prime minister (at the time) called for a ‘high intensity’ drive on street crime, with £66 million being made available in March 2002, as part of the national strategy to reduce street crime (NAS/UWT, 2004, p. 7).

One of the key original aims of SSPs was the prevention and diversion of young people from offending. At this time there was a growing concern about problem behaviour and schools, and increasing evidence
about the connections between truancy, exclusion from school and increased opportunities for offending. Parallel to the police interest in reducing crime was an interest from schools that needed additional support in managing pupil behaviour. Initiatives were also coming from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) which actively encouraged schools to work with other agencies in order to address ‘indiscipline and truancy’ (NAS/UWT, 2004, p. 5). Initiatives such as the Behaviour Improvement Programme (which ran from 2002 to 2005) aimed to develop better responses to behaviour and reduce truancy and crime. As part of this programme multi-agency Behaviour and Education Support Teams (BESTs) were established around schools that were seen as having high levels of truancy and problem behaviour. The SSPs were linked to these BESTs; with attached police officers having a role in helping to create a safer school community, provide a support structure for victims of crime and anti-social behaviour and also work with those who had committed offences.

While having police officers in school in the United Kingdom is not a new phenomenon, the SSPs altered their existing role to one in which the police became responsible for assisting in the reduction and management of problem behaviour that was not necessarily criminal, as well as behaviour that was criminal (in a sense blurring the boundaries between problem, anti-social and criminal behaviour, as we argue in Chapter 1). This development is not unique to the United Kingdom, with law enforcement forming part of a whole school approach to crime reduction in the United States for a number of years.

Since the 1960s police have been working in varying capacities in schools across the United Kingdom. Traditionally officers have visited schools on an ad hoc basis as part of their community beat, providing a measure of reassurance and a familiar face to both teachers and young people. With the exception of the occasional presentation on the dangers of crossing the road and taking sweets from strangers, there was very little focused purpose within the interaction between schools and the police. Until the 1990s police visits to schools were primarily focused on their educational value, with officers preparing and delivering schemes of work, based mainly on issues to do with citizenship and the law (O’Connor, 2001; Avon et al., 2002). During this era, schools were considered to be private places and although the police were invited in to perform educational duties there was no real sense that they worked in ‘partnership’ in relation to a crime prevention role.

A number of dramatic events (or ‘signal crimes’) since the early 1990s in the United Kingdom (with new events unfolding at regular intervals)