



# Safety And Firearms Education

## School Resource Officers

by Cherise Barsaloux, Assistant Instructor

It took no time at all after the Newtown, Connecticut shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School last December for America to start talking about how best to prevent another such event in the future and demand that our government not only “do something,” but do it soon. Not surprising. Twenty precious little kindergarteners and first graders and six adults lost their lives in the school that day at the hands of a psychologically disturbed man with no regard for the sanctity of human life or anything else beyond his warped agenda. It is truly horrifying, and the fact that the likelihood of a similar event occurring at my own children’s school being statistically remote was of very little comfort when I dropped them at the front doors the following week. I don’t know a mother who didn’t feel similarly. We control the environment in our homes directly in order to minimize the risk of our children being harmed there, but then send our little ones off to school where they spend seven hours or more a day, and have to merely trust that everything will be fine. Surely, Sandy Hook’s parents believed as their children left for school the morning of the shootings that they would be safe there. After all, the school is in a town that had reportedly had such rare occurrences of violent crime that only a single homicide had occurred in the ten years immediately prior<sup>1</sup>, and Sandy Hook Elementary School itself had updated its security system earlier that year so visitors had to be visibly identified and buzzed in after the doors were locked at 9:30 each morning<sup>2</sup>. How much risk would anyone assume there could be in a quiet town of only 28,000?

According to Wikipedia per updates as recent as March 28th, the shooter began firing at 9:35am. Though 9-1-1 was called within the first minute of the shootings, the shooter expended 154 rifle rounds and murdered all twenty-six of his victims before law enforcement arrived eleven or twelve minutes later at 9:46 or 9:47am. Then he took his own life when, it is believed, he saw law enforcement approaching. That the shooting ended in such a manner isn’t surprising: we often hear of spree killers who commit suicide at the end of their murderous rampages when confronted by law enforcement or armed citizens rather than face the consequences of their actions.

Eleven minutes, maybe twelve. *Eleven or twelve minutes* of children and school personnel being butchered while many more hid, ran, shielded others or were themselves shielded. If there’s a word sufficient to describe the terror of what that must have been like for those people, I cannot imagine what it is. It’s such a short amount of time, and yet it must have seemed interminable to those present. One also wonders how things might have been different if anyone in that building had been able to meet lethal force with lethal force in less time than it took law enforcement to arrive on the scene. What might have been different if an armed school resource officer had been present to respond within moments of the locked door being shot open? What might have been different if school administrators and teachers had been able to confront the shooter with more than merely the strength in their bodies and hearts?

The presence of armed law enforcement on school campuses has been increasing in recent years, and is in fact increasing in the metropolitan OKC area as well. Edmond's School Resource Officer (SRO) program expansions have been widely publicized in the last couple of months. Another local district added three new SROs to their existing program immediately following the Sandy Hook shootings. Yet there are schools and even entire school districts in Oklahoma that do not have SRO programs in place. According to the Shawnee police department, statistically, one person dies every fifteen seconds in a mass shooting. Four people a minute. Minutes count. *Moments* count. Of course, not every school is going to experience the horror that made Newtown, Connecticut and Columbine, Colorado infamous. Most won't. Most won't even experience incidents as comparatively small as the nine school- or higher education-related shootings that have taken place in the U.S. since the beginning of this year<sup>3</sup>. But when any of these things happen, they destroy the lives of the people directly involved and their families, devastate communities, and erode our nation's confidence in our education system and our ability to protect our children. We grieve from a distance with our own children safely asleep in their beds, knowing that there are mothers and fathers not so far away who will never tuck their children in again. We know there is nothing we wouldn't do to protect our children, but our *schools* are failing to protect them and far too often cite statistical insignificance as the reason for that failure. *It can't happen here, they say. This is such a good community. We've never needed an SRO before.*

School Resource Officers are not, of course, a guarantee that nothing bad will ever happen in our schools. "You can't protect against crazy," after all, and determined people will always find ways to wreak the havoc they are intent on inflicting. Yet we prepare for and take precautions against statistically remote adverse events as a matter of routine in our day to day lives in order to avoid or at least mitigate them should they occur. We take out insurance on our vehicles in case we're in an accident, on our homes in case of a tornado, and on our lives in case we die prematurely. We lock our doors in case a prowler tries to gain entry into our homes, and many of us carry firearms with which to defend our families and our own lives if we are assaulted. Why on earth do we gamble with our children's lives by sending them to schools that do not take the reasonable and increasingly commonplace precaution of having an armed SRO on campus? An SRO whose mere presence makes an assault upon our schools less likely, who is moments away should the presence of law enforcement be required rather than minutes, who can instantly request back-up via radio rather than waste precious time (one victim every fifteen seconds) dialing 9-1-1 and being routed through dispatch which then forwards the call to law enforcement for response, and who is trained and prepared to confront and stop *any* aggressor, from a violently disruptive student to a disgruntled parent creating a scene to an active shooter to – and I hate to say it because it sounds entirely paranoid, but here goes nothing – a terrorist threat? The Department of Homeland Security warns law enforcement that terrorism is coming to the United States, and that "soft targets" such as schools are not just vulnerable but highly valued targets because attacks in such places yield maximum impact in terms of both human casualties and the crippling of an entire community. For people like the Newtown shooter, a school is the perfect target in which to take out his angst against society because far too many of them are "gun-free zones": he knows there will be no one to stop him before he has destroyed lives and crushed a community. Oh, I wish I could remember where I read that typically 25% of a community's population is in school each weekday. One in four people in a community, in school, five days a week for most of the year. That's a sobering thought, especially for more rural communities where school-aged children aren't spread out across several campuses but contained within a single target.

I am firmly of the opinion that it is reprehensible not to have an SRO on every school campus. No matter where you live or how safe you believe your community is, no matter how much you enjoy the cozy family feel of your friendly little school, if the unthinkable should occur and an SRO might be able to prevent or mitigate it, the benefit of having an SRO available instantly will far outweigh the costs and minor inconveniences involved. A friend recently asked as we discussed this issue, “How much is a child’s life worth?” How much, indeed? How much are the lives of a classroom full of children worth? Or of a school full of children? How much would you take for your child? There isn’t a sum on earth that would buy one of mine. How much personal inconvenience is too much when it comes to the security of your child? If something were to happen to my child, there isn’t an apology, an excuse, or a settlement that would even begin to lessen that loss, and I’m betting you’d say the same about your child. We hear a lot of soothing chatter about how “children are our most valuable national resource” and “children are our future.” Fabulous. We agree. Now it’s time for schools to put their money where their mouths are. I suspect most parents would agree that all of the SMART Boards, facility improvements, and extra-curricular programs in the world are of no value whatsoever if school security isn’t proactive enough to ensure that the children who use those resources will be safe while they do so. School districts *must make this a priority* and allocate funds sufficient for the procurement of SROs.

However, the reality of the matter is that not all schools in all communities have sufficient revenue with which to hire all of the *teachers* that are needed, much less scrounge up additional funds with which to pay an SRO. Good news! There is hope for Oklahomans on the near horizon thanks to our state legislators. It may soon be possible for every school in Oklahoma to have armed security on campus. How, you ask?

It was my great pleasure to hear State Representative Jason Murphey (R-Dist. 31) address OPD’s Girls’ Day Out class a couple of weeks ago. Representative Murphey discussed three Second Amendment-related bills which have passed the state House floor and are now in the Senate awaiting action. Among those three is HB1062, authored by Representative Mark McCullough (R-Dist. 30), which creates the Special Reserve School Resource Officer Act more widely referred to as the “teacher carry bill”<sup>4</sup>. Should this bill pass the Senate, certain school personnel who have obtained their Oklahoma carry permits and attended a CLEET course for Special Reserve School Resource Officers will be allowed to carry concealed handguns on campus provided their school district’s board of education has adopted a policy that authorizes the carrying of a handgun onto school property. According to the bill, participation by school personnel must not be compulsory or a condition of employment: it is strictly voluntary. The CLEET training must be paid for by the school district in question, however, CLEET training for the Special Reserve SRO will be far less costly than hiring a full-time law enforcement officer to fill that role. **Folks, every one of us needs to contact our state Senator and tell her or him to support this piece of legislation.** I know, I know... some of you don’t like the idea of teachers or other school personnel carrying a loaded firearm at school. I understand the concerns. Really, I do. But back up a second and read the condition I mentioned above: **individual school districts’ boards of education must adopt a policy authorizing a Special Reserve SRO to carry on campus.** Maybe you don’t like the idea of “teacher carry” on your child’s school campus. For whatever reason, it gives you the willies, or simply sounds like an absolutely terrible idea. Perhaps the demographics of your student population makes the suggestion a harrowing one. You’re entitled to that opinion, and if the bill passes, you can cry foul at your local school board meeting every time the question of whether to allow campus carry comes up. It’s a safe bet that the school board would be thrilled to see you show up with

an opinion either way: those meetings are usually poorly attended and fresh faces are appreciated. So, by all means, if you can't get on board with the idea of "teacher carry," debate it vigorously within your own school district, but please, please, *please* take the simple step of contacting your state Senator and asking her or him to support this bill so *other* school districts have the opportunity to authorize "teacher carry" if they determine it to be their best option. Doing that is how you promote liberty in a country where we are increasingly seeing our liberties eroded by a government which has forgotten it exists for the people it serves and not the other way around: you speak up and allow people to choose what they believe is best for themselves rather than forcing your own beliefs upon them. If you don't know who your Senator is, go to <http://www.oklegislature.gov/FindMyLegislature.aspx> and enter your address information. A complete list of your U.S. and state legislators will be generated for your convenience. From there, you'll find links that will allow you to visit your legislators' websites and/or obtain their contact information.

Can you imagine how such a measure could impact an attempted school shooting of any scale in the future? When the would-be shooter doesn't know whether the uniformed SRO is the only person on campus who can stop an attack, or whether every other teacher and administrator in the building could potentially also do so? Representative Murphey said he believes this legislation, if the bill passes, will take effect as soon as August of this year. What utterly perfect timing. I can't think of a better way to kick off "back to school" this autumn. Our schools might soon have two methods – LEO SROs and volunteer citizen Special Reserve SROs – by which to more effectively protect and defend the irreplaceable charges that march, with our hearts attached to them, through the school doors.

Please get involved. Help make Oklahoma schools safer. Petition your school board for uniformed law enforcement officers as a full-time SROs for your school district, and support HB1062 by letting your legislators know that this bill is important for the safety and security of our schools, for our children, and for the people who dedicate their lives to educating those children, and you want them to vote it into law.

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy\\_Hook\\_Elementary\\_School\\_shooting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy_Hook_Elementary_School_shooting)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/12/us/sandy-hook-timeline/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School\\_shooting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_shooting)

<sup>4</sup> See <http://oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1062> for the bill's current status, click the Versions tab for a PDF of the most recent version of the bill

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