

ROCKING THE ROCKIES: A FULBRIGHTER'S EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL-BASED POLICING

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ABSTRACT

Research conducted in Colorado, US in fulfilment of a PhD on comparative school-based policing, led to a subsequent exchange program between US and UK police officers as part of a Fulbright Alumni Initiative 2003-05. This formed the creation of the UK Safer Schools Partnership program (police officers based full time in schools) and the start of a twenty-year relationship with school safety across the world.

Keywords: police • youth • crime • school • education



BACK TO SCHOOL

It was 2001 and I had just spent a year working as the UK's first police officer based full time in a secondary school in North London. It had been an eventful time working alongside teachers and students in a vibrant area of London which had over one-hundred different spoken languages. A high percentage of students qualified for free school meals. The community could be characterized as having a varied relationship with the police, shaped most recently by the Tottenham riots of 1985.

Not everybody was in favor of police officers being present in the community's secondary school. Indeed, this most recent development was viewed as a trial to help build confidence with the local community to support young people and keep them safe on their journey to and from school as well as inside the school grounds. On my first day, I entered the staff room in uniform. Several of the staff got up and walked out. On closer inspection, I saw several leaflets posted on the staff noticeboard with the headline, "Police out of the classroom." A frosty start, but I was young, determined and had grown a thick, albeit cynical, outer skin from working the streets as a uniformed officer in a busy inner-city borough. Not surprisingly, the teacher's union expressed concerns about policing, arguing that policing would lead to criminalizing students in a school setting that should be a safe haven. This led me to think more about understanding the interactions between the police and young people and how the police could effectively safeguard youth in the community. Prior to taking the position at the north London secondary school, I previously worked as a secondary school teacher. Informed by this prior experience, I took the leap and applied to undertake a PhD to explore

the subject further. My initial scoping revealed the extensive work that the US had undertaken in this area through the development of the *School Resource Officer Programme* - uniformed police officers being placed in schools across the US.

“ROCKY MOUNTAINS” AHEAD

The Police Fulbright Research Award gave me the perfect opportunity to conduct research on policing in schools. Upon my completion of a year at university, I was able to spend the following six months in Colorado conducting a comparative study examining the UK and US approach to school-based policing. I set off full of excitement. My wife and our two young boys accompanied me, a one-year-old and a three-year-old. The four of us arrived to a part of the world I had never visited with no place to stay and no contacts other than the name of a woman who had just completed her PhD on this subject at Colorado State University at Denver.

What an adventure I thought, although that was not universally shared with my wider family. We spent several weeks in a cheap hotel before finding an affordable home to rent. We took trips to parks and baseball games. It wasn't long before the realization struck that there were no tubes or trains. Our precious and dwindling cash was used to buy an old Dodge with a bench seat and gear shift that barely made it up the mountains of the front range. These were very happy days watching my boys play with other American kids and attending the local community church, which was the size of an American football stadium that looked over the Rocky Mountains. I spent time cruising with officers in patrol cars. It felt like something out of the TV show *Hill Street Blues* - learning that you can't live off pizza and beer and that cooking or exercising at high altitudes (Denver is known as the Mile High City) comes with its own issues of inedible, undercooked dinners, and breathlessness. There were no mobile phones, the internet was patchy and only accessible at the local library, and calls home were made via a phone card purchased from the liquor store at an exorbitant price.

At one point we managed to attend a baseball game to watch the Colorado Rockies. Unfortunately, I lost our tickets at the gate and had to find them. In the meantime, my wife and kids stood on the curb and watched a cavalcade of black SUVs accompanied by police outriders slowly pass by. The window of one of the blacked-out cars wound down and President George W. Bush smiled while waving and said “Hi, how are you?” Michelle, my wife, dutifully replied whilst the boys were in awe of the flashing red and blue lights.

Once settled, I was able to get down to work. I visited Columbine High School. Several years earlier Columbine experienced a horrific mass school shooting where a teacher and twelve students were killed by two students. I was able to talk to students, parents, teachers and local law enforcement about

the events and the initial police response. The retelling of the events by some of the officers who had been first on scene were very moving and showed me just how much they cared for their community. It was also evident that the mass shooting had a profound impact on them personally.

Several of the parents I spoke to in Colorado explained that they deliberately looked to send their children to schools that had school-based officers. They felt that school based officers provided needed safety. This stood in stark contrast to parents in the UK who expressed concerns that the police would target their children. In fact, many uniformed responders attending schools in the US were viewed with positivity, which contributed to a safer school community. Whilst in the UK, the presence of a uniformed officer resulted in the community perceiving the school as unruly and unsafe.

There are clear cultural differences. In the US, officers are routinely armed, unlike UK officers. However, it is the presence of the officer that brings about this “safe-school” perception. Determined to change this UK perception, I spent additional time with Lakewood and Fort Collins police officers observing their school-based policing and attending training events with local authorities. These activities increased my understanding of good practice and helped me to develop training materials for use in the UK.

THE WORLD STOOD STILL

My research was briefly punctuated by the tragic events of September 11th. I was in the control room of the local police station. At approximately 9:00 am, the monitors in front of me switched to the national news and I witnessed the attacks on the New York Twin Towers. My wife recalls my son, who was only three years old at the time, calling her from the living room as he sat in front of the television watching the aftermath of the plane crashing into the first tower and asking her why his favorite program “Arthur” had suddenly stopped broadcasting.

We were living in South Denver at the time, which is close to the *American Air Force Academy and the North American Aerospace Defense Command* (NORAD situated in the Rocky Mountain Cheyenne Complex). It was a dark and somber time. In the proceeding weeks the road traffic was sparse and air travel stopped except for fighter jets and stealth bombers crisscrossing the skies of Colorado. American flags flew in unity from every house. Public buildings flew flags at half-mast in solidarity with the country and for those who lost their lives. It was a time for reflection, especially in regards to the responders who lost their lives. Having taken several trips to New York since that tragic day, each visit to the 9/11 Memorial brings back the sad memories of the attack and aftermath.

BACK TO REALITY

The Fulbright Police Research Award accelerated my learning and understanding of school policing. On return to the UK, I was able to complete my PhD and write peer-reviewed articles for international journals in partnership with the *Home Office*, *Youth Justice Board*, and DfES. I developed and implemented a training program for police officers and teachers and published a companion book entitled, “Safer School Communities.”

I was invited to a Street Crime Action Group Meeting at No 10 Downing Street. After a roundtable discussion with the Prime Minister, I was able to launch the Safer Schools Partnership program. This brought over five hundred police officers to schools across the UK.

In terms of outcomes for the Police, the Fulbright was a good return on investment. In looking back, there were many other benefits from the experience, some good and others less positive; yet, each had a huge impact on my life and have shaped the way police interact daily with young people in the UK.

There was some resistance within the organization when I expressed my desire to apply for the Fulbright Research Award because I was relatively young and only had ten years of police service. Typically, these awards were awarded to more senior officers. Despite the opposition, I managed to persuade the management that I was a worthy applicant. The now late Roger Graef, film maker and criminologist, was a member of the interview panel. He commented on my enthusiasm.

THE LEGACY YEARS

In the last twenty years, I attended many Fulbright events, mentored young Fulbrighters from the US, and ran events promoting the variety of awards available at local universities. I also served as a Fulbright board member. During this time, I heard countless stories of how the Fulbright has changed people’s lives and how it had a lasting impact on those around them.

Recently I was reminded of the impact of Fulbright when I returned to Colorado to visit old friends. Amongst the many friends were retired police officers and school district officials who threw my wife and me a 25th wedding anniversary surprise party. During the event, a spontaneous speech highlighted how the Fulbright experience had changed their lives as well. Amongst the tears, officers also recalled how the opportunity to participate in a subsequent 2003 Fulbright Alumni Initiatives program facilitated a police exchange program between Fort Collins Police and the Metropolitan Police in London over a two-year period. This experience opened participants’ eyes to a different world.

Several US officers said that it was the first time they travelled outside of the US and the experience changed their world view. One officer said, "I thought everywhere was the same as Colorado, I just never looked any further."

I have countless memories of hosting and being hosted by fellow officers who opened up their homes and apartments to my family and me during both Fulbright experiences. There were many memorable moments with my dear friend Dr. Ellyn Dickmann, from Colorado State University. One memory that tops the list is the time she came to help me train police officers in Devon and Cornwall and found herself drinking cider and dancing in the street around the Maypole with local Morris dancers. Alongside this memory is the one in which a US school officer accompanied me to New Scotland Yard carrying his 5-inch flick knife concealed on his person. As he went through the search arch, it lit up. When questioned about the object he replied, "It's only a pocketknife - we all carry them."

REFLECTION

Returning to the UK with a bump after my initial award, I found it difficult to settle back into working life in the police service. It is fair to say they were not particularly accommodating or supportive of my exploits. I naively assumed everyone would want to hear about my findings and newfound adventures; however, sadly the structure was not in place to support, nurture,

or integrate what I learned and experienced. Thankfully policing today has moved on since then and we have a thriving *Evidence Based Policing Forum* and bursaries for budding scholars and a thriving network of officers and staff to support, mentor, coach and promote good ideas throughout their careers.

It is a sad reflection that support for the Alumni Initiative exchange program was dropped by the Metropolitan Police Service halfway through. Despite the stoppage, the enthusiasm and commitment of the officers and staff who participated collaboratively continued with the program. We used our own holiday time and money to complete the program. I would not change a thing about the experience. I only wish I could do it all over again and relive my time with the people who have now become lifelong friends.

This has been a great experience. It will stay with me and my family forever. My hope is that, unlike many policing initiatives, this would not be short lived but would rather have a legacy, something enduring that would make a difference and change the way we police our local communities and interact with young people.

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WHAT NEXT?

I'm currently on secondment to the Prince's Trust as the National Police Liaison Officer working across the UK with police forces and local authorities promoting opportunities to engage, support and safeguard young people through positive activities, such as employment, engagement and education. I still get excited seeing young people achieve and access opportunities they thought were beyond their reach. The Fulbright experience was center to my beliefs. It fueled my desire to teach comparative policing to students and police officers in New York supported by a John Jay College Fellowship to conduct additional research into school-based policing through a Sir Winston Churchill Fellowship.

Nowadays, I am in a more strategic role and spend less time with young people. I often find myself driving home past the local school gates at closing time and seeing uniformed school officers talking to children and parents and I smile to myself. Poignantly on the train this week, I saw a Police recruitment poster of a school's officer with a caption "As a safer school officer...I know I'm leaving a positive legacy for the next generation." It was all worth it!

NOTES

1. For Information on Metropolitan Police Schools Charter-MPS Guidance for Schools and Colleges – National FGM Centre
2. For Information on the Prince's Trust- The Prince's Trust | Start Something (princes-trust.org.uk)
3. For information on Depaul - <https://int.depaulcharity.org>



Reliving my Fulbright experience at Bierstadt Lake, Colorado with my family.

BIOGRAPHY

Andy Briers started life as a secondary school teacher before joining the Metropolitan Police Service in 1991. He is currently on secondment to the Prince's Trust as the National Police Liaison Officer. He has devoted most of his career to working with vulnerable and at risk young people and is an experienced Peer Reviewer for the Home Office Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation team. He is a double Fulbright Scholar (PhD) and lectures at several UK universities and has written and published several books and peer reviewed journals on the theme of engagement. He is also passionate about housing for young people and volunteers as a night stop host for the charity Depaul. He can be reached at Andy.briers@btinternet.com
