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## Students' perceptions of School Resource Officer quality and school safety

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Students' perceptions of School Resource Officer quality and school safety

By

William N Cooper

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science  
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in the Department of Sociology

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Students' perceptions of School Resource Officer quality and school safety

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In recent years, school resource officers (SROs) and their role in the context of school safety have become a popular topic of research. In this study, I analyze data from 31,156 students from over 100 schools in Kentucky to better understand how students perceive SROs and the impact of SROs on their perceptions of school safety. The findings reveal that males, students who liked having an SRO at their school, students who saw their SRO at several locations on campus during the typical school day, and students who viewed their SRO as more than a law enforcer felt safer at school and had a higher opinion of the SRO working at their school. Interestingly, school-level variables had no impact on these relationships. Implications for policy and future research are also discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On August 27, 2019, at Mesa View Middle School in Farmington, New Mexico, a school resource officer (SRO) responded to an incident where an 11-year-old female student allegedly assaulted a school administrator with one of her elbows and pushed another administrator with her hands. When the SRO responded and attempted to arrest the student and place her in handcuffs, the student resisted and received multiple minor injuries and a concussion from the altercation. Video footage of the incident both revealed that the student had not assaulted the administrator and captured the altercation between the officer and the student in graphic form. The SRO resigned from the police department two months later amidst allegations of excessive force brought about by the incident (Kellogg, 2019).

This altercation is just one of many examples revealed by news, social media, and other video outlets where SROs conduct themselves in ways that suggest they are being improperly trained. This is one reason for debates surrounding the presence of SROs in schools. Those who support SROs focus on data that document the amount of crime that is being prevented, while those opposed to SROs believe their presence creates a school-to-prison pipeline where children are criminalized at young ages. The need for national evaluation of SRO programs is greater now due to this debate and the fact that there is some evidence supporting both sides.

## Problem Statement

Despite the variety of studies discussed below that examine SROs, their activities, and their effectiveness, Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) argue that there is still a paucity of research on how students view SROs. They also argue that it is imperative for SRO programs to be evaluated regularly to ensure that students feel comfortable in their learning environment (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). In this study, I hope to add to the literature by determining whether SROs, as they are currently trained, are performing as intended.

According to Theriot (2016), investigations into how SROs influence students' attitudes and the school's environment could potentially enhance students' relations with law enforcement and their educational outcomes as well. If students do not feel that SROs are actually creating safer environments in schools or that SROs are currently of low quality, then they are not performing as intended and the factors that influence these perceptions need to be reevaluated. If it is something as simple as how frequently the SRO is seen around the school, then it would be easy to change these perceptions with additional SRO training about how to perform their daily operations. However, it is also possible that certain demographic factors such as race, age, or socioeconomic status, which would be unrelated to SROs, may be partially responsible for how students are perceiving these officers; if this is the case, then that could be considered when evaluating and training SROs in the future as well.

In this study, I used data from over 30,000 students in Kentucky schools where SROs were assigned to determine how SROs are perceived by these students, whether the SRO's activities influenced these perceptions, and whether these perceptions varied by the students' gender, grade, and school characteristics. I am hopeful that the results from this effort will provide further clarity around the effectiveness of SROs in the United States. I believe that this

analysis has the potential to add something significant to the current literature due to the uniqueness of the dataset involved. This is the first study of which I am aware that examines student perceptions of SROs with (1) a statewide sample and (2) a sample of over 30,000 students. It is also the first multilevel study regarding student perceptions of SROs. My hope is that the large sample, and the improved statistical nature of this study, will better inform readers about perceptions of school safety and SRO quality, and what factors drive those perceptions.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND

The use of school resource officers (SROs) began in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s. SRO programs became more widely used in the 1990s, partially due to legislative acts encouraging cooperation between schools and law enforcement and partially due to the creation of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. The COPS program allocated federal funds to SRO programs in schools across the country (Counts, Randall, Ryan, & Katsiyannis 2018).

The COPS program (42 U.S.C. §3796dd-8) defines an SRO as:

a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community oriented policing, assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with schools and community organizations to: (A) address crime and disorder problems, gangs, and drug activities affecting or occurring in or around an elementary or secondary school; (B) develop or expand crime prevention efforts for students; (C) educate likely school-age victims in crime prevention and safety; (D) develop or expand community justice initiatives for students; (E) train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime awareness; (F) assist in the identification of physical changes in the environment that may reduce crime in and around the school; and (G) assist in developing school policy that addresses crime and recommended procedural changes.

While most media attention focuses on the law enforcement role of the SRO, their numerous other roles suggest that they are much more than simply law enforcers. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), SROs are intended to be community-oriented law-enforcement officers who are trained to protect and serve in schools. In order to accomplish this, NASRO recommends that SROs follow a triad model where they take on the role of a teacher and mentor as well as a law enforcement officer (NASRO, 2019). SROs are viewed as a potential solution to protect students and faculty from violence within schools. As a long-term goal, their presence and guidance could possibly prevent future violence altogether.

There is currently no national database that tracks how many SROs are working in the United States. NASRO, using results from previous surveys that have attempted to measure numbers at a national level, estimates that approximately 20% of K-12 schools employ SROs and that there are between 14,000 and 20,000 SROs total (NASRO, 2019). Others have suggested greater numbers of SROs in the United States; in fact, Weiler and Cray (2011) estimated that nearly 35% of schools employ SROs. The lower NASRO estimate may indicate (a) that the popularity of the SRO program is fading or (b) that there are many SROs who are not members of NASRO and thus are uncouncted by their estimate. If numbers are truly declining, that decline may be due to the fact that many SRO programs begin with a three year, federally funded grant but are then required to be funded by schools and other local/state agencies in order to continue (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Even if there is a local budget in place, when those sources go through budget cuts, SROs are affected as well. Specifically, SROs might have their training and equipment reduced and their workload increased (e.g., by having to monitor multiple schools in the same area). While this is only observed in a small percentage of programs, budget cuts could potentially be a hindrance to the SRO programs that are affected (May, Hart, & Ruddell,

2011). This disagreement in the number of SROs serving in the U.S. serves as a reminder of the importance of a national evaluation of SRO programs in order to determine their effectiveness and obtain an accurate estimate of how many there are in the United States. If the effectiveness of having SROs in schools could be measured, this could potentially help with funding issues as well.

### **SRO Impact on School Crime**

The seminal work on SROs and school crime was published in 1999. Ida Johnson (1999) set out to evaluate an SRO program in a southern city to study its impact on disciplinary problems, mainly school violence. Johnson chose a select number of schools based on where they were located in the city, which led to a final sample of four high schools and one middle school. The principals and assistant principals at each school were formally interviewed. Johnson also informally interviewed SROs, small groups of students, and an average of six teachers at each school. Her research team also conducted walk-throughs of the schools in order to observe how teachers and students interacted with SROs. Data were also collected from the City Department of Attendance, an office responsible for keeping records of public-school attendance, and the weekly incident reports of all 18 SROs in the city to compare rates of disciplinary action. The results illustrated many positive effects the SROs were having in the schools, including an overall reduction in the number of suspensions and gang-related activities since the schools received permanent SROs. Many students reported in their group interviews that their SRO was an effective deterrent because whenever someone was arrested, they were immediately handcuffed and taken to a police car. The students stated that the embarrassment of being arrested in front of other students, along with the immediacy of the legal action, was an effective deterrent.

Despite these positive student comments, all but one SRO interviewed stated that they believe changes needed to be made to the program, including more outreach with parents and a mandate for teamwork between administrators, teachers, and the SROs. Johnson's conclusion, based on these results, was that the SRO program in these schools was performing well in reducing school violence, providing counseling services, and providing support services to teachers and administrators. However, the biggest takeaway from this analysis was that SROs and their supervisors need to have (1) community support and (2) regular communication with school officials, parents, and students in order to be effective. Johnson argued that plans devised by all of these parties working together would have more support and be more effective in achieving the defined goal for that program (Johnson, 1999).

In 2007, a group of researchers examined the influence that the New York City (NYC) Impact Schools Initiative was having on behavior in NYC public schools. This initiative was a punitive-based partnership between schools and police that began in January of 2004 in the city's most problematic schools. Researchers obtained incident data from the NYC public schools' published annual report cards for 2002-2003 as a pretest and incident data for 2004-2005 as a posttest. They split the schools into four categories for analysis: impact schools, comparison-nonimpact schools, all non-impact schools, and all NYC schools. Impact schools were any schools that were involved with the initiative and comparison-nonimpact schools were schools that did not participate in the program and were comparable to the impact schools based on size and racial composition. The analysis showed that, compared to the average NYC public school, impact schools were generally larger, had higher levels of student overcrowding, more suspensions, lower attendance rates, larger minority populations, and received less funding for student services. The researchers found that, compared to nonimpact schools, the majority of the

incident rates at impact schools did not significantly change from pretest to posttest. In fact, both suspension and absence rates actually rose at the impact schools during this time. The authors argued that this finding implies that the increased security and punishments actually discouraged more students from attending school (Brady, Balmer & Phenix, 2007). This is just one example of overly punitive measures not effectively reducing problematic behavior in schools.

In 2009, Theriot examined the role of SROs in school-based arrests to determine if arrest rates were higher in schools with these officers. Arrest data were analyzed from a county in the Southeastern US that included 14 middle schools, 12 high schools, and two alternative schools. Data were compared between 13 schools with an SRO and 15 schools without them. The arrest data, which included 1,012 arrests involving 878 different students, covered a three-year period from 2003-2006. Analysis showed no noticeable increase in arrest rates within schools that employed SROs when compared to schools that did not. In fact, schools with SROs actually showed lower rates of arrests regarding weapons and assault charges. However, the rate of disorderly conduct arrests increased by over 100% when comparing schools with SROs to schools without. Theriot argued that SROs might be effective in deterring serious violent crime, but it is at the expense of criminalizing youth for less serious crimes that would otherwise have never brought them to the attention of the criminal justice system (Theriot, 2009).

Two studies published in 2011 also dealt with the effectiveness of SROs and other security measures regarding school violence. One group of researchers set out to analyze the effects of SROs versus private security guards, as well as their use-of-force capabilities, in terms of school crime. These researchers used data from the 2006 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) and analyzed data from 1,853 elementary, middle, and high schools across the country. They found considerable variation between schools that only had SROs versus schools that only



had private security guards. Their analysis led them to conclude that, in certain situations, schools with SROs observed lower crime rates than schools with private security guards. However, they also found that schools with SROs that were authorized to use mid-level force, such as pepper spray or tasers, had significantly higher levels of school crime. This could mean that the presence of an SRO is a good deterrent of crime, but only when used in a manner that lacks a need for frequent use of force. However, it is also possible that those schools had higher levels of crime prior to bringing in an SRO and, as a result, the SRO was given more discretion regarding use of force (Maskaly, Donner, Lanterman, & Jennings, 2011).

Another group of researchers also evaluated the relationship between school police, security measures, and violent crime in schools. This group also used the data from the 2006 SSOCS, but only analyzed the 932 high schools that were in this dataset. Their analysis found that the impact of SROs on school violence was mixed and inconclusive. However, they did find a significant association between an increased number of officers and a reduction in incidents of serious school violence. On the other hand, an increased number of security guards led to an increased amount of both serious incidents of violence and school violence in general. This implies that having SROs and no private security might be the better way to reduce incidents of serious violence. The installation of weapon-detecting devices, such as metal detectors, appeared to have an effect on general violence, but no effect on serious violence. The authors recommended that programs targeting bullying, racial tensions, and disrespect within schools, combined with effective SRO programs, might be the best way to reduce overall rates of violence in schools (Jennings, Khey, Maskaly & Donner, 2011).

Next, in 2013, Na and Gottfredson published an article about whether the presence of police in schools has had an effect on the level of school crime or how schools respond to crime.

They combined data from the SSOCS that was conducted in 2003-2004, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008 to create a longitudinal sample of 470 schools nationwide. The primary goal of using this data was to compare the actual number of reported crimes from schools with an increased police presence to schools with no police presence. The results, contrary to other published literature at the time, showed no association between an increased police presence and reduced crime rates. The schools that employed officers actually reported more crimes involving weapons and drugs, which may be a result of the officers finding these incidents more often than school officials would by themselves. However, they also found that students at schools with police officers were not more likely to be suspended or expelled than students at schools without officers. No negative effects were observed on minority or special education students either. While these last two observations are positive, the authors concluded that schools should look into other evidence-based programs instead of SROs and increased security measures. They argued that these measures are largely expensive and unproven whereas there are evidence-based programs that are cost-effective and demonstrated to be effective when conducted the way they are intended (Na & Gottfredson, 2013).

Dohy and Banks (2018) examined the effects that the total number of school police officers would have on reported incidents of student insubordination and school violence. Over 2,000 (2,583) principals in the state of Ohio were emailed a survey to gauge their perceptions around this topic. Of the 167 responses, 148 were deemed usable. The others were dropped due to an inability to determine the total number of behavioral incidents that occurred at those schools. Data were also obtained from the Ohio Department of Education website for the years 2010-2014. The results showed that, in 2010, many schools that began using police officers actually saw an increase in incidents of insubordination and violence, but this increase did not

persist over time. This implies one of two phenomena: that the initial onset of police officers in schools can create mistrust and cause students to act out against the officers or that officers assigned to schools discovered problems that had been unrecognized prior to their assignment to the schools. Dohy and Banks (2018) referenced a handful of other studies that found that students actually view these officers as adversaries rather than trusted advisors. The authors concluded that schools and policy makers should put more time and effort into other proven strategies instead of zero-tolerance, punitive measures that breed mistrust between students and schools (Dohy & Banks 2018).

In 2018, Anderson conducted a study to determine how *Senate Bill 402, Section 8.36-Grants for School Resource Officers in Elementary and Middle Schools* in North Carolina, which increased funds to SRO programs, affected school safety across the state. Anderson retrieved seven years of data from the North Carolina Public Schools website, including 110 districts and 471 middle schools. Anderson argued that policy makers often make decisions based on serious events or on the socioeconomic conditions of the schools involved rather than data available about that topic under study. He found that most public policy initiatives only occurred after a school shooting. He argued that it would be more effective to create policy addressing underlying issues and increasing the quality of education since his analysis showed a strong relationship between academic success and school crime. Anderson found that after the increase in funding of SROs, there was little reduction in the amount of school crime, if any at all. He concluded his piece by urging policy makers to look at the underlying causes of school crime instead of the symptoms of it (Anderson, 2018).

Most recently, Zhang (2019) examined the influence of school-based law enforcement (SBLE) officers on school crime and disciplinary problems and responses by school

administrators. In West Virginia these officers are called Prevention Resource Officers (PROs). Data were obtained from the West Virginia Department of Education by special request; these data came from all schools within the state from 2014-2016. An additional dataset was obtained from the West Virginia Division of Justice and Community Services in order to identify which schools employed PROs during these years. The final sample used for analysis included 130 middle schools and 108 high schools.

Zhang (2019) reported an increase in the number of reported out of school suspensions and drug-related incidents in schools with PROs. Schools that had employed a PRO for three years had lower rates of violent crime and general disorder than did schools without a PRO. This trend did not show up in schools that had employed a PRO for less than three years, so it is possible the positive effects of SBLE officers may take significant time to develop and become observable. However, the findings regarding various other types of incidents saw no change or a negative change with the presence of a PRO. This finding led the authors to conclude that the effect of a SBLE officer varies by problem type and various contextual factors with the schools (Zhang, 2019). This is just another example of how the analysis of the official incident records has been generally inconclusive so far with regard to SROs.

### **Training SROs**

As mentioned earlier, many researchers that examine SROs argue that better training is needed. Finn et al. (2005) found that few programs provided specialized training for SROs prior to the program implementation. They recommended that not only should SROs be trained before being deployed into a school, but school administrators and teachers should be trained alongside them so they can learn to work as a team. The researchers also suggested periodic reports and reviews of activity logs with SRO supervisors and argued that collaboration between SROs, their

law enforcement supervisors, and school administrators and teachers were one of the greatest challenges for SRO programs. School administrators frequently reported problems such as not knowing who is in charge, especially regarding arrest decisions. Regarding working with students and parents, the authors suggested that a set of guidelines on how to deal with students in a way that is appropriate and fair to everyone would be beneficial. They also reported that many parents tend to have an issue with their school bringing in an SRO because they think it means their school is dangerous. The research team found that programs that used PTA meetings and other methods of getting information out into the community experienced few complaints from parents (Finn, Shively, McDevitt, Lassiter & Rich, 2005).

May and Higgins (2011) examined how new SROs might differ from veteran SROs in terms of characteristics and activities. The Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) identified and mailed surveys to all SROs in the state of Kentucky in 2009. Of the 211 officers surveyed, 149 provided usable surveys. “Newbies” were defined as those who had been on the job for two and a half years or less. Analyses showed that even though there were some differences in terms of characteristics such as age, experience, and organizational memberships, there was no significant difference in the daily activities of new and veteran SROs. In the survey the SROs were asked to describe the schools they worked in so that the researchers could observe if there were any noticeable differences in their activities based on the school’s environment. May and Higgins (2011) found no significant differences in SRO activities by type of school. There was also no significant difference between newbie and veteran SROs’ perceptions of school administrators.

Of particular interest in this study was whether newer SROs would criminalize students at higher rates than would veteran SROs. The analysis showed no significant difference here as

well. May and Higgins (2011) suggested that their findings are promising for school and law enforcement administrators because the findings imply that programs and schools can be less concerned about the inexperience of the SRO as long as training and other forms of law enforcement experience exist. Because the average years of experience of the SROs in their sample was 19 years, they suggested that departments were actually putting their older officers “out to pasture” into SRO positions (May & Higgins, 2011). If true, this could mean that SRO positions are not being filled by officers that are best suited for the job and that there could possibly be a significant difference in how officers with little experience behave in this role.

Martinez-Prather & Mckenna (2016) explored how much school-specific training was available to school-based law enforcement (SBLE) in Texas. They also wanted to determine how different types of training affect the methods of discipline that SBLE officers would most often use. Eleven police departments in the state of Texas were contacted; these departments provided a list of 106 officers to contact. Only 26 of the 106 officers that were emailed a survey responded. Two of these officers were interviewed in person and the rest via telephone. The survey was made up of open-ended, qualitative questions in order to try and obtain as much detail as possible. Nearly 40% of the officers reported they had not received any kind of specialized training. More than half of the officers stated that specialized training regarding schools is important to improve SRO effectiveness. Many officers reported a desire to receive training on how to deal with students with mental health needs, juvenile law, and how to more effectively communicate with parents. They also reported being frequently asked by school administrators to perform disciplinary actions that would normally be taken care of by school staff. The authors of this article concluded that specialized training is essential not only for SBLE, but for school administrators as well. They recommended that school police officers and

administrators should be trained together in order to create clearer expectations of what should and should not fall under the duties of the SBLE officer (Martinez-Prather & Mckenna, 2016).

### **Implementing and Evaluating SRO Programs**

In 2005, Finn et al. received funding from the National Institute of Justice and the COPS Office to conduct a national evaluation of SRO program models. The report covered 19 SRO programs for which the team collected data via telephone and onsite visits. The final report focused on seven issues:

- 1: Choosing a Program Model
- 2: Defining Specific SRO Roles and Responsibilities
- 3: Recruiting SROs
- 4: Training and Supervising SROs
- 5: Collaborating with School Administrators and Teachers
- 6: Working with Students and Parents
- 7: Evaluating SRO Programs

Regarding choosing a program model, the researchers found that most programs fell somewhere on a spectrum of the common triad model, which is the idea that the three primary roles of an SRO are to enforce laws, teach, and mentor. At the two ends of this spectrum, SROs either conducted primarily law enforcement activities or mentoring and teaching activities. The authors concluded that it is paramount to consider the school's level of crime and general disorder, as well as the desires of the school administrators, when deciding whether or not to bring in an SRO. However, they also believed the biggest factor in terms of the program's success might be the personality and experience of the SRO. Regarding defining roles and responsibilities, they found that most successful programs had written expectations and that the

schools were involved in defining these expectations. They also recommend having these guidelines reviewed periodically and that there be a mechanism to provide a method of resolving disagreements between SROs and administrators. In terms of recruiting SROs, the researchers created a list of traits that they believe need to be present for SRO programs to be successful. The traits for successful SROs, as perceived by this team, are that SROs must: (1) like and care about kids, (2) have a temperament to deal with school administrators, (3) have the capacity to work independently, (4) not be a rookie, and (5) know the community well. The authors recommended that if there is a lack of qualified candidates, departments should use incentives to try and obtain more attractive candidates instead of settling for officers who are not entirely suited for the role (Finn, Shively, McDevitt, Lassiter & Rich, 2005).

Finn et al. (2005) also observed that few of the programs they studied attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of the SRO programs. They argued that every program should begin by defining the goal(s) for their specific program at their specific school. Once this is accomplished, the program can develop questions and a process of data collection to evaluate whether or not these goals are being met. The team stated that the most important part is having the law enforcement agency and the school collaborating on the creation of these goals and evaluations (Finn, Shively, McDevitt, Lassiter & Rich, 2005).

In the second section of her report to the Department of Justice, Raymond (2010) summarized what was known at the time about the effectiveness of having police officers in schools. In this section, she discussed how evaluations of SROs had much of the same problems that are still evident today. She stated that the majority of SRO evaluations are descriptive accounts of the SRO's daily activities or measures of stakeholders' (parents, students, school administrators) perceived satisfaction with the program. The few studies that had attempted to



measure actual safety/security outcomes have shown mixed results. The positive takeaway is that many of the studies measuring perceptions have shown that all parties involved are generally supportive of SRO programs once they have been established. This finding is also important since it may lead to positive perceptions of police in general by youth.

In the final section of her report, Raymond (2010) discussed how to decide whether an SRO is needed and how to effectively implement one. As discussed by other researchers in this review, an important first step is to determine the needs of the school. Any safety plan or SRO program should be developed with consideration to the various contextual factors of the school and community. According to Raymond, the next important step is to identify collectable data that can help with the evaluation of the school's needs, as well as provide an empirical measure to evaluate the program on later. Once this is complete, the team can then create a comprehensive safety plan with tailored approaches based on the collected data and specific activities to be completed by the SRO to meet these goals. The suggested attributes and training of an SRO are very similar to the guidelines suggested by Finn et al. (2005). Raymond (2010) suggested that SROs need to be able to work effectively with students, parents, and school administrators, which requires good communication skills. She also suggested that SROs receive training in mental health issues, problem solving, teaching and classroom management strategies, and child development. In her conclusion, Raymond stated that another important factor is that those planning these programs need to be creative and flexible. She argued that the most effective SRO programs are effective because they account for the context of the community (Raymond, 2010).

Cray and Weiler (2011) examined the patterns of SROs in public schools, documents in place by school districts to guide SROs and administrators, and whether these documents provide

tools for SROs to effectively meet their goals while also respecting students. They obtained data from the National Center for Education Statistics from 2009, which covered 83,000 schools, and data from a stratified random sample of the 67 Colorado public school districts. They determined that 43% of schools reported inadequate training regarding classroom management and 64% of schools reported having no method, or an inadequate method, of dealing with disruptive students. They also found that around 35% of the reporting schools had an SRO available to them. This is much smaller than the 45% of surveyed schools in Colorado that reported having an SRO.

Of the 30 schools that reported having an SRO, 16 reported having some type of memorandum of understanding (MOU) or other agreement in place to clearly define the role of the SRO. An analysis of the MOUs found that most of the MOUs specify three primary goals for SROs: to provide a safe learning environment and reduce school violence, to improve collaboration between the school and law enforcement, and to improve perceptions/relations between students, staff, and law enforcement. While these types of guidelines are effective at setting goals and providing tools to achieve them, the authors found no instance of SROs and school administrators receiving training together. They recommended this kind of training, along with the development of a clear MOU, and argued that these changes are necessary for SRO programs to ensure program effectiveness and the most effective use of SROs in those schools that have them (Cray & Weiler, 2011).

In 2013, as a result of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in December of 2012, renewed interest in SROs led to a Congressional inquiry into whether or not SROs were an effective deterrent of future school shootings. The goal of this report, written by James and McCallion (2013), was to compile all of the information available at the time about SROs and to report those findings to Congress. This report focused mainly on providing a descriptive analysis

of SROs in the U.S., how they are funded and what they do, and whether these officers are actually affecting the students and schools at all. Data were combined from the 2007 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey with the 2007 SSOCS to obtain a rough estimate of how many SROs were in the United States at this time. James and McCallion (2013) found that there were nearly 20,000 SROs across the country in 2003, but that number was closer to 19,000 by 2007. They then searched for research conducted on the effectiveness of SROs. The writers of this report concluded that the current research about SROs is too limited and conflicting to be able to make conclusions with any certainty. However, they did note that there was a decrease in serious violent incidents in schools around the same time as the expansion of SRO programs in the last two decades.

James and McCallion (2013) concluded their report with three issues they believed Congress should consider before passing any legislation. The first issue was whether an increase in the number of SROs is even needed when schools were, at the time, safer than they have ever been. They point out that only 12 of the 78 public mass shootings between 1983 and 2012 were in an academic setting. The second issue was the cost of a large increase in the number of SROs. They believed that even a conservative estimate of placing an SRO in every school in the country would cost billions. The final issue that they discussed was how SROs affect the educational setting, specifically as it relates to the school-to-prison pipeline. They referenced multiple studies that discuss the potential effect SROs can have on the number of youth going through the criminal justice system (James & McCallion, 2013). This renewed interest did not only apply to Congress. In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of academic studies conducted about SROs. However, little is still known about what effect they are having in schools.

## General Perceptions of SROs

In 2006, Brown consulted over 100 scholarly sources to provide an overview of the evolution of police in schools that included a set of factors to consider when conceptualizing what these officers would actually be doing. Brown also included a discussion of the various methodological issues that come with trying to assess these programs. Brown argued that the most consistent finding across these studies was that that officers were performing too many different duties for a large number of students under their supervision. He recommended that a set of expected duties and roles for these officers needs to be established prior to the SRO being assigned to the school.

Regarding assessing these programs, Brown believed that the best option was to use a combination of official crime data and survey data because many studies, like the one he was a part of in 2005, have shown that young adults generally have a more negative opinion of law enforcement than do older adults. This could indicate youth might be unnecessarily critical of law enforcement officers, so it is important to look at official crime data as well when trying to evaluate these programs (Brown, 2006). Jaydani (2019) conducted a similar review of over 70 scholarly sources and came to a similar conclusion with two additional thoughts. Jaydani found that officers are still overextended and there is still much confusion about their role. Jaydani also recommended increased research on how SROs are specifically affecting underserved children, as well as an emphasis on the possibility of SROs having a distinctive negative impact on minority populations (Jaydani, 2019).

Myrstol (2011) examined whether or not the general public supported SRO programs. Specifically, he wanted to determine whether the general public was even aware of SRO programs and, if so, whether they perceived SRO programs as needed or effective. Data were

collected in Anchorage, Alaska as a part of the Anchorage Community Survey of 2009 from 1,983 adult heads of households. He concluded that the general public, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents strongly support these programs. The most important predictors of positive opinions of police in schools were measures that examined prior social (informal) contact with a police officer (Myrstol, 2011). This implies that the key to shaping the public's perceptions of the police is to ensure that they meet more often in social (informal) settings.

Chrusciel and colleagues (2015) examined the perceptions law enforcement executives and public-school administrators had about the effectiveness of SROs as part of a larger study about whether or not school administrators and teachers should be armed. The results from the school administrators will be discussed in the next section below. Questionnaires were sent to 228 law enforcement executives in South Carolina. Completed surveys were received from 141 law enforcement executives. These surveys asked questions about SRO programs as well as questions about the main topic, arming school staff. Among the law enforcement respondents, half identified as either a police chief or deputy chief, 6% as sheriffs, and another 3% as a director of public safety. The rest were at various positions within their departments. Around 60% of both groups reported having an SRO. The results showed tremendous support for SRO programs. One interesting result from this study revolved around responses to a question about the most effective method to maintain overall school safety. The given options were SROs, armed teachers, armed administrators, or other. A majority of the law enforcement officials (91%) answered SROs. The authors concluded that policy makers should look into SRO programs that are already implemented and look for ways to improve them with more funding instead of using money to arm teachers and administrators who, according to this survey, do not want to be armed in the first place (Chrusciel, Wolfe, Hansen, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015).

## **Perceptions of SROs by School Administrators**

In 2004, May and his colleagues examined how SROs affected perceptions of school safety by school administrators. In 2002, as part of an ongoing study with the Kentucky Center for School Safety, 119 SROs were contacted via mail survey in order to obtain information on which schools would be used for this analysis. These 119 SROs then named 177 school officials they worked with; these administrators were then mailed similar surveys and received 128 responses from administrators. The surveys consisted largely of close-ended questions about SRO duties and the various factors affecting school safety. However, there were also open-ended questions regarding their opinions on problems with their school and the SRO program in order to obtain more detailed responses.

Overall, the results showed that principals were very supportive of their SROs and believed they were effective. They commonly stated that SROs reduce problematic behaviors such as fighting, marijuana use, and theft. One question on the survey asked them what the most negative aspect of an SRO being in the school was and over half responded that there were no negatives that come out of employing an SRO. The only statistically significant predictor of administrators' perceptions was the frequency of meetings between principals and SRO supervisors; principals that met more often with SRO supervisors had higher opinions of the SRO at their school. This is a problem considering that half of the administrators surveyed reported that they never met with the SRO supervisor. However, they did report that good communication between SROs and administrators is as important, or more important, than specialized training (May, Fessel & Means, 2004).

The findings by Chrusciel et al. (2015) regarding school administrators were as supportive of SRO programs as the findings regarding the law enforcement executives.

Questionnaires were sent to 1,086 elementary through high school principals in South Carolina. Completed surveys were received by 486 school officials. The overwhelming majority of these respondents (90%) identified as principals. In response to the question regarding the most effective method to maintain overall school safety, 76% of school officials chose SROs, with a large portion of the remaining respondents choosing other. The most common response in the other category was the creation of clear safety plans and procedures (Chrusciel, Wolfe, Hansen, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015).

### **Perceptions of SROs by SROs**

Using the same group of surveyed SROs discussed above, May, Corder, and Fessel (2004) examined whether SROs participated in activities that could be defined as community-oriented policing. Of the 119 responses from SROs received, only 117 were deemed usable for this specific analysis. The vast majority of the sample were white males over the age of 35 with six or more years of law enforcement experience. This analysis found that roughly 40% of the surveyed officers were participating in what could be defined as community-oriented policing. More specifically, they found that these officers were spending at least half of their time counseling students and teaching classes in addition to their more traditional law enforcement responsibilities. However, the two most frequently reported daily activities were monitoring the parking lot and cafeteria. Coupled with the finding that less than one third of the officers actually perceived having a duty to participate in more community-oriented actions like counseling and teaching, if community-oriented policing is the intended goal of SRO programs, then more officers need to be socialized/trained to act in ways that fulfill that role even if their most common activity is patrolling the school grounds. The authors also recommended that training to

improve problem solving is needed to ensure these methods of policing are also effective (May, Cordner & Fessel, 2004).

Another piece, published in 2009, involved interviews with SROs in 16 districts within the state of Massachusetts. The researchers also attempted to obtain data on school-based arrests. They were only able to obtain data from six of the sixteen districts and even then, they were only able to obtain minimal information on the overall numbers of school-based arrests. The resulting findings are both supportive and unsupportive of SROs (Thuruau & Wald, 2009).

Contrary to general assumptions, the self-reported methodology used by SROs varied widely. Some did take a zero-tolerance approach, but others described themselves as a resource to the students and the community whose job was akin to that of a “case worker” advocating for the children and their families. Many SROs stated that they felt like they were being misused by school administrators and staff for matters that should fall under normal school discipline. These researchers also concluded that the definition of what is an “arrestable” offense is too vague and needs to be better defined through regulations and law enforcement oversight to prevent officer discretion from being too large of a factor.

Thuruau & Wald (2009) suggested that SROs need to undergo specialized training for dealing with youth. They suggested that this training should include: de-escalation techniques, identification of youth suffering from experiences with violence, abuse, or other traumas, and adolescent psychology specific to the age range of children they will be monitoring. They also found that SROs often base their perceptions of students on the perceptions of the school administrators and staff. If the employees of the school do not positively value the students, then the SRO working there likely will not either and that can affect how they go about their duties. Overall, Thuruau and Wald recommend that SROs undergo more types of training in order to be



effective within schools. They also recommended that SROs make it clear to parents, students, and school faculty what is considered an “arrestable” offence so there will be no confusion (Thurau & Wald, 2009).

In 2014, Wolf published an article about his analysis of SRO arrest decision-making in the context of Black’s general theory of arrest (Black, 1971). Data were collected via online survey, which was distributed to all 49 SROs working in the state of Delaware during the 2010-2011 academic year. The final sample included 31 usable respondents, of which the overwhelming majority were white male SROs. The survey consisted mostly of scaled questions about factors that might influence decision-making about arrests. However, there were also general questions about the SROs’ perceptions of how the arrest process differs in school compared to the arrest process on the streets. Wolf found that many SROs preferred using alternative disciplinary measures that the school offered and only resorted to arrest when the crime was serious enough and it caused a disturbance to the school’s environment. However, this does leave open the possibility that some SROs may be attempting to maintain the school environment at the expense of misbehaving students who could likely benefit from alternative disciplinary actions. The SROs ranked evidence, seriousness, and disrespect as three of the most important factors when deciding whether to make an arrest. This is concurrent with Black’s general theory of arrest and it led Wolf to conclude that SROs do have a similar decision-making process about arrests as officers on the streets, but various factors of the school can significantly affect those decisions (Wolf, 2014).

In 2015, Kelly and Swezey sought to add to the literature on SROs because they could not find a single study on the effects of gender on SROs’ perceptions of their roles. The authors collected their data via online survey and ended up with data from 53 SROs from three cities

along the East Coast; 13 of the respondents were female. Their analysis found that female officers spent less time in law enforcement activities and they also had greater levels of job satisfaction than their male counterparts. The researchers concluded that school districts need to consider hiring more female officers because studies have shown that they are more likely to use policing styles that involve less use of force and are often better at de-escalating situations as their first response. They also recommended that further research asking SROs' perceptions about their work could provide important information that might improve these programs in the future (Kelly & Sweezey, 2015).

In 2016, Barnes conducted interviews with SROs about their opinions of their SRO program. The goal was to determine how SROs would assess their daily operations within their respective programs. Initially, 25 schools in North Carolina were randomly chosen, and their SROs were contacted via mail. Only twelve SROs from seven high schools and five middle schools were willing and able to participate. These officers were interviewed with open-ended questions in order to gain as much detail as possible. Many of the officers said that school administrators either did not know how to fit the SRO into their school or wanted to use them in a way that is not how the program is intended. Some stated that they were treated essentially like hall monitors or were asked to deal with almost all disciplinary issues no matter how small. Overall, however, the SROs stated that they believe the presence of a uniformed officer in the school was creating a safer environment for the students. Some went as far as saying that they would receive information from students pertaining to crimes outside of the school that they would then pass along to their department. Barnes concluded that educating school personnel on the proper uses of SROs is paramount to the success of the program (Barnes, 2016).

## **Current Debate Surrounding SROs**

There currently remains a heated debate around the presence of SROs in schools. Those in support of SROs focus on stories about SROs being successful at their job and do not receive much attention from the media. Those against the idea of SROs believe that SROs create a school-to-prison pipeline by increasing the likelihood that students will get arrested for behavior that otherwise would be taken care of within the school. The prevalence of this debate may be due, in part, to confusion surrounding the exact role of these officers. Is the main role of an SRO to be a police officer or a school administrator? This can lead to some confusion, such as when an officer is allowed to search a student's personal belongings (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Some view SROs as simply being a police officer the school retains onsite and, as a consequence, the officer would end up fulfilling his law enforcement duties more than the teaching or counseling others would argue SROs are intended to do (Schlosser, 2014).

## **Debate Regarding Role of SROs**

In 2012, Ivey sought to determine how SROs were being used in South Carolina with respect to their three implied roles: teacher, counselor, and law enforcer. To do this, SROs, their supervisors, and high school principals were interviewed about their SRO's perceived time spent in these three roles. Ivey used simple random sampling with a random number generator and ended up with 63 participants across the state. The teaching role was found to be perceived as being least used by SROs across all three groups (i.e., SROs, supervisors, and principals). Ivey also concluded that, contrary to popular belief, SROs believe they are spending an equal amount of time in their counseling role as their law enforcement role. On the other hand, high school principals believed that SROs spent significantly more time in their law enforcement role while SRO supervisors believed that they spent significantly more time in their counseling role (Ivey,

2012). This is another example of how there is still much confusion about the intended role of SROs in schools. If this is still true today, this could be an indicator that SROs need to be trained, and allowed by the school, to take on a more educational role and step back from their law enforcement role in order to operate as intended. SROs may be more effective if they are given a class or after school activity to teach students about crime prevention and safety.

Coon and Travis (2012) also examined how principals and police compared when reporting the daily activities being performed by school police. They used secondary data from the U.S. Department of Education to examine responses from 3,156 schools that were representative of the national population based on school type, grade level, states, and various other measures. The principals of these schools were mailed a survey in 2002. They received responses from 1,387 principals. The principals were asked what law enforcement or security agencies they used and then 1,508 chiefs of these reported agencies were also mailed a survey. Coon and Travis received responses from 1,140 of them. For the purpose of this analysis, schools that only used private security were eliminated from the sample, which left a final set of 1,080 usable surveys from both groups. Their analysis found that the principals generally perceived lower levels of school involvement; however, both groups said that the most common activity for an officer was patrolling, mirroring the findings of May et al. (2004) presented earlier. Police respondents generally reported higher perceived levels of involvement with law enforcement activities, advising and mentoring, and general presence at school events.

Coon and Travis (2012) argued that the discrepancy between the principals' and police officers' perceptions of SRO activity was due to the fact that principals do not know about or observe everything officers participate in at school. Coon and Travis concluded their piece by discussing the importance of communication between SROs and school administrators, similar to

much of the other literature discussed. They recommended that SROs be chosen and trained with this goal of improving communication in mind so officers will be able to better cooperate with school administrators and more easily set guidelines for expected roles and responsibilities while diffusing any potential issues of authority (Coon & Travis, 2012).

There is also confusion as to whether or not SROs are intended to handle discipline within the school that would normally be handled by school administrators. Some of this confusion could be reduced if there were specific policies in place about the role and regulation of SROs. Counts et al. (2018) conducted an analysis of current state legislation and federal recommendations regarding the use and training of SROs. They compiled any recommendations published by the Department of Education (DOE), Department of Justice (DOJ), and NASRO regarding federal recommendations concerning SROs. They also searched state legislative databases for current policies or contact information of any position that could be considered school security personnel using various keywords such as school, safety, security, and officers.

Counts et al. (2018) found that over half of the states have few or no policies regarding SROs. One recommendation they found by the DOJ was that schools should evaluate their specific safety needs through targeted data collection prior to beginning an SRO program. The other recommendation they found were a set of suggestions developed by the DOJ and DOE working together. It is called the Safe School-based Enforcement through Collaboration Understanding and Respect (SECURE) State and Local rubric. Part of this rubric is the idea that SROs need to receive specific training. NASRO offers a 40 hour, nationally recognized certification course for SROs that meets most states requirements for approved SRO training certification (Counts et al., 2018).

The findings from Counts and colleagues (2018) suggest that if all those involved with the SRO program do not have the right mindset, or do not fully understand the purpose of the program, then it will not be enacted as intended. Price (2009) discussed this same problem over a decade ago when he suggested that SROs not having a defined role can create confusion and lead to more juveniles being introduced to the criminal justice system. He framed this argument within the larger discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline. In this piece, he discussed many factors that have led to the creation of this pipeline. Zero tolerance policies began in 1989 in a few states within the United States as a response to drastically increasing rates of violence. These policies have spread throughout most of the country since then and are present in many schools. These zero-tolerance policies, combined with an increase of police officers in schools (documented above), has led to various problems when it comes to how officers conduct themselves within schools. At the time of his writing, courts could not even agree on whether or not SROs are considered school employees or police officers and, as a result, no one knew what rules they should be held accountable to regarding Miranda warnings and search and seizure. He concluded that the best course of action would be to treat all SROs as police officers instead of additional school administrators so there would be no confusion (Price, 2009). Without some kind of clarification, there cannot be any consistency in how SROs and schools believe they are legally permitted to operate.

### **Debate Regarding SRO Impact on School Crime**

Some research may indicate that SROs are more of a problem than a solution in schools. In 2016, Swartz, Osborne, Dawson-Edwards, and Higgins set out to examine how the presence of an SRO, as well as their level of place management activities, was associated with rates of violence in schools. In this context, place management activities were similar to those of a

security guard or formal patrol officer. For example, SROs with high levels of place management activities were asked by their school administrators to simply stand guard in certain areas around the school. Data were obtained from the 2010 SSOCS and included 1,699 elementary, middle, and high schools. They found that the presence of an SRO within a school did coincide with increased rates of serious violence. This was also true for SROs that had a high-level of place management duties. They concluded that this was due to the SRO detecting more violence than the school was on its own, but the SRO was also failing to prevent or reduce violent acts as well. This leads to the coincidence of an SRO coming into a school and the rate of violent acts increasing. They also discuss how previous literature has shown place managers can be effective in deterring crime, but that police officers, including SROs, are more reactive than preventive and that is why they do not function well when given place management duties (Swartz et al., 2016).

In the 2015-2016 academic year, around 291,000 students were either referred to the juvenile justice system or arrested for a school-related incident. Nearly 83,000 (29%) of these cases were students with disabilities, which is a vast overrepresentation since they are estimated to only be 12% of the population (Counts et al., 2018). Merkwae (2015) found similar results when it comes to both students with disabilities and minority youth. Merkwae reviewed over 200 scholarly articles concerning the various factors that contribute to the disproportionate representation of minority students and students with disabilities among disciplinary actions. She concluded that SROs need to be more regulated since it is possible that this overrepresentation of certain demographics being funneled into the criminal justice system may be due to discretionary actions of SROs. She specifically focused on how to prevent students with disabilities from being unjustly referred to the criminal justice system. Some courts currently hold the opinion that

SROs are categorized as school officials, which allows them to follow lower standards of arrest and evidence than they would in their role as a police officer. She suggested that SROs be trained to hold themselves to their standards as a police officer, so they do not take advantage of their role as a school official to avoid 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> amendment issues. The 4<sup>th</sup> amendment gives people the right to be secure from unreasonable search and seizure. The 5<sup>th</sup> amendment states that no person can be compelled to be a witness against themselves or be deprived of property without due process of law. Merkwae also argued that if officers are going to be classified this way, then they should be held to all the expectations that come with that role. This would include training for dealing with students with disabilities, including their Individualized Education Programs (IEP). IEPs are required for every student receiving special education and is developed based on their individual needs (Merkwae, 2015).

Opponents of SRO programs would likely argue that the negative effects of SRO presence on students with disabilities may be because SROs are not trained to properly deal with students who have disabilities. They would also point to the observation that as the number of SROs has increased, the number of arrests/referrals to the juvenile justice system has also increased overall (Counts et al., 2018; Weiler & Cray, 2011). This can be partially supported by an article by May, Rice, and Minor (2012). These researchers examined SRO perceptions regarding the behavioral issues of students receiving special education. In 2004, surveys were mailed to 216 SROs identified by the KCSS. They received 132 usable responses. Over half of the sample reported never having received any academic or on-the-job training regarding the issues of special education. In general, responses showed that SROs had a negative perception of students in special education programs because the officers perceived them to be negatively affecting the school climate. Specifically, many SROs believed these students were using their



status as an excuse to act out and expect to receive no, or lesser, consequences than other students. This finding was particularly strong among officers who reported viewing themselves as mainly law enforcement officers, instead of also being mentors and teachers. Officers who reported being in a teaching role did not tend to share these negative perceptions (May, Rice & Minor, 2012). This evidence, combined with the previous literature discussed, makes a compelling case that SROs are not properly trained to deal with students within special education programs or students with mental health needs. This kind of training, along with an increased emphasis on being a mentor and teacher as well as an officer, is paramount to increasing the effectiveness of SRO programs with this demographic.

In 2017, Owens conducted research on the school-to-prison pipeline in order to determine how SROs, through the funding of federal grants, were affecting crime in schools. Data were obtained from multiple sources and merged for analysis including grants awarded by the COPS program from 2004-2007, the Uniform Crime Report, the LEMAS, the SSOCS from 2007-2008, grants awarded by the COPS in Schools program 2003-2006, and the National Incident-Based Reporting System from 1997-2007. The final dataset included 218,244 reporting agencies and 6,850 schools. According to her analysis, the presence of an SRO does lead to a slight increase in arrests, particularly for minor offenses that would usually be handled by the school. She also stated that she found that the SROs seem to create a safer environment in the school and within the community. She finished by concluding that the presence of an SRO leads to the increase of police involvement in drug and weapons crimes in the school and they also obtained knowledge of violent offenses and drug crimes out in the community (Owens, 2017).

In contrast, some recent studies have concluded that the presence of an SRO is not the cause of this increase in referrals and arrests. In 2016, May, Barranco, Ruddell, and Robertson

published an article discussing whether or not SROs in rural schools contribute to net-widening compared to SROs in urban schools. The data were collected from the Youth Information Delivery System (YIDS) and include 57,005 referrals from urban and rural counties between 2009 and 2011. They did find that SROs from rural schools were almost twice as likely to refer students for status offenses than were SROs in urban schools. They also found that most referrals were coming from the schools and not from the officers. Urban schools were referring juveniles at a rate twice that of rural schools. Overall, they concluded that SROs, in both rural and urban areas, barely contributed to the overall number of youths referred to the criminal justice system. (May et al., 2016).

In 2018, May, Barranco, Stokes, Robertson, and Haynes sought to further investigate the hypothesis that SROs refer youth to the criminal justice system for less serious offenses. This group used the same three-year data source from the YIDS as the previous group from 2016. However, this group used all 72,447 referrals made about juveniles including 168 different offenses. They concluded that SROs were actually less likely to refer juveniles to the criminal justice system than were officers outside of school for both status and serious offenses. They also found that schools themselves actually contributed a large amount of the referrals for status offenses. The authors discussed the idea that it is actually other parties, including family, schools, and the Department of Human Services that are referring more juveniles to the criminal justice system, specifically for status offenses. They found that schools actually referred more students for status offenses than any other group. Even if referrals for status offenses are excluded, schools still referred four times as many juveniles as SROs (May et al., 2018). In 2018, another group of researchers set out to determine if the mere presence of an SRO in a school actually increases the number of expulsions and the total number of incidents reported to police.

Data were obtained from the 2009-2010 SSOCS and included 950 high schools. They concluded after their analysis that there is actually zero evidence that the presence of SROs increases the likelihood of being admitted to the criminal justice system or being suspended/expelled from the school (Pigott, Stearns, & Khey, 2018).

### **Student Perceptions of SROs**

In 2002, Jackson conducted a study with 271 students from four schools in southeastern Missouri regarding their perceptions of SROs and how their perceptions of SROs affected both their perceptions of law enforcement in general and their own involvement in crime. He concluded that the use of an SRO in schools had little to no effect on how students perceive law enforcement or their own involvement in crime. He admitted this may be because of prior negative encounters with law enforcement, but he also recommended that decision-makers in schools at least consider putting their funding into other types of programs. He believed that student-faculty crime prevention programs, counseling programs, or even delinquency awareness programs, rather than SROs, would be better suited for dealing with troubled teens and helping them develop a more positive attitude towards law enforcement (Jackson, 2002).

As an extension of the Finn et al. (2005) study, McDevitt and Paniello (2005) conducted a separate analysis to determine what facets of SRO programs affect students' comfort level for reporting crimes and their perceptions of safety. During the larger evaluation, a survey was also developed and distributed to three of the SRO sites being evaluated. The sample of responding students included 907 students in four different school districts from three different states. Analysis found a statistically significant relationship between the number of student-SRO conversations and students' comfort level reporting crimes. There was also a positive relationship between a student having a positive opinion about their SRO and their comfort level

with reporting a crime. Specifically, students with a positive opinion of their SRO were more than twice as likely as students who did not have a positive opinion of their SRO to feel comfortable reporting a crime. A similarly strong relationship was also noted between students' perceptions of safety and their comfort level in reporting a crime. Regarding what affects perceptions of safety, a majority (92%) of the students who reported a positive opinion of their SRO also reported feeling safe in school. Only 76% of students who did not report a positive opinion of their SRO also reported feeling safe in school. The analysis also found that the lower the level of crime in a student's neighborhood, the safer they feel in school. Most importantly, even when victimization and neighborhood context were considered, positive opinions about their SRO still remained statistically significant (McDevitt & Paniello, 2005). The authors argued that this provides further evidence that a good relationship with an SRO can be a significant factor in the success of a program and increasing positive perceptions of students.

Also in 2005, two other researchers published the results of their analysis on students' perceptions of school police in a majority Hispanic community. Data were gathered from 2000-2001 in Brownsville, Texas, a community that is 91% Hispanic and one of the poorest cities in the country. The Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) is responsible for 40,000 students at 46 schools. At the time of this research, the BISD had 15 police officers and 70 security officers. Security officers were required to go through 180 hours of training and were allowed to carry handcuffs, but not allowed to carry weapons. Only the five high schools in the city were contacted to participate in the research; four of these high schools were cooperative and this resulted in a convenience sample of 230 students. Each high school was assigned three security officers, but the police officers patrolled and investigated incidents at all schools. The survey results revealed that students were more likely to be supportive of both types of officers

(police and security) when asked general questions compared to when they were asked more specific questions about these officers' ability to reduce/prevent drug and gang-related activities. They also found that Hispanic and white students had similar opinions of the police and security officers. Even though the majority of youths had positive opinions about the officers, the proportion of students who had a positive opinion about police was still lower than the proportion of adults that approve of police in other studies. According to Brown & Benedict (2005), that implies that although a majority of students have positive opinions of police officers, youths as a whole still have more negative perceptions than do adults (Brown & Benedict, 2005).

Kupchik and Ellis (2008) analyzed whether African American and Latino students perceive school security measures as less fair, less well communicated, and less evenly applied compared to white students' perceptions. They used data from the 2001 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. The dataset from that year has a sample size of 8,370 children aged 12 to 18 who were either currently in school or had been enrolled in school in the previous six months when their interview occurred. They found that African American students did perceive less fairness and consistency of school rules and their enforcement than did white students. The perceptions of Latino students did not significantly vary from that of white students. Their analyses also found that perceptions of security measures and non-police security guards did not affect perceptions of fairness. This implies that it is only police officers who are perceived as more unfair by African American students (Kupchik & Ellis, 2008). This needs to be a consideration of schools with larger minority populations because it is possible that bringing in SROs might only create more mistrust by the students and make problems worse.

Bracy (2011) examined students' experiences with, and perceptions of, high-security schools. Bracy reviewed literature that suggests there are two competing theories on how security measures affect schools. On one hand, many studies within the fields of psychology, criminology, sociology, and education have shown that these types of measures are ineffective and actually make problematic behaviors worse. On the other side, schools and law enforcement organizations across the country continue to declare these programs a success and claim that these increased measures make students feel more comfortable and safer. Data were collected for this research during the 2006-2007 academic year in two Mid-Atlantic high schools. These schools were only 20 miles apart and use similar strategies regarding security. One school was predominantly white and middle-class with a small percentage of students coming from low-income families. The other school has a much more racially mixed composition and roughly 40% of the students were from a low-income background. Two ethnographers conducted over 100 observations in these schools, with each observation ranging from one to three hours. They also interviewed SROs, school administrators, disciplinary staff, five teachers, ten students, and five parents at each school, for a total of fifty-two interviews.

Overall, the results of the observations and interviews led the author to conclude that the schools are achieving their goals with these high-security measures. There were no reported serious incidents of violence in the schools' recent history and the students at both schools reported that they felt fairly safe. However, the interviews with the students seem to imply that they do not believe it is the various security measures (e.g., SROs, metal detectors, cameras) that are making the school safe. If this is true, it would imply that all of these measures are not effective deterrents either. The author also found that the way the schools conduct themselves with regard to disciplinary actions seems to create mistrust between the students and school

officials. Students reported feeling as if they never get to share their side of the story and that mitigating factors are deemed irrelevant by the officials in the face of whatever evidence is presented, usually via security measures like cameras (Bracy, 2011). This implies that increased security measures coupled with punitive school officials and SROs might not be deterring any crime, but it might also be creating issues that will make interacting with students even more difficult.

In 2016, Theriot and Orme sought to determine how SROs affect students' perceptions of school safety. They collected surveys from 1,956 students at seven middle schools and five high schools about their perceptions of SROs and whether or not they felt safe in their school. All of the schools involved fell under a single SRO program run by the metropolitan police department. All of the SROs surveyed were required to go through 40 hours of initial training and an additional 16 hours each year they were involved. They concluded that interactions with an SRO did not affect the student's feelings about whether or not they were safe at school. However, they do acknowledge that this could likely be due to the fact that 52% of the students reported having no interactions with an SRO at all as well as an additional 27% that reported only having one or two interactions. They discussed how some may see this and suggest that SROs need to have more contact with students, but these authors disagree. They believe this study illustrates the conflict of law enforcement being in schools in the first place. Their role often requires them to be dominating and controlling with students, which would only create negative perceptions of SROs and destabilize the school's climate in general (Theriot & Orme, 2016).

Christen Pentek and Marla Eisenberg (2018) sought to determine how perceptions of SROs and school safety varied among different racial groups. Their data were obtained from the 2016 Minnesota Student Survey that included 126,868 respondents from 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade

students. Over 70% of respondents reported that they had an SRO at their school. Their findings suggest that certain racial groups had more negative perceptions of school resource officers regarding school safety. Specifically, they found that African Americans, students of multi-racial backgrounds, and American Indian students had the lowest scores regarding perceptions of SROs. They also found that American Indian and African American students were experiencing discipline at three times the rate of Caucasian students, and African American students were significantly more likely to report having an SRO in their school. According to these researchers, the current literature on how SROs are perceived by students is still very scarce (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). New studies focusing on the perception of SROs by students of different races and genders could significantly add to the current research. This is information that would be helpful for understanding the impact that SROs are having on students.

The literature reviewed here suggests a large number of studies about factors surrounding SROs and SRO programs and their effectiveness. I have summarized these findings in Table 1 below. Despite the fact that there are dozens of studies that examine SROs in some manner, there remains little consensus about their effectiveness, their utilization, or even predictors of satisfaction with SROs. This study is an attempt to fill some of those gaps.

### **Problem Statement**

The literature reviewed above has demonstrated that SROs have the ability to significantly impact schools when given the proper training and opportunity to do so. However, if students are negatively perceiving SROs, this means they are not performing as intended and it also makes their job more difficult (Theriot, 2016). In some cases, SROs may simply need to be more active in their school to have a greater impact. Other times, it may be that the officers and school faculty are not being given proper training and this makes it hard to get anything done.



Currently, however, little published research has examined student perceptions of SROs (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Considering SROs are working primarily with students, this is something that cannot continue if SRO programs are to reach their full potential. I am hopeful that this analysis will provide significant results for the current literature on SROs.

## **Hypotheses**

In this analysis, I use survey data from over 30,000 students in Kentucky schools regarding their perceptions of SROs in an effort to determine what factors affect these perceptions and whether or not students believe SROs are making schools safer. Based on the extant literature, in this study I test the following hypotheses:

H1: Students who report seeing their SRO more frequently will score significantly higher on a measure of perceived school safety than will respondents who report seeing their SRO less frequently.

H2: Students who report seeing their SRO more frequently will score significantly higher on a measure of perceived SRO quality than will respondents who report seeing their SRO less frequently.

H3: Students who report seeing their SRO most often in the main office or in the SRO office will score significantly lower on a scale of perceived school safety than will respondents who report seeing their SRO most often in other places around the school.

H4: Students who report seeing their SRO most often in the main office or in the SRO office will score significantly lower on a scale of perceived SRO quality than respondents who report seeing their SRO most often in other places around the school.

H5: Students who report seeing their SRO in many places during the school day will score significantly higher on a scale of perceived school safety than will respondents who report seeing their SRO in fewer places around the school.

H6: Students who report seeing their SRO in many places during the school day will score significantly higher on a scale of perceived SRO Quality than will respondents who report seeing their SRO in fewer places around the school.

H7: Students who report perceiving their SRO as solely a police officer will score significantly lower on a scale of perceived school safety than will respondents who report perceiving their SRO as a combination of the other surveyed roles.

H8: Students who report perceiving their SRO as solely a police officer will score significantly lower on a scale of perceived SRO Quality than will respondents who report perceiving their SRO as a combination of the other surveyed roles.

Table 1 Summary of Literature

Topic	Findings
<b>Impact on school crime</b>	Most quantitative studies of SROs regarding school crime found that the presence of an SRO slightly reduced crime or had no effect at all.
<b>Training</b>	SROs are currently not receiving any kind of specialized training to help them deal with children in their daily work.
<b>Implementation/Evaluation</b>	Most SRO programs are not being implemented effectively or being regularly, objectively evaluated to determine if the program needs improvement.
<b>General Perceptions</b>	Most school administrators and SROs champion these programs as being very important and effective. Parents and students are usually supportive if the program is including them throughout the process.
<b>Student Perceptions</b>	The literature on student perceptions of SROs is limited. The few studies that have been published found that most students have positive opinions of SROs.
<b>Roles</b>	Ideally, SROs are intended to evenly be a mentor, teacher, and law enforcement officer. The research suggests that both officers and school administrators are confused about what their role should actually be and as a result the SRO is misused.
<b>Race</b>	Few studies have investigated how race affects student perceptions of SROs. The two that are discussed in this analysis came to the conclusion that the impact of race is nonsignificant on perceptions of SROs.
<b>Gender and Student Perceptions</b>	The few studies that have controlled for gender regarding perceptions of SROs found no significant gender differences in student perceptions of SROs.
<b>Grade Level and Student Perceptions</b>	The few studies that have controlled for grade level regarding perceptions of SROs found no significant grade level differences in student perceptions of SROs.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The data used for this analysis were collected by the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) to gauge students' perceptions and attitudes about having school resource officers (SROs) assigned to their schools in Kentucky. Data were collected via online surveys from students on campus in their computer labs during April and May of 2018. Because of a previous working relationship with KCSS from one of the faculty with whom I worked; I was provided access to these data for these analyses. Data consist of responses from 31,156 students in 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades, with responses distributed fairly evenly across all grades. The distribution of students at the school and county level can be found in Appendix A. Since this analysis involved school level variables, 1,324 respondents who did not properly identify their school were deleted. This yielded a working sample of 29,832 respondents.

#### **Variable Operationalization**

##### **Dependent Variables**

The two dependent variables for this analysis were a measure of school safety and a measure of SRO quality. Both of these variables were operationalized from a series of questions on the KCSS survey that asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements about their school climate.

*School Safety Scale.* There were three questions that appeared to have face validity as measures of perceived school safety in the survey. I conducted an exploratory factor analysis

using principal axis factoring with direct oblimin rotation to examine whether responses to these questions loaded on one or more factors. Principal axis factoring allows the researcher to better understand the shared variance between a set of variables by identifying common factors that underlie that variance; direct oblimin rotation assumes that there will be shared variance between the variables and is an appropriate strategy to use in those circumstances (Warner, 2002). The results revealed that responses to these three questions loaded on one factor, with all items having factor scores above .561 on that factor. The *School Safety Scale*, designed to examine the students' perceptions of the safety of their school, was constructed from responses to three statements: "I think my school is safer because there is an SRO on campus;" "I usually feel safe while at school;" and "During this school year, I have noticed an increased awareness placed on school safety and security (doors are locked, more drills, etc.)." Responses to the statements ranged from strongly agree (coded 1) to strongly disagree (coded 6). Responses to all three statements were recoded so that Strongly Agree=6 and Strongly Disagree=1. Responses were summed to create an index called *School Safety Scale* and respondents who scored higher on the scale believe their school is safer than those who scored lower on the scale. Cronbach's alpha was 0.694. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of the internal reliability of a summated index. An acceptable alpha is considered to be 0.7 or higher. An alpha ranging from 0.6-0.7 is considered questionable. Because the alpha for this scale is very close to 0.7, we left the index in the analysis (Warner, 2002), but realize its low reliability is a limiting factor in the generalizability of these results.

*SRO quality.* There were six questions that appeared to measure perceptions of SRO quality in the survey. I conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with direct oblimin rotation to examine whether these questions loaded on one or more factors.

The results reveal that responses to these six questions loaded on one factor with the lowest one being 0.256. The remaining five items had factor loadings of 0.634 or higher. Therefore, the lowest item, the fourth question about SRO quality, was removed. That question asked students whether or not they agree with the statement, “My school would be just as safe if we did not have an SRO.” The *SRO Quality Scale* thus consists of responses to the remaining five statements: “My SRO is visible in my school;” “I see my SRO interacting with students during the day;” “If I had a problem, I would feel comfortable talking about it with the SRO at my school;” “I would feel comfortable reporting crimes/threats to my SRO;” and “Having SROs in schools helps prevent school violence.” Responses to all statements were recoded so that Strongly Agree=6 and Strongly Disagree=1. Responses were summed to create an index called *SRO Quality* and respondents who scored higher on the scale believe their SRO is doing a better job than those who scored lower on that scale. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.818.

The frequencies of the statements used for the *School Safety* scale and *SRO Quality* scale can be found in Table 2 below. The results have been collapsed into either Agree or Disagree for simplicity in the table. The first three variables in the table are the measures that comprise the *School Safety* scale. An overwhelming majority (89.5%) of the sampled respondents agreed that having an SRO makes their school safer. Similarly, a majority of the sampled respondents, 84.6% and 86.9% respectively, agreed that they usually feel safe at school and that they have noticed an increased emphasis on school safety in the past year. Results for the next five variables in the table display the frequencies for the statements regarding the *SRO Quality* scale. An overwhelming majority (88.1%) of sampled respondents agreed that their SRO is visible in their school and a smaller majority (75.3%) agreed that they see their SRO interacting with students during the day. Next, 79% of the respondents agreed that having an SRO in school helps

prevent school violence. While only 69% agreed that they would feel comfortable talking to their SRO about a problem, 86.6% agreed that they would feel comfortable reporting a crime or threat to their SRO.

### **Independent Variables**

*SRO activity.* Three independent variables were used to measure how active the SRO was in their daily work at the school. The first variable used for this measure was derived from responses to a question that asked, “How many times a day do you typically see your SRO?” This variable was originally coded as a continuous variable ranging from 0 (Never) to 3 (3 or more times a day). For the purposes of this analysis, it was recoded into a dichotomous variable of 0 (Never) and 1 (One or more times a day). This variable is called *Saw SRO One or More Times*. The second variable used to measure SRO activity was derived from responses to a question that asks, “Where do you **most often** see your SRO?” The possible responses were in car line, in the main office, in the SRO office, in the lunchroom, in the gymnasium, and walking the hallways. Because the most active SROs will not spend most of their time in either the school office or the SRO office, this variable was coded so that students who responded “in the main office” or “in the SRO office” were scored (0) while all other responses were coded as (1). This variable is called *Saw SRO Outside of Offices*. The two previous variables were dichotomized in order to compare students who saw their SRO engaged in active movement with students who did not see their SROs in active movement throughout the school. The final variable used to measure SRO activity was derived from responses to a question that asked respondents to indicate (by checking all responses that applied) where they saw the SRO during the school day. Response options for this question were the same as the options for the question used for *Saw SRO Outside of Offices* with an added “Other” write-in. For the purpose of this analysis, the

responses will be coded from 1-6 counting the total number of places that are checked. Given the small number of unique places mentioned in the written responses, and the fact that most of those responses were unusable to begin with, I treated all those responses that were included under “Other” as missing. I included this variable to capture the number of sightings per day for each student. This variable is called *# of Locations SRO Sighted*.

The final independent variables to measure student perceptions of the SROs examined the perceived role of the SRO and the perceived likability of the SRO. The variable to measure the role of the SRO was created from responses to a question that asked, “What best describes the role of your SRO? (select all that apply).” Response options included teacher, counselor, law enforcement officer, mentor, and coach. Because students who viewed their SRO as mainly a police officer likely have different perceptions of that SRO than those who feel the SRO takes on other roles, students who responded ONLY law enforcement officer were coded as ‘1’ while students who marked any other combination (including law enforcement and one of the other roles) of choices were coded as ‘0.’ This variable is called *SRO as Law Enforcer Only*. The measure of perceived SRO likability was created from the responses to a Likert type question, “I like having an SRO in my school.” Responses were coded so that the highest score (6) represents the students who strongly agree with that statement. This variable is called *Like Having an SRO in School*. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (89.6%) reported that they like having an SRO in their school.

### **Control Variables**

There were seven control variables used in this analysis. Two of these were self-reported demographic variables. *Sex* was coded dichotomously (Male=1; Female=0) and *Grade level* was coded continuously ranging from 6-12. Because the type of school the students attend is also



likely important regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the SRO assigned to their school, a number of school-level measures were used. Data for these measures were obtained from the Kentucky School Report Cards, for the 2017-2018 academic year, available at <https://openhouse.education.ky.gov/Home/SRCData>. The two datasets used to obtain these numbers are labeled Student Counts, which can be found in the Overview section, and School, which can be found in the Safety section. The operationalization of these control variables is described below.

*Total Enrollment* was a continuous variable coded as the total number of students enrolled in the schools. *Percent Nonwhite Enrollment* was derived from dividing the nonwhite enrollment by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100. There were two variables created from suspension statistics. *Percent OSS* was derived from dividing the total out-of-school suspensions by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100. *Percent ISR* was derived from dividing the total in-school removals by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100. *Percent Free/Reduced Lunch* was calculated by dividing the total number of students reported as being on a free or reduced lunch by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100. *Percent Arrested* was estimated by dividing the total number of students reported as being arrested by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100. *Percent SRO Involved* was derived from dividing the total number of students that were reported as being involved in an incident that required SRO intervention by the total enrollment for each school and multiplying by 100.

In addition to the aforementioned control variables, there was also a control variable for the population of the county because there are likely rural/urban differences in both the type of SRO assigned to the school and the funding received by the school. Students self-reported the

school that they attended in the survey. *School Rurality* was determined by locating the county in which each school was located using the Kentucky School directory website at <https://openhouse.education.ky.gov/Directory>. The schools were then coded 1-9 using the latest USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes.aspx> and at the time of the development of this thesis, the latest data available were from 2013. These codes are described as follows:

- 1: Metro- Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
- 2: Metro- Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- 3: Metro- Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
- 4: Nonmetro- Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
- 5: Nonmetro- Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
- 6: Nonmetro- Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
- 7: Nonmetro- Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
- 8: Nonmetro- Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
- 9: Nonmetro- Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area.

To better understand the data and determine whether my hypotheses about the predictors of student perceptions of school safety and SRO Quality were supported by these data, I conducted a series of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses. The results of those analyses are presented in the next chapter.

Table 2 Student Perceptions of School Safety and SRO Quality

	Agree (4-6)	Disagree (1-3)	Missing
<b><i>School Safety</i></b>			
I think my school is safer because there is an SRO on campus	26,723 (89.5%)	3,059 (10.3%)	50 (0.2%)
I usually feel safe while at school	25,219 (84.6%)	3,853 (12.9%)	760 (2.5%)
During this school year, I have noticed an increased awareness placed on school safety and security	25,942 (86.9%)	3,760 (12.6%)	130 (0.4%)
<b><i>SRO Quality</i></b>			
My SRO is visible in my school	26,293 (88.1%)	3,419 (11.5%)	120 (0.4%)
I see my SRO interacting with students during the day	22,451 (75.3%)	7,244 (24.3%)	137 (0.5%)
If I had a problem, I would feel comfortable talking about it with the SRO at my school	20,561 (69%)	9,166 (30.7%)	105 (0.4%)
I would feel comfortable reporting crimes/threats to my SRO	25,843 (86.6%)	3,851 (12.9%)	138 (0.5%)
Having SROs in schools helps prevent school violence?	23,560 (79%)	5,762 (19.3%)	510 (1.7%)

\* For purposes of clarity, Strongly agree, Agree, and Somewhat Agree were collapsed and presented as “Agree” in the table, while Strongly Disagree, Disagree, and Somewhat Disagree were collapsed and presented as “Disagree” in this table. In the multivariate models, these indexes are summated scales of these variables calculated by summing their original six-response metrics.

## CHAPTER IV FINDINGS

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The demographics of the sample used in this analysis were fairly evenly split amongst all groups. As shown in Table 3, the sample contained around 15% of each grade level except 12<sup>th</sup> grade (8.3%). The working sample was approximately 48.5% male and 50.8% female. Regarding the independent variables dealing with SRO activity, 15.3% reported never seeing their SRO during the day while 84.5% reported seeing their SRO one or more times during the day. Similarly, 17.2% reported seeing their SRO most frequently in the Main or SRO office while 81.7% reported seeing their SRO most frequently in one of the other listed locations throughout the school. The number of locations the respondents reported seeing their SRO are also displayed in Table 3. Roughly 23% of the students reported seeing their SRO in one, two, or three locations each. A smaller proportion (13.5%) reported seeing their SRO in four locations. Lastly, much smaller proportions (5.9% and 3.7%, respectively) reported seeing their SRO in five or six locations. Regarding the perceived role of the SRO, 60.8% of respondents marked law enforcement officer only and 37.9% chose any other combination of the five available options. Finally, the question regarding SRO likability showed that an overwhelming 89.6% of students agreed that they liked having an SRO in their school.

The results displayed in Table 4 show the descriptive statistics for the schools that were included in this survey. The average school was 13.5% Non-white and had 55.3% of their

students on either free or reduced lunch plans. The average school also had 5.6% of their students receive out of school suspension (OSS) and 14.6% receive in-school removal (ISR). Finally, the average school had less than one percent (0.03%) of its students arrested or involved in an event that required an SRO to intercede (0.65%).

### **Bivariate Analyses**

The bivariate correlation results are presented in Tables 5 and 6. In Table 5, the correlations between the dependent variable scales and the student-level variables are presented. In Table 6, the correlations between the dependent variable scales and the school-level variables are presented. The results presented in Table 5 indicate that all of the individual-level variables were significantly correlated with both school safety and SRO quality. Males, students in lower grades, and students who (1) liked having an SRO at school, (2) saw their SRO one or more times during the day, (3) saw their SRO outside of the main office and SRO office, (4) saw their SRO at the most locations, and (5) perceived their SRO as more than just a law enforcement officer scored highest on the School Safety scale and the SRO Quality scale. The results presented in Table 6 similarly show that most of the school-level variables were significantly correlated with both school safety and SRO quality. Schools that (1) were the most rural, (2) had the lowest nonwhite percentage, (3) had the highest free/reduced lunch percentage, (4) had the lowest OSS and ISR percentages, and (5) had the highest percentage of student incidents that required SRO intervention scored highest on the School Safety scale. The only difference between the bivariate correlations with the dependent variables was that percent of students arrested did not significantly correlate with the school safety scale. Therefore, the schools that scored highest on the SRO Quality scale would be the same as the ones listed for the school safety scale with the addition of those that have the highest arrest percentage. There were only

two correlations that were near the 0.7 cutoff for being potentially problematic. If the correlation between two variables was too high, this would mean that they are essentially measuring the same topic. However, one of them was that the school safety scale had a 0.717 correlation with the SRO Quality scale. This is expected since ideally if student perceptions of SRO quality increase, then perceptions of school safety should increase as well. The other was that percent of school on free/reduced lunch had a correlation of 0.658 with school rurality. While this correlation is high, it was decided to leave both variables in the analysis because they tap different concepts that are important to the explanation of the dependent variable scales.

### **Multivariate Analyses**

A multilevel modeling approach was chosen because this analysis deals with various data at both the student-level and school-level. The intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were determined to be 0.039 for the school safety model and 0.034 for the SRO quality model, as shown in Tables 7 and 8. The N's for these regressions are 26,160 and 26,155 respectively. These numbers are lower than the initial 29,832 since not every student answered every question completely on the survey. These ICCs determine the proportion of variance at the school-level. This means there is very little variation at the school-level for this dataset. This implies that factors within each school are primarily responsible for the variation in perceptions of school safety and SRO quality. All multilevel analyses were conducted with Stata/IC 16.0 software.

The multilevel analyses of the dependent variable scales are presented in Tables 7 and 8. Table 7 contains the regression results for the School Safety scale while Table 8 contains the results of the SRO Quality scale. The results presented in Table 7 suggest that, with the exception of student grade level, all of the student-level variables were statistically significant predictors of both the School Safety scale and SRO Quality scale. The results indicate that males,

student who liked having an SRO in their school, students who reported seeing their SRO (1) one or more times during the day, (2) outside the Main/SRO, and (3) in the most locations at the school were significantly more likely than their counterparts to feel safer at school and to rate their SRO higher on the SRO Quality scale. Additionally, students who perceived their SRO as only a law enforcement officer were significantly less likely than their counterparts who felt SROs filled more than a law enforcement role to feel safer at school and to rate their SRO higher on the SRO Quality scale.

With the exception of the relationship between the percent of the school that was non-white variable and the school safety scale (where students from schools with lower percentages of non-white students felt safer than their counterparts in schools with higher percentages of nonwhite students), none of the school-level variables had a significant impact on either of the dependent variables. This finding is significant for policy implications and is discussed in greater detail in the conclusion section.

Table 3 Student Demographics and Perceptions of SRO Activity

Variable	Frequency (%)
<b>Grade Level</b>	
6 <sup>th</sup>	3,981 (13.3%)
7 <sup>th</sup>	5,119 (17.2%)
8 <sup>th</sup>	5,536 (18.6%)
9 <sup>th</sup>	4,451 (14.9%)
10 <sup>th</sup>	4,195 (14.1%)
11 <sup>th</sup>	3,944 (13.2%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	2,490 (8.3%)
Missing	116 (0.4%)
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	14,471 (48.5%)
Female	15,165 (50.8%)
Missing	74 (0.2%)
<b>Saw SRO One or More Times</b>	
Never	4,551 (15.3%)
1 or more times	25,207 (84.5%)
Missing	74 (0.2%)
<b>Saw SRO Outside of Offices</b>	
Main/SRO Office	5,141 (17.2%)
Anywhere else in the school	24,382 (81.7%)
Missing	309 (1%)
<b># of Locations SRO Sighted</b>	
One school location	7,752 (26%)
Two school locations	6,887 (23.1%)
Three school locations	6,738 (22.6%)
Four school locations	4,021 (13.5%)
Five school locations	1,766 (5.9%)
Six school locations	1,110 (3.7%)
Missing	1,558 (5.2%)
<b>SRO as Law Enforcer Only</b>	
Law enforcement officer only	18,138 (60.8%)
Any other combination of roles	11,302 (37.9%)
Missing	392 (1.3%)
<b>I like having an SRO in my school</b>	
Agree	26,733 (89.6%)
Disagree	2,262 (7.7%)
Missing	837 (2.8%)



Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of School Level Variables

	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
% Nonwhite	13.48	8.65	1.48	47.74
% Free/Reduced Lunch	55.32	13.97	13.21	96.10
% Out of School Suspension	5.58	3.36	0	13.74
% In School Removal	14.57	8.84	0	51.25
% Arrested	0.03	0.11	0	0.84
% SRO Involved	0.65	0.90	0	5.07
Rurality	4.37	2.38	1	9

Table 5 Student-Level Bivariate Correlation Analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) School Safety Scale	-							
(2) SRO Quality Scale	0.717*	-						
(3) Sex (Male=1)	0.044*	0.028*	-					
(4) Grade Level (6-12)	-0.107*	-0.046*	-0.017*	-				
(5) Like Having an SRO in School	0.593*	0.681*	-0.029*	-0.080*	-			
(6) Saw SRO One or More Times	0.264*	0.414*	-0.005	0.020*	0.268*	-		
(7) Saw SRO Outside of Offices	0.119*	0.149*	0.001	-0.044*	0.088*	0.171*	-	
(8) # Locations SRO Sighted	0.246*	0.358*	-0.006	0.033*	0.249*	0.212*	0.084*	-
(9) SRO as Law Enforcer Only	-0.135*	-0.203*	0.007	0.108*	-0.134*	-0.016*	-0.009	-0.181*

\*p<0.01

Table 6 School-Level Bivariate Correlation Analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(1) School Safety Scale	-								
(2) SRO Quality Scale	0.717*	-							
(3) School Rurality (Most Rural=9)	0.073*	0.087*	-						
(4) Percent School Nonwhite	-0.089*	-0.045*	-0.195*	-					
(5) Percent School Free/Reduced Lunch	0.052*	0.053*	0.658*	-0.248*	-				
(6) Percent School OSS	-0.075*	-0.046*	-0.141*	-0.066*	0.100*	-			
(7) Percent School ISR	-0.119*	-0.126*	0.018*	0.074*	0.018*	0.172*	-		
(8) Percent School Arrested	0.009	0.045*	-0.049*	0.375*	0.016*	0.071*	0.064*	-	
(9) Percent School SRO Involved	0.028*	0.095*	-0.044*	0.066*	-0.018*	0.214*	-0.066*	0.249*	-

\*p<0.01

Table 7 School Safety Regression Model

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Male	0.358***	0.027
Grade Level (Interval 6th-12th grade)	0.001	0.013
Rurality of School	-0.004	0.026
School % Non-white	-0.017*	0.006
School % Free Reduced Lunch	0.003	0.005
School % OSS	-0.015	0.015
School % ISR	-0.015	0.006
School % Arrested	0.751	0.467
School % SRO Involved	-0.073	0.053
Like having an SRO in School	1.330***	0.014
Saw SRO One or More Times	0.711***	0.044
Saw SRO Outside of Main/SRO Office	0.309***	0.038
# Locations SRO Sighted	0.163***	0.011
SRO as Law Enforcer Only	-0.226***	0.029
Constant	6.90	0.299

N=26,160; ICC=0.039 \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 8 SRO Quality Regression Model

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Male	0.516***	0.042
Grade Level (Interval 6th-12th grade)	0.047	0.020
Rurality of School	0.049	0.038
School % Non-white	-0.002	0.008
School % Free Reduced Lunch	-0.001	0.007
School % OSS	0.019	0.022
School % ISR	-0.023	0.008
School % Arrested	0.547	0.680
School % SRO Involved	0.099	0.078
Like having an SRO in School	2.638***	0.021
Saw SRO One or More Times	2.770***	0.069
Saw SRO Outside of Main/SRO Office	0.567***	0.060
# Locations SRO Sighted	0.481***	0.017
SRO as Law Enforcer Only	-0.890***	0.045
Constant	5.511	0.443

N=26,155; ICC=0.034 \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### **Discussion**

There has been relatively contentious debate in recent years about the effectiveness of SROs and their impact on school safety, but there has also been little quantitative research on their perceived effectiveness. The purpose of this research was to fill a gap in the literature between studies that have looked at smaller groups of students' perceptions of school safety/security overall and a larger portion of the literature that has analyzed official statistics regarding schools and crime. This analysis used data from 28,832 student surveys regarding their perceptions of SROs and school safety at the schools they were attending at the time in order to determine what factors influenced their perceptions of school safety.

This analysis resulted in a few important findings that I believe contribute to the existing literature on student perceptions of SROs regarding school safety. In Table 9, I have included each of the original hypotheses and the results of the analyses in relationship with each hypothesis. All initial hypotheses were confirmed by the analysis. I believe the most important finding from this research deals with the SRO activity measures. The results of this analysis showed that students who saw their SRO most frequently outside of the main offices and more times during the day scored significantly higher on both the School Safety scale and SRO quality scale. This, combined with the non-significance of the school arrest measure, is an empirical contradiction to those that would suggest increased interactions with SROs would lead to

negative perceptions of the SROs as well as being a detriment to the school's climate like Theriot and Orme (2016) discussed.

Another important finding was that students who perceived their SRO as only a law enforcement officer scored lower on both scales. This is significant empirical evidence that the triad model supported by NASRO can be effective in increasing perceptions of SRO quality and school safety. However, SROs also need to be properly trained on how to effectively work with students in a way that fulfills all three roles. The two most common recommendations across the literature are that SROs need specialized training on working with youth and that there needs to be more communication between SROs and school administrators to ensure there is no confusion regarding the role of the SRO. Proper training prior to program implementation would fix both of these issues. As recently as 2018, more than half of the states within the United States have few or no policies regarding SROs (Counts et al., 2018). It would be much easier for these programs to succeed if they had a solid framework for training and use; NASRO has a variety of recommendations in this area on their website and their policies and materials could be used as a starting point to build this framework.

Another important finding that fills a gap in the literature was that male students scored higher on the School Safety scale and SRO Quality scale. This result is significant because there have been few studies that have controlled for gender. At the time of this writing, this is the first study that has found a significant association between student gender and perceptions of SROs. This is also important because it supports the recommendations made by Kelly and Swezey (2015) about programs needing to hire more female SROs. Female students in these schools would likely be more comfortable talking with a female SRO.

Lastly, students who reported that they liked having an SRO in their school also scored higher on both the School Safety scale and SRO Quality scale. This finding is important because it shows that SROs need to try and make connections with the students they are working around daily. All of these findings are significant and hopefully will influence future, as well as current, SRO programs. Unfortunately, the research of recent years shows that it is possible most SRO programs may never see the results of this analysis.

In 2005, Finn et al. conducted an evaluation of SRO programs and concluded that (1) very few programs were providing specialized training to SROs prior to the program being implemented, (2) one of the biggest problems facing SRO programs was the confusion between school administrators and the officers on what the role of the SRO is within the school, and (3) that most programs were not even attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of the program or defining goals for the program at its onset. They recommended that these officers should go through specialized training alongside school administrators and faculty in order to create a more cohesive program with less confusion. They also found that the programs that made an effort to communicate with the parents and students in the community found little to no resistance from parents about the officer being put into the school. They also argued that these programs need to have goals created by collaboration between law enforcement and school officials in order to create a plan that involves data collection and evaluation so the program can improve (Finn, Shively, McDevitt, Lassiter & Rich, 2005). This evaluation and these recommendations were made in 2005. If one were to look at evaluations of SRO programs over a decade later, not much progress has been made.

Barnes (2016) interviewed SROs about their opinions of the SRO programs in which they participated. Many of the officers that participated in the research stated that school



administrators either did not know what to do with the SRO or wanted to use them in a way that did not align with how the program was intended. They said that they felt more like hall monitors than law enforcement officers (Barnes, 2016). SRO programs grew in popularity in the 1990s and have been a popular topic of debate ever since. Over a decade of research, and dozens of articles later, programs are still being implemented with the two most important parties, school administrators and the officers themselves, not being able to communicate or work together effectively. It is difficult to believe that progress is being made in the development of these programs at all.

However, it is also worth noting that the school-level variables were found to be insignificant. This finding is actually good news. The finding implies that it is mainly the actions of the SRO that are influencing student perceptions of SRO quality and school safety instead of the characteristics of the school which would be much harder to change. SRO programs can easily implement changes that have their officers attempt to engage with students more frequently and in more locations throughout their respective schools. The results from this study suggest that they can also do this in any school, with any population, and increase school safety and perceptions of SRO quality in those locations.

### **Limitations & Directions for Future Research**

The initial limitation that was encountered during this thesis development was that the original survey did not collect information on the students' race/ethnicity, a fact I verified before beginning any analysis. This did not allow any comparison by the student's race, which could have made an important contribution based on the dearth of research that has controlled for race regarding students and SROs to date. It is possible that students of different races/ethnicities might have more negative views of SROs. While the students were asked if they could name

their SRO, they were not asked how many SROs worked in their school, which likely influenced how often they saw and interacted with SROs at their school. A third limitation was that, while the survey was administered to schools in throughout all regions of the state, students from Fayette county and Jefferson county, the most populous and urban counties in the state, did not participate, thus limiting the generalizability of these findings even further. Finally, the three-item school safety scale had a low reliability of .695. Future efforts should include more measure of school safety to see if the findings uncovered here remain when more reliable measures are used.

Regarding future research, it is my hope that future studies will expand on this analysis with additional measures. Student race/ethnicity, SRO race/ethnicity, and additional school safety measures could be just the start of additional measures. Some of the literature discusses how students perceive strict security measures in schools. It would be interesting to compare those at both the individual and school-level in addition to this analysis. However, I believe the most beneficial item that could be added to future research would be questioning students and SROs about how they believe SRO programs need to be improved in order to be more effective.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis was an effort to better understand how students are perceiving SROs and the impact they are currently having in schools. At the time of this writing, this is the largest analysis conducted with a survey specifically made to measure student perceptions of SROs. This analysis found a statistically significant relationship among various SRO activity measures and perceived school safety. This information could help with the implementation of new SRO programs or improve existing ones by doing something as simple as changing how often the officer leaves his office and walks around the school. An investigation of the published literature

found that potential guidelines on how to build and evaluate an effective SRO program have been available for years. Effective SRO programs have the potential to make schools safer when implemented in the right manner. Nevertheless, recent attempts at evaluating SRO programs across the nation have found that these types of guidelines are not being used. Unlike many other areas in social science research, it appears that there is relatively clear consensus on how to increase the effectiveness of school safety programs. Until legislators, educators, and police develop the political will to use these measures, however, it is likely little will be done to improve SRO programs since the best predictor of future change is past behavior.

Table 9 Results of Hypotheses

H1-H2: Analysis confirmed that students who reported seeing their SRO more frequently scored significantly higher on both measures of perceived school safety and SRO quality

H3-H4: Analysis confirmed that students who reported seeing most often in the Main or SRO office scored significantly lower on both measures of perceived school safety and SRO quality

H5-H6: Analysis confirmed that students who reported seeing their SRO in many locations during the school day scored significantly higher on both measures of perceived school safety and SRO quality

H7-H8: Analysis confirmed that students who reported perceiving their SRO as solely a police officer scored significantly lower on both measures of perceived school safety and SRO quality

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## APPENDIX A

### STUDENT DISTRIBUTION ACROSS SCHOOLS AND COUNTIES

<i>County (Total respondents)</i>	<i>School</i>	<i># of Respondents per school</i>
<b>Adair (154)</b>	Adair County High School	154
<b>Allen (367)</b>	James E Bazzel Middle School	367
<b>Anderson (1,160)</b>	Anderson County High School	501
	Anderson County Middle School	659
<b>Barren (937)</b>	Barren County High School	23
	Barren County Middle School	630
	Glasgow High School	284
<b>Bell (557)</b>	Middlesboro High School	279
	Middlesboro Middle School	200
	Page School Center	78
<b>Boone (1,319)</b>	Camp Ernst Middle School	40
	Conner Middle School	783
	Gray Middle School	496
<b>Bourbon (24)</b>	Bourbon County High School	24
<b>Boyd (508)</b>	Boyd County High School	254
	Boyd County Middle School	254
<b>Boyle (305)</b>	Danville High School	305
<b>Bracken (220)</b>	Bracken County High School	220
<b>Bullitt (1,503)</b>	Bernheim Middle School	282
	Bullitt Central High School	280
	Bullitt East High School	116
	North Bullitt County High School	482
	Zoneton Middle School	343
<b>Butler (652)</b>	Butler County High School	286
	Butler County Middle School	366
<b>Caldwell (101)</b>	Caldwell County High School	101

<b>Calloway (309)</b>	Murray High School	308
<b>Campbell (175)</b>	Campbell County High School	121
	Campbell County Middle School	54
<b>Carroll (233)</b>	Carroll County Middle School	233
<b>Carter (925)</b>	East Carter County High School	524
	East Carter County Middle School	401
<b>Cumberland (372)</b>	Cumberland County High School	107
	Cumberland County Middle School	123
	Cumberland Elementary School	142
<b>Edmonson (287)</b>	Edmonson County Middle School	287
<b>Estill (107)</b>	Estill County High School	107
<b>Graves (399)</b>	Graves County Middle School	399
<b>Greenup (497)</b>	Greenup County High School	497
<b>Hardin (428)</b>	Elizabethtown High School	230
	John Hardin High School	198
<b>Harlan (462)</b>	Black Mountain Elementary School	97
	Cawood Elementary School	71
	Evarts Elementary School	113
	Green Hills Elementary School	46
	Rosspoint Elementary School	22
	Wallins Elementary School	113
<b>Henderson (485)</b>	Henderson County High School	473
	South Middle School	12
<b>Hopkins (1,663)</b>	Browning Springs Middle School	402
	Hopkins County Central High School	232
	James Madison Middle School	433
	Madisonville North Hopkins High School	364
	South Hopkins Middle School	232

<b>Jessamine (443)</b>	West Jessamine High School	443
<b>Kenton (509)</b>	Beechwood High School	509
<b>Leslie (23)</b>	Hayes Lewis Elementary	23
<b>Lewis (125)</b>	Lewis County High School	125
<b>Livingston (171)</b>	Livingston County Middle School	171
<b>Logan (1,103)</b>	Adairville Elementary School	72
	Auburn Elementary School	84
	Chandlers Elementary School	134
	Lewisburg Elementary School	95
	Logan County High School	660
	Olmstead Elementary School	58
<b>Lyon (192)</b>	Lyon County Middle School	192
<b>Madison (3,066)</b>	B Michael Caudill Middle School	466
	Clark Moore Middle School	392
	Farristown Middle School	180
	Foley Middle School	255
	Madison Central High School	1011
	Madison Middle School	210
	Madison Southern High School	552
<b>Marion (286)</b>	Marion County High School	142
	Marion County Knight Academy	144
<b>McCracken (953)</b>	Heath Middle School	411
	Lone Oak Middle School	257
	Reidland Middle School	285
<b>McCreary (894)</b>	McCreary Central High School	532
	McCreary County Middle School	362
<b>Mercer (789)</b>	Mercer County High School	277
	Kenneth D. King Middle School	512
<b>Metcalf (276)</b>	Metcalf County High School	3
	Metcalf County Middle School	273
<b>Muhlenberg (293)</b>		

	Muhlenberg County High School	19
	Muhlenberg South Middle School	274
<b>Pendleton (341)</b>		
	Pendleton County High School	341
<b>Pulaski (1,213)</b>		
	Northern Middle School	566
	Pulaski County High School	647
<b>Rowan (233)</b>		
	Rowan County High School	233
<b>Scott (2,215)</b>		
	Royal Spring Middle School	198
	Scott County High School	1454
	Scott County Middle School	563
<b>Shelby (705)</b>		
	Martha Layne Collins High School	580
	Shelby County High School	125
<b>Simpson (363)</b>		
	Franklin Simpson High School	169
	Franklin Simpson Middle School	194
<b>Warren (346)</b>		
	South Warren High School	94
	Warren Central High School	132
	Warren East High School	120
<b>Wayne (348)</b>		
	Wayne County High School	348
<b>Whitley (410)</b>		
	Corbin Middle School	295
	Whitley County High School	39
	Williamsburg Middle School	76
<b>Woodford (390)</b>		
	Woodford County High School	390