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Exploring the Influence of School Location on School Resource Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles and Priorities

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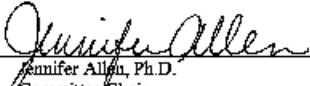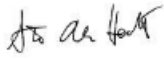Their Roles and Priorities

by
Larry A. Potts

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
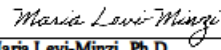
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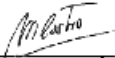
Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Larry A. Potts, under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Nova Southeastern University.

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Statement of Original Work

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Name <u>Larry A. Potts</u>

Date <u>7/25/2023</u>

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to so many people for their encouragement, guidance, and support through the years of my life. It begins with my family and my parents. My mother gave me a sense of caring for others and my father gifted me with a work ethic that for both of us at most times was a blessing and at other times a burden. My paternal grandfather and grandmother have always been my idols. My grandmother nurtured me through my life into young adulthood. My grandfather worked non-stop, funded my undergraduate education, and talked to me at every opportunity about getting all the education I could. I thought of him often during these years of study and know that he would be proud of this accomplishment. He gave and continues to give me the drive to be successful. My wife Pat is the sine qua non of this effort. Without her unwavering support and encouragement this would not have happened, and I owe her everything in return. She is the rock of the family and treasured by her family and friends. I am also indebted to my teachers throughout my life for their patience and consistently demanding that I study and learn. My professors at the University of Richmond, the University of Cincinnati, and Nova Southeastern University have given me the opportunity to learn from them and the desire to never stop learning. Finally, I want to thank my dissertation committee-Chairperson Dr. Jennifer Allen, Dr. Maria Levi-Minzi, and Dr. Steven Hecht. Their direction, suggestions, and questions improved this study and made this a better product. Dr Allen provided professional advice and encouragement at every opportunity, and I am appreciative beyond words.

Abstract

Exploring the Influence of School Location on School Resource Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles and Priorities. Larry A. Potts, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: school resource officers, roles, perception, location, expectations

Despite the widespread presence of school resource officers (SROs) in public schools for decades, their proper roles and priorities have remained unsettled because those roles are often varied, complex, conflicting, and ambiguous. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether school location influences those perceptions. Qualitative research methods provided opportunities for one-to-one interviews with SROs and their supervisors. Two elements embedded in the design consisted of a descriptive questionnaire provided to the SROs before their interviews, and a qualitative interview question designed to elicit a percentage estimate response from SROs. Eleven SROs and two supervisors from two law enforcement agencies were interviewed. All participants served the same school district in one county in Virginia and operated under one Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the school district. The SROs agreed that location made a difference in their roles and provided anecdotal information to corroborate that statement. The school designations of rural and suburban did not adequately define or describe the student population. Most of the rural schools draw students from rural locations and nearby suburban communities. Some differences in role perceptions were noted between the rural and suburban SROs but urbanicity was not attributed as a major influence of those differences. Location stability, defined as being assigned to the same school and the same administrator for five or more years, was believed to have some influence on expanded roles. The trust partnership between the SRO and the school administrator may result in expanded roles by the SRO and open opportunities for developing trust relationships with the students. The SROs believed it was important for them to interact with the parents in non-crisis situations. Expectations have a substantial influence on roles. Recruitment and retention of SROs is an important issue that should be addressed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nature of the Research Problem

The research problem investigated is that despite the widespread presence of school resource officers (SROs) in public schools since the 1950s, their proper roles and priorities have remained unsettled (Rhodes, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021). They have remained unsettled because they have often been varied, complex, conflicting, and ambiguous (Glenn et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021). The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO, n.d.) advised that SROs were the fastest growing law enforcement sector in the United States. Mandated national roles and priorities for SROs have not appeared. Several investigators have called for further research concerning the roles of SROs (Barnes, 2016; Glenn et al., 2019; Lambert & McGinty, 2002; McKenna et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2021). The focus of the proposed study is SROs' perceptions of their roles and priorities in different school locations, specifically comparing perceptions in rural versus suburban schools.

Some jurisdictions have treated SROs as extensions of community policing (Department of Criminal Justice Services [DCJS], 2017b). The purpose of an SRO program within a community policing strategy is to treat each school as a separate neighborhood; identify problems in cooperation with students, staff members, and parents; and develop strategies to provide solutions. This allows SROs to be proactive and not rely on reacting to incident reports. Those responsible for SROs expect them to be more than police officers assigned to schools, and much of an SRO's performance depends on the latitude they have to apply their own discretion (Devlin & Fisher, 2021; Schlosser, 2014). The roles and priorities of SROs vary from school to school, and school

characteristics, such as location, may affect the choice of roles (Curran et al., 2021; Finn & McDevitt, 2005; Jennings et al., 2011; Lesley, 2021; Rhodes, 2015). Research was not found that compared suburban SROs' perceptions of their roles to those of rural or urban SROs, even while suburbia has become much more economically and ethnically diverse (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020; Nijman, 2020).

The way SROs fulfill their roles in schools can affect entire communities. Students' perceptions of safety based on the roles adopted by SROs can impact the students (Curran et al., 2021). Whether administrators and teachers perceive SROs as parts of the team or as people who can handle discipline affects the administrators and teachers (Cornell, 2020; Devlin & Fisher, 2021; May et al., 2004; Wood & Hampton, 2021). SROs may detect and reduce bullying incidents in schools (Devlin et al., 2018) or find diversion programs that assist at-risk children and their families (Rosiak, 2015). SROs, through positive interactions with students, can improve those students' long-term perceptions of law enforcement (Granot et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2020). SROs who approach their roles by focusing only on violations of rules and laws can impact students and their parents by criminalizing disciplinary matters (Gottfredson et al., 2020). Arresting a student in school may alter the trajectory of their life (Wolf, 2014). A substantial number of arrests and referrals, often determined in part by the roles of SROs, impact the juvenile justice system (Fisher & Devlin, 2020). How the public, students, and others in the school system view the roles and priorities of SROs can impact the legitimacy of SROs and their law enforcement agencies (Theriot, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether school location (fringe rural or large suburban) influences those

perceptions.

Background and Significance of the Problem

The number of SROs assigned to public schools has been growing since their introduction in the 1950s, dramatically so since 2000 (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). In the 2017–2018 school year, SROs had a full- or part-time presence in 84.3% of U.S. high schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019).

Many SROs have chosen to join NASRO (n.d.), which has provided guidance regarding best practices, but the organization has been powerless to mandate the acceptance of those practices. Among its best practices, the organization recommends that every SRO adopt a trio of roles pertaining to law enforcement, mentoring of students, and teaching matters related to law enforcement. Counts et al. (2018) reported that calls for mandatory development of best practices for SRO programs had largely gone unheeded; these researchers found that very few states had issued policies, requirements, or guidance regarding the roles of SROs. Even among states with requirements, the requirements varied widely. Glenn et al. (2019) concluded that SRO roles needed clarification and encouraged states to standardize the operation and evaluation of SRO programs.

Role Variations

Scholars have reported considerable variation in the roles performed by SROs (Devlin & Fisher, 2021). Devlin and Fisher (2021) used secondary data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) and focused on the emphasis given to particular roles and whether performance of those roles was proactive or reactive. Even SROs implementing the NASRO-recommended trio of duties have not done so consistently by

performing the same tasks with the same priorities within the trio of duties (Rhodes, 2017). The role of law enforcement encompasses a variety of tasks that someone performing the role may or may not undertake, such as patrolling, investigating, surveillance, profiling, interviewing, preparing reports, escorting visitors, and conducting searches (McKenna et al., 2016). Some jurisdictions have treated SROs as parts of their community policing strategy (DCJS, 2017b). In such instances, the law enforcement role of SROs may differ from that in jurisdictions not using that strategy. Individual SROs may prioritize different tasks. Describing the role of SROs as law enforcement is therefore ambiguous and conceals considerable complexity. The same is true of the counseling and teaching roles, each of which involve various tasks to which different SROs devote different amounts of time (Devlin & Fisher, 2021; McKenna et al., 2016). Police officer roles are often more nuanced when performed in a school setting than when performed elsewhere (Curran et al., 2020).

SROs may employ a mixture of the trio of roles, or their roles may extend beyond the trio (Higgins et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2016). For example, Lynch et al. (2016) studied secondary data from the SSOCS and identified seven roles performed by SROs: school security, enforcement of school rules, liaison with local police, training, counseling of students, problem solving, and teaching law enforcement. McKenna et al. (2016) interviewed 26 SROs across Texas—including those in urban, rural, and suburban districts—and also identified roles beyond those in the triad model, in this case the surrogate parent and social worker roles. Fisher and Devlin (2020) noted that SROs seldom perform only one role and instead perform numerous roles and different combinations of roles. Eklund et al. (2018), who studied 16 secondary schools in the

Southwestern United States, acknowledged the variety of roles expected of SROs. They noted that the special skills and training SROs brought to their schools specifically equipped them to contribute substantially to a multidisciplinary effort to develop strategies and plans dealing with the physical safety of students and with crises. Eklund et al. emphasized that SROs should be fully integrated into these matters and not limited to law enforcement, informal counseling, and teaching.

Some SRO roles converge and overlap with the roles of other school staff members, such as teachers, administrators, counselors, and mental health workers (Eklund et al., 2018). This overlap may cause critical conflicts, complexity, and confusion during a crisis. Many circumstances require substantial role collaboration by SROs with other staff members or agencies outside the school. A school psychologist examined this issue and concluded that the problem resulted from a cultural conflict (Jones, 2014). She identified a difference between herself and SROs in relation to role awareness and expectations. She concluded that SROs had shared goals and were in schools to protect students, but the role of a psychologist was proactive, and that of an SRO was reactive. Jones (2014) concluded that SROs needed additional training in adolescent development and trauma but acknowledged that their de-escalation skills were assets in a crisis. Jones recommended that SROs join mental evaluation teams to deal with crises and discover alternatives to discipline.

Factors Contributing to Unsettled SRO Roles

Many factors may influence how SROs perceive their roles and develop their priorities (Rhodes, 2017). No consensus has emerged across the United States regarding the roles police officers should play in schools (Coon & Travis, 2012).

Expectations of Schools and Law Enforcement Agencies. Expectations substantially affect SRO roles and have varied widely among states, among school districts, and among individual schools (Rhodes, 2017). Expectations regarding the roles of SROs come from the SROs themselves, their law enforcement agencies, their school systems, and the students, teachers, administrators, parents, and communities associated with those school systems. Lack of agreement among school principals, SROs, and SRO supervisors regarding how much time SROs should spend on the generic trio of roles recommended by NASRO has led to confusion, conflict, and ambiguity. Ivey (2012) randomly selected 32 SROs, 16 high school principals, and 15 SRO supervisors across South Carolina. The SROs came from 24 districts in rural (38.1%), suburban (41.3%), and urban (20.6%) locations, but the researcher did not analyze differences based on urbanicity. Ivey found that the three participant groups had different perceptions of what SROs were doing during their time in schools. The teaching role differences, although not significant, were interesting from a practical standpoint. SROs estimated that they spent 14% of their time teaching, supervisors estimated 17%, and principals estimated 10%. There were statistically significant differences between SROs' and principals' estimates of the time SROs spent in the counseling role (41% and 15%, respectively), and SRO supervisors estimated that SROs spent 30% of their time counseling. Principals insisted they did not want SROs to spend time counseling and preferred them to focus on enforcement.

Lambert and McGinty (2002) reported similar findings from their study in which they provided a Likert-scale questionnaire to 161 principals, 159 SROs, and 57 law enforcement administrators in North Carolina from rural, suburban, and urban locations.

The results indicated that principals and SROs had different concepts of SRO roles. Principals wanted greater emphasis on discipline and less emphasis on counseling. SROs recognized their law enforcement responsibilities but believed counseling and mentoring students were important. SROs ranked leadership as an essential characteristic of SROs, but principals wanted loyalty from their SROs. SROs favored a prevention role with community involvement, but principals wanted SROs to concentrate on enforcement within school. The supervisor of SROs in a North Carolina county, asked in a newspaper interview to describe the roles of SROs, responded that they were to be role models, to be visible in the hallways to deter crime, and to provide principals with whatever was needed to run schools (Huber, 2014). This arrangement gives principals a great deal of latitude regarding the roles of SROs but does little to clarify those roles. Aligning various stakeholders' expectations regarding SRO roles is a complex balancing act (Ramos & Del Palacio, 2021).

Ambiguous and Conflicting Guidance. Curran et al. (2020) studied SRO activity in two school districts in the South that represented the full range of urbanicity and offered some insight into the ambiguous and conflicting roles of SROs in school discipline. Establishment of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between law enforcement agencies and school boards has become common practice. Such MOUs vary with regard to the degree to which they define expectations for SROs (Lesley, 2021). The MOU in Curran et al.'s (2020) study instructed SROs to avoid becoming involved in formal discipline. However, the MOU was ambiguous about what SROs could do concerning discipline. Only 10% of Curran et al.'s (2020) SRO participants acknowledged involvement in disciplinary matters. However, many of the SROs

indicated during interviews that they regularly engaged in verbal correction of students who violated school rules or misbehaved. SROs also said that they were present during correction or punishment of students, both on their own initiative and at the request of principals and teachers. The SROs explained that the purpose of their presence was to prevent escalation. Lack of clarity concerning the role of SROs in discipline extended to other stakeholders in Curran et al.'s (2020) study. Three out of four teachers reported the involvement of SROs in discipline, and 85% of parents believed SROs were involved in discipline. Coon and Travis (2012) found that principals reported more SRO involvement in discipline than that reported by law enforcement participants. Teachers and principals expected SROs to help them enforce school rules and maintain discipline. Even when SROs attempted to avoid a disciplinary role, there was often a fine line between a disciplinary matter and one that crossed over to criminal conduct and required SRO involvement (Coon & Travis, 2012).

SRO Discretion. Curran et al. (2020) indicated that SROs' discretion and environmental circumstances affected their decisions concerning their roles and priorities. An SRO's discretion relates to their role determination and how they perform their roles (Bolger et al., 2018). For example, SROs exercising their law enforcement authority may use their discretion to either arrest students and refer them to the juvenile justice system or informally handle incidents, taking advantage of community resources to work with students. The outcome of that decision depends on whether an SRO prioritizes their enforcement role or their support role.

Coon and Travis (2012) distributed questionnaires nationally and received 1,387 (44% of those distributed) responses from principals and 1,140 (75.6% of those

distributed) responses received from law enforcement administrators of SRO programs. The researchers considered only school questionnaires with responses from both principals and law enforcement administrators. One important finding was the recognition that principals were not always aware of all the roles performed by SROs. This finding suggests a lack of communication between principals and SROs regarding roles, and it possibly reflects liberal use of SRO discretion.

School Demographics. Researchers have demonstrated that a school's demographics influence the roles SROs adopt in that school. Influential characteristics include size, level, location, crime rate, and student socioeconomic status (Finn & McDevitt, 2005; Jennings et al., 2011). The DCJS (2017b) noted that the SRO program in Virginia was an extension of the community policing initiative and that the program did not involve a "cookie-cutter" (p. 4) approach; instead, each SRO had to adapt their roles and priorities to their assigned school.

Role theory provides location as a factor that impacts role choice (Biddle, 1979). Researchers have identified school demographics, including location, as influencers of role selection (Finn & McDevitt, 21005; Jennings et al., 2011; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). Youths in urban locations tend to have less trust in police officers than youths in rural locations (Gau & Brunson, 2015; Skaggs & Sun, 2017). There are substantial differences in violence in urban, rural, and suburban schools (Pequero et al., 2020). Researchers have placed their focus on urban settings and have found that the SROs in those locations emphasize their enforcement role (Rhodes, 2017). However, there are few studies on rural SROs' roles and priorities (Hurst, 2007; Skaggs & Sun, 2017). Hunt et al. (2019) compared SRO interactions with youths in urban locations to those in rural locations and

discovered differences in their authority level and the volume of referrals of students to the juvenile justice system. According to the NCES (2018), 61% of U.S. students were in suburban (32%) or rural (29%) schools in the 2015-2016 school year. No studies were located that compared rural and suburban SRO perceptions of their roles. Suburban schools face increasingly complex educational challenges (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020). The rapidly changing demographics of suburbs have outpaced schools' preparedness for the cultural changes brought about by the influx of immigrants and members of minority groups (Nijman, 2020). The increase in the number of immigrants and those belonging to minority groups has led to many social and economic inequalities in suburbia (Nijman, 2020). These characteristics form part of the environment in which SROs must adapt their roles and priorities. Different school demographics between rural and suburban schools may influence how the SROs perceive their roles and the criteria for selecting the SRO.

Community Influence. Ramos and Del Palacio (2021) of the National School Boards Association stated that the top priority of the association was to provide safe learning environments for children. Establishing the roles of SROs requires community involvement (Ramos & Del Palacio, 2021). Very few researchers have conducted empirical studies of how members of the public perceive SROs in relation to their roles and effectiveness (Almanza et al., 2022). Zirkel (2019) said that a Phi Delta Kappa (2018) poll of randomly selected adults across the United States indicated an 80% adult preference for armed police officers at schools; however, the poll included no questions concerning specific roles, and 72% of responding parents expressed concern about the safety of their children at school.

Not all parents agree that their children are safer with police officers in schools (Almanza et al., 2022). Those opposed to the presence of SROs have frequently expressed their opinions through local media and at public school board meetings. Almanza et al. reported that negative perceptions of the police in general have impacted perceptions of SROs. The association between SRO presence and long-term adverse outcomes for some students, especially students belonging to minority groups, has resulted in demands by those affected for removal of police from schools (Balingit et al., 2020). However, removing SROs may reduce the security of schools and leave staff members and students feeling less safe (Yu, 2020). SROs have remained in schools in most jurisdictions. Discussion of this issue has been contentious at times, and roles and priorities of SROs, determined mainly by individual SROs and their schools, may influence relevant political decisions (Almanza et al., 2022). Those making decisions about the need for, or proper roles of, SROs have not frequently relied on empirical evidence (Crosse et al., 2020). The placement or retention of SROs in schools has more often resulted from emotional reactions (Gottfredson et al., 2020).

Role Conflict. A role such as having responsibility for being an enforcer may conflict with forming mentor relationships with at-risk young people (Javdani, 2019; Rhodes, 2015). Integrating a police officer from a police culture into a school culture complicates this particular role conflict (McKenna & Pollock, 2014). Characteristics of police culture include only trusting other officers, being aggressive and in control, demanding instant compliance, and arresting those who fail to show proper respect for an officer's authority (McKenna & Pollock, 2014; Rhodes, 2015). According to McKenna and Pollock (2014), those characteristics often conflict with the more open and

supportive school culture. Higgins et al. (2020) found another example of conflict among the complex roles of police officers in schools. They found that SROs they studied could establish bonds with at-risk children who were not receiving needed services through the school. The SROs made referrals to various community organizations that could assist these children and their families. However, at times the police culture instincts and training took over. SROs sometimes used their close relationships with children to develop intelligence about criminal activity that eventually led to investigations and arrests. Higgins et al. expressed concern that this kind of outcome interrupts such relationships and creates trust problems. Higgins et al. viewed this as a role conflict between being a mentor to the youth and using the youth as an informant. While the information provided by the student may be helpful in a criminal investigation, the youth may question the motivation for the SRO's effort to develop rapport and undermine the trust established between the adolescent and the SRO (Higgins et al., 2020). Schildkraut et al., (2022) noted the importance of school administrators and SROs openly encouraging students to come forward with information involving the risk of violence. Educating students about the difference between being a police informant and helping individuals in need or danger is critical (Daniels & Page, 2013). Daniels and Page (2013) recommended establishing confidential and anonymous tip lines for students and ensuring they are taught how and when to use them.

Importance of SRO Role Selection

Selection of SRO roles is critical because roles have consequences (Biddle, 1979). Sullivan and Hausman (2017) focused on SROs in Kentucky high schools and found that the roles and personal approach of an SRO made a difference in the handling of incidents.

Fisher and Devlin (2020) reported a similar finding, that the different roles assumed by an SRO made a difference in the crimes reported to police or the juvenile justice system. Stevens et al. (2021) criticized those who studied SROs by focusing on statistical findings associated with the mere presence of an SRO. They argued that it is essential to consider the roles of an SRO in a particular situation to evaluate their value and contributions properly. Theriot (2016) observed that having a highly visible, uniformed, and armed police officer in the hallways of a school influences the school's climate and the perceptions of its students regarding the impact of the SRO on their safety. The roles and priorities of an SRO affect the nature and frequency of their interactions with the students and staff members, and these interactions affect not only how the students and staff perceive the SRO but also whether students have positive or negative connectedness with the school (Theriot, 2016). Theriot defines connectedness as a positive feeling about the school and a sense of comfort with the staff and students.

Few researchers have focused on understanding the perspectives of SROs regarding their roles (Glenn et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2015). Rhodes (2015) found that expectations of SRO performance varied from school to school, which impeded SROs' adaptiveness to school culture. Rhodes (2015) reported that SROs often operated under the weight of nearly impossible expectations and in poorly defined roles. Heise and Nance (2021) stated that SROs' roles, priorities, and daily routines varied widely across the United States and even from school to school.

Proposed Study

A qualitative methods study was conducted. The proposed study involved qualitative interviews of SROs that were intended to advance the body of knowledge

concerning how SROs develop and perceive their roles and priorities in different school locations (rural and suburban). This new knowledge will be valuable to stakeholders in SRO programs and may help to minimize role conflicts and improve alignment of expectations with roles and priorities. Considering expectations and roles can lead to better hiring and placement of SROs, possible situational standardization of roles based on location, identification of specific training needs, less criminalization of minor infractions, reduction of the disproportionately negative impact on students belonging to minority groups, and improved relationships between adolescents and law enforcement officers.

Barriers and Issues

Access was anticipated to be a barrier to the study. Public debates around schools concerning books in the library, curriculum, mandating of masks, and presence of police have created an atmosphere that acts as a barrier to accessing students, administrators, staff members, and SROs. However, the leaders of the law enforcement agencies decided in favor of allowing access to the SROs. I interviewed SROs at their law enforcement offices. These interviews were critical, and care was exercised to create a relaxed atmosphere in which each participant feels comfortable.

The next anticipated barrier was obtaining forthright and reliable responses in the interviews. Participants were assured that the collected information would be treated confidentially and within the limits of the law and that information would only be made available to those who need access to it. The participants proved to be very cooperative and provided valuable information for this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether geographic location (fringe rural or large suburban) influenced those perceptions.

Definition of Terms

Interaction With Students

Interaction is any communication between an SRO and one or more students.

Role

In the context of this study, roles are functional roles assumed by any individual assigned to a high school as an SRO. Functional roles are actions, tasks, and behaviors of an individual performed in the context of being an SRO based on a number of variables, including situational conditions, formal agreements, individual discretion, and expectations of the community, the school, the law enforcement agency employing the SRO, and the SRO (Biddle, 1979).

School Climate

School climate is the quality of life within a school based on relationships among and between students and adults, respectful treatment, student conduct, rules and their enforcement, feeling safe in the school, having a bond with the school through engagement in activities, and the level of academic success and aspiration (Cornell et al., 2020).

School Connectedness

School connectedness is a multifaceted measure of a student's attachment and belonging to their school, their feeling of camaraderie with their peer groups, and their

feeling of trust and care for teachers and staff members (Theriot, 2016).

School Location

School location is a school's geographic category (NCES, n.d.). The categories derive from standard designations established by the U.S. Census Bureau. For example, an area outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with a population of 250,000 or more is large suburban. A rural area is one that is not urban (or suburban).

School Resource Officer

An SRO is a sworn police officer employed by a law enforcement agency and assigned to a school to ensure student and staff safety (NASRO, n.d.).

School Survey on Crime and Safety

The SSOCS is a cross-sectional survey administered by the NCES, part of the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2019). The center sends a survey approximately every other year to about 4,800 public elementary and secondary school principals to gather data on crime and safety in schools (NCES, 2019).

Triad of Duties

NASRO (n.d.) identified a triad of duties recommended for SROs. These duties are law enforcement, mentoring, and teaching law enforcement-related matters.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The review in this chapter is divided into four major sections: (a) the history and evolution of the SRO position, (b) SRO roles, (c) the impact of role on response, and (d) influences on role selection. Several of the sections have subsections. The SRO Roles section highlights law enforcement and non-law enforcement roles. The Role Impact on Response section details how roles impact outcomes, how SRO interactions indicate roles and influence outcomes, and existing relationships between law enforcement and adolescents. The Influences on Role Selection section includes subsections on location, expectations, school environment, police culture, and training.

This extensive review focuses on prior research and informational resources concerning the four areas listed above and includes information from 103 journal articles, 9 books, 12 news reports, 21 government websites, 10 organization websites, and one government report.

History and Evolution of the SRO Position

An SRO is a law enforcement officer employed by a local law enforcement agency and assigned to one or more schools to ensure the security and safety of students and staff members (NASRO, n.d.). SROs have been in public schools since the 1950s (Glenn et al., 2019; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). The purpose of assigning SROs to public schools in Flint, Michigan, in 1958 was to help keep the peace at the beginning of desegregation of the schools (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018), based on the belief that police presence would reduce violence in the schools (N. James & McCallion, 2014). SROs have unquestionably become much more commonplace in schools, in large part because

of three factors. The first was the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law

Enforcement Act, which provided federal funds to communities in response to increasing

crime in the early 1990s (Glenn et al., 2019; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). That legislation

funded the hiring of SROs for school safety and participation in student education

through such programs as the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program (Glenn et al.,

2019). The second factor was fear of an increasing crime rate and violence associated

with juvenile crime in the 1980s and early 1990s. The third factor was gun violence

resulting in the mass murder and wounding of students and teachers in schools (Glenn et

al., 2019).

During the school year 2015–2016, SROs were present in nearly half of public

schools in the United States, compared with only about 1% of schools in the 1970s (Hunt

et al., 2019). Either full- or part-time SROs were in 93% of Virginia's middle and high

schools in 2020 (Cornell et al., 2020).

SROs in Virginia and some other jurisdictions are extensions of community

policing (DCJS, 2017b). The purpose of SRO programs within community policing is to

treat each school as a separate community; identify problems in cooperation with

students, staff members, and parents; and develop strategies to provide solutions. This

allows an SRO to be proactive rather than reactively responding to incident reports. SROs

should use their training and experience to work outside the law enforcement parameters

of a patrol officer through planning, crime prevention, and finding ways to divert at-risk

students to supportive programs and away from the criminal justice system (DCJS,

2017b).

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education

issued a joint letter encouraging SRO programs to develop policies to improve student security and outcomes (DCJS, 2017b; DOJ, 2016). Some of the suggestions included improving training, minimizing arrests, and avoiding SRO engagement in noncriminal matters. The letter also suggested including feedback from students, staff members, and parents in SROs' evaluations.

NASRO (n.d.) claimed over 3,000 members worldwide and declared that its goals are to provide safe learning environments and to promote positive relationships with students.

According to the DCJS (2017b) in Virginia, Section 901-101 of the Virginia Code defines SROs as law enforcement officers employed by a law enforcement agency to provide security for public schools. This definition is consistent with the definition provided by the NASRO (n.d.). DCJS (2017b) noted that most agencies lack formal processes or guidelines for the selection of SRO supervisors. However, a few agencies have formalized their processes to ensure their programs receive adequate monitoring. Supervisory responsibilities include coordination with school administrators, close contact with SROs, regular reviews of SRO reports and logs, visiting schools, and maintaining high morale among SROs (DCJS, 2017b).

Police officers and their roles have received criticism for actions taken in communities and in schools (Rhodes, 2017). Despite decades of experience, the roles of SROs have continued to evolve to align with the problems they confront, the expectations placed upon them, and expansions of their responsibilities (Fisher et al., 2022; Rhodes, 2017).

SRO Roles

NASRO (n.d.) adopted the community policing strategy and proposed three roles for SROs as best practice: educator, counselor, and law enforcement officer. These roles are only recommendations; NASRO has offered nonmandatory SRO training but has not been directly involved in SRO certification. NASRO has not determined how many SROs are in the United States or how much training they have received and has collected data only about its members and those who have received training through the association. No federal minimum requirements for serving as an SRO have appeared, and nationally there has been no specification of required training or standardization of duties. Some states have established such requirements. As discussed in Chapter 1, most states have not established requirements, and requirements have varied among those states that have established them (Counts et al., 2018). Glenn et al. (2019) concluded that the SRO role needed clarification and encouraged states to standardize the operation and evaluation of SRO programs. Federal guidelines have tended to emphasize education, and state guidelines have tended to prioritize enforcement (McKenna & White, 2018). Fitzgerald et al. (2019) studied a rural part of Oklahoma and cautioned that the roles and behavior of SROs are not uniform across different school environments.

SROs may employ a mixture of NASRO's trio of roles as well as additional roles (Higgins et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2016). As discussed in Chapter 1, Lynch et al. (2016) identified the SRO roles of school security, enforcement of school rules, liaison with local police, training, counseling of students, problem solving, and teaching law enforcement-related matters; social worker and surrogate parent are other identified SRO roles (McKenna et al., 2016). Fisher and Devlin (2020) analyzed several years of SSOCS

data and noted that SROs seldom performed only one role and instead performed numerous roles in different combinations.

As discussed in Chapter 1, overlap between SRO roles and the roles of other school staff members—such as teachers, administrators, counselors, and mental health workers—may cause conflicts, complexity, and confusion during a crisis (Eklund et al., 2018). Jones (2014) compared her roles with those of SROs and found that although both SROs and psychologists were in schools to protect students, psychologists' roles were proactive, and SROs' roles were reactive.

In September 2013, The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention published a brief, authored by Thomas et al. (2013), declaring broad public support for law enforcement in schools and noting that such law enforcement can provide several safety and security measures. The brief posited that law enforcement officers in schools can often increase the feeling of school safety among students, staff members, and parents; improve police–youth relationships; and deter crime and violence. R. K. James et al. (2011) reported that school mental health professionals in coordination with SROs performing a crime prevention role can substantially increase their effectiveness. R. K. James et al. recommended schools encourage the prevention role in SROs, increase SRO training in this role, and research how to adjust this approach for students of different ages, races, and cultures.

An MOU between a school and a cooperating law enforcement agency is essential for an SRO program, but beyond the MOU, an SRO needs to determine the roles and priorities to employ in an assigned school (DCJS, 2017b). This determination requires study, observation, and discussion with school administrators. Some have described the

SRO position as a collaborative one, but the job often requires independent action. For example, perception and treatment of an SRO as a member of a school's team is useful to the SRO. However, SROs must also retain the authority of law enforcement officers. An administrator may advise an SRO that a violation of the law has occurred, but the SRO must decide whether law enforcement action is justified and necessary (DCJS, 2017b).

Stevens et al. (2021) criticized studies of SROs focusing on statistical findings associated with the mere presence of an SRO. They argued that it is essential to consider the roles of an SRO in a particular situation to properly evaluate their value and contributions. Stevens et al. used secondary data from the 2017–2018 SSOCS. They looked only at data from middle and high schools. The survey included responses from 1,859 schools, of which 39.3% were suburban, 24.2% were urban, 21.3% were rural, and 15.2% were town. Stevens et al. highlighted the prevention role as an area offering excellent opportunities for success with students. However, they cautioned that non-law enforcement prevention roles, such as teaching and counseling, required substantially more training for SROs than most were receiving.

McKenna et al. (2016) explored the roles that school-based law enforcement (SBLE) officers believed they performed, and the roles they perceived they should perform in a school setting. SBLE officers fill the same niche as SROs and the terms are often used interchangeably, but SBLEs are employed by the school system rather than the local law enforcement agency (McKenna et al., 2016). McKenna et al. (2016) advised that local school districts make the decision whether they will have a police agency under their budget and authority. Many school districts such as Miami-Dade created school-based police departments but continue to identify the officers in the schools as SROs

(Benitez, 2018).

McKenna et al. (2016) conducted qualitative telephone interviews of 26 SBLE officers from 11 districts in Texas schools located in rural, major urban, and major suburban areas. The researchers noted the NASRO-recommended triad of roles for SROs. They identified a need for deeper examination of the SRO and SBLE positions. The researchers pointed out that SROs and SBLE officers work at the intersection of law enforcement and education, which have very different cultures. McKenna et al. emphasized that a qualitative approach allowed them to obtain more detail from the participants than another approach would have done. The researchers attempted to determine how roles were initially established, and they identified the surrogate parent and social worker roles beyond those in the triad model. The mentorship role targeted the most at-risk students and those who had prior negative encounters with police. When asked to identify the roles they believed they should be performing, 69% of the 26 police officer participants identified law enforcement, 54% identified mentoring or role modeling, 23% identified social work, and 19% identified education. Most explained mentorship as an attempt to change students' negative perceptions of the police. Jackson (2002) studied this issue and found that how students viewed SROs did not usually change their perception of police outside school. Jackson noted that students made clear contrasts between SROs and neighborhood police.

SROs sometimes fall into categories based on the roles they assume (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Fisher & Devlin, 2020). However, the findings of Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) and Fisher & Devlin (2020) indicate that SROs often perform a mixture of roles within schools. Even within the law enforcement role, students'

perceptions vary depending on the way SROs carry out the associated duties (Cooper, 2012; Devlin & Santos, 2022). Students may view the enforcement actions of an SRO as too aggressive, arbitrary, or unfair and thus develop a negative opinion of the SRO and law enforcement in general (Devlin & Santos, 2022). Adolescents' perceptions of law enforcement in schools are complex: Adolescents may disagree with how SROs perform their duties but nevertheless still credit SROs with improving school safety (Devlin & Santos, 2022).

The roles performed by SROs vary widely among school districts and even among individual schools (Nolan, 2018). However, SRO roles break down broadly into two major categories: law enforcement roles and non-law enforcement roles.

Law Enforcement Roles

Fisher et al. (2020) sought to understand the roles of elementary school SROs in two suburban school districts. In interviews, most of the SROs said that their two top priorities were security and relationship building. Most of the SROs studied by Na and Gottfredson (2013) were responsible for security and enforcement. SROs generally spend most of their time on law enforcement duties (Javdani, 2019). Gottfredson et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the effect of SROs on crime by comparing 33 California secondary schools that increased the number of SROs with 72 that did not. Of the schools studied, 59% were suburban, 19% were rural, and 22% were urban. The researchers ensured they included a similar number of schools from each location, but they did not use location as a comparison variable. They examined administrative data from the schools and found that the immediate effect of increasing the number of SROs was an increase in weapons and drug cases. Regarding the roles of the SROs, they

reported that the degree of formal response to crime correlated with the focus of SROs on enforcement. Curran et al. (2021) studied a school district representing the full range of urbanicities and found that the enforcement role could generate conflict with students to the extent that some students considered the patrolling of the hallways by an SRO to be harassment. Devlin and Fisher (2021) found that when SROs focused on enforcement, the number of racial issues and bullying incidents increased. The enforcement role reduced the likelihood of SROs bonding with students. However, Devlin and Fisher (2021) found that the triad of roles reduced racial tensions and bullying incidents through relationship building.

SRO law enforcement roles encompass several activities, such as making arrests, conducting investigations, deterrence, maintaining order, interviewing offenders and witnesses, surveillance, patrolling, issuing citations, law enforcement liaison, and writing reports (Higgins et al., 2020). Eklund et al. (2018) studied 16 schools (of unidentified urbanicity) in the Southwestern United States and acknowledged the multifaceted roles expected of SROs. They noted that the special skills and training that SROs brought to their schools specifically equipped them to contribute substantially to multidisciplinary efforts to develop strategies and plans dealing with the physical safety of students and with crisis situations. Eklund et al. emphasized the importance of integrating SROs fully integrated into these matters and not limiting them to law enforcement, informal counseling, and teaching.

Stevens et al. (2021), using data from the 2017–2018 SSOCS, found no association between the presence of an SRO in a school and school problems. Stevens et al. noted that SROs primarily performing the law enforcement role usually resulted in

referral of more nonviolent matters to police. The researchers concluded that this meant

the presence of an SRO in a school did not deter bad behavior by students but did offer a

readily accessible way for the SRO to report these matters to the school. Considering

high schools in isolation revealed a statistically significant positive association between

SRO presence and the reporting of nonviolent and violent incidents to police. Stevens et

al. noted the importance of considering grade level when evaluating the roles and

outcomes of SROs.

One issue for police in schools is whether they act as law enforcement officers or

school employees (Price, 2009). For example, legal requirements for search and seizure

depend on whether school officials or police conduct the search and seizure. The courts

have given mixed signals regarding whether a police officer can act as a school

employee. Some courts have ruled that SROs are school employees, which means they

are not subject to the Miranda warning requirement or the probable cause standard for

search and seizure. Georgia case, *Farmer v. State*, 275 S.W.2d. 774,775 (Ga. 1980), and

the Illinois case, *People v. Dilworth*, 661 N.E.2d 310,317 (Ill. 1996), held that SROs are

school employees and *Miranda* is unnecessary (Price, 2009). New York appellate case

People v. Bowers, 356 N.Y.S.2d. 432 (App. Div. 1974) found that SROs are law

enforcement officers and must adhere to the due process requirements of probable cause

and *Miranda* (Price, 2009). Price (2009) indicated that some states, such as Pennsylvania,

have left the issue unresolved. The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), while

not addressing the SRO issue, ruled in *Veronica Sch. Dist. 47J v. Acton*, 515 U.S. 646

(1995) that school officials were not required to issue Miranda warnings or adhere to

search and seizure provisions noting that the school officials did not turn the evidence over to the police (Price, 2009).

Search and seizure cases are analyzed under the SCOTUS case *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*, 469 U.S. 325, 342 (1985), that ruled school officials acting on their own initiative do not need to meet a probable cause standard but only a reasonable suspicion standard (Price, 2009). The cases often hinge on whether the school officials or the police ran the investigation. In *In Re P.E.A.,* 754 P.2d 382 (Colo. 1988), the facts involved a without consent search of a student's car by a school administrator and a school security officer (not a sworn police officer), with a police officer standing by. The Colorado Supreme Court found that since the police were not involved in the search or interrogation, the search was reasonable, and the interrogation did not require *Miranda* (Price, 2009). However, in a similar set of facts, the Florida appellate court ruled in *F.P. v. State*, 528 So. 2d. 1253 (Fla. 1988) that since the investigation was done on behalf of the police, probable cause was required for the search (Price, 2009).

Price (2009) suggested that merely having SROs follow the requirements of police officers would clarify the situation for all concerned. Some MOUs clarify the issue. For example, the Ohio sample MOU provided by the Ohio School Resource Officers' Association [OSROA] (2018), requires that if SROs conduct a student interview, they are required to give prior notice to the parents in time for them to attend the interview and advise the student of their *Miranda* rights and a search by the SRO requires probable cause. The MOU requirements are the same, as in the Ohio example, for interviews and searches in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia [FCPS], (n.d.). The State of

Pennsylvania sample MOU requires the SROs to follow the constitutional requirements for interviews and searches (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDOE], 2019).

Non-Law Enforcement Roles

Non-law enforcement SRO roles often line up with a law enforcement agency's community policing goals (Higgins et al., 2020). Mentoring is one of the non-law enforcement roles recommended by NASRO (n.d.); an SRO performs this role by providing guidance or assistance to students or their families on law enforcement issues (McKenna et al., 2016). An SRO may talk to a student about problems the student is encountering in school, at home, or with the justice system. The officer may offer advice, refer the student to an appropriate authority, speak with the parents to give assistance, or simply serve as someone to listen to the student's concerns (McKenna et al., 2016). In 2002, 83.8% of SROs provided some form of mentoring in high schools, and nearly 90% of SROs did so in middle schools (Coon & Travis, 2012). SROs have a unique opportunity to establish relationships with students, especially through the assumption of roles related to teaching, mentoring, and counseling (Devlin & Santos, 2022). However, Kennedy (2001) reminded those recruiting SROs that the transition from street to school is not easy, and the position requires someone who has received specialty training, is approachable, and will commit to school culture.

Hurst and Frank (2000) noted that young people have a more negative view of police than adults do. Fine et al. (2021) identified this problem as critical and found that the youth–police relationship had a U shape. The relationship is favorable for children aged 13–14 years, turns negative and reaches a minimum around ages 17–18, and then tends to become positive again for people in their early 20s. In their qualitative study,

Higgins et al. (2020) investigated SROs employed by four different law enforcement agencies and assigned to schools in a large urban district in the Midwest. Most of the officers had a considerable amount of street experience, but a few of them had received the SRO position as their first assignment. Higgins et al. identified an SRO strategy of seeking at-risk children in school, establishing bonds with them, providing them with guidance, and directing them and their parents to available community services. The overriding goal of building relationships with at-risk students and their families impacted the roles and priorities of the SROs.

This literature review identifies that SROs perform several non-law enforcement roles. Some SROs have told researchers that they felt pressure to mentor and teach students (McKenna & White, 2018). Teaching roles vary and may include formal classes on drugs and gangs; guest speaking in classrooms sharing law enforcement experiences, crime prevention techniques, and good citizenship principles; and crisis and active shooter training (McKenna & White,2018). R. K. James et al. (2011) noted that SROs strongly invested in teaching and mentoring often experience less school violence and crime than other SROs. Lynch et al. (2016) found that SROs identified a community policing goal of relationship building as motivation for performing non-law enforcement functions in schools. The SROs said they believed that improving relationships with the students could enhance overall community relationships. The SROs recognized the need to change students' negative perceptions of law enforcement, especially those of at-risk students. Na and Gottfredson (2013) longitudinally analyzed SSOCS data for 470 schools. According to the administrators who completed the surveys, most SROs performed enforcement duties, about three fourths were involved in mentoring, and fewer

than half were involved in teaching. Na and Gottfredson also reported that SRO presence was associated with reporting of crimes to police, and the presence of an SRO did not abate crime rates in schools with substantial numbers of students of low socioeconomic status. The researchers did not consider urbanicity.

Seattle hired Gill et al. (2016) to evaluate its School Emphasis Officer (SEO) program. SEOs, like SROs, were active duty sworn police officers. The SEOs aggressively intervened in incidents and received training to de-escalate problems. The researchers were interested in determining whether this program could be adapted as a trauma-informed program. The SEOs said that they believed middle school students were more receptive to counseling than high school students. They suggested it was difficult at the high school level to differentiate between a role emphasizing prevention and one focusing on enforcement, noting that some high school students are legally adults. The SEO program prioritized prevention and intervention in areas such as truancy and gang involvement. Law enforcement was not a priority. Problem solving and collaboration with school officials and other agencies (such as social services) were primary strategies. The officers had wide discretion, and they accentuated school culture over police culture. SEOs emphasized connections with the students, teachers, and parents, the cornerstone of their effort to build trust. In Gill et al.'s review of visible security measures, they added community liaison to the list of roles for SROs.

Kelly and Swezey (2015) conducted a cross-sectional survey in three east coast metropolitan areas of 53 SROs (out of 55 to whom surveys were distributed). Law enforcement functions dominated the time of 45% of the respondents. However, 51% indicated that their counseling or mentoring role was very time consuming, and 93% of

them said they were satisfied with the counseling or mentoring role and considered it almost as important as the law enforcement role. The SROs revealed that they spent extended time on this role every week. The SROs performed the teaching role less frequently than the counseling role, and it did not provide the same level of satisfaction as the counseling role. Female SROs were more satisfied with their duties and spent significantly more time on each of their roles than their male counterparts. Kelly and Swezey noted that researchers had not widely studied the roles of SROs. Understanding SRO roles may be a very important aspect of evaluating how SROs can most effectively contribute in their school (McKenna & White, 2018).

Glenn et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study to obtain information from SROs that might aid in improvement of policing in schools. Out of about 1,200 SROs in North Carolina, 456 responded to a request to furnish data. The original survey was part of a 2018 study by the North Carolina Center for Safer Schools. The survey asked open-ended questions and requested that participants provide three ways to improve the SRO programs. The researchers did not provide the urbanicity of the schools involved. Glenn et al. identified three key issues: the behavior of SROs, the roles of SROs, and the need for more policies and standardization of the programs. The researchers deemed specialized training in dealing with disorderly students to be a critical need. Glenn et al. concluded that SRO roles needed clarification and that SROs expected to provide counseling and teaching needed training for those duties. The researchers recommended that states should standardize the operation and evaluation of SRO programs. Barnes (2016) also interviewed SROs, and those SROs said that school administrators should learn about the most effective roles for SROs and ways to improve communications with

SROs.

      Curran et al. (2021) studied the full range of urbanicity and noted the purpose or purposes of putting an SRO in a school can vary from school to school; such purposes include to reduce crime, to teach, and to improve the safety and security of students and staff. Some police agencies prioritize establishing positive relationships with students (Curran et al., 2021). The purpose of an SRO's assignment influences their roles and priorities. Curran et al. (2021) presented a criminalization model and a support model that contrast a priority for the role of investigating criminal conduct with a priority for the roles of prevention, deterrence, and mentoring. They noted that drawing lines between the roles is complex.

Role Impact on Response

      McKenna and White (2018) explored how an SRO's roles in a school influence how they respond to incidents involving students. Role theory provided the framework for the design of their study. The site of the study was Texas, and the researchers included urbanicity as a control variable; however, they reported no findings concerning urbanicity. According to McKenna and White, SROs' roles guide their actions, and SROs who prioritize law enforcement may take very different measures to those taken by SROs who prioritize mentoring. The researchers noted that other researchers had focused on the presence of officers in schools but had not considered other variables that may influence officers' actions. For juveniles, the factors considered by officers in a response include age, demeanor, history, and nature of the offense. The researchers noted that officers in schools assumed expanded roles and often relied on their discretion to harmonize excessive, conflicting, and ambiguous role assignments. McKenna and White concluded

that role identification can affect how an SRO responds to student incidents. The researchers reported that researchers had often attempted to quantify the enforcement response to misconduct; however, McKenna and White found that most responses involved counseling, and SROs referred only serious offenses to the legal system.

Fisher and Devlin (2020) used data from multiple versions of the SSOCS but added a new variable to their review of SRO roles: the time expended by SROs performing each of seven identified roles. The researchers developed role profiles based on that assessment. The low engagement profile characterizes SROs with limited involvement in any of the roles. The full triad profile characterizes SROs who engage in all of the roles. A third profile, the reactionary profile, characterizes SROs who have significant involvement in roles associated with law enforcement but limited engagement in non-law enforcement roles. Fisher and Devlin found that reactionary SROs made formal records of more nonserious and property crimes than other SROs, mirroring findings reported by Devlin and Gottfredson (2018). Fisher and Devlin argued that this association may result from reactionary SROs actively looking for such incidents and thus detecting more of them.

SRO–Student Interactions Indicate Roles and Influence Outcomes

This section of the literature review reflects researchers' efforts to understand how the nature of SRO-student interactions vary according to the SRO's roles. The nature and frequency of interactions between SROs and students may be important indicators of how SROs perceive their roles and priorities (McKenna & White, 2018). For example, an SRO dealing with student misconduct who sees themselves in the role of an enforcer might choose to issue a citation or referral to a student, but an SRO in the role of a

mentor might choose, in the same circumstances, to interact supportively with the student or involve the assistance of a social agency (McKenna & White, 2018).

For decades, scholars have studied the relationship between adolescents and police. Griffiths and Winfrey (1982) studied the attitudes of Canadian and American adolescents toward police. They found that a complex set of variables impacted attitudes, but the principal predictor of an adolescent's attitude was the nature of the interactions they had had with police. Positive interactions tended to produce positive perceptions, and negative interactions tended to produce negative perceptions. Attitudes formed as a result of direct encounters or vicariously through experiences of family and friends. Jackson (2002) argued that perceptions young people have of police and perceptions police have of young people are often key to determining the outcomes of their interactions. Nivette et al. (2020) found that the stronger an adolescent's connection with their school was and the fewer negative contacts with police they had, the more they perceived law enforcement officers to have legitimacy.

Murphy (2015) studied youth and police interactions in Australia. She found that the importance of these interactions rests partly on the fact that young people are the citizens with whom police are most likely to interact. Youth–police interactions can result from a youth committing a crime, being the victim of a crime, or merely hanging out peers. Hanging out and doing nothing wrong can lead to complaints from members of the public and can result in police encountering young people and ordering them to move along. These kinds of negative encounters produce hostile reactions to police when police are just doing their job. Murphy suggested a way for police to have these encounters while still developing positive relationships with youth. Murphy argued that adapting

their role from enforcer to mentor and emphasizing respect and fairness in dealing with youths can strengthen such relationships. Hill et al. (2021) reported that assigning SROs to high schools provides an excellent opportunity for positive interactions between law enforcement and youth. Hill et al. indicated that opportunities to exchange ideas between groups often lead to the kind of trust necessary for strong relationships. They referred to a study conducted in Bristol, England, by Hewstone et al. (1992) in which SROs used non-law enforcement roles to emphasize positive interactions in school and in coaching sessions with students outside school to develop positive student perceptions of SROs. However, Hewstone et al. also reported that these positive perceptions did not transfer to law enforcement in general. Students saw SROs as more caring and friendly than typical police officers. Hill et al. posited that community police need to foster that same type of relationship with members of the public in general and at-risk youth in particular.

Curran et al. (2021) studied secondary data from a mixed methods study in a single school district in the Southeastern United States. The district contained schools in urban, suburban, town, and rural locations. They found that 87% of students felt safe in school. Students who interacted with an SRO tended to feel safer than other students, and 76% of all students credited an SRO with making them feel safer. Overall, the data indicated that students felt trust and comfort with an SRO, even those who had never interacted with an SRO (39%). This finding was consistent with the feeling toward law enforcement in the community. A substantial number (44%) of student participants said that despite having experienced interactions that led to them being disciplined, they trusted and found comfort in the presence of an SRO. The researchers did not find that increasing interactions reduced disciplinary actions; nor did the number of interactions

predict the number of youths referred to juvenile justice. Curran et al. (2021) posited that those findings were a result of many of the schools being in relatively affluent neighborhoods in which focus fell on external threats rather than student behavior. Also, the data were from elementary and middle schools rather than high schools, and students said that SROs were not involved in discipline and often counseled and helped students. Curran et al. (2021) indicated that the nature, quality, and frequency of an SRO's interactions vary and may partly define the role played by the SRO and their likely impact.

Theriot (2016) examined whether the number of interactions between an SRO and students affected the students' perceptions of the SRO and the students' bonding with the school. The site of their research was a school district in a city in the Southeastern United States. Students with limited or no contact with the SRO reported little exposure to violence. Students with more contact reported more exposure to violence and a more favorable view of the SRO. Interaction with the SRO was associated with positive perception of the SRO, and the stronger a student's school bond was, the more positive was their view of police. Theriot (2016) recognized the mixed feelings of students but recommended developing an SRO strategy to adopt roles that improve students' bonding with school and police. The more a student interacted with the SRO, the more confidence and trust the student had in the SRO. Negative student interactions with an SRO may increase acting out and reduce academic performance among students (Wolf, 2014).

It is unclear how much adolescents' attitudes toward neighborhood police transfer to their relationships with SROs. Wu et al. (2015) surveyed 1,300 students aged 13–18 years in several U.S. cities. They found race to be the principal dividing line regarding

perceptions of police: Black students generally expressed more negative attitudes about police than did White and Hispanic students. Many other factors also affected student students' attitudes, including their social bonds to family and school, their connections with crime as victims or offenders, their feeling of safety in their neighborhoods and around their schools, and their geographic locations. Students who felt safe, bonded to family and school, and who did not have negative interactions with police provided favorable evaluations of police.

Calvert et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative case study to explore perceptions of the reasons for violence between police and Black youths. The participants were Black youths (aged 12–24 years), police officers, parents of Black youths, educators, and youth services employees. All of the participants, with the exception of the police officers, agreed that there was no relationship between police and the Black communities they served. Many described the situation as a state of constant conflict based on lack of trust. An educator said this lack of trust was a part of Black culture. The police officers blamed the presence of many guns in the communities and the inability of Black youths to communicate effectively with police officers. Officers complained about lack of respect and failure of youths to follow lawful orders. One police officer related that some officers had no experience dealing with adolescents and the normal hostile responses they often give. As a result, these officers had an unrealistic expectation of how youths would respond to them. Parental perceptions were also a factor. One SRO organized a fishing trip in an effort to establish a relationship with students; however, some youths' parents prevented their children from participating because they did not trust the police. Calvert et al. offered some hope based on positive perceptions of police provided by some of the

Black youths who offered examples of positive interactions.

Based on the community policing concept, many SROs may view their job as one of "bridging the gap" (Higgins et al., 2020, p. 437), meaning they want to repair the relationships among police, community, and adolescents, especially at-risk adolescents. Non-law enforcement roles and support roles may be pathways for this effort (Higgins et al., 2020). Like interactions between neighborhood police and citizens, SRO–student interactions can quickly escalate from minor infractions to violent reactions (Li et al., 2016). Li et al. (2016) conducted 1,143 phone interviews with randomly selected individuals from the phone directory in Houston, Texas, and came to the same conclusion as other scholars: Negative interactions between police and citizens are much stronger than positive encounters. They found negative encounters had 3 times the strength of positive encounters in the survey responses concerning public satisfaction with the police. At each new encounter, prior negative encounters influence the presence of feelings of fear and mistrust in both parties before either utters a word.

Devlin and Santos (2022) explored the relationship between SRO presence at an individual's middle or high school and the individual's subsequent perceptions of police with respect to procedural justice. The researchers also factored into their study the various roles assumed by SROs. They found that SROs were in a unique position to influence the growth of young people's understanding of law enforcement and legal processes. This growth allowed students to perceive police positively. Granot et al. (2021) reported a similar finding from their cross-sectional survey of high school students from five schools in four school districts in a Northeastern state. Granot et al. found that when students believed SROs treated them fairly and gave them opportunities to explain

situations, those students were more likely than other students to respect and obey not only SROs but also neighborhood police.

Devlin and Santos (2022) surveyed college students at a state college in the Southeastern United States. Students with experience of SROs in middle school generally indicated a negative effect of that experience on their perceptions of police in later life. The pure enforcement role had the most negative effect, and the triad roles (law enforcement, teaching, and informal counseling) mitigated negative perceptions. With regard to SROs in high schools, there was a small but statistically significant positive relationship between SRO presence and students' subsequent perceptions of police. The enforcement role had no impact, but the triad roles did produce a statistically positive association. Devlin and Santos noted that the counseling and teaching roles provided interaction opportunities for SROs to develop bonds with students and demonstrate their trustworthiness.

Influences on Role Selection

Location

Role theory predicts that the location and context of a position impact the roles expected of and implemented by someone in that position (Biddle, 1979). Researchers have demonstrated that school demographics influence the roles SROs adopt in their schools. Influential demographic characteristics are size, school level, location, crime rate, and socioeconomic makeup of the student body (Finn & McDevitt, 2005; Jennings et al., 2011; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). Taylor et al. (2001) studied data collected from over 5,000 eighth-grade students in 11 locations around the United States. They found that perceptions of police in rural locations with predominantly White students were more

favorable than those in urban locations with mostly Black students. Crank (1990) found that in urban communities, arrest rates were higher among students of lower socioeconomic status and among students who mostly spoke a foreign language when with their families and in their neighborhoods than among other students. Arrest rates and the percentage of those in a neighborhood who are Black are typically positively correlated (Crank, 1990). Rhodes (2017) reported that SROs in urban locations tended to prioritize the law enforcement role. Devlin et al. (2018) found that rural schools had lower levels of bullying than urban schools. Relatively few researchers have investigated rural youths and their law enforcement relationships (Skaggs & Sun, 2017). Most relevant research has occurred in urban settings. Urban youths generally have negative perceptions of police based on their experiences or the experiences of those they know (Gau & Brunson, 2015). This environment fosters, among youth, a lack of trust and fear for their safety on the streets. Rural police often have more personal relationships with those in their communities, and these relationships shape their responses in their street encounters with adolescents (Hurst, 2007; Skaggs & Sun, 2017). This difference might account for the more favorable attitude of rural youths toward police relative to that of urban youths and consequently the roles the SROs develop in schools.

Crank (1990) used data from small and medium-sized police departments in Illinois and found that the variables that affected police style varied considerably between city and rural locations. Crank noted that the variables related to environmental and agency differences, and he found that the effects of environment and organization were greater in rural departments than in city departments. Feld (1991) found a disparity in the treatment of juveniles based on whether they were in urban, suburban, or rural locations.

Before Feld's research, most researchers investigating the impact of location focused on sentencing differences. Feld studied the entire process, beginning with a juvenile's contact with police, but his primary focus was on how juvenile courts dealt with initial referrals. He found that, relative to other counties, a larger percentage of charges filed against youths in suburban counties were for serious crimes, but more urban youths committed serious offenses than youths in other locations. Feld also noted the apparent existence of informal charging guidelines concerning youth offenses. He found that the focus in suburban counties was more on serious crimes and that those counties had the lowest percentages of referrals. Rural areas had the fewest serious crime charges, but the most status offenses petitioned. Feld found more formality in urban counties, which resulted in more formal (court) intervention than in other counties, while rural areas tended to rely on informal social controls. Feld concluded that location makes a difference in juvenile justice. School climate, which varies from school to school, is related to violence prevention and school bonding (J. Cohen et al., 2009).

Hunt et al. (2019) found that urban police in Oklahoma focused more on community policing than rural police did. SROs participated more in school discipline matters in rural schools than in urban schools. Rural SROs perceived that they had discretion to refer matters to the juvenile justice system. Urban SROs were more likely to have formalized processes in place to gain authority needed to make a referral. The purpose of these processes was typically to minimize the number of referrals. SROs accounted for only about 3% of all referrals in either rural or urban environments in a Southeastern state between 2009 and 2011 (May et al., 2016). However, schools in some jurisdictions have become the primary sources of referrals to the juvenile justice system

(Hughes et al., 2020).

Lynch et al. (2016), using data from the SSOCS, concluded that student socioeconomic disadvantage influenced the roles performed by SROs. SROs assigned to the most disadvantaged schools prioritized law enforcement duties. Lynch et al. reported that SROs in high schools and urban schools often made the same role choices as those in disadvantaged schools.

Skaggs and Sun (2017) attempted to identify which factors influenced police officers' attitudes and behavior in interactions with juveniles in a rural environment. Officers working for the five law enforcement agencies in a rural Kentucky jurisdiction received copies of a survey; 119 of those officers (96%) completed the survey. Gender, socioeconomic level, and seriousness of crime were related to use of an authoritarian police response (one relying on power to control). Officers who favored tough punishments were less authoritarian than other officers, and officers who favored rehabilitation were more authoritarian than other officers. The researchers interpreted the finding to mean that officers determined that the degree of support and comfort youth needed corresponded to the seriousness of their violations. Individual characteristics and training influenced officers' responses. Police officers' training concerning juveniles, both inside and outside agencies, affected their approaches; however, these effects were not the ones anticipated: Training increased the use of an authoritarian approach rather than a supportive approach. Skaggs and Sun noted that this finding probably reflected the tactical control strategies taught to police. Situation and individual SROs' characteristics impacted the use of authoritarian responses, and those variables plus organizational characteristics influenced the use of supportive responses. Skaggs and Sun did not find

that social disadvantage played a part in the choice of an authoritarian or supportive approach by police.

 Rhodes (2017) studied the nature of conventional and unconventional roles expected of SROs. Highlighting that police and school cultures contrast in many ways, the researcher attempted to determine how SROs integrate themselves into school environments. Many variables may influence an SRO's role selection, including personal characteristics, school crime, training, diversity, and length of time served as an SRO. Rhodes used a mixed methods approach, employing a survey and interviews. SROs described how they carry out their assignments in schools. SROs in urban schools and high schools tended to assume strong enforcement and order maintenance roles. Officers' participation in nontraditional police duties—such as mentoring, social work, and education—was almost significantly associated with their support for community policing. However, limited variance prevented prediction of these roles. SROs performed the mentoring role just as much as the enforcement role. The emphasis on mentoring was a positive sign that officers adapted to their school environments (Rhodes, 2017).

 Hunt et al. (2019) concluded from their survey study of public-school SROs in Oklahoma that rural schools were more likely than other schools to have inadequate resources, and minimal attention to rural schools had impeded their progress and standardization. Although most researchers investigating effects of location on policing have focused on comparison of rural and urban areas, the majority of students are in suburban schools (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020). As discussed in Chapter 1, suburban schools have been facing complex educational challenges in the face of changing demographics, to which SROs have also had to adapt (Diamond & Posey-

Maddox, 2020; Nijman, 2020).

Pigott et al. (2018) used secondary data from the SSOCS to examine the effect of SROs on the school-to-prison pipeline. Considering school location as a variable, they found that schools in suburbs and cities excluded students at higher rates than rural schools did.

Pequero et al. (2020) identified significant differences in school violence and allocated resources among urban, suburban, and rural locations. They reported that schools reflected the characteristics of the communities in which they were located—including crime, diversity, and socioeconomic conditions. For example, gun ownership was high among rural residents, but the rate of using guns to attack people was low. However, widespread policies regarding bringing weapons to school mean that the chance of a student bringing a weapon to school is relatively low across all locations. Pequero et al. emphasized that school location affects how people perceive security concerns. Those in urban locations worry most about conditions surrounding schools, and those in suburban and rural locations focus most on school facilities (Shelton et al., 2009). However, Shelton et al. (2009) defined suburban as affluent, cohesive, and relatively crime-free, a definition that differs from that used by Diamond and Posey-Maddox (2020), which accounted for increased minority presence and socioeconomic disadvantage in the suburbs.

Expectations

Cooper (2012) conducted a study based on role theory and noted that role expectations are an important factor in how police react; an officer's role expectations consist of expectations of others communicated to the officer and the officer's own

expectations. Expectations substantially affect SRO roles and vary widely among states, among school districts, and among individual schools (Rhodes, 2017). Expansion of expectations and duties has accompanied the substantial increase of law enforcement officers in schools (Ryan et al., 2018). The roles of an SRO sometimes align with the objectives of those who approved their placement in a school or schools such as the local school jurisdiction and the participating law enforcement agency (Jackson, 2002). Although its structure is not rigid, the community policing model calls for improving community attitudes toward police officers. Application of the community policing model to schools led to teaching programs such as the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program and anti-gang instruction (Jackson, 2002). The roles of SROs have evolved in part from corresponding community policing objectives (NASRO, n.d.).

Expectations regarding the roles of SROs come from their law enforcement agencies, the school systems, students, teachers, administrators, parents, the community, and the SROs themselves (McKenna & White, 2018).

According to role theory, the consequence of multiple groups with different expectations is role overload and conflict (Biddle, 1986). In the context of SROs, this circumstance results in SRO discretion becoming a major point of conflict among stakeholders (McKenna & White, 2018).

MOU. The U.S. Department of Justice (2019) addressed the substantial expansion of SRO programs and recommended having MOUs between school districts and SROs' 5law enforcement agencies to establish desired guidelines. An MOU provides some expectations of these entities regarding the performance, duties, and behavior of SROs.

Lesley (2021) acknowledged the complexity of expectations for SROs and noted

that an MOU should guide and establish the parameters of SRO roles for school

administrators and SROs. School disruptions and student misconduct do not condense

easily into a simple chart depicting the proper action to be taken by school officials or

SROs. Each individual offender and the nature of each particular incident require

consideration. Lesley suggested that a national MOU, a state-wide MOU, or even a

school district-wide MOU is probably not the answer because the individual climate and

characteristics of a school also require consideration. Lesley argued that school diversity

and crime rate are factors to consider when attempting to find the best outcomes for

students. Lesley explained that SROs should not add trauma to the lives of vulnerable

students in disadvantaged communities through strong-armed law enforcement

techniques and harsh out-of-school punishments. Special student needs require

identification, and strategies need development so that responses to such students can

bend in the direction of positive outcomes for them (Lesley, 2021). MOUs written for

individual schools allow for consideration of special needs and application of appropriate

available resources. Lesley noted that student behavior at times crosses the line from

disciplinary matter to criminal incident—that is the point at which an administrator

should call on the experience, authority, and discretion of a well-trained SRO to provide a

solution.

Some schools have manuals that define and clarify the roles, tasks, procedures,

and behaviors expected of SROs (Gottfredson et al., 2020). However, Gottfredson et al.

(2020) found that only 20% of the law enforcement agencies they studied in California

had such manuals. Although almost all had MOUs with associated school districts, only

10% of those MOUs provided guidance on controversial issues such as use of force, only

13% dealt with arrests on school grounds, and just one third established guidelines for formally reporting matters to law enforcement and handling disciplinary matters.

School Expectations. Rhodes (2015) studied urban locations across a Midwestern state and found that expectations regarding SRO performance varied from school to school, which impeded the ability of SROs to adapt to school culture. Rhodes reported that SROs often operated under burden of nearly impossible expectations and poorly defined roles. However, Rhodes expressed surprise that police officers on the streets expressed even more role uncertainty and less job satisfaction than SROs did. Concern about serious crime in a school may influence the emphasis given to the law enforcement role, and concern about the school-to-prison pipeline may influence adoption of more supportive roles, such as counselor or social worker (Rhodes, 2017).

Chrusciel et al. (2014) provided some insight into law enforcement executives' and school administrators' expectations concerning the impact SROs can have on violence in schools. A Gallup poll taken in 2012 shortly after the Sandy Hook mass shooting indicated that over 50% of people thought SROs could prevent such crimes, and another 34% believed SROs might be effective at preventing such crimes (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). Teachers surveyed in 2013 by the School Improvement Network believed armed guards could improve the safety of the schools and favored an increase in their presence. Chrusciel et al. sent surveys to law enforcement agencies and public schools in South Carolina. Most law enforcement executives and school principals thought SROs should be in schools, and both groups overwhelmingly believed they enhanced school safety. Most thought an SRO could minimize the number of victims in a shooting, but just 55% of police executives and 51% of school principals thought an SRO could

prevent a shooting. Principals agreed that cooperation among SROs, schools, and parents was the most significant facilitator of school safety (Chrusciel et al., 2014). These survey results are very instructive regarding the role expectations of various stakeholders in SRO programs.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the lack of agreement among school principals, SROs, and SRO supervisors regarding how much time SROs spend on the generic trio of roles recommended by NASRO indicates confusion, conflict, and ambiguity (Huber, 2014; Ivey, 2012; Lambert & McGinty, 2002). In these studies, researchers found that principals seem to prefer the law enforcement role to other roles for SROs and were not fully aware of how the SROs were implementing their roles (Huber, 2014; Ivey, 2012; Lambert & McGinty, 2002). There was no mention of the MOU role expectations in the three studies cited.

Researchers found that school principals expressed the need to frequently communicate with the SRO and understand their roles (May et al., 2014). Wolfe et al. (2017) described the results obtained from a cross-sectional questionnaire distributed to 1,086 South Carolina schools. Completed questionnaires from 487 schools (mostly completed by principals) indicated that principals believed SROs had legitimacy among staff members and students when they performed their roles in a fair, respectful, and unbiased manner. The principals noted that trust of SROs by students led to improved behavior and compliance. Principals wanted their SROs to be a strong presence (Wolfe et al., 2017).

Devlin and Fisher (2021) conducted a national longitudinal study to investigate whether SROs could reduce student-created disturbances in schools. Principals identified

racial tensions and bullying as two significant disturbances. Devlin and Fisher (2021) reported that their survey findings indicated that SROs did not affect those disturbances by their mere presence. However, SROs who employed the triad of roles, which included building relationships and teaching classes, reduced racial tensions and bullying

School expectations influence not only the roles performed by SROs, but also the time spent by SROs on those roles (Rhodes, 2017). Aligning various stakeholders' expectations regarding SRO roles is a complex balancing act (Ramos & Del Palacio, 2021). Gottfredson et al. (2020) queried SROs and school principals in California about their approaches to school discipline. The responses indicated that SROs generally took an approach oriented toward punishment, but 83% of principals preferred an approach oriented toward prevention.

Self-Expectations. Self-expectations play a major part in the establishment of SROs' roles (McKenna et al., 2016). Some officers essentially become surrogate parents to at-risk youth and go as far as providing clothing and supplies to students in addition to mentoring them. Many officers recognize the strained relationship between law enforcement and adolescents and place expectations on themselves to correct that situation (McKenna et al., 2016).

Cooper (2012) described circumstances in which police officers believe they have a duty to provide a safe environment but believe that to do so they must violate a rule, law, or constitutional right. Personal values and organizational culture can blur the lines between roles. Cooper suggested that part of the purpose of community policing is to turn some burdens associated with officers serving as guardians into joint responsibilities shared with the officers' communities (or schools). These situations may also influence

an SRO to adopt a social worker role to advocate with social service agencies on behalf of families (McKenna et al., 2016). An SRO can, in the final analysis, make a determination regarding appropriate actions and reactions consistent with their adopted roles and expectations (McKenna et al., 2016).

Discretion. Curran et al. (2020) found that SRO discretion and environmental circumstances affected SROs' decisions concerning their roles and priorities. An SRO's discretion influences their role determination and how they execute their roles (Bolger et al., 2018). For example, SROs exercising their law enforcement authority may use their discretion to arrest students and refer them to the juvenile justice system or to informally handle incidents and take advantage of community resources to work with students. The choices they make may depend on whether they prioritize the enforcement role or the support role.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Coon and Travis (2012) surveyed school principals and law enforcement administrators of SRO programs, and their findings indicate liberal use of SRO discretion and suggest a lack of communication between principals and SROs.

The officers studied by McKenna et al. (2016) noted that their unit chiefs, school administrators, and school boards established guidelines for the officers to follow; however, the officers used their discretion to decide how to respond when incidents occurred. The widespread use of individual discretion means that implemented roles can differ substantially from school to school. McKenna et al. did not highlight differences based on school location.

Impact of School Climate and Environment on SRO's Roles

A school's environment or climate is the quality of life within the school based on relationships among and between students and adults, respectful treatment, student conduct, rules and their enforcement, feeling safe in the school, having a bond with the school through engagement in activities, and the level of academic success and aspiration (Cornell et al., 2020).

Crime and Misconduct. Schools with substantial crime and misconduct problems usually influence SROs to focus on the enforcement role (Gottfredson et al., 2020). School administrators can anticipate the usual behavior problems of their students, but criminal acts also occur in schools. School crime emerged as a pressing problem in the 1990s, and school leaders wrestled with how to prevent crime and deal with existing crime (Jackson, 2002). Although overall crime has decreased since the 1990s, it has remained a concern (Irwin et al., 2020). Reported student victimization has decreased along with bullying, physical fights, and possession of weapons on school grounds. Some disturbing results from the Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2019 survey conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences and reported by Irwin et al. (2020) were that an increased number of students from the previous year reported being threatened with a weapon, being offered drugs, or feeling unsafe in certain areas while on school property. A higher percentage of urban students (6%) than rural students (4%) expressed fear about certain areas of their schools. Students aged 12–18 years experienced 764,600 victimizations at school in 2019—30 per 1,000 students, more than the 20 victimizations per 1,000 youths that occurred in the community. Bullying remained a significant problem in schools, with 22% of urban students and 28% of rural students reporting

experiencing bullying.

School crimes are usually relatively minor—stealing, drug crimes, assaults, bullying, and destruction of property—compared with the mass murders that prompted the substantial growth of SRO programs (Robers et al., 2015). However, Gerard et al. (2016) reported a possible connection between minor crimes involving threats and intimidation and students who committed mass atrocities. Most of the adolescents who committed mass shootings were depressed (Gerard et al., 2016). School shootings are traumatic, and in the decade 2009–2019, school shootings occurred in 177 schools in the United States, resulting in 356 victims, including 110 deaths (*10 Years*, 2019). Shootings have been increasing in number, and all types of communities have felt the effects. The annual number of school shootings reached an all-time high of 93 in the 2019–2020 school year, 43 of which resulted in deaths (Irwin et al., 2022).

Schools have taken additional security precautions including controlling access, employing security cameras, and requiring staff members and faculty to wear identification badges (Irwin et al., 2022). Carroll et al. (2010) evaluated the SRO program in Broward County, Florida, administered by the Broward Sheriff's Office. This longitudinal evaluation spanned the 12-year period from 1995 to 2007. The evaluators identified the SRO program as a community policing initiative with a crime prevention approach. They found collaboration between police and schools, an example of which was an educational program for students on safety and resisting drugs and alcohol. The evaluators noted that the SRO program administrators carefully managed the program's budget, and the program was associated with a long-term reduction in the cost of crime. However, the Broward County SRO program was severely criticized following the mass

shooting at the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School on Valentines Day in 2018 (Hatter, 2018). The SRO at MSD failed to enter the school and confront the shooter and stands charged with numerous felony counts of child neglect (Riess & Alonso, 2021). A school safety task force was created in Broward County following the shooting (Hatter, 2018). The task force noted philosophical difference in the role the SRO should play regarding referring problem students to the juvenile justice system. Florida increased the budget to hire additional SROs (Hatter, 2021).

School staff members and students have recognized SROs as a real force to counter school crime (R. K. James et al., 2011). SROs have the advantage of encountering adolescents under normal circumstances rather than just when they are under suspicion. The environment allows for normalization of interactions with youths and the prospect of building trust.

The Virginia Department of Education (2018) reported that during the 2016–2017 school year there were 147,155 incidents of student misconduct and crime. Most were minor incidents of disruption or insubordination, but the total included 3,983 incidents of harassment, 3,927 assaults (28% against staff), 1,221 instances of students bringing knives to school, 25 instances of students bringing guns to school, 2,040 thefts, and 7,225 instances of bullying and intimidation.

DCJS (2017b) recognized the need for SROs to support those addressing student misconduct but encouraged school officials to make every effort to handle ordinary discipline matters with school disciplinary processes without using SROs, unless required by absolute need or law. School policies and SRO directives should ensure all receive and understand this guidance.

Virginia law requires that school officials report certain acts of criminality to law enforcement agencies but does not require that charges be filed or that the school cannot handle through sanctions (Reports to school authorities and law enforcement, 2014).

Violence and Bullying. Scholars have not reached a consensus regarding the effect of SROs on school violence and bullying problems (May et al., 2016). However, they have all recognized that bullying is a substantial problem and that victims of bullying may resort to school violence (May et al., 2016).

Devlin et al. (2018) made a longitudinal assessment using 3 years of SSOCS data from 480 schools (of unidentified urbanicity). They found fewer incidents of bullying in schools with more students from minority groups, schools with more security cameras, and schools in rural areas than in other schools. However, SRO presence did not significantly impact the number of school bullying incidents. Swartz et al. (2015) used secondary data from a sample of 1,699 public and private schools (all grade levels) selected randomly for the SSOCS in 2007–2008. They found an association between SRO presence and reporting of serious violent crimes but not deterrence of such crimes. Robles-Pina and Denham (2012) conducted a mixed methods study of SRO interventions for bullying and found that improved preparation of SROs might strengthen their effectiveness with respect to mitigating bullying. Jennings et al. (2011) found a negative and statistically significant association between violent crime and SRO presence. Zhang (2019) found that presence throughout the year of SROs did deter violent crime and disorder. Paez and Colvin (2020) reported that SROs generally intervene when they identify bullying. Kupchik and Farina (2016) argued that SROs could improve school safety if they identified and intervened in bullying incidents.

Broll and Lafferty (2018) studied bullying and described the role of an SRO as a guardian, as defined by routine activities theory. This theory concerns crimes of opportunity (Bernard et al., 2016). The theory anticipates that crime can be expected to occur when there is the intersection of a suitable target, a willing offender, and the absence of a guardian (Bernard et al., 2016). Broll and Lafferty used the cross-sectional 2006 SSOCS completed by school principals. The survey differentiated between security officers and SROs and measured the frequency of bullying (the dependent variable) on a 5-point Likert scale. SRO presence served as the independent variable. Other security measures acted as control variables. Broll and Lafferty found that the presence of SROs was not associated with frequency of bullying. However, training teachers in behavior management was negatively associated with bullying in middle schools and, to a lesser degree, high schools. Schools with more violent acts had more incidents of bullying. Behavior modification resulting from teacher training may reduce the number of students motivated to bully others, and that approach may be more effective at reducing the number of severe incidents of violence than SRO presence. These results emphasize the need to consider elements of routine activities theory that may guide deterrence of bullying.

Paez and Colvin (2020) conducted a cross-sectional survey of 214 SROs in eight regions of Florida (of unidentified urbanicity) and found that SROs' personal characteristics did not influence intervention decisions. They also found no relationship between SROs' perceptions of the importance of their role in preventing bullying and their decisions to intervene in incidents. Paez and Colvin indicated that influences on SROs' decisions to intervene were school position regarding the role of SROs in

bullying, SROs' training, and SROs' increased awareness of the impact of bullying. The researchers indicated that a problem with the SSOCS was that it called for "yes" or "no" responses concerning intervention for bullying but did not provide an explanation of the reasons for the responses.

DCJS (2017b) advised that although corporal punishment was unlawful in Virginia, SROs could use physical restraint when necessary to prevent physical harm or to obtain possession of a dangerous weapon or controlled substance. DCJS (2017b) made it clear that such physical intervention could occur only according to the policies and procedures of an SRO's law enforcement agency.

Discipline. Glenn et al. (2019) concluded that SROs should not deal with school discipline, for which school officials should retain responsibility. That finding is consistent with the conclusion of Na and Gottfredson (2013) that SROs cause conflict in school role responsibilities when they become too involved in disciplinary matters. NASRO agreed with that position and recommended that school leaders insist that SROs avoid involvement in disciplinary incidents and decisions (Lynch et al., 2016; NASRO, n.d.). However, Barnes (2016) found SROs in his study who expressed frustration that the educators used them to control classroom behavior.

Fisher et al. (2020) found that 90% of SROs they studied said they did not participate in disciplinary matters under the MOUs between schools and their agencies. SROs maintained their culturally ingrained values of being suspicious and anticipating danger; however, they were very willing to stand aside and allow school staff members to deal with disciplinary matters. The researchers surmised that this was because SROs knew they had to work in concert with school staff and therefore did not react as they

would have as police officers on the street. Curran et al. (2019) identified an apparent lack of clarity regarding SROs' involvement in discipline. These researchers studied two school districts in the Southeast. The majority of the 47 SROs they interviewed said they were not involved in formal discipline; however, the SROs sometimes issued verbal warnings or personally counseled students in connection with disciplinary matters. One officer said a teacher summoned him to a classroom to deal with a student refusing the teacher's instructions. The student obeyed the SRO, but the SRO told the researchers that he would have probably arrested the student if the student had not obeyed. The researchers noted that discipline could be ambiguous for SROs, but the SROs they interviewed tended to allow their MOUs to dictate their responses. Curran et al. (2019) concluded that the SROs perceived their role as one of protecting students rather than policing criminals.

SROs have found involvement in discipline is complex and confusing, which means it is essential to carefully define SROs' roles regarding their involvement in discipline (Curran et al., 2021). The findings suggest that SROs should not focus on noncriminal misconduct.

School-to-Prison Pipeline. Critics of SROs have said that an unintended consequence of having police officers in schools is an increase in the number of incidents of student misbehavior referred to the criminal justice system that would previously have required only school discipline, resulting in criminalization of student conduct (Parker et al., 2014). Fitzgerald et al. (2019) commented that the term "school-to-prison pipeline" has become a common name for this phenomenon. A referral is a process of officially sending information concerning an incident involving a juvenile to the juvenile justice

system in the city or county with jurisdiction (Elrod & Ryder, 2021). The increase in the number of SROs intensified concern by some that SROs were increasing the number of referrals (Fedders, 2021).

Parker et al. (2014) detailed incidents in a rural North Carolina school they identified as criminalizing school discipline problems. They described incidents in which 12-year-old children were charged with misdemeanors for crimes such as stealing an ice cream bar from the cafeteria and throwing a cookie in the cafeteria. The researchers concluded that the SRO program might be responsible for an increase in the number of charges filed for nonviolent behavior matters in school and recommended that SROs should not have sole responsibility for decisions to refer matters to the juvenile justice system. Critics of SRO programs have cited excessive use of force by SROs on students as a reason police should not be in schools (Ryan et al., 2018). Ryan et al. (2018) concluded in their study of issues with SROs that designating SROs to handle student misbehavior has the unintended consequence of criminalizing disciplinary matters. Robers et al. (2015) published the Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2014 indicating that there had been 260,000 referrals of students to police, 92,000 arrests, and 70,000 instances of students being physically restrained. Ryan et al. recommended mandating SROs to stay out of school discipline that does not involve criminal matters.

Heise and Nance (2021) noted that many people take it for granted that SROs contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. These researchers set the stage for their study by explaining that lack of resources in schools had led many administrators to delegate student discipline to SROs, which had resulted in criminalization of matters traditionally handled with school discipline. State legislatures have contributed by passing laws

requiring schools to report certain kinds of student misconduct to law enforcement. In addition to serious violent misconduct, some states have required the reporting of possession of alcohol, theft, destruction of property, and disorderly conduct. These requirements prompted one journalist to claim that adolescence had become illegal (Ripley, 2016). Ripley (2016) recorded that 22 states had made it illegal to act in a way typical of teenagers. Even activities such as burping and using cell phones in class have become criminalized in some districts (Heise & Nance, 2021).

Zero-tolerance policies originated in the 1980s with the initial aim of deterring students from bringing firearms to school (Curtis, 2014). By the late 1990s, about 90% of schools implemented these policies for firearms, drugs, alcohol, and violence. Curtis (2014) noted that these policies increased the number of referrals to the juvenile justice system. Curtis also indicated that zero-tolerance policies often required schools to report crimes to law enforcement, and schools also reported disruptive behavior to law enforcement in many instances. Curtis reported that the presence of SROs in schools increased the number of referrals to the juvenile justice system.

This literature review reflects that researchers have yielded conflicting results regarding the efficacy of having SROs in schools and whether they contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Theriot (2009) found an association between SRO presence and delinquency involving behavior problems, such as disorderly conduct. Na and Gottfredson (2013) reported that the findings of their study did not indicate that SROs enhanced school security but did indicate that SROs influenced reporting of more nonviolent minor crimes. However, Na and Gottfredson did not find that SRO presence increased reporting of serious crimes, impacted discipline, or had a disproportionate

effect on children belonging to minority groups or those with special needs. In their conclusions, Na and Gottfredson favored more research and increases in security measures other than SROs.

Chan et al. (2019) reviewed 44 litigations brought against SROs. The courts found the actions of SROs and school authorities acceptable in 83% of those cases. However, the researchers noted that because 61% of the cases involved a student's arrest, concern had arisen among some scholars and segments of the public that SROs contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline. Chan et al. argued that SRO interventions increased negative encounters with students and produced larger numbers of referrals to the juvenile justice system. Gottfredson et al. (2020) concluded from their findings that increasing the number of SROs increases the numbers of weapon and drug crimes and the incidence of schools excluding students. Lynch et al. (2016) concluded based on their results that SROs tend to adopt an enforcement-oriented role in schools with disadvantaged student bodies and expressed a concern that the approach could increase referrals. Fisher and Devlin (2020) suggested that SROs who focus on enforcement indirectly contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline by detecting more crime. They also noted that the presence of an SRO in a school provides school officials with an insider from the juvenile justice system.

However, other researchers did not link SROs and the school-to-prison pipeline. Pigott et al. (2018) studied secondary data from the 2009–2010 SSOCS and found that the presence of an SRO did not increase the frequency of referral of matters to police. Sullivan and Hausman (2017) focused on SROs in Kentucky high schools and did not find any statistically significant difference in the number of referrals between schools

with SROs and those without SROs. These researchers found that an SRO's roles and personal approach to students affected their handling of incidents. Fisher and Devlin (2020) reported a similar finding, that SRO roles affected the crimes reported to the police or juvenile justice system. May et al. (2016) found that referrals for status offenses were more likely in rural schools than in urban schools, and referrals for serious offenses were more likely in urban schools than in rural schools. The researchers reported that SROs had very limited responsibility for the school-to-prison pipeline because SROs accounted for only about 3% of all referrals in either rural or urban environments. Fitzgerald et al. (2019) studied referrals to the juvenile justice system from 54 public schools in Oklahoma. Male, Hispanic, and Black students consistently received referrals at higher rates than other students did. In some cases, students from neighborhoods of low socioeconomic status and students with special needs also received referrals at higher rates than other students did. However, Fitzgerald et al. did not find that SROs increased the number of referrals.

DCJS (2017b) acknowledged media stories of overly aggressive actions by SROs and concern about the criminalization of minor infractions. DCJS (2017b) emphasized the difference between misconduct and crime and stated that SROs should not become involved in incidents that violate school rules but not the law. DCJS (2017b) took a strong position, warning those working in schools and law enforcement not to criminalize truancy but to recognize it as a warning that a youth is experiencing adjustment problems. DCJS (2017b) cited a finding that truancy in children under the age of 12 years is a strong predictor of delinquent acts. Truancy also predicts drug use, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school (DCJS, 2017b).

Heise and Nance (2021), using data from the 2015–2016 SSOCS, reported that the presence of SROs in schools increased the likelihood of student incidents being reported to law enforcement. That finding remained significant even when the researchers controlled for certain other variables. However, some of the variables they controlled for had important impacts on the referral of incidents; for example, the number of referrals was higher in large and urban schools and in schools with high levels of disorder than in other schools. There was an association between the higher percentage of economically deprived students in a school and the number of reports to law enforcement of nonviolent incidents. Stevens et al. (2021) reported that certain school climate issues—such as racial stress, bullying, and classroom disorder—were associated with the number of nonviolent and violent incidents reported to law enforcement.

During the 2011–2012 school year, Virginia had a rate of referral of students to the juvenile justice system three times the national average (Ferriss, 2015; Virginia Commission on Youth, 2019). Referral rates in Virginia for students with disabilities and those belonging to minority groups were disproportionately high. The Virginia legislature expressed concern about the referrals and took action that included requiring SROs to receive training, prohibiting the charging of students with disorderly conduct for school misconduct, and eliminating the requirement to report student misdemeanors to law enforcement (Shillingford & Sczerzenie, 2020; Solomon, 2020). In February 2022, the Virginia legislature reintroduced the reporting requirement, and principals were again required to report all incidents that could be misdemeanors to police (Mitchell, 2022). Nearly 40% of states have taken steps to regulate school discipline and limit referrals (Mittleman, 2018).

DCJS (2017b) recommended some points for law enforcement personnel and SROs to consider when deciding how to resolve an incident involving a student: the nature of the offense; the student's record, age, attitude, and intent; violence; and the availability of an appropriate resource to which to divert the student. DCJS (2017b) emphasized diversion over the criminal justice system. However, students involved in felonies, weapons crimes, serious violence, and repetitive criminal activity usually require formal handling (DCJS, 2017b). DCJS (2017b) reported that approximately 14% of juvenile matters handled by law enforcement in Virginia ended up before juvenile court intake officers. Reducing referrals has been a goal in Virginia and has impacted SRO roles through the associated strategy of keeping SROs out of discipline matters and requiring filtering of all referrals to SROs through school administrators.

School Diversity. School sanctions have disproportionately affected students belonging to minority groups (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Ramey (2015) found that a student's likelihood of punishment was higher in disadvantaged schools than in other schools. Parker et al. (2014) studied criminalization of behavior in a rural North Carolina middle school and found that Black students made up 43% of the school population but accounted for 65.4% of formal referrals. Black and Hispanic students have less regard for police than White students do (Wu et al., 2015). Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) found that student perceptions of SROs differed significantly based on their race, with White students having the most positive perceptions and Black students having the least positive. Pentek and Eisenberg also found that Hispanic students reported negative perceptions of SROs more than white students.

Fitzgerald et al. (2019) found in their study of referrals in Oklahoma public

schools that the schools with the highest percentages of students belonging to minority groups and disadvantaged students had the highest referral rates. SROs in those schools usually focused on enforcement and were more likely than SROs in other schools to experience racial tension and gang presence (Devlin & Fisher, 2021). Devlin and Fisher recommended that SROs avoid focusing only on enforcement but conceded that SROs are unlikely, regardless their role, to make much difference to school disturbances. Schlesinger (2018) found that the emergence of diversion programs has led police to refer young people to whom they would in the past have only issued a warning. She emphasized the need for those making jurisdictions' risk assessments to make sure that those assessments do not contribute to disproportionate impacts on those belonging to minority groups. Fisher et al. (2020) expressed concern that SRO actions could change people's perceptions of non-White children from students to offenders. SROs in schools with significant student populations from minority groups are more likely than SROs in other schools to approach their job from an enforcement perspective (Fisher et al., 2020).

Sullivan and Hausman (2017) examined the impact of SROs on crime rates in Kentucky high schools. They discovered that when race was a covariate, SRO presence had no significant effect on crime rates in these schools. The researchers conceded that their result differed from those of other researchers, such as Theriot (2009). Bracy (2011) conducted an ethnographic study in two mid-Atlantic high schools (of unidentified urbanicity). When asked about whether certain groups of students in their schools received treatment different from that of other students, most students acknowledged differential treatment, but most also believed differential treatment was based on a student's athletic participation; very few said students received different treatment based

on race. However, according to Bracy, there were clear indications that race influenced some disciplinary actions.

Heise and Nance (2021) aimed to explore the disproportionate impact of the school-to-prison pipeline on students belonging to minority groups, students from low-income families, and students belonging to other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. They used secondary data from the 2015–2016 SSOCS. However, they discovered the SSOCS data did not allow identification of students reported to law enforcement. They therefore could not empirically support the hypothesis that law enforcement personnel disproportionately handled incidents in a formal manner for those belonging to vulnerable groups. Heise and Nance concluded that ample anecdotal evidence supports the existence of this phenomenon, despite the absence of empirical support.

Ramey (2015) found elevated rates of arrest and referral in schools with substantial numbers of Black students and high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students. Curran et al. (2020) looked at this racial issue from the perspective of SRO presence in two medium-sized Southern suburban districts. The schools in these districts varied in their racial and ethnic makeup and socioeconomic conditions. Curran et al. (2020) concluded that SROs in these schools evaluated risks and their roles and priorities without consideration of the racial and economic composition of the student bodies.

Fisher et al. (2022) conducted a mixed methods study of SRO roles in a large Midwestern school district. The qualitative portion of the study involved interviews of 26 of the district's 30 SROs; 24 of those interviewed had assignments to secondary schools. The researchers found that the SROs' threat assessments varied based on school racial

composition. SROs described problems in predominately White schools as misbehavior and expressed minimal concern about criminal conduct. In schools where White students did not predominate, SROs described more serious crimes involving weapons and violence. SROs characterized the schools with crime problems as having students from problem families and problem neighborhoods.

Impacts of Police Culture on SRO's Roles

This section looks at the research that explores the difficulty for SROs', who trained and worked as police officers, perceiving their SRO role as anything other than a law enforcement. SROs have conflicting goals of improving relationships with students and serving as enforcers within schools (Javdani, 2019). McKenna and Pollock (2014) studied potential role conflicts for SROs resulting from their prior experience as patrol officers and their law enforcement training. The researchers reported that most police officers begin with a positive attitude of service to their fellow citizens, but many evolve to adopt a cynical view of their fellow citizens. McKenna and Pollock (2014) described the characteristics of traditional police culture as officers trusting only other officers, the prominence of police authority, the need to stay safe, and an attitude that the job requires an "us against them" (p. 171) attitude.

McKenna and Pollock (2014) noted that serious consequences can develop from the collision of police culture and school culture. The purpose of these researchers was to reinforce the need for specialized SRO training. They gathered data from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice concerning school crime from 1992 to 2011. Three hypothetical scenarios represented ethical conflicts: one involving disorderly conduct, one involving bullying, and a weapons violation that an

SRO would likely confront. The researchers then provided an analysis of the ethics in each scenario. They noted the inadequacy of research available regarding how schools handle minor school infractions with SROs. McKenna and Pollock compared formal and informal handling of matters in the hypothetical scenarios. This comparison confirmed to the researchers that SROs encounter conflicts they lack training to handle.

A role conflict exists between being a police officer on the street and serving as an SRO (Fisher et al., 2020). Fisher et al. (2020) found that, based on their interviews of suburban school SROs, the police culture elements of suspicion and being prepared for danger served SROs well. SROs understood the difference between their duties and the duties they had on the street and indicated that ensuring the safety of students and staff members was their primary goal—not dealing with misbehaving students.

Higgins et al. (2020) reported that SROs in their study could establish bonds with at-risk children. They made referrals to various community organizations able to assist these students and their families. However, an SRO cannot stray too far from their law enforcement role. At times, SROs used their close relationships to develop intelligence about criminal activity that eventually led to investigations and arrests. Higgins et al. expressed concern that this kind of outcome could interrupt relationships and create trust problems. This is the kind of conflict SROs may encounter.

In the qualitative portion of their mixed methods study of a large Midwestern school district, Fisher et al. (2022) did not identify the individual roles of the 26 SROs interviewed but did identify their priorities. The SROs said they attempted to operate while remaining unpredictable, established a physical presence, and made efforts to build relationships with students. Using their police training and experience, the SROs

evaluated threats they could anticipate or for which they should be prepared. The SROs identified students as their first existing threat. They described an often stressful, disrespectful, and disorderly school environment in which they feared losing control of students. The SROs blamed parents, the neighborhood, and a lenient school district for these problems. They also identified an external intruder threat and an environmental threat. They minimized the possibility of an external intruder but were sure they were prepared for such an event. They seldom mentioned environmental threats, those outside school; those discussed related most often to angry parents, reckless driving in the parking lot, or those with no connection to the school roaming school property.

Training

No national standardized training requirements exist for SROs (Ryan et al., 2018). Counts et al. (2018) found guidelines and legislation at the state level inadequate to operate SRO programs. They said that not all states had established SRO training requirements. They proposed training that addresses dealing with children and adolescents in school settings beyond basic and advanced courses.

NASRO has become the largest provider of basic and advanced SRO training (NASRO, n.d.). At the time of writing, the association's basic course provided 40 hours of instruction to officers regarding what the SRO position involves and tools to aid establishment of relationships with students and staff members (NASRO, n.d.). Other topics included threat response, child brain development, and dealing with children with special needs. The advanced training was a 24-hr course on implementing the triad model of the SRO as a law enforcement officer, counselor or mentor, and teacher. The association also offered specialized training in adolescent mental health, a course for

SRO supervisors, and a course on crime prevention through environmental design. NASRO (n.d.) recommended that officers assigned as SROs should have at least 3 years of patrol experience and receive the NASRO training.

Ryan et al. (2018) found that SROs trained with NASRO courses and those without that training used diversion programs to handle conflict behaviors with about the same frequency. However, other SRO characteristics affected the use of diversion. SROs belonging to minority groups, female SROs, and SROs with higher levels of education were more likely than other SROs to divert students involved in behavior issues away from the formal juvenile justice system. Ryan et al. recommended further study of this topic because the scenarios they presented to SROs in their research needed refinement. Glenn et al. (2019) argued that SRO roles needed clarification and that SROs need training as mentors and teachers if they are to perform those roles.

Skaggs and Sun (2017) found that officers who received internal or external training in juvenile issues were more strident in their interactions with youths than were officers without such training. McKenna and Pollock (2014) found that some of the police training those officers received, both initially and once in service, was insufficient to prepare them to work in the school environment. These researchers argued that SROs needed additional training to prepare them to deal with juveniles in schools and focus on alternatives to arrest and referral. McKenna and Pollock recommended ethics training as a compulsory part of initial SRO training. They also indicated that careful selection of SROs is critical to SRO success and that hiring decisions should involve police agencies in concert with representatives of responsible school systems.

Martinez-Prather et al. (2016) found that many SROs believed they needed more

training in juvenile law and school policies. Mandating such requirements has been difficult because nobody has kept a central record of how many SROs there are and who they work for; 31 states have not required youth development training for SROs, and those that have introduced such a requirement have not kept records of exactly what training SROs have received (Morris, 2021). The director of the Indiana School Resource Officers Association called for required training for SROs (NASRO, 2021). He indicated that some SROs were working in schools without having received any training specific to their roles. Parker et al. (2014) concluded based on their research that placing SROs without proper training in schools almost guarantees an increase in the number of referrals to the juvenile justice system.

Skaggs and Sun (2017) studied variables that might influence a police officer's attitude and behavior in interactions with juveniles in a rural environment. The authors reported that the type of police training officers received regarding juvenile policing did not facilitate supportive behavior toward juveniles. Hunt et al. (2019) studied SROs in urban and rural locations in Oklahoma and found that basic SRO (or NASRO) training was more common among urban SROs than among rural SROs, but rural SROs had more specialized training than urban SROs did, with the exception of implicit bias training.

Gottfredson et al. (2020) found that 80% of the California law enforcement agencies they studied indicated that they required some SRO training, and 67% of SROs studied said they had completed some specialized training. However, only 25% had received any regular or follow-up training. For 90% of SROs, their training focused on security, juvenile legal issues, mental health intervention, and crisis response. Over half of the SROs had received some training in counseling and teaching skills and in how to

work effectively with school staff members and parents. Only half had received training concerning adolescent development and behavior and understanding their perspectives.

Sections 9.1-114.1 and 9.1-102 of the Virginia Code established mandatory training for certification of SROs that includes de-escalation, establishing control without restraints, cultural diversity and implicit bias, working with students with disabilities, mental health issues, drug abuse issues, and child development (Legal Aid Justice Center, 2020). DCJS (2017b) recommended all those courses and also school-specific training and training in cultural competence to help SROs work with school staff and students. DCJS (2017b) also recommended joint training sessions with school administrators, staff members, and SROs to enhance their familiarity with each other's roles and responsibilities.

The "Trauma-Informed Training Program" is an example of specialized training.

Trauma-Informed Training Program. Many students have a great deal of trauma in their lives (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). They bring their experiences of such traumatic incidents as abuse, neglect, crime, divorce, parental incarceration, and family deaths to school with them from their neighborhoods. These same students often experience more trauma at school because of bullying, peer rejection, and educational failure.

Inadequately trained SROs can add further trauma to the lives of these students (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). SROs also have a great deal of pressure on them, which has substantially increased since the murder of George Floyd and against the background of regular mass shootings in schools. Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) indicated that SROs must receive trauma-informed training. Such training teaches school staff members and SROs

to realize the presence of, recognize, respond to, and resist further trauma in the lives of children. Forber-Pratt et al. studied 95 school security personnel (35 of whom were SROs) from large Southwestern urban schools. The researchers reported that although a typical SRO receives an assignment to a single school, the surrounding community and society impact their roles in that school every day. Forber-Pratt et al. insisted that SROs must understand their local communities and play a part in getting community members involved in their schools. The researchers also argued that every SRO should strive to earn the trust of teachers and administrators while becoming involved in students' lives.

Trauma-informed training helped participating SROs understand the need to show more empathy and compassion during their interactions with students (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). The SROs also learned to see that each child they encounter is unique. All participants indicated that they perceived their roles as extending far beyond those of law enforcement, teaching, and counseling. They understood the need to build relationships and that recognizing and dealing with trauma can aid detection and prevention of violence. The SRO position is complicated because SROs must attempt to balance so many different roles and responsibilities.

Summary

SROs have been in U.S. public schools since the 1950s, but their presence and prominence have dramatically increased since the 1980s in response to an increase in juvenile crime in the 1980s and early 1990s, the mass school shootings that began in 1999, and federal funding that became available to hire school security (Glenn et al., 2019). No national standards have appeared for SRO hiring qualifications, roles, training, or evaluation (Ryan et al., 2018). Some states have established requirements, while others

have not (Counts et al., 2018). Expectations for SROs, including law enforcement and non-law enforcement roles, have continued to vary from school to school (Rhodes, 2017). The roles SROs adopt likely affect how they handle student interactions (McKenna & White, 2018). SROs may encounter overload, conflict, and lack of clarity in their roles (Glenn et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021).

The literature yielded information concerning the differences between urban and rural SRO roles but no information comparing suburban schools' SRO roles. The influence of location on role development has remained primarily unexplored except in urban schools, where researchers have reported that the law enforcement role is dominant (Rhodes, 2017). The literature provided some information about the process of SRO determination of roles and priorities, such as that SROs rely on MOUs between school authorities and law enforcement agencies to define the scope of their discretion; however, researchers have not thoroughly explored how SROs develop their non-law enforcement roles. I will examine the thought processes of SROs concerning the roles and priorities they have adopted. In the proposed study setting, both law enforcement agencies adopted the same MOU.

Research Questions

Five research questions guided this qualitative methods study:

1. How do SROs perceive their roles and priorities and do their perceptions vary according to location? (SRO and supervisor interviews)

2. How do SROs and their supervisors describe the process of establishing SRO roles and priorities? (SRO and supervisor interviews)

3. How do SROs describe their interactions with students at different school

   locations? (SRO interviews)

4. How do the roles described in the MOU controlling an SRO compare with

   how the SROs describe their roles? (SRO and supervisor interviews, MOU)

5. What percentage of their time do SROs estimate they spend on each of their

   roles? (SRO interviews)

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the participants and their selection, the instruments employed, the procedures used for gathering data and the analysis of the data.

Strategies of Inquiry

Qualitative research methods were used to obtain directly from SROs a deeper understanding of how they perceived their roles and priorities, the reasons behind their perceptions, and the potential effect of location on their perceptions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that qualitative research places an emphasis on "learning about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information" (p. 182). The qualitative process provided opportunities for one-to-one interviews and the opportunity to gauge participants' reactions and responses to interview questions and ask follow-up questions to further explore responses. The design included two embedded descriptive elements to provide additional insight (Bachman & Schutt, 2020): SROs completed a short descriptive questionnaire before their interviews, and one qualitative interview question elicited estimated percent responses from SROs. Qualitative components included document analysis such as the SROs' MOU to allow me to understand the expectations of the school system and the law enforcement agencies regarding the roles and behaviors of SROs. Analysis of documents describing the climate of each school allowed me to better interpret SROs' use of their environment to identify their roles and priorities. Multiple perspectives were uncovered, allowing for a deeper understanding of the issue.

The study was a collective case study based on multiple cases. A collective case study highlights a specific issue but relies on multiple cases to demonstrate various

perspectives in different locations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each case was an individual

SRO assigned to a separate Virginia secondary school: five described as fringe rural

(rural) by the school district profile and five described as large suburban (suburban).

Another two cases represented SROs assigned to alternative high schools. One for at-risk

students and the other for high performance students in the sciences and technology.

Additionally, two SRO supervisors were interviewed for their perceptions of SRO roles

and the effect of location. The focus of a case study is not causation but is instead

explanation of an issue, and multiple cases provide opportunities for cross-case analysis

(Bachman & Schutt, 2020). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that it is critical to identify

the object of a case study in the early stages of research. My intent was to discover how

the SROs in these schools perceived their roles and priorities and the potential influence

of location on those perceptions.

Participants

The participants were sworn law enforcement officers from two law enforcement

agencies serving as SROs in high schools within a single school district. The SRO

participants represented a convenience sample because they serve as SROs in schools

purposefully selected based on their location (rural and suburban). Purposeful selection of

the schools was for creating a sample with maximum diversity of school characteristics

within the school district, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). The Virginia school

district includes six fringe rural high schools, one fringe town high school, and 12 large

suburban high schools. While Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated that case studies

usually include four or five cases, this study was guided by the concept of saturation or

the point at which new information about the categories was not being generated from the

interviews (Bachman & Schutt, 2020). Saturation was reached through the interviews of the eleven SROs and two SRO supervisors in the county responsible for the participant SROs.

Procedures

Data was collected through in-person interviews, a descriptive questionnaire, and document reviews. Institutional review board approval was obtained, and no aspect of the proposed study took place prior to receiving approval (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Written permission to contact potential participants was received from each of the law enforcement agencies. In each instance, an email to the agencies' leadership described the purpose and process involved in the study and the voluntary nature of participation for everyone. During phone calls with the agencies' leadership, I presented the purpose and focus of the proposed study. In the case of one of the law enforcement agencies, a follow-up phone briefing was provided to the senior official in charge of the Investigative Division. The emails explained that each participant would be briefed concerning the purpose and intent of the study and interviewed only if they sign the consent form. The informed consent form (Appendix A) was attached to the email and explained that participation was voluntary, the purpose of the study, the way the interviews would be conducted, the data that would be collected, the confidentiality of the participants, any potential benefits/risks of the study, and that participants could discontinue their participation at any time. Both agencies granted permission to reach out to potential participants and provided a letter to the IRB agreeing that the interviews could be conducted in the law enforcement agency offices.

Contact information for the intended participants from both agencies was received

by email. The agencies insisted on making initial contact with the SROs to advise them of the study and their approval for the SROs to voluntarily participate. I received a contact list from each agency and sent each of the potential participants information by email concerning the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. A participant consent form (Appendix A) presented the purpose of the study and how it would be conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019). The form invited potential participants to ask questions as the study progresses and offered to share the study's findings, upon request, once they are approved. Finally, the form explained that there were no known benefits to the individual participants from this study, and the only known risk was the loss of confidentiality. The steps taken to ensure confidentiality were explained. The participants were requested to indicate that they consented to participate by signing the informed consent form. Before the scheduled SRO interviews, each SRO received the URL for a short descriptive questionnaire on SurveyMonkey (Appendix B), which they were asked to complete prior to their interview.

All research records obtained in this study were securely stored and will remain so for a minimum of three years from the end of the study, as required by the Institutional Review Board at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), on a secure, password-protected computer in a password-protected folder on Microsoft Office 365. Paper documents are retained in a locked file cabinet in my home. Any information obtained in confidence or that might be harmful to a participant was aggregated in the report to protect participants' identities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study report uses numerical designations or omits names to protect the identities of the individuals, schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies involved.

Interviews

Before each participant's interview, they were advised of the purpose of the study, their rights in the study, and asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix A). Participants were invited to email or call me with any questions.

In-person interviews were conducted with the SROs from the purposefully selected schools and the SROs' supervisors. Interview protocols (Appendix C for SROs and Appendix D for SRO leaders) guided the interviews to ensure the interview questions aligned with the study's research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, and the recordings were professionally transcribed. All interviews were conducted in a private office at the SRO's agency office. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Following most interviews, a memo was prepared documenting any observations, key insights, and needed adjustments. After the interview, participants were asked for agreement to a short telephonic follow-up if one was needed for clarification. Each of the participants agreed to any necessary follow-up.

The SRO interviews addressed all the research questions, and the supervisory interviews addressed Research Questions 1 through 4.

Documents

A document review was performed and is described in the subsections that follow.

MOU. The MOU (personal communication, 2021) between the school system and both law enforcement agencies regarding the rules guiding the conduct and duties of the SROs was obtained from public records. Disclosure of the website from which the MOU

was obtained would breach the confidentiality of the identity of the specific site and thus the participants of this research. The same MOU applies to both law enforcement agencies. The roles established and performed by the SROs were compared with the perception of the roles described by the SROs in their interviews. This review directly addressed Research Question 4 and contributed context for each research question.

Previous Virginia School Survey and Departments of Education. Researchers at the University of Virginia conducted the School Climate and Safety in Virginia High Schools survey in all public high schools in Virginia in the spring of 2020 (Cornell et al., 2020). A separate report prepared for each school provides the school's demographics and the students and staff responses to questions regarding climate and safety. Reports for the participating schools were obtained along with public records from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) regarding the current demographics of the schools in the study, including their size, location, diversity, academic rating, and degree of economic disadvantage. These documents established the environment in which each SRO worked and added context to the responses from SROs regarding the roles and priorities. The University of Virginia school reports helped in preparing for the interviews but were not used in the data analysis because more current information was available from the Departments of Education (National and Virginia).

Memos. A running memo was prepared during the study to highlight key ideas, concepts, and reflections that developed during data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Notes were also taken during the interviews to record thoughts about themes, visible reactions of interviewees, and areas requiring follow-up. The memos were

entered into NVivo.

Instruments

Questionnaire

An online questionnaire (Appendix B) with questions concerning the participants' demographics was sent by SurveyMonkey to each SRO participant along with the consent form before their interview. The survey was designed to gather basic personal and professional demographic information about the SRO and allowed me to focus during their interview on their roles and priorities. Examples of information gathered on this questionnaire were the number of years a participant has been a police officer, their education, their experience as an SRO, the specific SRO training they have completed, the name of the school they are currently assigned to, the location and urbanicity of their prior SRO experience, their roles (selected from a list), and why they wanted to become an SRO. I created this document and provided it to an expert who was a former director of SROs in the school district and to my dissertation committee for review and comment. Feedback from the committee was used to make several improvements to the form. The data facilitated comparison of the personal and professional characteristics of the SROs assigned to the different locations.

Qualitative Interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for each SRO interview (Appendix C). The protocol contained prompts for the interviewer to explain the interview purpose, the voluntary nature of the interview, confidentiality, and that the interview would be digitally recorded. The interview protocol form contained the identities of the interviewee and the interviewer; the date, time, and place of the interview; and the position of the

interviewee. Examples of interview questions for the SROs were as follows:

Describe your role and priorities.

Estimate how much time you spend on each of your roles.

Describe your school's climate.

Describe the nature and frequency of your interactions with the students.

Describe your involvement with the community in which the school is located.

What factors did you consider in determining your roles and priorities?

Before the questions were adopted, the dissertation committee, a cohort in the doctoral program at NSU, and a retired former director of the SRO program in the county that is the site of this study reviewed them. The end of the protocol prompted the interviewer to thank the participant, reassure them about confidentiality, and provide the interviewer's contact information for any questions or follow-up. The interview protocol was designed based on suggestions made by Creswell and Poth (2018) and information presented by Sanchez (2021). This instrument gathered data pertaining to all five research questions.

A separate interview protocol was used for SRO leaders. This protocol had the same design as the SRO interview protocol but contained different questions (Appendix D). The questions for the SRO supervisors concerned the SRO selection process, expectations of SROs, the process involved in determining SROs' roles and priorities, roles in relation to the MOU, the level of discretion SROs have, and whether school location makes a difference in decisions made about the SRO program. The interview guide was reviewed by the expert reviewer, an NSU cohort, and my dissertation committee as for the SRO interview protocol. This instrument was primarily

designed for research questions 1 and 2, but also added context and support for the

information provided by the SROs for all the research questions.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the methodology for this collective case study based on multiple

cases, as discussed in the strategy section of this chapter, I carefully reviewed and

organized my memos and the MOU between the law enforcement agencies and the

school district regarding the SRO program. The memos were organized as suggested by

Creswell and Poth (2018) into categories: (a) memos on individual interviews to record

important ideas, observations, or follow-up, and (b) a running memo on coding with

ideas, connections, and questions to resolve. The documents were entered into NVivo

(created in 2020) on a secure, password-protected computer.

The initial questionnaires completed by the participant SROs were analyzed, and

a descriptive table was produced to reflect the personal and professional demographics of

the participants. The responses to the interview question concerning the percentage of

their time SROs estimated they spent on each of their roles were analyzed for the findings

regarding RQ 5.

The coding process for this study was a blended approach using both deductive

and inductive processes. Dr. Katie Smith (2021) noted that the blended approach is

common in research because the deductive approach provides structure for the process

and the inductive aspect adds nuance. Saldana (2021) noted that inductive and deductive

coding are not mutually exclusive and can provide a logical approach.

The coding began with identifying themes from the research questions. Saldana

(2021) noted that research questions may often point to the codes that are likely to appear

in the data. These initial themes were of value to help focus the analysis that would be most helpful in answering the research questions. Five themes were initially identified from the research questions: roles, process, interactions, expectations, and location. Having established these initial themes, I opened separate folders in NVivo (created in 2020) for each of them. I then loaded the interview transcripts, the reflective memos generated following the interviews, the running memo concerning thoughts about connections, and the MOU in NVivo. Prior to any analysis in NVivo, I read through each of the paper documents and performed line by line initial coding and made notes in the margins. I used inductive concept coding to code the documents in both this initial reading and in the subsequent coding in NVivo by approaching the coding with an open mind and allowing the data to reveal the codes. Following the NVivo coding I reconciled the coding on the paper documents and NVivo. This served as a cross check for my coding and ensured consistency. Saldana (2021) described concept coding as words or phrases that suggest "an idea rather than an object or observable behavior" (p. 152). For example, enforcement, mentoring, and culture were identified through concept coding. While these codes were revealed in the data, it was clear at the time of coding that they would support the initially identified themes of roles (enforcement and mentoring) and location (culture) and the coding notations included the code with the theme in parentheses, such as culture (location). The theme of "interactions" was initially intended to only apply to students, however, the data produced substantial information concerning interactions with the administration, parents, and the community as well. Therefore, those codes were added.

When the initial coding was completed and folders had been established in NVivo

for each of the codes, axial coding was used to identify which codes would contribute as (1) categories within the initially identified themes, (2) if new themes were developed, and (3) if all the initial themes were useful for the study. The inductive coding process drove the final confirmation of the themes. This process involved going through the documents, studying the coded sections, and moving (copy and paste) the sentences or paragraphs identified for coding from the documents and transcripts into the designated NVivo folders for each code. Then the folders were aligned under the appropriate themes in NVivo. During this phase it was discovered that two of the codes required adjustment and were partitioned. The parent code was divided into parents' expectations and SRO interactions with parents. The administration code was partitioned under the expectations theme and separately the data pertaining to the relationship between the SRO and administration was included under the locations theme.

The "process" theme was eliminated as a theme for the study. It became apparent, through analysis of the data, that the process for developing the SROs' roles was a function of the combination of the other four themes: roles, interactions, expectations, and location. Therefore, a separate process theme could result in unnecessary duplication and confusion. Several concept codes were determined to be germane to the study but were secondary to other codes. For example, "at-risk," and "bridge" were determined to be "subcodes," which Saldana (2021, p. 121) described as useful in a multiple-case study. The "at-risk" and "bridge" subcodes were placed under the mentoring code, while "discretion," "referral," and "visibility" were folded into the enforcement code. Visibility was also determined to be a subcode for mentoring. This was consistent with Saldana in describing the consolidation process as "not to arrive at a reduced answer but to move

toward a consolidated meaning" (p. 13). In addition to the four themes, there were 33

codes identified in the initial data analysis. Seventeen of them were determined to be

conceptual categories based on Axial coding. These categories were the result of

synthesis and consolidation of the 33 codes and are listed under the final four themes as

displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Coding Chart: Themes and Categories

Roles	Interactions	Expectations	Location
Enforcement	Student	MOU	Rural/Suburban
Mentoring	Parent	Self	Administration (trust)
Teaching	Community	Administration	Culture
Social Work		L.E. Agency	Stability
Community Policing		Parents	

Note. Themes are in bold at the top of each column and the categories for each theme are

listed directly below them.

When interpreting the data, I emphasized cross-case analysis among the SROs in

different locations. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I particularly analyzed similarities and

differences among SRO and school demographics; similarities and differences among

how SROs described their schools' climates; the nature and frequency of SROs'

interactions with students, administrators, parents, and community members; the process

SROs used to develop their roles and priorities; the level of discretion SROs perceived

they have; and SROs' identification of the roles they performed and the percentage of

their time they spent on each of the roles. The roles and activities identified by the SROs

were compared with the MOU and the leadership interviews to determine similarities and

differences among the individual schools and between the aggregated rural and suburban

high schools.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The results of this qualitative multi-case study are presented in this chapter. The purpose of the study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether school location influences those perceptions. Four major themes, each with multiple categories, were developed from the research questions and the coding process.

The participants provided in-depth data regarding their roles, expectations, and experiences in vivid and candid detail. Each interviewee responded in the context of their roles within their current school climate and at times provided comparative experiences with previous SRO assignments. The following research questions guided this qualitative methods study:

RQ 1: How do SROs perceive their roles and priorities and do their perceptions vary according to location?

RQ 2: How do SROs and their supervisors describe the process of establishing SRO roles and priorities?

RQ 3: How do SROs describe their interactions with students at different school locations?

RQ 4: How do the roles described in the MOU controlling an SRO compare with how the SROs describe their roles?

RQ 5: What percentage of their time do SROs estimate they spend on each of their roles?

Participants

Eleven of thirteen SROs who were offered the opportunity and both SRO supervisors agreed to participate and executed informed consent forms. A descriptive

survey (Appendix B) was sent to each of the SROs with a request to complete the questionnaire prior to their scheduled interview. Ten SROs completed the questionnaire online and one SRO copied and completed the questionnaire off-line and provided it at the start of their interview. Table 2 reflects the SRO participants' demographics.

Table 2

Demographic Breakdown of Participant SROs

SRO	Gender	Race	Age	LE Exp	SRO Exp	Current Assignment	School Location	Education Level
1	Male	Black	48	21.0	16.0	6.0	Rural	College (ND)*
2	Male	White	44	23.0	2.0	2.0	Rural	College (ND)*
3	Male	White	40	10.0	6.0	3.0	Suburban (2)**	Graduate Degree
4	Male	White	57	23.0	1.0	1.0	Suburban***	High School
5	Male	White	43	23.0	9.0	1.0	Rural***	College Degree
6	Male	White	37	13.0	6.0	6.0	Rural	College Degree
7	Male	Asian	33	7.0	1.5	1.0	Suburban	Associate Degree
8	Male	White	38	10.0	3.0	2.0	Suburban	College (ND)*
9	Male	White	40	12.0	2.0	1.0	Rural	College Degree
10	Male	White	49	20.0	7.0	5.0	Suburban	College (ND)*
11	Male	White	49	29.0	10.0	5.0	Rural	College

Note: * = no degree; ** = 2 different high schools; *** = Alternative high school

The mean age of the participant SROs was 43.5 years with a range of 33 to 57 years. All the SROs were male, while one of the SRO supervisors was a female. She previously worked as an SRO in the county. Most were White (82%) with one Black and one Asian SRO. Both SRO supervisors were White. Ten of the eleven SROs had some college. One had an associate degree, four had a college degree, and one had a master's degree. There were six fringe rural (rural) and six large suburban (suburban) school locations (two for SRO #3) served by the SROs in Table 2.

Location

The study site was a county located in the State of Virginia. The name of the county is not provided to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. The eleven SRO participants provided their role perceptions for 12 high schools in the county. One of the participants (SRO #3) recently served at two different suburban high schools and was able to provide role perceptions based on each of those locations. It is noted that ten of the schools were regular high schools (five rural and five suburban) and two were alternative high schools. The alternative schools were useful for examining the roles of the SROs but were not included in the analysis of rural versus suburban as they served students from all over the county.

The rural portion of the county makes up 64% of the land mass, 14.5% of the population, and 13% of the calls for law enforcement services (Sheriff's Department, personal communication, May 26, 2023). The suburban portion of the county covers 36% of the land mass, accounts for 85.5% of the population, and for 87% of the calls for law enforcement services.

Demographics of the Schools in this Study

SRO #1 was assigned to a rural school that had approximately 1,500 students and was 49.6% minority (NCES, 2023). Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals made up 32.76% of the student body (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #2 was in a rural high school which had about 1,400 students, 50.8% minority (NCES, 2023), and 37.79% of whom were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #3 was assigned to a suburban high school with 1,501 students that were 66.9% minority (two-thirds of the minority were Asian) (NCES, 2023), and 26.52% of

the student body qualified for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023). His prior high school had 1,408 students that were 89.5% minority and 70.7% Hispanic (NCES, 2023), with 91.07% of the student body eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #4 was assigned to a suburban alternative high school for adolescents from all parts of the county who had exhibited behavior and academic difficulties. The student body was 50.7% minority (NCES, 2023). The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals was 84.54% (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #5 was currently assigned to an alternative high school (rural) for high achievers in science and technology. The school had 2,100 students, 66% minority (NCES, 2023), and 5% eligibility for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #6 had a primary assignment in a rural middle school, and in a nearby rural high school. The high school had over 1,500 students, 19.5% minority (NCES, 2023), and 13.77% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #7 was assigned to a suburban high school of 1,700 students, 63% minority (NCES, 2023) and 21.51% eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #8 was in a suburban high school of nearly 1,500 students, that was 58.9% minority (NCES, 2023), and 44.99% were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE,2023).

SRO #9 was assigned to a rural school of 1,479 students that was 63% minority (NCES, 2023), and 10.25% were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #10 was assigned to a suburban high school with over 1,800 students, a diversity of 68% minority that were 40% Asian (NCES, 2023). Eligibility for free or reduced-price meals was 17.27% (VDOE, 2023).

SRO #11 was assigned to a suburban high school with almost 1,400 students, a diversity of 77% minority, of which 52.4% are Asian (NCES, 2023), and 20.5% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals (VDOE, 2023).

Comparisons of school minority representation and eligibility for free or reduced-price meals for Virginia and non-alternative rural and suburban high schools in this study are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
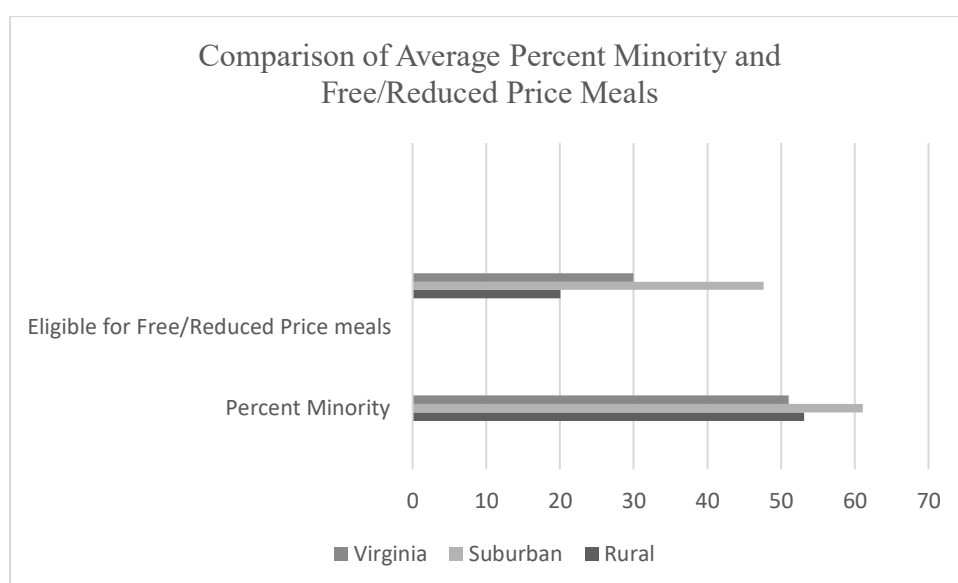
Note: Percentages do not include the two alternative schools in this study.

Figure 1 does not include data for the alternative school SROs because their students are drawn from the entire school district rather than the neighborhoods near the school.

The average percentage of minority students in Virginia high schools is 51% (Public School Review, 2023). The average minority percentage for this study was 53.08% for rural high schools and 61.1% in suburban high schools (VDOE, 2023). The average percentage for students eligible for free or reduced-price meals in Virginia was 30% (NCES, 2020). The average for this study for rural high schools was 20.02% and for suburban high schools it was 47.64%.

SRO Experience

The SROs in this study varied between the rural and suburban locations in law enforcement experience, time as an SRO, and time at their current school. Refer to Figure 2.

Figure 2

Note: data in Figure 2 taken from the questionnaire completed by the SROs prior to their interview.
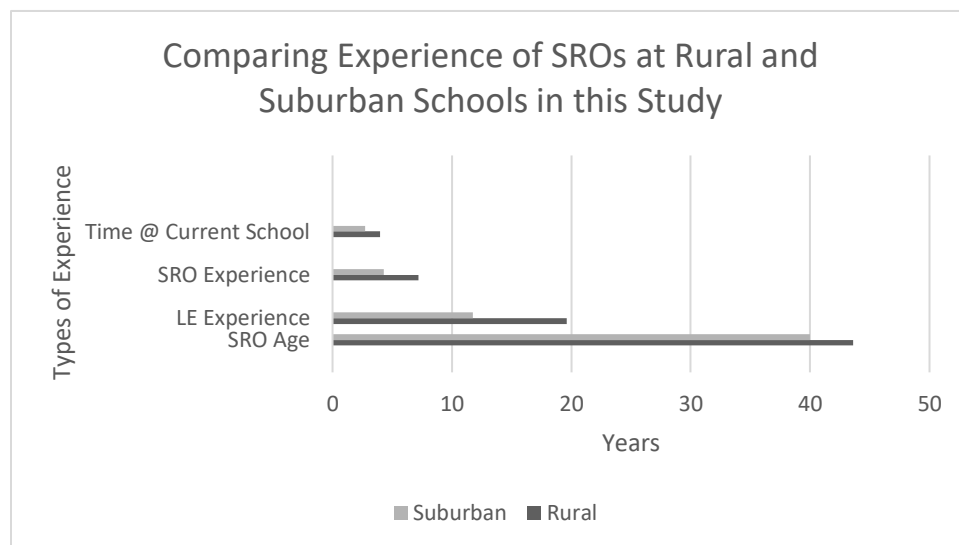
Figure 2 does not include data for the alternative school SROs because their students are drawn from the entire school district rather than the neighborhoods near the school. Figure 2 reflects more experience in each category for the rural SROs. The average law enforcement experience was 11.75 years (suburban) to 19.6 years (rural), the average time as an SRO was 4.4 years (suburban) to 7.2 years (rural), and the time at their current assignment was 2.75 years (suburban) to 4 years (rural). It is noted that the figure for SRO experience for the rural SROs is skewed high with one of the SROs having served for 16 years in that role. Overall, the range of time in law enforcement extends from seven years to 29 years, the range for SRO experience runs from one year to sixteen

years, and the current assignment range runs from one to six years.

SROs #1, 2, 6, 9, and 11 were assigned to the non-alternative rural schools in this study and SROs # 3, 7, 8, and 10 were assigned to non-alternative suburban schools. It is noted that SRO #3 represented two different suburban high schools as further explained in this chapter under the RQ 1 section. The numbers for the two alternative schools (SROs # 4 and 5) were not included in Figure 2 and are discussed separately. Both alternative school SROs just completed their first year at their current school. They provided important insights regarding SRO roles in alternative educational facilities. Students at both alternative schools were drawn from all sectors of the county and represented both suburban and rural demographics.

RQ 1: How do SROs Perceive their Roles and Priorities and do their Perceptions Vary According to Location?

The "roles" theme is the dominant theme for the findings for this RQ with the "location" theme intermingled through direct comments or identified by the geographical classification in parentheses following the SRO designation. The schools in this study are sub-classified as fringe rural and large suburban under the major categories of rural and suburban (NCES, 2023). They are referred to in this study under their major categories of rural and suburban.

Theme: Roles

Every SRO and both supervisors agreed the SROs' primary role was for the safety of the students and staff. Some of their responses were: SRO #5 (alternative) advised the priority is to "keep kids safe because that's why we're there first and foremost. We're there primarily for safety. Everything else is extra." SRO #9 (rural) verified their role is

"first and foremost is to make sure that there are no threats to the students. If there are threats, we have to do our job and handle those issues." Supervisor #2 summed up her view of the primary role as "safety, security, if there was any kind of shooter, like that's what we train for. All this other stuff we do is like bonus in my opinion." Supervisor #1 advised "they're there in case bad things happen. That is the law enforcement part."

However, the participants acknowledged in their questionnaire responses that they participated in a wide variety of roles as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
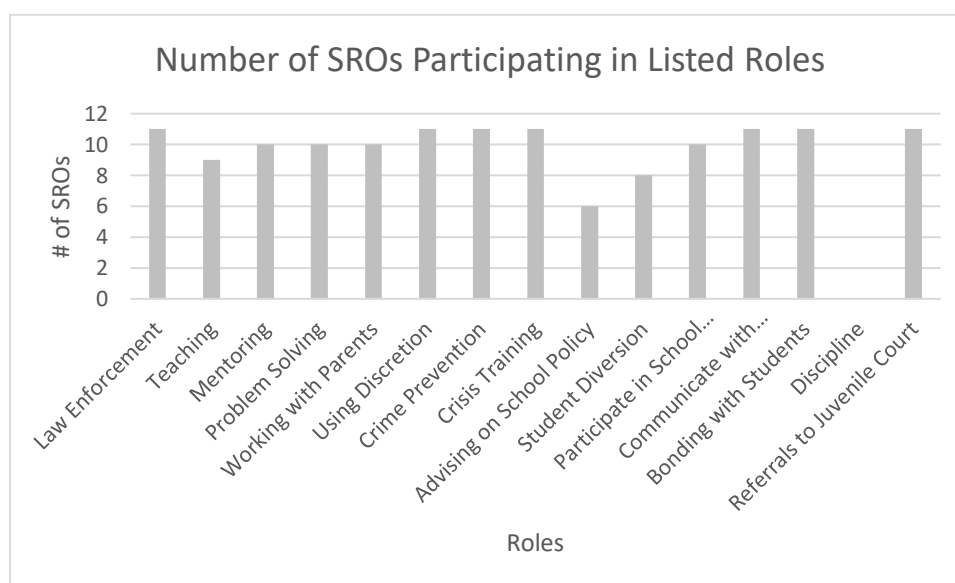
Note. The data in Figure 3 comes from the responses provided by the eleven SRO participants to the questionnaire they completed prior to the interview.

Supervisor #2 revealed the county also provided School Security Officers (SSOs) to every school. SSOs are school district employees, not armed, and not law enforcement officers. She described their duties as being responsible for the "safety and security" of the schools by checking doors, helping with discipline, and other safety checks.

NASRO (n.d.) and the MOU (personal communication, 2021) described the triad of roles that an SRO performs as law enforcement, mentoring/role model, and teaching. Each of the participants acknowledged those roles and some of the interviewees expanded the perceptions of their roles beyond that triad.

Categories: Enforcement and Community Policing. The role of an armed, sworn police officer providing for the safety and security of students would by any objective definition be considered law enforcement. The SROs did not disagree with that notion, but most of them minimized their enforcement role as an SRO. All the participants agreed they complied with the directive of the MOU and employed community policing as the framework for their position. For example, SRO #7 (suburban) referred to his position as an SRO as "the ultimate form of community policing," and SRO #11 (rural) referred to the SRO position as "the truest form of community policing." SRO #1 (rural) indicated his role as an SRO was community policing which was "what all policing needs to become." SRO #3 (suburban) advised, "My whole day is community policing" and that high school "is my town." SRO #4 (alternative) related he was "100% community policing." SRO #6 (rural) stated:

> *It's [community policing] the reason why we're there for the most part. Like I said, we still do handle incidents that occur, but first and foremost, our job is to make sure those kids are safe and the staff as well.*

Several SROs and both supervisors emphasized they wanted to avoid referring students to the juvenile court if possible. SRO #2 (rural) who is a self-described "by the book cop" advised that it is important to him that the students understand that "it's not like I'm patrolling the streets. I'm not there to try to catch them in some type of criminal

act." SRO #1 (rural) related he told the students that he was not in the school to "hem you up." However, if he gave them a break and then they get in trouble again he tells them, "I have to put you in the courts because you need more help than what the school can offer you." Supervisor #2 explained a process of evaluating each case and while they try to avoid a referral, it comes to a point where the conclusion is "he's not understanding these programs that we're offering" so a referral is made. SROs #5 (alternative) and #6 (rural) specifically spoke about wanting to avoid contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. SRO #5 (alternative) said:

> *My primary duty wasn't there to arrest kids. I don't want to do that. That's the last thing I want to do. But if I have to refer somebody to the juvenile court systems, and obviously I'll have to, but I try to do everything in my power to keep it at a school level and teach risks versus consequences. I try to do everything in my power to keep kids out of that school-to-prison pipeline.*

SRO #6 (rural) emphasized that "it's not to punish every kid that makes a mistake because that's not our role in society and especially not our role in the schools." He believed that the "school-to-prison pipeline is the opposite of what we are about."

The notable exception to minimizing the enforcement role was SRO #3 (suburban) who recently spent three years in a suburban high school in this jurisdiction, which he described as having a "very urban setting." He advised during his three years at that school he was totally dedicated to enforcement because of the "heavy gang population." He related he was "totally overwhelmed with gang activity." However, he treated them with respect and warned them, "Look do what you want out there. Don't bring it into my school."

Category: Mentoring. This role was embraced and highlighted by all the participants. This concept is also addressed in some detail under the findings for RQ 3 in this chapter concerning the interactions between the SROs and the students.

SRO #3 (suburban) described "being constantly on the move around the school"; however, he advised that visibility offered the opportunity to "bond with the students" and considered that time as mentoring rather than enforcement. SRO #1 (rural) advised mentoring took up most of his time and his focus was on the "at-risk kids." SRO #7 (suburban) indicated community policing or "being a community resource" took most of his time as he related that "keeping the community safe" and being a "role model for the students" were the tasks to which he devoted most of his time.

Bridging the Gap. All but one of the SRO participants mentioned the importance of building a bridge between law enforcement and adolescents. Two of the participants identified establishing a bridge to youth as their motivation for wanting to serve as an SRO. SRO #6 (rural) advised:

> *It's that one opportunity where we can help change their perspective on law enforcement for one, but it's not always a punitive-type thing when we're dealing with them. We can deal with them through other means, albeit like a counseling-type role, restorative practice-type role.*

SRO # 3 (suburban) noted his motivation to become an SRO was fueled by frustration that began while he was a patrol officer dealing with juveniles. He discovered "their outlook on what a police officer is was skewed, basically due to, from my opinion, how the media portrays and how social media portrayed police officers are just guys looking to get people in trouble." He wanted the opportunity to show that he was a "normal

person" and was at the school to protect them. SRO #8 (suburban) advised that he believed SROs could make a difference in how law enforcement was perceived by young people but reflected it must be done "one person at a time, you know."

Category: Teaching. Four of the five rural (non-alternative) SROs claimed a substantial involvement in and displayed excitement about their teaching roles, while all the suburban SROs minimized their teaching roles. The suburban SROs characterized their teaching as follows:

- SRO #3 noted a 'very small amount of his time is devoted to teaching" despite the fact he did some teaching in law, drivers ed, and drugs. At his previous high school, he was completely involved in gang suppression.

- SRO #7 indicated that it took up the "least amount" of his time and it was usually just providing "supplemental information."

- SRO #8 indicated he sometimes was asked to participate in driver's education, and he helped with one mock court.

- SRO #10 stated, "We don't do a lot of teaching, but I'm always asked to come in like driver's ed classes or civics classes or specific kind of classes."

The rural SROs perceived a more comprehensive teaching role:

SRO #1 described his teaching role in and out of the classroom as taking up nearly one-third of his time. He was very passionate about teaching the kids at every opportunity and indicated a conversation he might have with a fellow officer thinking about becoming an SRO. He would tell the officer, "You've got to teach." He suggested the officer might understand that to mean that he must be capable of teaching about the law.

At which point SRO #1 would say, "No, you've got to teach kids." He intended to communicate that teaching was more than just classroom instruction.

SRO #2 said he does teach but, "it's not as much as I would like, honestly, but it's probably maybe a quarter of my day, something along those lines." SRO #6 described his teaching role by saying he taught:

> ...about drug abuse and resistance, and I also meet with the government classes, so when they start talking about the constitutional law and, you know, fourth and fifth amendment stuff, they'll bring me in because everyone has their perceived perception on how law enforcement works, and it's nice to kind of say, "No, this is how we operate. This is our authority. This is where we can't do things," because unfortunately for everyone, not just our youth, but they get their information from TV. And as you know, that's not always the most accurate source to get your information from, so it's nice to kind of go in there and talk to them on a level where we can ask questions. It's not just me, you know, pointing at a PowerPoint. And kind of explain where law enforcement fits into society.

SRO #9 advised that counseling and teaching are his two biggest roles and stated:

> I've helped teach in social studies classes about search and seizure and all this stuff, and I've helped in driver's education. We've given tobacco, not D.A.R.E. per se in the high school, but they'll have you come in and deal with vaping and tobacco. I've done drunk-driving simulations. We have goggles that we use, so we do stuff like that within the school.

SRO #11 was enthusiastic when he talked about his teaching role and proclaimed he is "heavily involved in teaching." He liked to take advantage of the learning environment to build relationships and trust. His program included:

I'm involved a lot in the classrooms. I have a lot of different programs I do with the students, and I like it to be interactive, so if they're interacting with you, they see you in a different light, letting them know, "Hey, what you're learning in school today," and I'm helping reinforce what the teachers are teaching including up to their standards of learning for their SOLs, and I'm helping to reinforce that, but I'm actually giving them a live application of what they're learning and how that applies to law enforcement from CSI to radar where they're learning about frequency and Doppler tones and shifts. That's what you use for radar tickets.

He also did the following:

- Mock court

- A crime-scene sketch artist is brought to the classroom.

- "Weights and measurements at a grade level where the commercial motor vehicle unit can come in with their truck scales and will weigh school buses and motorcycles and cars."

- "The technology that we have in our police cars and letting them just see the police cars and all the technology in it..."

- The bomb unit. "I have them come in with the robots on the bomb squad and let them see the interaction of the bomb units."

Category: Social Work. Mental health work with students in concert with the school staff was considered as an element of the SROs' social work role. Four of the five rural high school (non-alternative) SROs discussed time they spent on mental health or social work issues. SRO #1 (rural) advised he spent a lot of time working with the school staff "to guide them on the emergency custody orders, the temporary detention orders" for students in a mental health crisis. He spent much of his time with at-risk kids attempting to provide the necessary counseling and assistance. He made sure if a child needed mental health assistance that the child was taken for those services, even if he must "take them myself."

SRO #2 (rural) did not address mental health in his responses during the interview for this study, but he did indicate a social work angle in the school's community. He stated:

> We have what was called like a [name omitted] program... It's an outreach for
> the lower income families. Food drives, we deal with that. We'll help hand out
> food. We have food banks that we will refer people to. You know, we can even
> transport them. I mean we really put a lot of time and effort into trying to be
> available for people.

SRO #9 (rural) dealt with student mental health in his role and provided some services normally associated with social work. He described one example as follows:

> ...girl was having trouble, and she was upset one day, and I walked with her from
> the school. I asked why she was upset. I went with her out of school back to her
> house, which was a couple blocks away...

When he saw the girl later, "she said that I saved her life." He worked with social workers and conducted welfare checks on students who made disturbing statements. He believes it is important "to identify the kids that need mental health services and other services that we have."

SRO #11(rural) was always alert for student behavior "that's outside their norm maybe" indicating they might be having a mental health issue. He explained:

Many times, I've been able to do the early identification to provide earlier intervention, whether they're emotionally upset and mad or just being broken down, crying and upset, might be hungry, just certain behaviors they might exhibit that are outside their other behaviors, and again, this is from doing it every day, that's outside their norm maybe. I might not catch them all, but I'm pretty good about catching them, and then we try to direct them to the right places. It could be to a teacher. It could be to one of their mentors. It could be towards a dean or administrator. It could be to a counselor, to a social worker, whatever resources we have because it might be a child they already know, so it's just to help have them have a better day.

SRO #7 was the only suburban SRO who mentioned mental health. He described the situation with a former student who lives near the school and is on the autism spectrum. She comes by the school a few times a week and is generally in a highly emotional state. He intercepts her and sits with her "helping her calm down for a little bit, and getting her back home..."

SRO #8 (suburban) did not specifically mention mental health or social work, but he discussed his work at a summer camp as part of his official duties. This camp was

sponsored by law enforcement and the county mental health department and provided a camp experience for youth at-risk for drug abuse and gang activity. He stated:

> *My summer assignments last year was at [name omitted] Camp, and I'm doing it again this year, which I'm excited to do, and because those kids in those camps, I'm with them most of the summer, those relationships that I built with them over the summertime, now in the school we have a better relationship with each other.*

RQ 2: How do SROs and their Supervisors Describe the Process of Establishing SRO Roles and Priorities?

The primary findings for this RQ are reported here under the "expectations" and "location" themes.

Theme: Expectations

The categories for expectations include the MOU, school administration, law enforcement agency, parents, and self.

Category: MOU. The NASRO (n.d.) and the MOU (personal communication, 2021) established guidelines for the triad roles the SROs are expected to fulfill in their schools. NASRO recommends as a best practice that SROs adopt a trio of roles pertaining to law enforcement, mentoring of students, and teaching matters related to law enforcement. The MOU in this jurisdiction was agreed to by both law enforcement agencies and provided the SROs and the school district with a guide for their duties. The MOU broadly described the NASRO trio of roles as the expected roles of the SROs. More detail concerning the specifics of the MOU are presented in the findings for RQ 4 in this chapter.

Each SRO interviewee advised that the first step in the process of developing their role was to read and understand the requirements of the MOU. SRO # 9 (rural) advised, "I mean the MOU obviously sets the framework." SRO #11 (rural) agreed and said, "It's guidance, so some of it more or less is guidance. It's to allow the school system and the law enforcement agency to understand each other's roles. It helps define it." SRO #1 (rural) agreed the MOU was important and must be understood but related "the MOU thing, it's a hard thing because the way we might interpret it as a law enforcement agency is different than a school board or an administration at a school interprets it or as a parent can interpret it." SRO #8 (suburban) advised:

> *We understand our roles, and, you know, there's the MOU, the memorandum of understanding. We follow it. If something comes up, I have it printed. They have it on their computer. We look at, and we follow it the way it's supposed to be followed because that's, you know, what we need to do.*

Supervisor #2 stated, "We have an MOU, the memorandum of understanding, that is updated every year, so that establishes like what we will do." However, SRO #5 (alternative) advised the MOU provided "general guidance", but "there's still a lot of gray area."

Subcategory: Law Enforcement Agency. The MOU contains many of the expectations of the law enforcement agency, but it was instructive to consider the additional expectations from the SRO supervisors.

Supervisor #1 advised the SROs have "a lot of autonomy. All of them have at least two, some have three schools. They deal with things on a daily basis that I honestly don't ever know about, and that's good. They're handling it." He noted that sometimes

the SROs come to him to complain about something the administrator at the school has done and he will tell them to go back to the school and work it out. He indicated his role was "to give them the training they need" and "everything they need to be able to do it without me." He confirmed they are expected to fulfill the triad of roles as set forth in the MOU:

They're an educator, a mentor, and then they're also there for law enforcement, and that's the problem is trying to find that balance. We want them to participate in teaching classes with the schools. We want them to be there so the kids can come see them when they want to talk without having an official police interaction, but also, they're there in case bad things happen.

Supervisor #2 echoed supervisor's #1 description of the autonomous nature of the SRO position:

When you're a school resource officer, you're really independent, right? It's your school. You know, like you work with just your principal, your school, your staff, so it's kind of an interesting perspective. I think because I've had this role, I know what to expect from just like the bare minimum.

She furnished the following clarification to the "bare minimum" comment:

People that do the bare minimum and people that are above and beyond, and there's nothing wrong with either one because some of these schools are a lot more busy than other schools, so for me as a supervisor really as long as they're, as silly as it sounds, showing up to work every day, right, showing up on time, being there, being present, and helping with whatever needs the school has within it, and if they have a problem or they have something that they need to talk about

> *like, you know, walking through something, then they call me, and that's how we*
>
> *kind of come to a final decision.*

Her approach was that the amount of time they spent on teaching and mentoring was left to the SRO, the administrator of the school, and the school climate. As indicated earlier in this chapter, she viewed student security as the most important role and "all this other stuff we do is like bonus in my opinion."

All the SRO interviewees mentioned the presence in the high schools of the SSOs and noted that their presence helped clarify the SRO role in the school. Six of the eleven SRO interviewees (#s 4-7, 9, 11) and both supervisors particularly mentioned regular consultation with the SSOs. Supervisor #2 advised the SROs worked closely with the SSOs in each high school and the SSOs "do a good job keeping track of all these kids and all the movement within the building." SRO #5 (alternative) added, "They're the ones that will triage an incident if it's not a law enforcement matter and then bring it to our attention if it does become a law enforcement matter." SRO #4 (alternative) indicated he worked "closely with the SSOs so we're both on the same page with each other, "Okay, if this happens, this is what you all need to do. This is what I will be doing." SRO #7 (suburban) noted, when discussing the process for determining the SRO role in his school, "It's the relationship with administration and the school security officers. They're the ones I interact with the most. We need to set a basis of how we want it to work."

Category: Administration. The comments about the MOU are informative regarding why all the SROs and both supervisors emphasized the necessity of establishing an understanding and relationship with the school administration. This was identified by every participant as the key step in the process of role development.

Supervisor #2 confirmed the importance of the MOU but added that "a very thorough MOU, yes, so it just kind of depends on what the principal wants you to do." She explained:

> Sometimes that's really the administration, so the first school that I worked at, the principal there was not a huge fan of the police, so he wanted my role to be very, very minimal. Then after I left that school, I went to another school, and that principal loves having us there, never wants us to be reassigned anywhere else, would let you do anything that you wanted to do, right? Like he wants you to be involved.

Supervisor #1 pointed to the importance of the administration in role development:

> The biggest thing I tell them [SROs] when they first start or go to a new school is they have to build a relationship. There has to be a relationship with the administrators. There has to be a relationship with the staff, the teachers, the children in the school, and the children's parents, and that's where when we put a specific SRO in a specific school, it's with the hopes that we're going to put the right person in there so it's easier to build that relationship. Everything else comes from that.

Supervisor #1 revealed that "I know we have the MOU, and it's one school system, but I imagine every SRO you talk to will tell you different things about their own administrations. They're all different."

All the SRO participants independently confirmed that supervisor's prediction as they described the different administrations. SRO #6 (rural) explained that role development required the blessing of the administration at the school: "You know, you

have to have that ability to talk to your administrators, work with them, to all accomplish the same goals." SRO #2 (rural) noted the key role the administration plays in the role of the SRO: "I've been at other schools, and I'm going to say the administration sets the tone of how things are done." SRO 10 (suburban) explained the importance of "getting on the same page with them [school administration] over time eliminates most of the problems you're going to have."

SRO #11 (rural) indicated a strong relationship with his administrators; however, noted a bad relationship can be disastrous:

> *Working with our school administration is important, too, because you have some school administrators that they're not pro law enforcement or pro school resource officer, I'll say, and that becomes a battle on its own, and it almost is counterproductive to what you're trying to do jointly, but it can have a very bad course of action.*

Supervisor #1 confirmed the administrators could sometimes be difficult and required his intervention. He bluntly explained:

> *And some of the administrators, I don't know if they're just ignorant of how it should work, or maybe they're just wanting to do their own thing, so that's where we have to get that relationship, and that's usually when I end up over at the school talking to the principal or, you know, one of the administrators.*

SRO #9 (rural) identified the many different sources of expectations and advised they represented "levels of complexity." He was one of only two SRO participants who identified the difficulties associated with myriad expectations as he explained:

So, for me it's kind of the layers. It's not so much the kids per se. The kids are

pretty easy. Kids are kids. It's the layers of, I don't want to say bureaucracy, but I

mean you deal with the kids, but then you have the students' parents, and then you

have the administration, and then you have like my side of things, my bosses.

SRO #10 (suburban) disclosed that:

The toughest part of the job is balancing the school side of things with the [law

enforcement agency name omitted] office kind of things because each has their

own role. The [law enforcement agency name omitted]doesn't agree with what

the school does sometimes. The school doesn't agree with what the [law

enforcement agency name omitted] does, and then you just have to balance that

out, so sometimes it's difficult to balance that.

Category: Parental Expectations. Several participants discussed the issue of

parental involvement and expectations as a hurdle. Four of the five rural, two of the four

suburban, and one of the two alternative school SROs identified the expectations of the

parents as the toughest part of the job. The other alternative school SRO agreed parental

expectations were an issue but saw parents as an opportunity. These participants

represented both law enforcement agencies.

SRO #7 (suburban) advised: "It's really just the parents that are hard to deal with,

just their temperaments, the way they wish things to be done, but I feel like that's a thing

in policing as a whole, though." SRO #1 (rural) related:

And the parents are, "Oh, we don't like how he said…" This is the problem.

That's why I told you it's a different kind of kid and a different way you can say

stuff. And, you know, if you say the wrong thing, now you're sitting here as a law

enforcement officer like, "Am I going to be called in? Am I going to be IA'd?" [internal affairs] *which causes stress on us at this point, and that's why a lot of people don't want to be school resource officers. There's a shortage. Nobody really wants to do that.*

SRO #3 (suburban) when asked about the toughest part of his job responded, "I would say the parents. The kids, I can have great conversations with kids, but it's when I do get involved and I have to call a parent." He advised many of the parents do not understand the role of the SRO or they become very defensive and take their anger out on the SRO. SRO #6 (rural) agreed:

The parents can make things a little difficult at times, and I understand. I'm a parent myself. You'll get a little pushback from some parents ... so everyone has their backgrounds, and everyone has their experience with the police. I do think that affects how they kind of want us proceeding at times.

SRO #11 (rural) related that:

Parents [are] *another struggle. It's a them-versus-us-type mentality every now and then until they get the chance to see us and get to know us, so that's something that as SROs, we should be working for from the very beginning from your day one on the job is establishing those positive relationships, which are key. Those are like the most valuable things to help us do our job and duties day in, day out.*

Both alternative school SROs singled parents out as impacting their roles. SRO #4 believed parents were a possible asset in addressing issues:

I like to look at it more toward the parents being able to teach their children that we're there for a reason. What I tell them is I'm not there to hem anybody up. If I have to speak with a parent on the phone or in person, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, "I'm not here to hem your son or daughter up. I don't want her to get in trouble. I want her to continue finishing with school, go forward in school. And I think that helps bridge. If I get to the parents and the parents understand, then they can go forward with the kids.

The other alternative school SRO (#5) advised that parental expectations are "all over the place." He explained "some parents want you to, you know, have strict adherence to the law." They insist that if some kid touched their kid then "he needs to go to jail."

Supervisor #1 expressed frustration about some parents and school authorities because they do not seem to understand the unique role played by the SROs:

I find it's frustrating because you hear the push for get rid of the SROs, get the police out of schools when really, if they dug into it, these are the police officers they should want. I understand their concerns with everything, but these aren't the police officers that are doing the things they're complaining about. These kids are – I mean they're holding their kid's hand walking across the street or coming up because he's having a bad day and just having a talk with him. I mean that should be what they want, and that's really frustrating.

Supervisor #2 agreed that parents could be difficult at times but believed it was a process of being "respectful and caring towards these parents and their family" and helping them understand the circumstances of a situation and the role of the SRO. She provided an example of the influence of parents:

For misdemeanor stuff, it's up to the parents, like do the parents want to go

forward with something or do they not, you know, a misdemeanor, not a felony, so

like if you get off the bus and you get in a fight and the parents don't want

anything done because the school's already like suspended the kid or whatever

their discipline may be and they don't want us to do anything with it, then we're

done, like then we don't have to force their hand, so there's kind of discretion

from multiple angles.

Supervisor #2 advised one substantial obstacle that was hard to overcome was the attitude of the parents and students toward the police. She explained:

I think that the parents think that we're here to get their kids in trouble, which

100% it's not. Some kids are very receptive of us being there. Some kids want

nothing to do with the police, but I think it comes because like their parents hate

the police, so they've been taught to hate the police. It kind of just trickles down.

Category: Self-expectations. Self-expectations play a substantial part in role selection. Several SROs identified their expectations for the role as they discussed their motivation for taking the position.

SRO #1 (rural) wanted to become an SRO because he did not have a positive relationship with the police in his adolescence and he "wanted to be a part of that community to get a bond with kids and to coach kids and mentor them at the same time." SRO #4 (alternative) likewise wanted to work with children and chose "a school for I would say more of the kids that need a little extra help in life." SRO #2 (rural) stepped up to fill this role when he discovered his agency was having a difficult time finding someone. He advised "I saw a need for, you know, a good, qualified candidate to go sit

with our youth, if you will, to try to be, you know, a role model and provide positive interaction." Both SROs 9 (rural) and 11 (rural) liked to work with kids and coach youth sports. SRO #11 commented he "enjoyed working with the kids in the neighborhood coaching the local baseball team." He enjoyed "helping young people learn to make better decisions and have a positive outlook."

Several participants chose to become SROs to influence kids to develop a positive attitude toward police officers. The comments of SROs # 3 (suburban), 6 (rural), and 8 (suburban) concerning this finding are located under the theme "roles," category "mentoring" (bridging the gap), for RQ 1 in this chapter.

A few of the SROs came to the position just to get a change from their patrol duties. SRO #7 (suburban) advised he was a patrol officer for over five years, and it was becoming "redundant." He was looking for a new experience and he thought that the SRO position offered "the truest form of community policing." SRO #8 (suburban) also sought a change in his duties and decided he would try this opportunity. To his surprise, he found this position to be the "most rewarding and the most fun I've had in law enforcement so far." That is analogous to SRO #10 (suburban) who professed to be "burned out on patrol." He moved to the SRO position, and said he had "not looked back since" and asserted, "I found my calling."

Theme: Location

A substantial purpose of this study was to understand if location made a difference in the way SROs perceived their roles. Every participant acknowledged that location affected their roles. As reported under the theme "roles" for RQ 1and the "expectations" theme (category of "administration") for this RQ, the relationship between the

administrator at each school and the SRO had a considerable impact on the roles established by the SRO. This was an important variable because each school in this study operated under the same MOU and was accountable to the same school board.

Category: Administration (trust). The findings in this category under the "location" theme concerned the essential need for the SRO and the administrator to have a relationship based on trust. SRO 11 (rural) advised that establishing a relationship with the administration was critical to role development. He indicated it must be a "trust partnership." He explained that his experience was that the administrators are different in each of the schools. Trust partnerships were sometimes difficult. SRO #3 (suburban) described such situations as:

> *You know, so we're all on the same page, and sometimes they [administrators] don't like it, you know, because it's added work for them, but it's just the nature of the beast. You know, we're teammates. You know, there's going to be days where we don't get along and days we do.*

SRO #10 (suburban) agreed there needed to be reciprocal trust between the administrator and the SRO. He stated: "If I was to go to my admin staff and say, "Hey, I can't do that," they would automatically go, "Well, there must be a good reason." SRO #1 (rural) suggested that trust is built through honest communication: "I think it's the trust of the admin, what they can tell you, what they won't because some administrations don't want to tell you nothing, then you get blindsided..." SRO #2 (rural) advised that many school administrators are "heavily influenced" by politics:

> *I had a couple different schools I got to sub at last year ..., and so I got to see different varying schools, so each school had its own politics. Each school is very*

protective of their reputation as a school. None of them want to be known in the news or, you know, the community as a bad school or problem this, problem that, so they're very protective, so, you know, without saying that they intentionally withhold information from law enforcement, you have to be very immersed and interactive in your school to decide, you know, are they being transparent with you at all times.

Category: Rural/Suburban. There is a difference in the rural and suburban sectors of this county. SRO #6 (rural) believed there were differences in the school environment between the "more heavily populated" portion and the rural section of the county. He recognized the "strong bonding" in the rural part of the county, with a more stable population, longtime residents, and a less transitory population. SRO #4 (alternative) has not worked in any other school, but he is very familiar with the county having worked patrol and criminal investigations for over 20 years. He advised there is a "big difference in the kids in the rural part of the county compared to the heavy suburban portion of the county." He described the rural part of the county as basically "rednecks;" he also described himself as one. The larger suburban part of the county is much more diversified. Supervisor #2 described the cultural differences among the schools as "huge." She described the rural end of the county as having "more farms."

Their grandparents might have been out here in the county for 100 years. Their parents have grown up together, and they still live in the area, and now they're raising their kids, you know, in the same vicinity as their friends that they've grown up with, so it's very different out there.

She described the more heavily populated parts of the county as much more diversified with "a whole bunch of different cultures."

      Category: Culture. All the participants agreed that the environment of each school is different and that matters when establishing and implementing their roles. SRO #1 indicated that role development "depends on administration" and the school "demographic" because "the kids are all different from each school." SRO #3 was asked if location affects role development and he responded "Right, wow, way different." He described his previous assignment in this same county as a suburban high school in a "very urban setting." He related his only role was enforcement "because I was so overwhelmed with the gang activity." SRO #8 believed every school is different and the SRO had to adjust to the administration and the students. He stated that "it's like every neighborhood is different." SRO #11 advised he knows that location makes a difference and stated:

> *The actual law enforcement aspect of things is probably – and again, a lot of it is going to be dependent upon the school or school district that you're in. That factor will influence how much time you can devote to the other roles.*

He confirmed that gangs and violence could impact not only the role of the SRO, but also the climate of the school:

> *So, it does, it affects the climate in the school. It's not just the SRO. It affects the whole climate, so my experience working in – and I like to refer to them as organized youth groups, not necessarily gangs – I've worked with Crips, Bloods, MS13, so I've worked with these, you know, known gang members, active participants, shot-callers in my schools. I've been there. I've done that.*

Supervisor #1 acknowledged that each school administrator is important, but role development is based on more than the administration:

> *Yes, the school environment, right, really dictates who we put in there, and to be honest, we put people into a school thinking this was going to work great, and it didn't, and we had to make a change. Sometimes we don't get it right.*

An interesting example of assignments involved SROs # 2 (rural), #4 (alternative), and #8 (suburban) who identified themselves as "by the book" officers who leave diversion decisions to the juvenile court officials. The schools served by these SROs were considered the toughest environments among the schools currently served by the SROs participating in this study. SRO #2 advised the kids call his school "the hood." SRO #4 noted that one SSO only lasted two days in the school before quitting indicating that "This school is bad. I don't want any part of it." SRO #8 noted in his current school the "fights are more violent" and frequent than his previous assignment in this county.

Supervisor #2 disclosed in the more suburban part of the county "You know, you might have a lot of the Muslim culture." She was surprised when she substituted in a large suburban high school that had a large Muslim population and discovered "they have a prayer room in the school." She suggested that for most of the SROs the culture differences presented "a learning curve. You just have to respect that's their cultural beliefs."

SRO #5 was currently assigned in an alternative high school of high performing students in the sciences and technology. He noted that the culture in the school was primarily one of "entitlement" and an administration that did not believe "their students would do anything wrong." The design of the school dictated that he spent a great deal of

time concerned with the security of the facility and trying to convince the administration of the need for security drills.

Supervisor #1 indicated when he first moved to this county, dealing with the different cultures "was my biggest challenge," but he advised that the department gives "you so much training around cultural diversity." He advised that prior to the training and his experience he "had no idea that doing this thing, this would be offensive, or that a person is not looking me directly in the eye, not because they want to disrespect me or don't want to listen, it's just their cultural norm." He noted most schools are highly diversified and so "we had to learn these things." He credited the school administrators and counselors for helping the SROs learn more about the cultures with which they were dealing.

SRO #8 (suburban) reported his awareness that different cultures were often a challenge to law enforcement. He knew there were many different cultures in the county where he works. He learned that some people who grew up in another country, experienced law enforcement that was "corrupt and not good and you can't trust them, and so then they kind of get worried to speak to you because of those things." He kept that in mind as he dealt with students who might have been taught that in their homes.

SRO #9 (rural) had experienced that "schools have different populations, I guess if you will, and different needs." His described his prior high school assignment (which is the current assignment for SRO #8) as having mostly Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Asian" students. His current high school "has a large Indian population, a large Middle Eastern population, not a very large Hispanic population, and the "economics" for his current school were better than at his previous one. He spent more time on his

enforcement role at his previous school. He advised that it does affect the way in which you deal with the students:

> *Yeah, so it is kind of different on how you approach it because like you'll have fights. I had more fights, more violent fights, at* [name of previous school] *than I have at* [name of current school]. *I don't know if that's just kind of the culture, not the culture of the school but the culture within that demographic.*
>
> *I mean how you approach the students, how you talk to the students, I could probably get away with talking to the students in a more direct way at* [name of previous school].

However, he cautioned it is important to know with whom you are dealing "because they'll play the victim fairly quick."

SRO #3 (suburban) experienced the same phenomenon between his previous school that was gang infested and his current school. SRO #3 admitted the difficulty at his previous school was "such a cultural barrier and a language barrier." He noted many of the students barely spoke English. While he found the climate of his current assignment required much less enforcement time, he still insisted, "it's so difficult to have conversations with kids these days because the parents just don't like it a lot of times, don't like the cops talking to their kids." He was very direct with the students at his previous high school assignment but related "it's a different clientele at [name of current school], so you have to tread lightly."

Category: Location Stability. In examining the perceived roles of the participating SROs there appeared to be a correlation between the SRO's stability (five

years or more) at the same school and the same administration with the expansion or focus of their roles.

For the two SROs serving in the alternative schools, their perception of their roles was very basic as they completed their first year, but they anticipated their roles would evolve into something more. SRO supervisor #2 spoke during her interview of the "cultural learning curve" that SROs experience when they start in a new school. There were examples in the conversations with the SROs where the length of service in a school contributed to the comfort an SRO had in expanding or focusing their roles. Supervisor #2 spoke about SROs who were in place for some time in the following manner:

> *...some of these guys get very attached to their school, so they're very like, "If you're here today filling in for me, this is what I want you to do." I mean they're very connected with their school and their staff, and they're very protective, almost like that's like their home...*

The two most exemplary cases to demonstrate the possible effect of location stability on SRO roles were SROs #1 (rural) and #11 (rural). SRO #1 is a veteran SRO having served in the position for 16 years, six of those years at his current school. He spoke with authority concerning his role and had a self-awareness that he crafted his roles in part as a response to the disadvantaged environment of his own childhood. He understood his primary role was to protect everyone at the school but saw it as his special role to provide support to the at-risk kids explaining that:

> *I gravitate to more the at-risk kids that they bring in because I can have a conversation with them different than I could have a conversation with another set of kids. I think the toughest part of the job is sometimes those kids that you*

can't help, you know, you have to learn to let them go. Even though you've tried

and tried, I've seen kids it's almost like you've got to watch them fail so they can

come back, you know, and you don't want to see them fail because I've seen that.

He recently noticed the increased mental health frailty of some students and added that

focus to his work. If a child needed mental health assistance, he was at the forefront of

making sure it happened by directing the school in the steps they needed to take and in

assuring the child went for help by following the parents there in his car or by taking the

child himself. He had an intensity when he talked about these issues and when asked

why, he responded, "Because I feel like it all becomes a cycle. If you don't take yourself

out of that cycle, then it becomes a generational thing."

He took his role personally and explained:

So, it hurts. It's sad to hear some of these stories that these kids want to harm

themselves or kill themselves so young and have plans on how to do it. So that's

what I see a lot of if you say what my role is, and that's the stuff you deal with on

a continual basis, you know what I mean? So, I don't get the old-school police

stuff. I get this mental health piece.

When asked how he developed this role, he explained that "it all depends on

administration" which he said must be "a trust partnership." He emphasized it takes time

and experience to develop such a partnership.

SRO #11 is a law enforcement officer with nearly three decades of experience,

with one of those decades as an SRO. He is a five-year veteran in his current school. He

echoed the comments of his fellow long-serving SRO #1 that his creativity in his roles

was only possible if you "make sure that your school administrators are going to support

you in your role." He exuded positive energy when he discussed his SRO position. He noted:

> *I always say when I'm in my school that every day in my school is a good day.*
>
> *It's all what we make it to be, so I do feel like I have one of the best schools, but*
>
> *it's my approach regardless of what school I am in.*

He had a couple of creative approaches that had multiple purposes. He started "high-five-Fridays" where every Friday morning he greeted students, staff, administrators, and parents when they entered the school with high fives using a large foam hand. He related that this started everyone off with a smile, a friendly welcome, and he could look everyone in the eye to see if anyone might need some extra support that day. He advised "..., you could tell a lot from a child's eyes. You actually got really good at determining where they were at mentally by the look in their eyes..."

SRO #11 also developed an extensive teaching curriculum that far exceeded any of the other SROs in this study. His teaching contributions were outlined in detail earlier in this chapter under the findings for RQ 1. He used his teaching opportunities to provide knowledge to the kids, support the educational environment, build relationships with the students and staff, and further the community policing concept. His teaching contributions evolved over time and continued to expand each year.

Experience in law enforcement and a well-developed partnership with the administrator gave SRO #11 confidence in his law enforcement role as well, which he described as:

> *Correct, so there have been times when something may happen or occur, for*
>
> *example, an intruder. The building is mine. It's no longer the school*

administrators. The school may make the decision to go into lockdown. I'm now

the one in charge. This is not open for debate. This is not discussed. It's not for

negotiations. The roles clearly change, and it becomes an environment that is now

my environment that I'm going to take charge. Same way when it comes to a fight.

If I have to go hands-on with somebody, the school can do what they need to do,

but that individual is now in my custody, and I'm calling the shots on it from this

point.

SROs #1 and #11 achieved success in their agenda, partnership with their administration, and expressed fulfillment in their assignment. The stability of location appeared to contribute to their ability to follow their passion for their self-expectations and chosen priorities. Both also possessed extensive law enforcement experience and displayed assertive, confident personalities during their interviews.

The other two SROs who had location stability (five years or more in the same school with the same administrator) in their current assignments were SROs #6 (rural) and #10 (suburban). Both established impressive roles. SRO #6 had 13 years in law enforcement and six years as an SRO in his current assignment. His agenda was clear from the start as he accepted the job for an "opportunity to help the youth." That philosophy was the driving force of his position as an SRO. He disliked the concept of school-to-prison pipeline and did everything he could to avoid contributing to that outcome. He believed there were lots of viable alternatives such as counseling and restorative justice. He was able to find success through:

You know, you have to have that ability to talk to your administrators, work

with them, to all accomplish the same goals, so definitely working with the

administration and the counselors because those are the ones that are going to

need you the most, so with those counseling roles talking to kids that maybe

are at risk but finding a happy medium in there to accomplish the goal to make

sure everyone's safe, educate these kids, and make sure they get on the right

path.

SRO # 10 has 20 years of law enforcement experience with seven years as an SRO, five years at his current school. He accepted the position of SRO because he was burned out on patrol. He did not come to the school with an agenda but understood from the beginning his primary role was to protect the students and staff. He was a volunteer assistant coach and liked to be around the kids. He identified mentoring as the role in which he spent most of his time. He tried to be visible and project a positive, friendly role model. He declared, "I have found my calling." He believed the key to his success was:

Well, me and my admin, we've been together for five years now, and we get along

fantastic, and it's to the point now where like they know when to get me. They

know when to leave me out. It's just one of those relationships that we've

developed over the years that, you know, we're always joking around. You know,

we're always talking. It is a friendship because you're free to talk to them a little

different.

He was very committed to the school he is in and said, "I think once you find a spot that you're comfortable in that matches your personality, I don't think we should ever have to leave that school."

SROs #6 and #10 had strong relationships with their administrators, perceived that they performed their roles in conformance with the expectations of their administrators

and agencies, and were comfortable in their position. The stability of location for these two SROs seemed to contribute to their stated comfort in their well-established roles.

SROs #2 (rural), #8 (suburban), and #9 (rural) had not been in their current assignment for an extended period yet they were laying the foundation for establishing themselves. SRO #2 has 23 years of law enforcement experience on patrol. He displayed a confident and forceful personality in the interview. He took the job of SRO because he "saw a need for, you know, a good, qualified candidate to go sit with our youth, if you will, to try to be, you know, a role model and provide positive interaction." Despite only being at his school for two years, by force of his experience and personality he had asserted himself in many areas. He said there was "no script" for being an SRO and that is one of the reasons he believes officers should have considerable experience on the street before assuming this role. He was a "by the book" SRO and that included the MOU. His school was one of the toughest environments in the county. He identified one of his roles as interpreting the MOU for the school authorities and making sure it was followed. He declined to accept matters that should be handled by the school as discipline and gave them back to the school, but when a matter was his, he demanded to make the decisions. His relationship was developing with the administrator, and he found ways to begin to establish relationships with the students in a school the students referred to as "the hood" and endeavored to provide a "guiding voice."

SRO #8 has been a law enforcement officer for 10 years and an SRO for three years, two of those at his current school. His school was one of the tougher locations in terms of misbehavior and violent fights, yet he declared, "I mold very well there in this school" and find it "very rewarding." He taught classes and spent much of his time

mentoring. He was determined to teach the kids that police officers were there to protect them and as part of that effort he volunteered to perform crossing-guard duties for the neighborhood elementary school so the kids can get to know him early in their lives. He believed that he was beginning to establish relationships with the high school students and worked with at-risk kids during a summer camp, many of whom attended his high school. He had a strong relationship with the administration. He was of the opinion he has made good progress but expected it would improve with time. He stated:

> *I want everyone to know who I am, and, you know, I've only been at the school I've been at now for two years, and I'm slowly starting to be known. It takes time. It doesn't happen overnight, and, you know, I hope to be at the school I'm at for some time because you start building that foundation, which I feel like I've done, and now you kind of move on from here.*

SRO #9 has been in law enforcement for 12 years, two of which have been as an SRO and has only one year at his current school. He took the position of SRO because he needed a change from patrol, and he wanted to be on the same schedule as his children. He teaches and was an assistant wrestling coach but spent most of his time mentoring. He did all those things because he thought it was essential to understand the "fabric of the school." He worked with the social worker at the school and tried to do all he could to provide for the welfare of the students. He was building relationships and like SRO #8 realized he needed to "build a foundation at the school which takes time." He perceived he was establishing a strong base in only one year and that his agenda was taking shape with the coaching, counseling, and social work activities.

Two of the SROs (#3 and #5) established strong platforms and agendas at previous schools and were in search of new opportunities and priorities at new locations. SRO #3 (suburban) was previously at what can easily be described as the toughest school in the district. He described that school as infested with MS-13 gang members who were in the school and hung around outside the school. He had a highly successful three years as the SRO there, which was described earlier in this chapter. He was now completing his third year at a different school. He was attracted to the SRO position based on his experience with juveniles while a patrol officer. He believed their perception of the police was negatively "skewed." He hoped to convince them otherwise based on his interactions with them in the school. He expected to do that through positive interactions, teaching, and coaching. Even at this current school there were challenges. He advised that "you get the kids that it seems like every time you see them in the hallway, they're making some snide comment towards you." He was concerned with politics and the pervasive allegations of grooming children, so he moved much of his mentoring efforts outside the school. He started a police cadet program with his agency, and he helped coach the school's baseball team. It was apparent that he was dedicated to doing all he could for the students, but he was tentative in setting his agenda within the school. He described this current situation as:

> There are some days where I'm not getting called to do anything. I almost feel like I'm just kind of there, you know, walking around. I'm talking to kids. I'm going into the gym class, you know, shoot basketball with some of the classes or just talking to kids, and there's days where, you know, kids are like, "What do you

> *do here?" you know, and in my mind, I'm kind of like, "That's a good question.*
>
> *What am I doing today?"*

SRO #5 found himself in a similar situation. SRO #5 (alternative) has been a law enforcement officer for 23 years and an SRO for 9 years but has only been in his current assignment for one year. He was highly successful in his previous assignment at a middle school. He was committed to the school and focused on developing relationships. He would even visit the school on his days off to let the kids see him in his civilian clothes. The school had "extreme have-nots" and he spent a lot of time with them trying to get them the kind of social work services assistance they needed. His current assignment was in an alternative high school for high performers in the sciences and technology. He read the daily reports from his agency to see if anyone from his school was having difficulty and he regularly checked with the counselors to see if his services were needed. He said most of the students have the resources they need and have a sense of entitlement. The administrators did not believe any of their kids could do anything wrong and he tried without much success to work with them to develop policies for security and safety drills and to be attentive to internal security. He was very concerned about the open concept of the school and classes. He acknowledged "it will take time to settle into his roles" at this new assignment.

SROs #4 (alternative) and #7 (suburban) were both in the stage of determining their place and roles in their schools. SRO #4 had extensive law enforcement experience of 23 years but only one year as an SRO. He was assigned to an alternative school for adolescents who are struggling with behavior and academic problems. There were only about 200 students but all of them were considered at risk. He focused on the safety and

security of the students and staff. He indicated he thought about that every day on his way to work as he created scenarios in his mind and strategized how he would respond. He presented himself as a hard-nosed police officer who cares about the well-being of his students. The extent of his counseling was establishing some baseline communication with the students by greeting them and striking up conversations in the hallways. He believed he established a great working relationship with the school administrators. He had not done any teaching, but said he was willing to if asked. His agenda was critical but simple. He was a police officer whose responsibility was the protection of the individuals in his school and presenting a friendly and helpful attitude toward them. It was not clear that he would or needed to develop much of an agenda beyond that.

SRO #7 (suburban) had seven years as a law enforcement officer and one and one-half years as an SRO, one of which was at his current assignment. He is Asian American and believed his experience of growing up in a minority neighborhood enabled him to feel very comfortable in the minority dominated environment of his current suburban school. He talked to students and parents and explained that in his position "school resource" comes before "officer." He therefore considered himself to be a resource for the school. He said that means "I'm more there to be for the administration, the staff, and the students more than I am to be a police officer, and that's going back to the community policing part of it." He did very little teaching and generally only when asked to provide "supplemental information." He tried to be a visible presence, altered his schedule to avoid a pattern, and talked to the kids when they were in the hallways. He indicated he had the least amount of responsibility during lockdown drills and mostly just observed or determined if anyone needed any help. He indicated he got along well with

the administration. He did not offer any special agenda. More stability at this school may result in him adopting an advocacy for a program, but he seemed content with following the basic requirements of the MOU.

SROs #6 (rural), #8 (suburban), and #3 (suburban) explained the advantage of working with the elementary or middle schools in the same sector with their high schools. They believed that working with the children at those levels gave a substantial jump start to establish "trust relationships" when those children attended high school where they work as the SRO. SRO #6 advised:

> *Like I said, that means a lot to kids because a lot of us, they'll see us in middle school. They'll see us throughout high school, and we have that relationship. They know us. We're a friendly face. You know, they know us personally and not just, "Oh, my God, this is a cop wearing all this equipment."*

SRO #8 worked overtime assignments in the morning as a crossing guard at elementary schools and stated "I can go do that before my shift starts. I try and stay at the same schools, once again building those relationships with those little kids and those parents." SRO #3 understood the advantage of extending time spent with the kids and made sure to "visit the elementary school that I watch over so the kids get to know me."

RQ 3: How do SROs Describe their Interactions with Students at Different School Locations?

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) calls for the school and the SROs "to promote a positive relationship between students, staff and law enforcement and to maintain safe, supportive and secure school environments." The theme of "interactions" accounted for the findings for this RQ.

Theme: Interactions

The categories of this theme were identified as student, parent, community, and administration. The findings relating to the categories "administration" and "administration (trust) are reported in this chapter for RQ 2 under the "expectations" and "location" themes respectively. Those findings for the administration categories apply the same for RQ 2 and 3. The focus of this section pertains to the interactions the SROs had with the students, parents, and community.

Category: Students. The nature of the interactions between the SROs and their students helped to identify the roles and priorities of the SRO. The SROs in this study unanimously recognized the importance of their interactions with the students. Every SRO participant spoke about positive interactions with the students that began with greeting the students as they arrived in the morning and saying good-bye to them as they left in the afternoon. These opportunities provided not only a chance to be visible to the students and display a friendly face, but also served to identify any potential problems. SRO #7 (suburban) explained:

> *I'm always there for the morning arrivals and then the afternoon dismissals,*
> *especially morning arrivals so that anybody coming into the building knows I'm*
> *there, and I believe that those two are the most dangerous times of the school day.*
> *You have 1500, 1600 people walk into the building. You can only do so well to,*
> *you know, catch everybody's faces and make sure you identify, "Hey, that's a*
> *student, that's a student. That's somebody new I don't know. Let's go introduce."*

SRO #5 (alternative) related:

I made a point to be at that front door every single day, fist bump, talk to people,

get to know their names, and just try and break through to them, and a lot of them

I was able to do that.

SRO #11 (rural) explained the importance of casual interactions:

Many times, I've been able to do the early identification to provide earlier

intervention, whether they're emotionally upset and mad or just being broken

down, crying and upset, might be hungry, just certain behaviors they might exhibit

that are outside their other behaviors, and again, this is from doing it every day,

that's outside their norm maybe. I might not catch them all, but I'm pretty good

about catching them, and then we try to direct them to the right places.

SRO #11 made Fridays as a special day by naming it "high-five Fridays." He greeted everyone first thing in the morning with a large foam hand high-five. He said everyone got the high five—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and bus drivers.

Ten of the eleven participating SROs mentioned at-risk children in the discussion of their interactions with the students. As already reported under RQ #2, SRO #1(rural) advised that "I gravitate to more the at-risk kids..." For SRO #4 (alternative), all his students were considered at-risk, but some required more attention than others: "I know where some of my more troubled children are and where they like to hang out. I make myself present there, and I'd start talking to them and stuff like that." SRO #10 (suburban) stated he ensured that he knew the students who were at-risk: "I would say probably a small percentage that are the continuing problems week in, week out, it's the same kids over and over again." SRO #11 (rural) makes sure to keep up to date with the at-risk kids and touch base with them regularly. For example,

If students do come in that are a little off or if we have students that are on ISR

[In School Restriction], we'll touch base and find out who they might be. They're

usually ones that we already have known, and so again, we try to keep pushing

that positive rapport, and we'll check in with them, just ask them how they're

doing.

Despite his efforts with at-risk kids, SRO #10 (suburban) found it difficult to reach some

of them. In response to a question about his efforts with at-risk children who he dealt

with on an incident, he responded:

That's a good question. Some of them will still talk to me, but once they get in

trouble, they kind of close off from everybody, not just me, like even the safety and

security people or maybe a teacher. They kind of slow that down and they kind of

keep to their little groups or whatever. But I wouldn't say that they're nasty

towards me. They just kind of ignore me.

He knew that left him in a position that was not consistent with one of his goals, which

was to "be looked at as somebody that they could come to if they needed something."

Changing Perceptions. The participants advised the purpose of positive

interactions with the students was to create an atmosphere in which the students and SRO

could bond, and the students would learn they could trust the SRO. For many students

that might represent a change in perception of how they viewed the police. All the

participant SROs believe that changing the students' perceptions was possible, but knew

it was difficult. SRO #8 (suburban) said it will have to happen with "one person at a

time." SRO #6 (rural) saw the position as "that one opportunity where we can help

change their perspective on law enforcement." It was a primary reason he wanted to be an

SRO. SRO #9 (rural) opined that "if the kids are having good interactions" with him in the school, "they may be more inclined to talk with an officer on the street." According to SRO #10 (suburban), an SRO "can give the kids a new perception of a police officer" because of the way they had learned to perceive him in the school. SROs #5 (alternative) and #11 (rural) experienced students with negative perceptions of the police and it was often, according to SRO #5, because "they think you are going to harm them in some way." SRO #11 surmised that "if we do that work on the front end, it usually will help us on the back end."

Trust. Eight of the eleven participant SROs specifically identified trust as a key factor in developing a bond with the students. SRO #10 (suburban) indicated that when trust existed, it "helps to bridge the gap" between law enforcement and adolescents and opened the door for them "to tell you what's going on." The SROs recognized that removing adolescents' fear of police was a big step toward gaining trust. SRO #1 (rural) indicated he tried to use positive encounters to convince the students he was not there to "hem them up." He explained the "interaction that I want the kids to see from me is not to be fearful of me." SRO #3 (suburban) agreed with that goal and even suggested that a change to a "softer uniform might help" reduce student apprehension. SRO #6 (rural) advised that he sometimes removed the vest holding all the equipment when he talked to students in a one-on-one because if he did not, the students were uncomfortable and "just stare at all the equipment on the vest."

Both alternative school SROs (#4 and #5) approached developing relationships in the same manner as the other SROs. SRO #4 advised that he explained to the parents he

was not there "to hem up" their child. SRO #5 stated, "I try to do everything in my power to keep kids out of that school-to-prison pipeline."

SRO #6 indicated the "last thing I want to do is refer a student to criminal justice." He expressed that the advantage of the school environment was:

> *We can actually talk to them. We can actually build a relationship, a rapport with them so they trust us, and they understand where we come from on things and it's that one opportunity where we can help change their perspective on law enforcement for one, but it's not always a punitive-type thing when we're dealing with them. We can deal with them through other means, albeit like a counseling-type role, restorative practice-type role.*

SRO #10 attempted to present himself in such a way that all the students could gradually feel comfortable with his presence:

> *You know, like the kids didn't see me as somebody that was giving them dirty looks or, you know, trying to get them in trouble and this kind of stuff, so even just by my presence walking and paying attention but not paying attention to what they're doing, it just kind of steamrolls from there where that's the trust, that's the relationship, then you start talking. You say hi, I say hi, you know, and then it builds from there, and then, you know, we have kids that want to hang out with you all day.*

Use of Situations to Create Positive Student Interactions. Several SROs were successful in producing a positive interaction from a negative situation. SRO #2 (suburban) was in a high percentage minority school that the kids called "the hood." He was a "by the book" police officer, yet he sought opportunities to develop positive

relationships with the students. One of his methods was when he encountered a group of students in some relatively minor misbehavior, he would warn them of the approaching administrators as follows:

> *"Hey, here they come. You might want to knock it off or move on because you're going to get in trouble," and it builds rapport between us. They'll disperse and go on about their way, and I have found that works to my benefit because the kids who butt heads and have problems with administration have come to me and provided me with information about, "Hey, there's going to be a fight. Hey, this kid's got a weapon," or, "Hey, this kid's got drugs in the bathroom."*

SRO #3 (suburban) told stories of kids making "snide remarks" to him in the hallways. His response was to ask them why they would do that without knowing him. That started a dialog and eventually:

> *once they start to understand like why I'm there, that I'm not there to just watch you the whole day in the hallway, see what you're doing wrong, it brings them down, you know, and then when they see me, it's either, "Hey, coach," or, "Hey, Officer [name omitted]," blah, blah, blah.*

SRO #4 (alternative) recounted a situation in which he interviewed a young girl concerning an incident at the school. He was warned by her guardian that she did not like the police and may not talk to him. He stated that he treated her with respect, and "she answered every question." He was later told by her guardian that the young girl indicated she "liked talking with him."

SRO #8 (suburban) noted there were times when a student, with whom he had not previously interacted, would get in trouble and when he talked to them, he would say:

"It's unfortunate that this is how we had to get to know each other, but from this point on, we know each other better now. Outside of an incident that happened, let's keep being friends, and if you've got anything, no matter what it is, come ask me. I may not be able to answer, but I can maybe lead you to somebody that can," and it's worked. It's been good.

SRO #9 (rural) recalled an incident in which he dealt with a young student who was having a mental health crisis. He was empathetic and supportive of her, and she later told him that he had "saved her life." SRO #11 (rural) related a story involving an adolescent who was causing a great deal of trouble in school. One violent incident resulted in him charging her and transporting her to the magistrate. He talked with her on the way and advised "that trip to the magistrate's office that day changed her life. To this day, whenever this student sees me, I get a big hug from her."

SRO #11 (rural) was sometimes asked by a teacher with the In-School Restriction (ISR) group to escort a student to the restroom. He viewed this as an opportunity as follows:

...we'll take those students to use the restroom and just walk with them, and again, that's our time to talk. Some of them actually will use us as a chill pass. They'll use me to help. Some of them earn it where if they do certain things, they have a chance to earn time to meet with me. Others, though, it's their way of getting away just to get a break, and they're able to come meet with me. Sometimes we'll walk around the building, we'll walk outside, or we'll hang out in my office until they're ready to go back to class...

Students in the hallways after the bell rings often found themselves being approached by SRO #11. He said these were "often students that need a little extra attention from time to time," so he took the opportunity to engage with them and made sure they "eventually find their way to the classroom."

Category: Parents. Parents are identified in the findings reported under RQ 2, for the theme "expectations" under the category: "parental expectations," as having varied expectations. This "parents" category for the theme "interactions" deals with interactions between the SROs and parents.

The SROs were asked to describe their interactions with parents other than those that were incident related. SRO #5 (alternative) replied, "I go to every single one of my back-to-school nights. I would do every single one of those so I could be available for parents, talk to parents." All the participants echoed this same response that they attended these events but were not asked to make presentations, except for SRO #7 (suburban) who advised he was "asked quite a bit to do or partake in the presentations that administration does for the students and parents." He used those opportunities to introduce himself and explain his role. SRO #3 (suburban) took any opportunity he had for "educating parents because there's parents that'll get upset if there's a fight and they weren't notified by me, and so they come in and I'm like, "Well, I don't have to get involved in this unless there's an injury." He understood that was not the optimal way to meet parents and he tried to be visible to the kids and parents at the elementary school for which he is responsible:

I try to be at my elementary school pretty much every afternoon just so that they see me there, parents see me there giving high-fives to kids and just letting them know like, you know, just because I'm there doesn't mean something's wrong.

SRO #2 (rural) mentioned that "it's so difficult to have conversations with kids these days because the parents just don't like it a lot of times, don't like the cops talking to their kids." His approach was to find ways to meet and talk with the parents, so they know him and understand his role:

You know, so I'm out there. A lot of them, if their kids are involved in sports, they've already heard through the grapevine who I am, you know, and I'm visible so much. I mean parents see me in the parking lot and they're waving. Parents are coming into the front office, and if I'm there, I'm talking to them. I want to get their name, you know, just introduce myself, so not necessarily up in front of a large group of people. I have zero qualms with speaking in front of groups of people.

He doubted that those encounters were enough for the parents to really understand his role and stated:

I think I would like more opportunities to do it to kind of break down those barriers and allow parents to hear because we get parents that come in and they're hot. Like they want to know why I wasn't involved, and they have no clue that there's a memorandum of understanding and that I can't get involved until it meets this threshold. And so just a five-minute opportunity just to explain that, you know, I think would clear up a whole lot of questions for these parents.

SRO #9 (rural) agreed that the opportunities to explain their roles to the parents were not adequate. He coached wrestling at the school as a volunteer and took every opportunity to be seen by the parents but related:

> *I wish kind of maybe that there should be like in the beginning of the year like an orientation where, "Hey, this is what I do. I'm not here to harass your kids all day," but no, there's not anything formal, but they'll have school nights. Like I went to the elementary school and was standing out in the lobby and stuff for their school nights, and there was like a freshman night where I went to my school and was just available for parents or kids to talk to me and ask questions.*

SRO #9 (rural) revealed that one message he tried to communicate to the parents when he spoke to them about an incident:

> *I tell the parents, I say, "Look, I'm here to again deter crime and all that stuff," but I say, "You're the ultimate authority on your kid, so your kid came to school with a vape. That's why I'm talking to you. I mean I'm not searching bags as we're walking into the school, and I'm not searching their person. You are the parent. Before they come to school, if you think there's something wrong, and right now I'm telling you that they're vaping, so you need to go through their room. Go to the counselor." Yeah, so I tell parents that like, "You guys are kind of the first line of defense here.'*

SRO #8 (suburban) remarked that it was discouraging that there were not more chances to interact with the parents:

> *I mean once again, I guess the times that I will get to speak to parents is when unfortunately, something is going on or they're having a problem with their kid*

outside of school and they want to come in and talk to me, and we see what's

going on.

Category: Community. Most of the participant SROs found varied ways to interact with the community. Several of the SROs resided in or near the community where they were assigned. One of the SROs lived outside the county, but only a short distance from his assigned schools. Five of the eleven SROs (#s 1,3, 8, 9, and 10) coached a varsity sport at their schools. They represent two rural schools and three suburban schools. Many participated in summer camps (#s 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, and 11), representing four rural and three suburban schools. Others (SRO #s 1, 2, and 3) ran a police cadet program, and some participated in community events.

SRO #9 (rural) advised that he worked as an assistant wrestling coach and stated it "helps you kind of get into the fabric of the school, too, so it helps with the community. I mean parents see you." SRO #3 (suburban) started a local police cadet program in the community and served as an assistant baseball coach at his school. He noted that students and parents will often call him "coach," even when he is working as an SRO and in police uniform. He disclosed that he is aware that he represents his department whenever he is in the public eye:

> *I live in the town and my kids go to the elementary school that I watch over as*
> *well, so my kids' friends know who I am. You know, I'm involved in sports. My*
> *kids are involved in sports, so people see me a lot in the community, you know,*
> *and for me, it kind of keeps me in check too because I'm ultra-competitive, you*
> *know, and so I can get, you know, into the event or into the game, and I've got to*
> *check myself because one, I'm representing myself and my kids, but two, I'm still*

representing our department when I'm out in the community whether I'm on duty

or off duty.

SRO #8 (suburban) advised he lives just minutes from his school where he also served as an assistant soccer coach which he viewed as being part of the community. He provided security at other sporting events which afforded him the opportunity to be seen and talk with the parents and students. He said:

We usually do all the football games, most of the basketball games, different

events like proms and homecomings and all that kind of stuff. They usually

request us to be there, and obviously I say yes to all of them because I know all

the kids, so yeah.

SRO #5 (alternative) advised he liked being seen in the community with his family:

I routinely attended the community block parties: It was primarily for Hispanic

students. I would go not while on duty. I would go in my plain clothes unarmed.

And once a kid recognized you, everybody recognized you. Again, to break

through. I would go to the plays that they had. I would bring my family.

SRO #2 (rural) stated that he participated in an outreach for lower income families and in other community events. He described his efforts as participating in "food drives, we deal with that. We'll help hand out food. We have food banks that we will refer people to. You know, we can even transport them."

SRO #8 (suburban) participated in a camp for at-risk kids last summer and was excited he would do so again this summer. He found that "those kids in those camps, I'm with them most of the summer, those relationships that I built with them over the

summertime, now in the school we have a better relationship with each other." He indicated the events and activities were fun and relaxed:

> *We start in the morning, play games. We might have activities, eat. You know, sometimes they have speakers come in, you know, talk about internet safety or whatever, and then we a lot of times go places in the afternoons whether it be like a water park or movies or, you know, a museum, and it's just keeping – I don't want to say keeping them busy but kind of so, because if you're not doing anything, you're probably going to get in trouble.*

RQ 4: How do the Roles Described in the MOU Controlling an SRO Compare with how the SROs Describe Their Roles?

The findings for this RQ are reported under the themes "expectations" and "roles."

Theme: Expectations

The "expectations" theme is a major contributor to the findings for RQ 4 beginning with the MOU.

Category: MOU. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was in effect between the school system and both law enforcement agencies that provide the SROs. There is an annual review of the MOU, and the current version was executed by the heads of the agencies in July 2021. The stated purpose of the MOU (personal communication, 2021) was to "promote a positive relationship between students, staff, and law enforcement and to maintain safe, supportive and secure school environments." The document "clarifies" the roles of the SROs and the school division.

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) was reviewed and key parts of the document pertaining to the roles of the SRO are set forth. The SRO roles as perceived by

the participants of this study were reported in this chapter under RQ 1.

Throughout the MOU (personal communication, 2021), the relationship between the SRO and the school administration was described as a "partnership." The selection, training, and evaluation of the SROs were entirely the responsibility of the law enforcement agencies. The SROs remained under the supervision and control of their respective law enforcement agencies.

According to the MOU (personal communication, 2021), SROs were expected to assist with developing crisis management and response plans, problem-solve along with the administrators to deter crime, function as a "visible deterrent," maintain security, and "minimize student involvement with the juvenile and criminal justice system." The MOU identified the triad of roles for an SRO as established by NASRO (n.d.), namely law enforcement, teaching, and mentor/role model. The MOU required that the SRO be a member of the school's threat assessment team. Multiple SRO roles, defined by the MOU, all had the same objective of ensuring a safe and positive learning environment. The law enforcement role was defined as:

> *SRO's primary role in schools is as a law enforcement officer. SROs assume primary responsibility for responding to requests for assistance from administrators and coordinating the response of other law enforcement resources to the school* (MOU, personal communication, 2021).

The teaching role was described as:

> *As resources permit, SROs should strive to assist with presentations for school personnel on law related topics such as law enforcement practices. changes in relevant laws, crime trends, crime prevention, school safety strategies, and crisis*

response procedures. SROs may also deliver law related education with students using lessons/curricula approved in advance by the SRO Supervisor. In all cases, responding to incidents or conducting investigations will take precedence over delivery of presentations (MOU, personal communication, 2021).

The mentoring/role model role was described as:

Informal mentor and role model SROs serve as informal mentors and role models. SROs are not formal counselors; however, it is recognized that students often seek approval, direction, and guidance about problems through formal and informal interaction with SROs. SROs are expected to communicate clearly about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, to set a positive example in handling stressful situations and resolving conflicts, to show respect and consideration of others, and to express high expectations for students. Students who may need additional assistance shall be encouraged to seek the help of available school- and community-based resources (MOU, personal communication, 2021).

The response to student misconduct was established in the MOU by the following statements:

The parties agree the clear majority of student misconduct can be best addressed through classroom and in-school strategies, outlined in the Student Rights and Responsibilities (SR&R) without law enforcement involvement. The parties acknowledge children are generally less mature and responsible than adults; they often lack the experience, perspective, and judgment to recognize and avoid choices that could be detrimental to them; and they are more susceptible to outside pressures than adults (MOU, personal communication, 2021).

> *School administrators and teachers will handle discipline within the*
>
> *school disciplinary process without involving SROs. The School Division is*
>
> *responsible for communicating the goals and role of the SRO to all school*
>
> *administration, staff, parents/legal guardians, and students* (MOU, personal
>
> communication, 2021).

All the participants recognized the importance of the guidance provided by the

MOU as an agreement between the school system and the law enforcement agencies.

Themes: Roles and Expectations

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) provided broad definitions for the

expectations of the roles played by the SROs. All participants acknowledged the triad of

roles and, except for the two alternative school SROs, were currently engaged in all three

roles. The MOU also made provision for the SROs to participate in roles associated with

providing special needs children with assistance, which sanctioned the SROs'

participation in social work and mental health services.

Despite the thorough presentation of guidelines in the MOU (personal

communication, 2021), there were issues that required interpretation. SRO #1 explained:

> *I mean all the time, and the MOU thing, it's a hard thing because the way we*
>
> *might interpret it as a law enforcement agency is different than a school board or*
>
> *an administration at a school interprets it or as a parent can interpret it, you*
>
> *know what I mean, so that's the fight.*

SRO #2 (rural) agreed particularly when situations called for the enforcement role:

> *managing the interpretation of the school administration when it comes to*
>
> *whether or not something is a criminal offense, and it is being reported in a timely*

manner to make sure that I'm involved every step of the way to either guide them

to say that's a policy violation and I should not be involved or it is a criminal

violation and I need to be involved first, and then I'll pass it to you.

SRO #10 (suburban) explained that from the beginning, interpretation of and compliance
with the MOU sometimes called for flexibility:

I think that's not a good place to be because there's a lot of stuff that a principal

might ask you to do that's not anything job related, but again, like I said, if one of

my assistant principals would come, "Hey, do you mind doing this for me? We

don't have anybody to cover this study hall. Can you stand there for five

minutes?" Sure, no problem. I think if I was in an adverse relationship with the

people I work with, I'd be like, "No, that's not my job."

SRO #11 (rural) recounted that the MOU was not specific as to what activities or
limitations were included in the triad roles and some administrators believed SROs could
be used as extras to be pulled off the bench and placed in any school role:

If you develop that working relationship from the very beginning, and it's an

understanding between the two that, "I understand you might want me to do this.

I'll help out." I never want to ever be the one to sit there and say, "That's not my

job." When I hear individuals say that, then that just starts off a very negative

relationship instead of saying, "I understand. I'll help out where I can. That's not

the role that I should be doing, but these are some of the other things I can do to

help support you." So sometimes some school administrators might want us to do

drop-off and check-off lines, basically waving traffic in from inside the school

parking lot to keep the traffic moving, and that's not the role of the SRO.

Supervisor #2 (rural) corroborated those views expressed by SRO #11 and said:

Sometimes we're going to educate the staff of what our role is, and it comes down

to again something so basic, but like we don't do traffic control because if I did

traffic control at my school and your school is busy, you're going to want them to

do that, and we might be on a police matter, so we can't be guaranteed that we're

going to be there every day or things like that, so I think it's setting the

boundaries within the school. You're not one of their employees, so they can't use

you as one.

SRO #2 (rural) believed that:

The schools don't understand their own documents, though, and they look to us to

be, you know, the know-it-all, if you will, for the document as to what we get

involved with and what we don't, and they let their personal feelings define

whether or not they want to notify law enforcement.

SRO #1 (rural) suggested that there was at least one new area of concern for which

the MOU did not clearly identify who was responsible and what was required. He

assumed the role of providing guidance in those situations:

I think my current role is to advise and kind of mentor not the kids but the staff on

how to handle certain situations. What I'm seeing more is the mental health part

and what is the law enforcement responsibility when we have kids who are in a

crisis, a mental health crisis, and to guide them on the emergency custody orders,

the temporary detention orders.

Discipline was specifically addressed in the MOU (personal communication,

2021) and taken seriously by all the participants. SRO #11 (rural) described discipline as

an area that was a "red line you don't cross." SRO #9 (rural) declared that he was not involved in discipline matters because "that's how SROs get in trouble. I don't determine any sort of school punishment, and they don't tell me how to do my job essentially. They don't have any say in what I do." The MOU preserved discipline strictly for the administrators and the teachers. There were some differences in the way the schools and the SROs approached this issue, and it primarily fell under the theme of "roles" and the category of "enforcement." It could sometimes be a close call concerning whether an incident was properly identified as a rules violation or criminal violation. These were times when even the by the book SROs sometimes used their discretion.

Theme: Roles

Category: Enforcement. SRO #2 (rural) expressed concern that at times his attempt to reduce the fear that students have of police could be impaired by the school administrator's desire to "weaponize me against the kids, scare them. Scare them straight. That is not my job." He illustrated how such an event could impact relationships in the school:

> *I have seen when an assistant principal is visibly distraught with a student how they'll bring them to us as a punishment, and that's unfair, so I am thankful that we do have the MOU because that MOU will allow us to push back and shove that back across at them and say, "That is not a qualifying event for law enforcement. You're upset, and it's a school policy violation. We're going to give that back to you." And they get upset with us. You know, it'll change the dynamic of the school for a week or so, and then everybody kind of settles back in, and they realize they need us, and they'll try to relax.*

All the participants conceded that bullying was a big problem in the schools, but most incidents remained in the purview of the schools to handle as a discipline matter unless it was determined to be a criminal act. However, misbehavior that occurred in their presence might require some form of intervention. SRO #6 (rural) advised if there was bullying or the beginning of a fight, he would tell them to "knock it off and report it to a counselor or administrator." SRO #10 (suburban) stated that if there was danger of someone getting hurt, "I'll step in." SRO #1 (rural) recalled incidents of misbehavior that required him to de-escalate the situation immediately:

> *Some of the kids, I know they're bad, or I know they were ganged up. I can give them that look when they're cussing in the hallways and they're cussing at a teacher. I say, "Bro," and look at them like this and give them that look, and then they'll stop, you know what I mean, because of the respect and the trust they have built with you.*

As noted in the findings for RQ 1 in this chapter, the presence of Safety and Security Officers (SSOs) in every high school served as a buffer for the SROs' instinctive impulse to become involved in misbehavior incidents. Also, the MOU required that SROs serve as members of the Threat Assessment Team. This team was used to evaluate the threat risk of students involved in incidents. SRO #4 (alternative) described the purpose of this team as follows:

> *We sit down, and we discuss the incident that took place and how we're going to move forward with the incident that took place, but overall when it comes down to the actual discipline, if there's going to be suspensions or anything like that, detention, suspensions or whatever, that all comes through the school. They make*

that final decision, but in a threat assessment, yeah, I'm there. I give my input on,

"Okay, I think it's leaning toward more of a serious threat or more of a transient

threat of some sort." As a team, we all have to focus on that part of it, get

together on that, and then they'll make their decision when it comes to

disciplinary action.

SRO #5 (alternative) described how varied the expectations can be during an incident and

he believed it was important for an SRO to have input into the assessment of the incident:

Yeah, it's all over the place. Like some parents want you to, you know, have strict

adherence to the law. "This kid touched my kid, take him to jail." You know that

type of stuff where you can't really do that, then you've got some administrators,

they're like, "Yeah, this kid wrote a list of students and wrote a story about how

he's going to use a gun. I think it's just him venting. We're not going to do a

threat assessment." No, no, we need to do a threat assessment, so they're loosey-

goosey. They're' all over the place.

Supervisor #2 corroborated the importance of SRO involvement in threat assessments:

So, like a threat assessment is not a police matter, but we sit in on it to help give

background, to help make the decision and things like that. We assist in Gaggles.

The school has a system called Gaggle. It's on every computer, right? So, if you

type in the word like knife, kill, suicide or something, it dings the system wherever

they are, and it goes to [school system name omitted], and then they determine if

it needs a police response, so like we're also involved in those.

Discretion. Whether or not the SROs employed the use of discretion might have a

substantial influence on the outcome of whether a matter was determined to be criminal

and if so whether a referral was made. There was unanimous agreement that the MOU (personal communication, 2021) allowed for discretion under the provision that "in their performance of law enforcement functions, the SRO will remain at all times under the control, through the chain of command, of the [law enforcement agencies]." However, not all the SROs used their discretion on matters determined to be criminal. Four of the eleven SROs advised if they had a criminal matter, they made the referral. The four represented one rural, one alternative, and two suburban schools. SRO #2 (rural) indicated:

> *I am absolutely by the book. I don't apply my own opinions or judgment. They know that, and I've always said throughout my career, "If you make me do my job, I will do my job," so if I take a police report regardless of what the offense is because I'm in a high school, every one of those criminal offense reports gets dropped off at juvenile intake. They have a diversion program. The diversion program is incredible, right? It's great. It serves its purpose. It rids them of that first offense, that free touch, if you will, by the courts. And sometimes, right, and again, we are identifying future problems.*

Despite not using his discretion to divert kids from the juvenile justice system, SRO #2 expressed dismay at having to submit adolescents to the courts:

> *There will always be, you know, an argument as to whether or not law enforcement has too much discretion and authority or not enough. With the tides changing, I feel like I wish the school was a little more responsible for the students' behavior. I don't like and I don't take lightly to put a child's name in a police report. If I would have had an SRO when I was in school, I would have*

been listed in some police reports somewhere along the way. I don't know if that's

fair.

SRO #4 (alternative) agreed he has discretion, but his protocol was that "everything would go through juvenile intake." SRO #7 (suburban) agreed he had discretion but indicated he sent everything that was criminal to the courts. He perceived that course of action "follows the MOU." SRO # 8 (suburban) explained his position that despite having discretion, he was an "officer, we enforce the law." He noted:

I mean when we have incidents with juveniles, yeah, we have our report and turn

it over to them. Obviously, it depends on if it's a felony or misdemeanor, but, you

know, with the court, you know, once again, we're not the judge. We don't decide

that. We just give them the facts.

The decision or discretion point for all these SROs was in the consideration of whether a matter was considered a minor misdemeanor or misconduct. Once it was decided that the matter was criminal, they referred the matter rather than diverting to the school.

SRO #s 5 (alternative), 6 (rural), and 11 (rural) used their discretion and identified the school-to-prison pipeline as their motivation. SRO #5 indicated he had discretion and did "everything in my power to keep kids out of the "school-to-prison pipeline." He disclosed that:

And in cases where it's particularly difficult, I just type it up in my report, always

articulate the reason I did what I did. And, you know, I don't know what else to

say about it, but in those incidents where it's a super-gray area, just articulate

away in the report why you made the decision you made.

SRO #6 (rural) said he used his discretion because "kids make mistakes." He believed that the school-to-prison pipeline was the "opposite of what we are about." SRO #11 (rural) agreed and indicated he wanted to avoid the "school-to-prison pipeline" because "we try to do other things" to help them understand how to make better decisions.

Two rural SROs (#s 1 and 9) and two suburban SROs (#s 3 and 10) agreed they had discretion to make decisions in their enforcement role and they used it regularly. SRO #1 declared he "tries to be fair" to his kids and told them he would "give them a one-time chance." He stated he always insisted that they get "help from the school." SRO #3 revealed that for first offenses he used "diversion to the school resources." SRO # 9 described himself as "different than say Deputy Whoever." He did not follow the "letter of the law and send all that stuff to juvenile intake, but I just use my discretion, but you've got to be fair." SRO #10 considered "every case to be different." He communicated that he uses his discretion "probably on a daily basis."

Both supervisors corroborated that they wanted their SROs to use their discretion. Supervisor #1 insisted that discretion was essential "because no two situations are the same." Supervisor #2 cautioned that discretion "has limitations." She explained some SROs or parents "are very passionate, and they want everybody charged. They want everything to go to juvenile court services." She noted that "others prefer diversion to the school drug and substance abuse counselor. The school can still discipline the student."

Policy Development. The MOU (personal communication, 2021) states that SROs "should assist school administrators in developing school crisis management and response plans." SRO #5 (alternative) expressed frustration with his current administration in his efforts to influence policies involving security matters. None of the

participants indicated any substantial involvement in security plans and policies except for SRO #2 who said if there was a lockdown, he would make all the decisions.

Training for Roles. The MOU requires that the law enforcement agencies ensure that all the SROs receive basic SRO training as well as training in cultural awareness, implicit bias, and crisis intervention, "prior to or within 60 days of assignment in a school, whenever feasible." All the SROs completed those training requirements. The eleven SRO participants reported completing additional training as follows:

- All received active shooter training.
- Nine received de-escalation training.
- Six received trauma-informed care training.
- Five received training in dealing with special needs children.
- Five received training in how to teach.
- Two received training in adolescent development.
- Two received training in how to counsel.

SRO #9 indicated that the SROs receive a lot of training and related they receive more training than the patrol officers. He advised the specialty training is designed for the school environment and dealing with adolescents.

RQ 5: What Percentage of their Time do SROs Estimate they Spend on Each of their Roles?

Theme: Roles

All SRO interviewees were asked to estimate the percentage of time they spent on each of their roles, with particular focus on the NASRA (n.d.) identified key roles of law enforcement, mentoring/role model, and teaching. Most found it difficult to parse their time into specific segments, but there were two prominent approaches when responding to the question.

Six SROs (2 rural, 3 suburban, and 1 alternative) responded to the question by highlighting their community policing approach. SRO #2 estimated his time to be "25% teaching with the rest of the time combining into community policing," which he described as "relationship building and the law enforcement role of keeping everyone safe." SRO #3 advised, "You know, so I might say 3% teaching, and the rest, 97% is policing, community policing." SRO #4 advised he was "100% community policing." He had not done any teaching and had focused on safety and mentoring. SRO #6 struggled to give percentages. He noted that he served as a "deterrent with a community policing approach." SRO #7 was unable to provide a breakdown of time spent on individual roles but said that teaching took up the least amount of his time and that community policing or "being a community resource" took up the rest. SRO #7 advised, "keeping the community safe and providing a role model for the students account for most of the time." SRO #8 indicated all the roles were subsumed under the "community policing philosophy."

Six SROs (3 rural, 1 alternative, and 2 suburban) responded by emphasizing mentoring. SRO #6 is counted under both prominent responses. SRO #1 said, "I think mentoring would be 60%, teaching, and I mean teaching class or laws or just like in general the right and wrong ways would be 30%, and my law enforcement duty was about 10%." SRO #5 described his time allotment as follows:

> *Over the course of my time, I would say probably 40% to 50% [mentoring].*
> *Education like going into classrooms and talking. I don't know, 30%. You know, I*
> *would probably have to bump up the percentages to the others because the actual*
> *law enforcement putting pen to paper and saying, "You have to go to court for*

> *this," or refer somebody to that is pretty low because most things can be handled*
>
> *within the school system.*

SRO #6 relied on community policing but then added, "I would say that counseling is the most important thing we do, I think." SRO #9 did not provide a percentage breakdown of his time, but in terms of how he spent his time he advised: "I think most of my time is probably spent counseling. I spend most of my time just talking to kids." As he thought about it more, he added: "so counseling is the biggest one. It's funny, I mean just being there is probably preventing crime." SRO #10 provided the following description of his time:

> *I mean the mentoring part I think is probably – because most of the day, you're*
>
> *just being seen. I think that's probably the mentoring part where, you know,*
>
> *people are perceiving you every day just walking around saying hi to people. You*
>
> *know, the kids are sitting in the hallways. You say hi to them. You stop and have a*
>
> *little conversation. I would say probably 80% of that, and the law enforcement*
>
> *side is probably more like 10%. Teaching, yeah, I'd probably say about 10%.*

SRO 11 stated his time breakdown was:

> *I'm heavily involved in teaching, but that would probably only be about 20% of*
>
> *my responsibilities. The actual law enforcement aspect of things is probably – and*
>
> *again, a lot of it is going to be dependent upon the school or school district that*
>
> *you're in, so from my experience here in [name omitted], I would probably say*
>
> *that might be 5%, and then so the mentoring, I'm going to go back to building*
>
> *those relationships at the very beginning, and so that would basically be 75%, I*
>
> *would say.*

Summary

This chapter presented the findings that fulfilled the purpose of this study. The purpose was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether school location influences those perceptions. The participants were eleven high school SROs and two SRO supervisors from a single school district in one county in Virginia. The participant SROs and supervisors were from two different law enforcement agencies but operated under a single MOU with the county school board. Due to a recent previous assignment of one SRO, a total of twelve high schools were included in the study rather than eleven.

The data came from documents, memos, and face-to-face interviews. Four major themes, each with multiple categories, were developed based on the research questions and confirmed through the coding process. The categories emerged from the coding process of the interview transcripts, the MOU, and memos prepared during the research.

The interviews of the SROs provided a comprehensive and transparent examination of their perceptions of their roles and priorities. There were similarities and differences among the SROs in their perceptions. Reflection on and analysis of those perceptions increases the value of this study. Role perceptions vary according to location based on several variables. The SROs were energetic and passionate in their discussions, provided anecdotal information, and appeared to be forthcoming in their responses.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of the qualitative research undertaken to explore the influence of school location on the school resource officer's (SRO) perception of their roles and priorities. This was a collective case study based on multiple cases with each SRO in their assigned school representing a separate case. This discussion includes the research problem, a discussion of the findings, implications and limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.

Overview of the Study

School resource officers (SROs) have served in public schools since the 1950s, yet their proper roles and priorities have remained unsettled (Rhodes, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021). Researchers have described SROs' roles as varied, complex, conflicting, and ambiguous (Glenn et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021). SROs were declared by the NASRO (n.d.) as the fastest growing law enforcement sector in the United States. Mandated national roles and priorities for SROs do not exist. Several investigators have called for further research concerning the roles of SROs (Barnes, 2016; Glenn et al., 2019; Lambert & McGinty, 2002; McKenna et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities in different school locations. The following five research questions served as guides for this research:

1. How do SROs perceive their roles and priorities and do their perceptions vary according to location?

2. How do SROs and their supervisors describe the process of establishing SRO roles and priorities?

3. How do SROs describe their interactions with students at different school locations?

4. How do the roles described in the MOU controlling an SRO compare with how the SROs describe their roles?

5. What percentage of their time do SROs estimate they spend on each of their roles?

The participants of the study were eleven high school SROs and two SRO supervisors, all from two law enforcement agencies in one county in Virginia. The primary document in this study was the current MOU (personal communication, 2021) between the school system and both law enforcement agencies. Data was also obtained from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). In person interviews were conducted with each of the participants, which were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Memos were written following most of the interviews to add my observations and any additional information that was obtained following the interview. A running memo was also maintained with my reflections of ideas and concepts during the interview and coding process. A short questionnaire was sent by SurveyMonkey to each participating SRO prior to their interview to gather personal and professional descriptive data.

The interviews, guided by prepared protocols, were conversational and relaxed. The participants spoke freely, and I believe honestly about their perceptions and

experiences, good and bad. Each of them expressed their enthusiasm for working with the students and provided anecdotal stories to amplify the perceptions of their roles.

RQ 1: How do SROs Perceive their Roles and Priorities and do their Perceptions Vary According to Location?

An element of this study focused on whether school location influenced the roles of the SRO. The themes of "roles" and "location" provide the underpinnings for this discussion. First was the matter of determining the differences between the rural schools and suburban schools. NCES (2006) designates all schools based on their size and nearness to an area such as a town. The four major designations are city, suburban, town, and rural. The Virginia county serving as the site for this study had only suburban and rural schools. The subclassifications were large suburban and fringe rural. However, the school populations in this study did not align with the classic expectations for their designations. This was not fully consistent with the literature provided in chapter two. Pequero et al. (2020) reported that schools reflected the characteristics of the communities in which they were located—including crime, diversity, and socioeconomic conditions. Shelton et al. (2009) defined suburban as affluent, cohesive, and relatively crime-free, a definition that differs from that used by Diamond and Posey-Maddox (2020), which accounted for increased minority presence and socioeconomic disadvantage in the suburbs. Most of the schools in this study, including all but one of the rural schools, were more consistent with the new suburbia as described by Diamond and Posey-Maddox. It is noted that four of the five non-alternative rural high schools in this study served students from the rural area where the school was located as well as nearby suburban areas. According to a former high-ranking school official (personal

communication, 2023), it was a normal process in this county to balance the number of students with the capacity of the schools.

The discussion of the findings for this research question focuses on the responses by the SROs and their supervisors. Based on their interview responses, several factors were identified as influencing their perceptions of roles.

Similarities in Role Perception by Location

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) defined the SROs' roles of enforcement, mentoring, and teaching. Except for the two alternative school SROs, all the SROs participated in varying degrees in each of these roles.

Every participant indicated that each school is different, and the differences affected their roles. The SROs acknowledged participating in a wide variety of roles. There were many similarities between the perceptions of roles by the rural and suburban SROs. All the schools in this study operated under the same school system and the same MOU. All participants agreed their top priority was the safety of the students and staff and that everything else was a bonus.

Despite the unanimous agreement among the participants regarding their top priority and their adherence to community policing, most minimized their law enforcement role. While being visible was recognized as a deterrent to internal violence and external intruders, they emphasized that visibility provided opportunities for positive interactions with the students and establishing a bond with them. Curran et al. (2021) found in a study across all urbanicities that when an SRO emphasized enforcement, the mere act of walking in the hallways was viewed as harassment by the students. This was clearly understood by the SROs in this study as they highlighted their purposeful effort to

being friendly as they walked the corridors and not appear as if they were on patrol in the streets looking for violations. Several SROs opined that "fear" of police was an obstacle to overcome in gaining the students' trust. As a result, mentoring was often partially defined as time spent in the hallways engaging with and making the students feel comfortable. Devlin and Santos (2020) reported the unique opportunity for the SRO position to develop relationships with adolescents through teaching, mentoring, and counseling. The emphasis on a community policing strategy and the non-law enforcement roles by the SROs in this study was congruent with Lynch et al. (2016), who reported a community policing strategy was consistent with SROs' performance of non-law enforcement roles, such as teaching and mentoring.

The Lynch et al. (2016) research also reported that the adoption of non-law enforcement roles was a recognition by the SROs that they needed to improve students' negative perceptions of law enforcement. This study corroborated that finding as the SROs across all locations adopted a goal to improve the perception that adolescents had of law enforcement officers. The multi-purposed actions by these participants were apparent in that actions that were taken to improve the perceptions of adolescents about law enforcement were the same actions that facilitated bonding and promoted a safe learning environment. Role theory stated that "roles have consequences" (Biddle, 1979, p. 70). The consequences of the SROs' mentoring and teaching roles were students' safety, bonding, and perceptions.

Differences in Role Perception by Location

Differences in the emphasis on the teaching role were identified between the rural and suburban school SROs. All rural (non-alternative) school SROs placed an emphasis

on their teaching role and for one SRO it was a primary agenda item. None of the suburban (non-alternative) school SROs emphasized their teaching role. However, the urbanicity of the schools was not seen as influencing this difference. There was a delta of 1.25 years between the average time the rural SROs were in their schools (4 years) and the time the suburban SROs were in their schools (2.75 years). This concept was discussed below in the section dealing with "location stability." That variable might have been an influence. There were other variables including culture, self-expectations, and administration expectations that likely influenced the differences in the emphasis the SROs allotted to the teaching role.

There was also a difference between the rural and suburban SROs' emphasis on their roles concerning mental health. During the coding process, the mental health code was consolidated with social work into the category of social work under the "roles" theme. Three of the five rural (non-alternative) SROs discussed their role concerning mental health during their interviews. Two of the SROs identified a proactive role while the other rural SRO provided an anecdotal story dealing with his response to a mental health issue. One suburban (non-alternative) SRO likewise described his reactive response to a recurring mental health issue with a former student. Again, it was difficult to definitively identify the key variables that influenced this difference. Training for each of the SROs was reviewed and it was determined that four of the five non-alternative rural SROs and all four non-alternative suburban SROs completed training in de-escalation. Two of those rural SROs and three of the suburban SROs also completed trauma care training. Only one of the two SROs who implemented a proactive mental health role completed trauma care training, but both had been trained in de-escalation.

Therefore, training was not viewed as having a substantial influence on adopting the mental health role. Based on the SRO interviews, I concluded that location stability and expectations (self and administration) likely influenced adoption of a mental health role.

While only a couple of the SROs highlighted their social work roles, most of the SROs engaged in some activities that would qualify as social work, such as summer camp counselors for at-risk youth, assisting students or families to find needed assistance, and participating in community activities supporting disadvantaged families.

By the Book. Three SROs (1 suburban, 1 rural, and 1 alternative) described themselves as "by the book" officers. They were assigned to challenging school environments with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students and a substantial number of at-risk adolescents. Another SRO (suburban) did not describe himself as "by the book" but stated he refers all matters determined to be criminal to the juvenile court, which he believed was in accordance with the MOU. Despite the fact these SROs indicated they did not use their discretion to mitigate sending a criminal referral to the juvenile court, all of them made efforts to develop relationships and teach the kids to make good decisions that avoid the risk of referral. This approach was somewhat inconsistent with findings produced by Lynch et al. (2016), which concluded that SROs assigned to the most disadvantaged schools prioritized law enforcement duties. While the four SROs did not use their discretion to divert students who had committed a criminal act, each of them in their daily routines emphasized the non-law enforcement roles under the umbrella of community policing. They exercised their law enforcement prerogatives when dealing with a criminal matter, but they did not emphasize law enforcement to the exclusion of their other roles, nor did they prioritize their law

enforcement role. The SROs rationalized that the courts could divert the adolescent if they determined that was the right course of action, that they possibly provided early identification of a problem, and that their procedure was a consistent and fair approach. One of the four expressed his distaste for putting "children's name in a report", but believed he was following the rules by doing so. It is noted that current Virginia law (T22.1-279.3.1) requires misdemeanors or felonies committed on school property to be reported to law enforcement authorities; however, it does not require charges to be filed nor does it stop schools from dealing with the incident through graduated sanctions (Reports to school authorities and law enforcement, 2014). These SROs did not believe location influenced their approach. It was likely that they would take this same approach regardless of their assignment. Critics of the SRO program might say they had not adjusted to the school culture and on the surface that would be a reasonable position, but their day-to-day emphasis on non-enforcement roles would belie that criticism. Both supervisors emphasized that each SRO participant was selected specifically for a particular school and its culture.

Alternative School Culture. It was fortunate that two of the SROs that agreed to participate in this study were assigned to alternative schools. The downside was that they were not eligible for comparison with the regular schools based on geolocation because their students were drawn from all parts of the county. One of the alternative schools was classified as rural and the other was suburban, which was instructive to the degree that the geographical designation of a school does not necessarily describe or define the student population. Despite this limitation, the examination and comparison of the alternative SROs' perceptions of their roles was a worthwhile endeavor. Like the regular

high school SROs, both alternative high school SROs were primarily concerned about the safety of the students and staff.

The two alternative schools were very different. One had the fewest students at any high school in this district. All the students were considered at-risk, had experienced behavior and academic problems (SRO interview), and had the second highest free or reduced-price meal percentage (VDOE, 2023) in the county. The other alternative high school had the largest student body (NCES, 2023), who were high performers in the sciences and technology, with the lowest free or reduced-price meal percentage (VDOE, 2023) in the county. The differences in school climate were obvious but the SROs pointed out a factor that was shared by the students and staff of both schools. The students' ability to stay in these schools represented opportunities for their future and they were generally afraid of the consequences of being expelled. For one group it might mean that a public high school education was not possible and for the other it could mean that they would not get into the college program of their choice or be competitive for a scholarship. Therefore, the SROs opined that behavior was generally better than might be expected and the staff of both schools were reluctant to administer strict discipline because of those potentially harsh consequences.

Both SROs understood the relatively high stakes for these students and shared a view that the last thing they wanted to do was arrest kids. Instead, they wanted to teach them that there are consequences in life, and they needed to make good decisions. The opportunities to counsel and teach were limited to this point in the alternative schools. However, both SROs were new to these schools and hoped to expand their roles into

those areas. In these two instances, the school's purpose, culture, and expectations had a substantial impact on their roles.

RQ 2 How do SROs and their Supervisors Describe the Process of Establishing SRO Roles and Priorities?

All participants acknowledged the MOU (personal communication, 2021) provided the general guidelines for the SROs' roles. There was a consistent refrain by the SROs and their supervisors that the first stop at a new school must be the administrator's office to understand their expectations and to identify and resolve any differences. According to one supervisor, once they arrived at the school it was up to each SRO "to carve out their role."

As noted under RQ 1 of this chapter, every interviewee opined that each school was different. In addition to the expectations of the MOU (personal communication, 2021) and the administrator, different roles and emphasis appeared to be influenced by self-expectations, SRO experience, location stability, and the challenges/opportunities presented by the environment at the school. Sometimes the personal agenda or self-expectations were reflected in the SRO's stated motivation for becoming an SRO, such as to focus on at-risk kids, to be a role model and create positive interactions, and to change the view of adolescents about law enforcement. Role theory posited that roles might be facilitated or hindered by expectations and the environment of the location (Biddle, 1979). That hypothesis was consistent with the findings here.

Location Stability

Rhodes (2017) found that many variables influence an SRO's role selection. One of the variables she identified was the length of time served as an SRO. However, Rhodes

did not identify specific role differences that were attributed to that variable. The perceived roles of the participating SROs in this study were examined and there appeared to be a relationship between stability at the same school and the same administration with the expansion or focus of their roles, as well as their expression of comfort in their assignment. A supervisor spoke about a "cultural learning curve" that existed in all schools. She also noted that once an SRO settles into a school and a partnership with the administrator, they become very passionate and protective about the way things are done at their school. Location stability for the purposes of this study were those assignments in the same school with the same administrator for five years or more. I did not locate any scholarly articles that dealt with the issue of location stability.

Two SROs that had location stability in their rural high schools displayed comfort in managing their relationships and developing their roles. One focused on students who were at-risk and those displaying mental health issues. He constantly took advantage of opportunities to teach life lessons to students during encounters. Much like several of the officers in the study by Rhodes (2017), this SRO believed his focus was in response to his own childhood neighborhood experiences. He credited his trust relationship with the administrator as the reason he could do the things he believed were important. He emphasized it took time and experience to develop such a partnership. The other SRO agreed with his fellow long serving SRO that the creativity in his roles was only possible if you "make sure that your school administrators are going to support you in your role." He had several creative approaches with multiple purposes. He started "high-five-Fridays" where every Friday morning he greeted students, staff, administrators, and parents when they entered the school with high fives using a large foam hand. He related

that this started everyone off with a smile, a friendly welcome, and he could look everyone in the eye to see if they might need some extra support that day. He also developed an extensive teaching curriculum that far exceeded any of the other SROs in this study. He used his teaching opportunities to provide knowledge to the kids, support the educational environment, build relationships with the students and staff, and further the community policing concept. His teaching contributions evolved over time and continued to expand each year. He actively sought opportunities to turn difficult situations into positive interactions.

Both SROs expressed that they had achieved success in their agendas, partnerships with their administration, and fulfillment in their assignment. The stability of location appeared to contribute to their ability to follow their passion and advocate for their self-expectations and chosen priorities.

Two other SROs had location stability in their current assignment, one in a rural school and the other in a suburban school. Neither of these were trailblazers in terms of their agendas, but both had established clear roles and expressed a high degree of comfort in their assignments. One came to the assignment with an expressed agenda of establishing relationships with the students to divest them of the view that the police are bad. He worked diligently on that agenda. The other did not come to the school with an agenda but identified mentoring as the role in which he spent most of his time. He tried to be visible and project a positive, friendly role model. He declared that he believed this job was his "calling", he credited being with his administrator for five years as the reason he was successful, revealed that he was very comfortable in his assignment, and asserted he should never have to leave.

Those SROs with less time in their current assignment were in the phase of establishing themselves and their roles. One was in a tough school (suburban) environment but felt that he belonged there and was beginning to establish relationships with some of the at-risk kids, especially through working with them at summer camp. He believed that his ability to connect would improve with time at that school. Another SRO (rural) perceived he was establishing a strong base in only one year and that his agenda was taking shape with the coaching, mentoring, and social work activities.

Examples of the difference between the influence of time as an SRO and location stability were found in examining the circumstances of two SROs, one with nine years as an SRO and the other with six years as an SRO. Both had over five years as an SRO but not location stability. Both were highly successful at their previous SRO assignments but are currently in the process of adjusting to their new assignments and trying to establish themselves and their roles. Both expressed some frustration as they negotiated this process of role development. They were impressive and dedicated officers but were not much more advanced in their role development than the two participants who had been SROs for less than 2 years and at their current schools for about a year. However, they did present themselves with more confidence and awareness about the SRO position than the one-year SROs.

Three SROs presented a way to enhance the effect of location stability by working with the elementary or middle schools in the same sector with their high schools. They believed that working with the children at those levels gave a substantial jump start in establishing "trust relationships" when those children eventually attended the SRO's high school. This was another example of the advantage of location stability. These SROs

explained that the kids get to know them personally, understand that they were there to protect them, and the fear disappears.

An article in the *Harvard Business Review* discussed the fact that businesses found it difficult to find the right balance between stability and change (Gottschalk, 2019). Gottschalk reported that stability has been undervalued despite the workforce's need to be able to depend on things such as identifying their proper roles and how their work should be organized. The article referred to the findings of an organizational behavior expert who opined that stability allows for a worker to work creatively toward their goals and self-expectations. This concept appeared to be the effect of location stability on this small group of SROs.

Expectations

A supervisor acknowledged that they have people who "do the bare minimum" but indicated she was comfortable with that if the school climate did not call for more SRO involvement and if their administrator expected the SROs to minimize their activities.

The participants opined that role development takes time. But an SRO must be motivated to develop roles beyond the "bare minimum." This study reflected that much of that motivation came from the purpose of their activities and purpose came from expectations primarily from the administration and self.

Self-expectations of the SROs helped form their purpose for wanting to become SROs, such as those whose expectations were to work with kids, help at-risk children, develop relationships and bonds that would change kids' perceptions of the police, and divert kids from the school-to-prison pipeline. An example of purpose motivated role identification is the previously discussed visibility issue, which due to the purpose of the

SROs in this study was viewed as an opportunity to bond with the students while keeping them safe rather than an opportunity to catch them doing something wrong. This was consistent with the study by McKenna and White (2018) that concluded role identification could determine how an SRO responded to a student incident. They reported that researchers often attempted to quantify the amount of enforcement response to misconduct; however, the McKenna and White study revealed that there were more mentoring/counseling responses to incidents than enforcement responses.

This study revealed that the process for establishing SRO roles was guided by the MOU; influenced by the school climate, length of time at the school, and expectations; and sanctioned by the school administration.

RQ 3 How do SROs Describe their Interactions with Students at Different School Locations?

McKenna and White (2018) reported that the nature and frequency of interactions between SROs and students might offer a clue as to how the SROs perceived their roles and priorities. Interaction was adopted as one of the themes for this study. The prevailing concepts for these participants concerning the category of interactions with students were positive interactions, trust, and changing perceptions.

Positive Interactions

Self-expectations play a major part in the establishment of SROs' roles (McKenna et al., 2016). Every SRO participant in this study spoke about developing bonds with the students by having positive interactions that began with greeting the students as they arrived every morning and saying good-bye to them as they departed in the afternoon. During the day they talked with them in the hallways and during lunch. These were

interactions with a purpose, sometimes multiple purposes. Several of the SROs used these greetings to bond with the students and to spot potential trouble or anxiety in a student. Positive interactions were partly for the purpose of mitigating any negative perceptions and encounters the students might have previously experienced with law enforcement. Griffiths and Winfrey (1982) reported the principal variable influencing an adolescent's attitude toward the police was the nature of their interactions with law enforcement. They found, not surprisingly, that positive interactions produce positive perceptions. The participant SROs used every opportunity to prove to the students that their role was to protect them and not to "hem them up." This approach was consistent with the findings of Murphy (2015) who reported that police who adapted their enforcer role to a mentoring role and emphasized respect and fairness were able to strengthen their relationships with adolescents. One of the SROs in this research with one year of SRO experience in an alternative school that was completely populated with at-risk students advised he was yet to have a negative interaction with a student. Most SROs were not so fortunate, but some were creative in turning negatives into positives.

Use of Situations to Create Positive Interactions. Several participant SROs were successful in fostering a positive interaction from a negative situation. Examples of these circumstances were provided in chapter 4 under RQ 3 ("interactions" theme and "student" category) The participants' perception of the way mentoring, security, and enforcement could work together corroborated role theory that described such occurrences as roles that facilitate each other and have an "interdependence" (Biddle, 1979, p. 78). This mutual facilitation served to mitigate the potential of a role conflict between enforcement and mentoring as described by several studies (Javdani (2019);

McKenna & Pollock, 2014; Rhodes, 2015; & Schlosser, 2014). Persistently seeking positive interactions with the students had the effect of normalizing relationships between SROs and students, as found by R.K. James et al. (2011). A participant SRO in this study noted that casual greetings to students often expanded into frequent conversations with some of the students wanting to "hang out all day." Unfortunately, this approach did not always work for some at risk kids as one SRO explained in chapter 4 ("interactions" theme and "student" category), but the effort and the purpose were valid and seemed to this group of SROs to produce excellent results consistent with the findings of R.K. James et al.

Trickle-Down Trust

One of the outcomes of positive interactions was that the students would learn to trust the SROs. Theriot (2016) reported that the more a student interacted with the SRO, the more trust the student had in the SRO. This concept was mentioned by eight of the eleven SROs interviewed and both SRO supervisors. Trust is needed between the SROs and the administrators and the SROs and the students. Without the first, it is much more difficult to achieve the second. It is trickle-down trust. As previously discussed, SRO roles can be severely restricted when an administrator decides to do so, and they may be expanded when allowed by the administrator.

The participants in this study believed that having the administrator's trust allowed tremendous latitude to the SRO in developing their roles. The participant SROs identified gaining the trust of the students as one of their main goals. There was also a recognition that it was an uphill battle with many of the students because they come into the school with a bias against the police. It might be a cultural issue carried over from a foreign

county where the police are considered corrupt, or it might be homegrown distrust based on news accounts or negative encounters with the police involving the student, friends, or family members. Calvert et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine the reasons for the lack of trust between Black youth and the police. An educator in the study explained the lack of trust as a cultural matter. Parental perceptions were also identified as having an influence on their children. One lesson that might be learned from the Gill et al. (2016) study was the conclusion that the cornerstone of the officers' goal to build trust with the students was an emphasis on connections with the students, teachers, and parents. Wu et al. (2015) found several factors influenced the perceptions of police including race, family, connections to crime, their bonding with their school, and the nature of their encounters with the police.

One participant SRO summed up the concept of trickle-down trust by saying when the administrator views him as a resource and has "that trust with me and then we can do wonders" for the kids. He saw kids struggle to come up with five names of adults in the school who they could trust. A supervisor revealed sometimes a "kid has no one to turn to, no one he can trust at home, so he turns to the SRO." That at least was where the participant SROs hoped the student would turn. The SROs considered it essential that the students were treated with respect in all circumstances. A participant SRO exemplified that principle when he operated in a high school that was gang infested. He treated them with respect, and cited examples of their reciprocal respect; however, he could not say that he ever trusted them. The SROs believed that respect was a necessary step toward trust, just as normalized positive interactions, fair use of authority, and honesty were important elements. According to school principals interviewed in Wolfe et al. (2017),

trust of SROs by students led to behavior and compliance with the rules. The SROs interviewed here were convinced that trust by the students would lead to bonding and cooperation.

Changing Perceptions

This study corroborated the findings in Higgins et al. (2020) that the community policing concept adopted by many SRO programs led many SROs to establish a goal of "bridging the gap" (p. 437), meaning they wanted to improve the relationships with the students and the community. Lynch et al. (2016) reported that community policing emphasized relationship building and could serve as the motivation for SROs performing non-law enforcement roles in their schools. The MOU (personal communication, 2021) prescribes, and all the interviewees acknowledged, that the SRO program adopted the community policing model in the schools. The findings here would suggest the community policing goal of bonding with the students provided purpose which in turn led to the motivation to adopt non-law enforcement roles. The participants believed that mentoring established relationships with the students, which would lead to bridging the gap.

RQ 4: How do the Roles Described in the MOU Controlling an SRO Compare with how the SROs Describe their Roles?

Noting the considerable expansion of the SRO program, the DOJ (2019) recommended that school districts and law enforcement agencies implement an MOU to establish guidelines. An MOU (personal communication, 2021) was in place for the school district and law enforcement agencies included in this study. The MOU described the relationship between the school and law enforcement as a partnership. The MOU

provided general descriptions of the triad of roles (enforcement, educator, and mentor) for SROs and explained that the presence of law enforcement in the schools was "best understood from a community policing perspective."

Lesley (2021) reported that complex expectations for SROs called for the establishment of an MOU to define the parameters for the SRO and administrator's roles. Lesley called for an MOU for each school because they are all different in their climate and characteristics. This research supported the proposition that SRO roles are subjected to a variety of expectations, that each school is different, and therefore roles may vary. However, the malleable nature of individual school climates found in this study and the need for the SRO and the school administrator to work closely to determine the proper roles for the SRO would not support the idea of trying to have a specific MOU for each school. It seems likely this would produce a bureaucratic process to create an MOU that would still be subject to interpretation, which would be resolved the same way it is currently done by the administrator and the SRO.

Roles

The SROs and supervisors understood the value of the existing MOU and viewed it as a guideline that attempted to define their role, the concept of their position as community policing, their lack of involvement in discipline, and guidance to generally avoid referring students to the courts. The SROs reported instances of disagreement with the administrators concerning the requirements of the MOU (personal communication, 2021). These occurrences involved requests for SROs to perform tasks such as traffic control, discipline for rule violations, and not including the SRO in threat assessments. The SROs and supervisors had a positive view of the MOU as it clarified that they did

not work for the school but remained under the direction and control of their agency. However, they acknowledged that the administrator could limit their non-law enforcement roles if they wanted to minimize SRO involvement. That was an infrequent occurrence in this study and the SRO roles generally conformed to the guidelines of the MOU. All the SROs, apart from the alternative school SROs, participated to a varied extent in the triad roles in conformance with the MOU. The alternative school SROs were new to their assignments and still in the process of role development.

The difference in roles among the non-alternative school SROs was often the extent of their involvement, such as how much time they devoted to teaching. Every SRO, in the non-alternative schools, emphasized their mentoring/role model role and de-emphasized their enforcement role. However, different approaches characterized the implementation of the mentoring role. For example, one SRO focused on the at-risk kids in his school. Several SROs helped coach athletic teams or served as camp counselors during the summer and viewed those activities as extensions of their mentoring role. Many of the SROs believed their role in mentoring was essential to bridge the gap that currently existed between the police, adolescents, and neighborhoods. Every SRO placed a high priority on regularly having positive interactions with the students. Most of the SROs described their social work role by identifying the needs of some children and referring them to a service provider or by participating in community social work activities. As a subset of the social work category, a few SROs established roles, both reactive and proactive, that dealt with student mental health problems. The roles involving social work and mental health were anticipated by the MOU (personal communication, 2021) as it called for the SROs to be ready to assist children with both

"visible and invisible disabilities."

A disruption of the triad roles occurred when an SRO was assigned to a high crime area and was required to focus on a law enforcement role to the exclusion of the others. This was consistent with Gottfredson et al. (2020) who reported that substantial crime and misconduct problems usually influenced the SROs to focus on the enforcement role.

The role descriptions in the MOU (personal communication, 2021) were broadly written and allowed for adjustments and discretion by the SRO and the administrator based on expectations and environment. Some of the directives were precise and dealt with matters that were likely deemed as critical by one or both of the parties to the agreement. Examples are the prohibition against SROs involvement in discipline, the affirmation that SROs are selected by and report to the law enforcement agencies and not to the school authorities, and that the school has the responsibility of explaining the role of the SRO to the parents and students.

One SRO saw the value of the MOU that supported his rejection of requests by an administrator who wanted to "weaponize" him against the students to scare them into obeying the rules. Other SROs noted the value of the MOU and cited examples of being requested to perform roles, such as directing traffic, that were contrary to the MOU. Participants viewed it as critical and beneficial that the MOU clearly placed them under the direction of their agency and not the school.

Discipline

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) directed that a "clear majority of misconduct" could be handled through discipline that was reserved as the sole

responsibility of the school officials. The MOU directed that SROs were not to become involved in discipline matters and the school staff was not to ask for their involvement. The presence of SSOs in every high school lessened the likelihood of such requests because SSOs were capable of and responsible, along with the school staff, for handling misbehavior that did not rise to the level of criminal conduct. SSOs were deemed by the SROs as effective in assessing an incident to determine if the SROs were required to evaluate if a crime had been committed. This discipline policy was compatible with the best practices of NASRO (n.d.) and the recommendations that resulted from the research of Glenn et al. (2019) and Na and Gottfredson (2013).

However, the SROs did not ignore problems occurring in their presence. The tipping point for intervention by the SROs, in this study, was a determination that someone might be physically injured. Their actions usually consisted of verbal warnings to prevent any further escalation of the incident followed by a report to the school administrators. All the SROs understood that discipline was, as one described it, "a red line you do not cross." Despite that awareness and without exception, the SROs expressed considerable concern about bullying in the schools and frustration about their inability to stop it. The serious nature of the bulling problem was summed up by one SRO as, "Kids get bullied, kids get depressed, and kids do things to themselves." Scholars have not reached a consensus regarding the effect of SROs on school violence and bullying problems (May et al., 2016). However, they have recognized that bullying is a substantial problem and that victims of bullying may resort to school violence (May et al., 2016).

Broll and Lafferty (2018) studied bullying and found that the presence of SROs was not associated with the frequency of bullying. This study did not gather data that would confirm or refute that finding. However, Broll and Lafferty described the role of an SRO as a guardian, as defined by routine activities theory. That theory concerns crimes of opportunity (Bernard et al., 2016). The theory anticipates that crime can be expected to occur when there is the intersection of a suitable target, a willing offender, and the absence of a guardian (Bernard et al., 2016). SRO presence for Broll and Lafferty meant they were assigned to the school, not that they were present at the same location when and where the bullying occurred. The effect of the mere presence of a guardian was supported in Broll and Laferty when they discovered that properly trained teachers were more effective in preventing bullying than SROs. Of course, many bullying incidents occur on cyber, further complicating this problem.

The SROs in this study perceived there was a lot of bullying both in-person and on cyber in the schools where they work. They recognized they could not be everywhere at once. The participants all agreed that they interceded when they encountered acts of bullying and reported the incident to the school, as most of the incidents did not rise to the criminal level. Incidents that required physical intervention by the SRO increased the liability of the student(s) to include possible referral to the juvenile court.

Discretion and Referral

Each participant was asked if the MOU allowed room for discretion. All agreed they had discretion, but several noted its limitations. Most of the SROs used their discretion to give a student another chance. The SROs were very hesitant about referring (charging) a student unless it was necessary. As discussed under RQ1, some participant

SROs adopted a by the book philosophical approach to the issue of how to deal with juvenile referrals to the court. Once the determination was made that a crime had been committed, they made a referral. Those SROs served in challenging environments with a substantial number of students who exhibited violent behavior, were economically disadvantaged, and considered at risk. Both SRO supervisors emphasized that every SRO was purposefully assigned to their school by their agency.

Most of the SROs used their discretion on relatively minor criminal infractions to divert the student to the school for handling. Instances not involving serious injury or where the student was not known to have previously been involved in misconduct or criminal activity were considered candidates for school diversion. One factor that often limited their discretion was the insistence of parents that the matter must be sent to the juvenile court. If the parents insisted, the matter was referred.

Parental Expectations and Interactions

Many of the participants lamented that the toughest part of their job was dealing with the parents. In each case the difficulty emanated from an incident at the school involving the parents' child. Several SROs explained that the parents did not often understand the role of the SRO and many parents believed they were there to get their children in trouble. The MOU (personal communication, 2021) called for the schools to inform the parents regarding the role of the SRO. The participant SROs, with one exception, were not provided the opportunity to describe their roles and purpose to an assembled group of parents at back-to-school events or in smaller gatherings such as a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. The participants attended back-to-school events and stood in the hallway so that any parent who wished could talk with them and ask

questions. However, most of the participant SROs expressed frustration that they were not given opportunities to interact more frequently with parents during non-crisis times. The study by Gill et al. (2016) reported that the law enforcement officers in the schools believed the cornerstone of their effort to build trust with the students were the connections they made with the students, teachers, and parents. School principals noted that in their experience the most significant facilitator of school safety was the cooperation among schools, parents, and SROs (Chrusciel et al., 2014). There is no expectation that increased opportunities for SRO interactions with parents would alleviate all the difficult parent-SRO interactions resulting from an incident. However, such opportunities might provide a better foundation for those potentially contentious interactions.

Parents who observed an SRO in their role in elementary and/or middle school were considered by the SROs more likely to have a better understanding of the role, purpose, and priorities of that same SRO at the high school level. This would provide additional factors (students and parents) of stability to the value of location stability.

RQ 5: What Percentage of their Time do SROs Estimate they Spend on Each of their Roles?

The data collected for this research question did not allow for a clear differentiation of time spent on each of the roles. The SROs struggled with providing percentages for their triad of roles. This was consistent with role theory that provided in a "well-ordered social system" (Biddle, 1979, p. 77) the roles were integrated and "fit well together" (p. 77). This was contrary to the findings, recorded in chapter 2, of previous studies that found role conflict between enforcement and mentoring (Javdani, 2019;

Rhodes, 2015). What factors influenced the roles to integrate rather than conflict? The answer in this study seemed to involve expectations and purpose.

The MOU (personal communication, 2021) and the participant interviews reflected an expectation to employ alternatives to referring students to the juvenile justice system. This mindset was demonstrated by the preponderance of participants who minimized their enforcement role and highlighted their mentoring role. Those that highlighted their role as law enforcement officers did so by referring to their immersion in the community policing strategy. Community policing for them incorporated being visible as a deterrent and serving as a mentor/role model. It meant engaging with students to develop a bond with them, while being alert to any red flags. This manner of approach illustrated, according to Rhodes (2017), that the SROs had adapted to the school environment.

The four SROs who did provide percentages for the triad of roles emphasized the mentoring role and the average of their estimates was that mentoring consumed two-thirds of their time. Those SROs averaged 10.5 years serving in the SRO position. Mentoring was inherent to their self-expectations of avoiding referrals and bridging the gap. Without exception, the participant SROs believed the more they bonded with the students, the better job they could do identifying risk and protecting them. That position was supportive of a Devlin and Santos (2022) finding that mentoring and teaching roles provided interaction opportunities for SROs to develop bonds with the students and demonstrate their trustworthiness.

The priority placed on bonding with students and diverting them from the juvenile justice system served as an important purpose for many of the SROs in this study. Curran et al. (2021) found that the purpose of an SRO's assignment influenced their roles.

Curran et al. reported that there is a criminalization model for the SRO position that describes its purpose as enforcement and criminal investigations. The other model is the support model with the purpose of ensuring prevention, deterrence, and mentoring. The SROs in this study, including the by the book officers, described their roles and priorities in a manner consistent with the support model.

Implications

The implications from this study rely on the considerable experience of the participants and their forthright responses during the interviews. The eleven SROs brought a wealth of experience, averaging 5.6 years of performance in that position.

Several of the participants noted a diminished interest by officers within their agencies in filling the SRO position. The agencies should take advantage of the vast amount of experience of the current SROs and use their input to develop a plan for the hiring, recruiting, and retention of SROs. The participants offered many suggestions during this study regarding the characteristics most helpful in the performance of this position. They included insisting candidates have sufficient experience on the street prior to going to a school so that they know who they are as police officers. According to two participants, that experience helped keep student conduct in context and when necessary, enabled them to stand up to the administrators. Another participant believed it was essential that candidates were patient and had a desire to work with and teach the kids. Both supervisory participants emphasized the need to match the school climate and administrator with the personal characteristics of the officer and a willingness by the agency to make a change when there was a mismatch. One SRO pointed out there were

no incentives, such as a take home car, increased pay, or career enhancement, to obtain and retain good SROs.

A strong MOU prohibiting SROs from becoming involved in discipline, the presence of SSOs to deal with basic security and misbehavior, the extensive law enforcement experience of the SROs, the location stability of several of the SROs, and the commitment to a community policing strategy in the schools all benefited the SRO program in this study. The experience and commitment of the participants justified their inclusion in policy development concerning school safety and student wellbeing; however, few of them were so involved. This echoes the Eklund et al. (2018) finding that SROs bring special skills and training to their schools that equip them to substantially contribute, beyond the triad roles, to the planning and development of policies dealing with student safety and crisis situations.

The SROs receive extensive training in key areas such as de-escalation and active shooter training. Because all the participant SROs emphasized mentoring, all should receive specialized training in adolescent development (currently two have this training), trauma-informed care training (currently six have completed), dealing with special needs children (currently five have completed), and how to counsel (currently two have completed). This study did not examine the effect of training on performance, but increasing the number of SROs trained in these suggested areas would be a logical and appropriate step as they address areas likely to be encountered in a school environment. Several of the participants are in their first two years in the program and could be expected to receive this training; however, the MOU should be modified to require SROs

to continue to receive specialty training that includes the above discussed courses. The completed training should be reported to the school authorities and possibly publicized.

The participant SROs emphasized mentoring. They described this as creating relationships, positive interactions, bonding with the students, gaining the trust of the students, and bridging the gap. The MOU did not specifically mention these goals. The SROs described situations in which they would de-escalate incidents, but all noted they would refer the students to school or outside resources for counseling. That was consistent with the MOU describing mentoring more in the vein of being a "role-model" and providing "guidance" and "positive reinforcement" to the students. SRO mentoring activities included work in summer camps, a police cadet program, and coaching sporting activities. There are pros and cons to defining mentoring too specifically and thereby either requiring activities that are not beneficial or reasonable in certain environments or limiting activities that would benefit the students and school environment. The SROs in this study treated the students in accordance with their purpose of creating positive interactions rather than looking for violations. The law enforcement agencies and the school authorities discuss the MOU each year to determine if modifications are needed. The current MOU definition of mentoring should be reviewed to determine if it needs to be expanded or clarified. It is possible that another term to define this role, such as "relationship-development," would be more appropriate.

There was a need expressed by the SROs for increased opportunities for the SROs to explain their roles and priorities to parents. The MOU called for that role to be handled by the schools. The SROs in this study believed they would bring value to the process. It is logical that opportunities for positive interactions with the parents might increase the

comfort and confidence level of both the parents and the SROs during a crisis event. Consideration should be given to modifying the MOU to allow for opportunities for the SROs to explain their roles and priorities to the parents.

Researchers should be cautious in making assumptions concerning the student populations of schools based on their geolocation designation by NCES. This study found that the student population of fringe rural schools could be like those found in large suburban schools and in one instance in this study a large suburban school that mirrored the population and climate of many urban locations.

Limitations

Rigor and credibility were critical to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rigor was applied to document gathering and the substantial hours of participant interviews. Interview questions were carefully formulated to ensure they aligned with the research questions and contributed validity to the interview results. The interview questions were reviewed prior to the study by a retired former leader of the SRO program, a cohort in the doctoral program at Nova Southeastern University, and my dissertation committee. Comments and suggestions were incorporated into the interview protocols. I attempted to describe the findings in accurate detail and make unbiased interpretations and comparisons. Full and accurate findings were reported. The design allowed for presentation of the perceptions of the SRO in each of the case studies, ensuring their views remained the focus of the study. The proposed case study procedures were followed. The report includes multiple perspectives to ensure balanced understanding of the issue.

The interviews were a crucial part of this study. Credibility, accuracy, and

truthfulness are necessary elements of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I carefully reviewed the transcripts and made corrections and clarifications, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the data. Triangulation was accomplished by comparing interviews of the SROs with those of their leaders and document reviews. I did all the coding and gave attention to ensuring consistency. Each step of the data analysis was carefully documented to ensure it is feasible for other researchers to replicate the study. The findings are not transferable because the study site was one school district in one state. Due to the small sample size, there is a potential limitation that the results may not reflect the true population frequencies or means. However, the sample size was large enough to allow for saturation of the topic in that no new information was being developed concerning the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The lack of input from administrators and students is a limitation as Theriot (2016) suggested that findings based only on SRO interviews may be based on interpretations that are different from those of the administrators or students.

I am a retired Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and have worked with law enforcement officers for several decades. I believe my law enforcement background helped put the interviewees at ease during the interviews. I have no personal or professional relationship with any of the participants. Thorough reviews of the interview transcripts for accuracy, triangulation of data sources, careful and consistent coding, and oversight by my dissertation committee helped to ensure the validity and credibility of the data and the data analysis.

The value of this study derives from the analysis and interpretation of identified similarities and differences in SRO roles and priorities among the participant SROs in

their respective school locations. This information provides value in establishing school policies, hiring, placement, training, and evaluation. This study enhances the literature on SRO roles concerning location stability, the importance of trust, and the role of SROs regarding mental health, positive interactions, expectations, and culture.

Recommendations for Future Research

Four recommendations are suggested for future research:

1. Research should be conducted around the concept of location stability to determine the effect on roles and effectiveness of the SROs.

2. Research should be conducted concerning ways to incentivize and retain quality law enforcement officers in the SRO program.

3. Research should be conducted to determine the value of involving SROs in school policy discussions regarding safety and crisis procedures.

4. Research should be conducted to determine if there is value in more precisely defining the SRO role of mentoring.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand how SROs perceive their roles and priorities and whether school location influences those perceptions. The participants were SROs and SRO supervisors from two law enforcement agencies serving one school district in one county in Virginia. Interviews of the participants and document reviews provided the key data for this study. This study advances prior knowledge of SRO roles and the variables that affect the roles.

The participants unanimously stated their most important role and priority was to ensure the safety of the students and staff in the school. Each of them acknowledged that

the triad of roles, law enforcement, mentoring, and teaching, as called for in their controlling MOU (personal communication, 2021) were their principal roles. Social work and mental health were also identified as roles. The emphasis and temporal balance placed on each of those roles accounted for the biggest difference among the SROs' perceptions. The participants endorsed their community policing strategy and prioritized non-law enforcement roles.

The school designations of rural and suburban did not adequately distinguish the student populations from each other in this county. However, there were some identifiable differences in expressed role perceptions between the SROs in rural and suburban schools. Teaching and mental health were areas identified as a more substantial part of the role perceptions for SROs in rural locations as opposed to suburban. Based on the data in this study, urbanicity, training, or home agency could not be identified as influencing these differences. SRO experience, expectations, or merely the circumstances of the school climate were likely factors. The rural non-alternative high school SROs in this study on average had more experience in law enforcement, as SROs, and in time spent at their current assignment, than the suburban non-alternative high school SROs. A suburban school previously served by one of the participants had such a high level of violence and gang activity that the SRO spent all his time on enforcement activities. That circumstance was supportive of the Gottfredson et al. (2020) finding that substantial crime and misconduct problems usually influenced the SROs to focus on the enforcement role. However, the SRO in this research stated that it was more than an influence, rather the substantial threat of violence demanded his full attention on enforcement.

Rhodes (2017) reported that many variables influence role selection including time

served as an SRO. I was unable to find any previous study regarding the influence of location stability on role development. Location stability was defined in this study as SRO service for five or more years at the same school with the same administrator. The five-year marker is based solely on the data in this study. This factor evolved while analyzing the contrasts in SRO roles with different service times at their schools. Participants spoke of the need for time to "immerse" themselves in the "fabric" of the school, learn about the environment of the school, build a "foundation" with the students, and develop the necessary trust relationships. A supervisor identified a "cultural learning curve" for SROs in a new school. There were also other key variables but this one presents an opportunity that could often be controlled. Other factors such as personal characteristics of the SRO and the climate of the school could impact the time required for location stability to substantially influence the roles.

Establishing a trust relationship with the school administration was believed by all participants to be critical and, once established, allowed the SRO flexibility in their roles with the students. The trust that trickles down from the administration to the SRO through roles and interactions can sometimes overcome the mistrust that trickles down from some parents or from prior negative law enforcement encounters (direct or vicarious). Frequent and positive interactions with students helped to normalize relationships with the students and SROs.

Key aspects of role theory (Biddle, 1979) that were consistent with the findings and illustrated in this chapter are:

- "Roles have consequences" (p. 70).

- Roles can be facilitated or hindered by expectations and environment.

- In a "well-ordered social system" (p. 77) the roles are integrated and "fit well together" (p. 77).

- Roles can facilitate each other and have an "interdependence" (p. 78). The mutual facilitation of roles in this study served to mitigate the potential of role conflict.

Based on this research, expectations, purpose, SRO experience, and school climate drove role selection while location stability, and a trust partnership with the administration enriched the performance or expansion of roles.

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Appendix A

General Informed Consent Form

General Informed Consent Form

NSU Consent to participate in a Research Study Entitled:

Exploring the Influence of Location on School Resource

Officers' (SROs) Perceptions of their Roles and Priorities

Who is conducting the research?

School: Nova Southeastern University (NSU)

Researcher: Larry A. Potts, doctoral student at NSU

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Jennifer Allen

Location: Loudoun County, Virginia Public High Schools

Funding: None

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose this study is to explore the SROs' perceptions of their roles and priorities and the possible influence of school location on those perceptions. This is a qualitative study in which the focus is on the perceptions of the SROs.

Why was I selected as a participant?

High schools in Loudoun County, Virginia were selected to be the sites for this study concerning SROs' perceptions of their roles and priorities. You were selected for one of two reasons: (a) you are assigned as an SRO to one of those high schools and your views on this topic are critical based on your training and experience or (b) you are in a supervisory position or specialty position with the Sheriff's Office or Police Department that relates to SROs.

What does my participation involve?

As a key participant in this study, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire about your background, participate in an in-person recorded interview that will last not

more than one and a half hours, and agree to a 15-minute telephonic follow-up, if

necessary, for any clarifications. Upon request, you will be provided with a summary of

the findings of this study when it is completed.

Are there any risks or benefits?

This study has no known risk to you. Your agency has approved your participation, and

your views about your roles and priorities should not be a contentious issue.

There are no direct benefits to you as a result of this research. However, you may gain

additional insight as you reflect on your roles, and it is possible that information from this

study could be used to make changes and improvements to the program.

Can I withdraw?

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time. No

penalty will be assessed for your withdrawal.

New Information

If any new information develops during the study that may relate to you or the overall

study, you will be made aware of that information.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Will the study cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for your participation other than the time that you are giving.

Will my information be confidential?

Yes, the information we learn from you in this study will be treated confidentially, within

the limits of the law, and will only be available to those who need access. Pseudonyms

will be used for your name, agency, and school in the transcript of your interview and in any published report.

Data will be on a computer in a password-protected program or in a locked cabinet. Data will be available to the researcher, the institutional review board or other representatives of the school, and any regulatory or licensing agencies. If this information is published, you will not be identified.

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns?

Please feel free to ask the researcher questions at any time. My name is Larry A. Potts, and my contact email is lp1589@mynsu.nova.edu

Participants' Rights

For questions or concerns about your rights, should the researcher not be able to answer your questions, you may contact the institutional review board:

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free 1-866-499-0790

IRB@nova.edu

The IRB website is http://www.nva.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants and contains information about research participants' rights.

The remainder of this page is left blank intentionally.

Informed Consent Form for Research Study

Voluntary Participation: You have been informed that you do not have to participate in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time. If you withdraw before the study is completed, there will not be a penalty to you.

If you agree to participate, please sign in the section provided below. You will be provided with a copy of the signed form for your records. By signing this form, you do not forfeit any of your legal rights.

SIGN THIS FORM IF THE TWO STATEMENTS BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read and understand the above information.

- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction.

Adult Signature

I voluntarily agree to participate in this school resource officers study.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Printed Name	Participant Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

Appendix B

Descriptive Questionnaire for SROs

School Resource Officer Survey (SRO)

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this short informational survey and agreeing to be interviewed as a part of this project to examine your perception of your roles and priorities and the potential influence that location has on those perceptions. Please complete this short questionnaire electronically prior to the time of our interview. I am extremely appreciative of your participation.

1. Name

2. Current rank in your agency?

3. Contact Information

Email Address _____

Phone Number _____

4. Name of school where you work

5. Gender

○ Female

○ Male

6. What is your age

_____

7. What is your race? (check all that apply)

○ White

○ Black or African American

○ Asian or Asian American

○ American Indian or Alaska Native

○ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

○ Another race

8. Education (check all that apply)

○ High School

○ College but did not complete degree

○ Bachelor's degree

○ Associate degree

○ Graduate or professional degree

○ Still taking college level courses

Other (Enhance Education Information, if needed)

[text box]

9. Years in law enforcement

_____

10. Years as a school resource officer

_____

11. Years as SRO in your current school

_____

12. If prior SRO experience in another school other than your present assignment, identify grade level, location (rural, suburban, or urban), and number of years

[text box]

13. Specialized SRO training completed (check all that apply)

○ Basic SRO

○ Advanced SRO

○ De-escalation techniques

○ Trauma-informed training

○ Adolescent development

○ Dealing with special needs children

○ Active shooter response training

○ How to teach

○ How to counsel or mentor a student

○ Other(s) (please specify)

14. My role includes (check all that apply)

○ law enforcement

○ teaching

○ mentoring or counseling students

○ problem solving

○ working with parents

○ using my discretion

○ crime prevention

○ preparing students and staff for a crisis situation

○ advising on school policy

○ involvement in school discipline

○ referrals to juvenile court

○ diversion of student to a social or mental health agency

○ participating in school programs

○ communicating with parents

○ building a bond with students

○ Other(s) (please specify)

Appendix C

SRO Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for SROs

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewee _____

Pseudonym _____

Interviewer: _____

Introductions, Explanations and Transparency

- Thank the participant for their willingness to complete the questionnaire and agree to this interview by signing the informed consent form.

- Explain the purpose of the study is a doctoral thesis that examines whether the location of the school influences the SRO's perceptions of their roles and priorities.

- Explain that the interview is being taped so it can be transcribed.

- Discuss confidentiality and the desired conversational nature of this interview

- The interview will not last more than 90 minutes.

Briefly Review Responses to the Initial Questionnaire

Briefly Review the Elements of the Memorandum of Understanding

Interview Questions

- What kind of adjustment is required when you move from patrol on the streets to an SRO in a school and then back to patrol in the summer? (RQ 1)

- Why did you decide to become an SRO? (RQ 1)

- Describe your roles and priorities as an SRO. (RQ 1)

- What are the toughest and most rewarding parts of your job? (RQ 1)

- Estimate how much time you spend on each of your roles. [law enforcement, teaching, mentoring/counseling, other] (RQ 5)

- Walk me through your day from when you arrive at school to when you leave. (RQ 1 & 2)

- Describe your school's climate and how it impacts your roles. [Prompts: diversity (race & economic), school spirit, parental involvement, student bonding with each other and adults, academic atmosphere, misconduct, disciplinary environment] (RQ 1 & 2)

- Give me an example of how you might become involved in disciplinary matters. (RQ 1, 2, & 4)

- What type of incident or behavior results in your intervention? (RQ 1, 2, & 4)

- How do you decide if a referral is necessary? [Prompt: impact on adolescents, guidance and expectations] (RQ 1, 2, & 3)

- Describe your relationship with the students. [Prompt: nature and frequency of interactions, steps they take to develop trust] (RQ 1, 2, & 3)

- How do you think you are perceived by the students and on what do you base that assessment? (RQ 3)

- Describe your relationship and interactions with the principal and teachers. (RQ 1, 2, & 4)

- Do you regularly communicate with your agency supervisor & what types of things are discussed? (RQ 2)

- What do the teachers, principals, and parents expect from you and how do you attempt to learn their expectations? (RQ 1, 2 & 4)

- Tell me about your involvement with the community in which the school is located. (RQ 1, 2, & 4)

- What factors did you consider in determining your roles and priorities? (RQ 2)

- Describe the process of establishing your roles. (RQ 2)

- Explain the guidance that the MOU provides concerning your roles and priorities and how the MOU affects your discretion. (RQ 4)

- What else should I understand about how you perceive your roles, and the influence different school environments might have on your perceptions? (RQ 1 & 2)

Interview Conclusion

- Very appreciative of your time and sharing your experience.

Ask if they would be willing to have a follow-up phone call if any clarifications are necessary on my part. Response: _____.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Leaders

Interview Protocol for Leadership

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewee _____

Pseudonym_____

Interviewer: _____

Introductions, Explanations and Transparency

- Thank the participant for their willingness to agree to this interview by signing the informed consent form.

- Explain the purpose of the study is a doctoral thesis that examines whether the location of the school influences the SRO's perceptions of their roles and priorities.

- Explain that the interview is being taped so it can be transcribed.

- Discuss confidentiality and the desired conversational nature of this interview

- The interview will take about 60 minutes, or less.

Interview Questions

- Describe the SRO selection process. [Prompt: is school location considered?] (RQ 1)

- Tell me what your expectations are for the SRO. (RQ 2)

- What factors do the SROs consider in establishing their roles and priorities? (RQ 2)

- To what degree does the MOU dictate the roles and priorities? (RQ 2 & 4)

- Can you talk about your role as SRO supervisor? How often do you communicate with the SRO? What types of support do you provide? (RQ 2)

- To what extent are SROs allowed to use their discretion in their SRO role? (RQ 2)

- Do you perceive that location makes a difference in their roles? (RQ 2)

- Does location make a difference in the decisions you make concerning the SRO Program? (RQ 2)

- Is there any additional information that might be pertinent to this study?

Interview Conclusion

- Very appreciative of your time and sharing your experience.

- Ask if they would be willing to have a follow-up phone call if any clarifications are necessary on my part. Response: _____.