

southeastern United States. This study aims to provide specific recommendations for public policy concerning the implementation of SROs to ensure that the appropriate officers are selected for this assignment, trained accordingly, and used effectively in a way that does not hypercriminalize student behavior.

Literature review

SROs as we know them today have been in place in some schools since the 1950s (Cray & Weiler, 2011), yet only within the past few decades have they played an integral role in school safety plans across the United States. Since SROs are not required to register with a national database, the exact number of SROs in the U.S. is unknown; however, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) estimates that there are approximately 14,000–20,000 SROs currently deployed in schools nationwide (National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), 2021). To date, there are no national standards or federal guidelines dictating how SROs should operate in schools. The roles and expectations of SROs vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction depending upon precedents set by various state supreme courts, school policies, and police department policies, allowing for SROs to operate with much autonomy (Price, 2009).

The National Association of SROs (NASRO), a nonprofit organization that provides training and resources for SROs, recommends the implementation of the “triad” model. The triad model sees the SRO role as divided into three areas: law enforcement officer, teacher, and informal counselor (National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), 2012). Research on the extent to which SROs implement the triad model largely suggests that SROs spend most of their time engaging in law enforcement, prioritizing it above teaching and counseling (Coon & Travis, 2012; Finn & McDevitt, 2005; McKenna et al., 2016). However, Kelly and Swezey (2015) found that a slight majority (51%) of SROs spend most of their time counseling and that those who did reported the highest job satisfaction and believed counseling to be the most important aspect of school policing. Along with roles of SROs outlined in the triad model, McKenna et al. (2016) found that SROs identified a fourth role of *surrogate parent*, wherein SROs exhibited parental duties such as emotional support and positive encouragement, and frequently interacted with students who did not appear to receive parental approval or support at home.

In addition to the triad model, NASRO also takes the firm position that SROs should abstain from involvement in school discipline (National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), 2015). However, NASRO’s recommendations on both the implementation of the triad model and abstaining from involvement in school discipline are neither mandated nor enforced. As such, concerns about SROs facilitating a link between schools and the juvenile justice system persist as a result of claims that they enhance punishments for school-based offenses that otherwise would be handled by school administrators with less punitive measures (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006) and that they have taken the use of discretion out of the hands of teachers and school administrators (Price, 2009). The criminalization of school discipline is particularly harsh for low-income students of color who are perceived to already be on a criminal justice “track” (Hirschfield, 2008).

Few empirical studies have investigated this claim, but the limited existing research has found mixed support for the notion that SROs are perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, Theriot (2009) found that the presence of SROs increased arrests for disorderly conduct, having a SRO did not predict more total arrests, and schools that had a SRO had fewer arrests for assault and weapons charges. Na and Gottfredson (2013) found that as schools increase their use of SROs, the percentage of non-serious violent offenses reported to the police increased. However, there was no evidence to suggest that increased use of SROs affected the use of harsh discipline, that SROs unjustly deprived students of their right to a public education through increased use of suspension or expulsion, nor did they have a disproportionate impact on students of racial minorities or students who utilized special education services. Similarly, May et al. (2016) found that SROs were responsible for only 3% of all referrals over a three-year period, with only 5.8% of those offenses considered minor

offenses. Furthermore, SROs were significantly less likely than non-school based law enforcement officers to refer juveniles for minor offense. The authors note that the school-to-prison pipeline issue is perhaps more of a school issue than a SRO issue, as, excluding status offenses, schools refer more than four times as many youths to the system as SROs.

Data and methods

Semi-structured interviews were performed with a sample ($n = 20$) of SROs in a municipal police department in a southeastern city.¹ This police department is contracted with the city's school district to provide full-time law enforcement services five days a week, eight hours each day to each of the 15 public middle school and 12 public high school campuses, as well to oversee the safety and security of a few neighboring elementary schools.

The majority of the SROs were male ($n = 16$), thirteen of the school resource officers were White, six were Black, and one was Asian. The SROs ranged from 27 to 61 years of age (mean = 40.75), had between four and 31 years of total law enforcement experience (mean = 14.45), and between one and 12 years of experience working in the capacity of a SRO (mean = 4.53). All the SROs were required to complete a 40-hour SRO school offered by the state, a three-day regional school safety and security conference, and recurring, annual departmental training prior to the start of every academic year. Throughout the course of these various training programs, SROs learned how to interact with youth, understand the legal aspect of the school setting, properly interview students, deal with the public, interact with school administrators, and prepare for active-shooter and other high-risk scenarios.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted at the individual SRO's assigned precinct in a private space to allow for the SROs to speak candidly, free from interruption or influence by police personnel. Since all the SROs were on-duty at the time of these interviews, the number of questions included in the interview schedule was limited at the request of the police department. These interviews ranged in length from 7 minutes to 41 minutes, were recorded using a LiveScribe digital recording device, downloaded onto a computer, and transcribed by the authors.

Interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The data were coded by reading and re-reading transcripts for the purpose of identifying initial themes. Next, a more focused coding was conducted for the purposes of identifying broader themes. These themes were formulated based on recurrent responses provided by the SROs, and reviewed to ensure that they appropriately represented the qualitative data obtained during the interview process.

Findings

The analysis resulted in the identification of four themes, including: 1) *oriented toward working with youth*, 2) *willingness to implement alternatives to formal juvenile justice sanctions*, 3) *the blurred lines between school discipline and crime*, and 4) *"we wear all the hats."*

Oriented toward working with youth

Nearly every SRO interviewed expressed that they enjoy working with youth and believed the assignment provided them with the opportunity to be a positive influence on students and claimed that the position affords them the opportunity to intervene before youth get involved with the criminal justice system.

I don't wanna see a lot of these young kids caught up in the criminal justice system. And the best way to do is try to get 'em while they're in middle school, high school, and just kinda get them on the straight and narrow. – Officer H

I spent 16 years as a detective, and I've locked kids up as young as 14 years-old for murder and 16 years-old for life sentences and I was kind of done with it. I just wanted to see if maybe I could get to kids before they got to the point where they were getting dealt with for robbery or homicide. –Officer Q

Many of the SROs interviewed took great pride in the fact that what they did in their assignments allowed for positive changes in the lives of students with whom they had known throughout their time as a school resource officer.

Sometimes you can actually take the ones that are in trouble, and you can kinda steer 'em. And it's not all of 'em. I mean its maybe two or three if you're lucky. You know, you can kinda get 'em on the right track, keep 'em from doing stupid stuff. –Officer N

I became a resource officer because I started to get frustrated with the results that I was getting on the streets. I didn't see a reason as to why I do it. With arrests, all it was just people getting released and rearrested. But I've always had an investment in children, and I felt that when you talk to them, when you teach them lessons before they get to the point of no return, they actually have an opportunity to correct things. –Officer G

A few of the officers expressed that it was disheartening when youth engaged in criminal behavior, despite the extra attention the SRO and school staff paid particular students in an effort to set students up for success.

You develop a relationship, you know with these kids, so when you see that they're making bad choices or doing something illegal, whether its getting into a fight, you know, you kind of counsel and mentor a set group of kids within your school and then those then make those bad decisions, you kind of . . . its more than just somebody you're taking a report for an assault. You know, you have a relationship established with them. So there's that kind of that connection and that almost level of disappointment because you grow to have expectations for these kids to make good choices, especially if you're counseling them on making good choices and working with the teachers on doing that stuff. –Officer M

Willingness to implement alternatives to formal juvenile justice sanctions

Nearly all of the SROs interviewed expressed the importance of exhausting all other alternative social control measures before implementing formal juvenile justice sanctions, particularly in cases that they believed to be minor offenses. Many observed that this was markedly different from the attitudes they had when previously working in the capacity of a patrol officer.

We're [the police] so used to just saying you did wrong, you go to jail. With kids its more, you know, walking through the steps, and talking to the parents, getting the right program, trying to figure out why you haven't . . . as opposed to the punitive part. –Officer D

If I can deal with it without me getting involved that's always the best way. Because I don't want that negative reinforcement from a police officer. I would prefer to talk to their parents, have their parents deal with it. Because ultimately at the end of the day, we say it all the time, we want kids to run to us when they're scared; we don't want 'em to be scared of us. And if I'm being the disciplinarian that's not there, unfortunately they're not gonna want to deal with me. So I try to use the parents or the school whenever possible. –Officer R

Not only did many of the SROs discuss the importance of relying on alternatives to formal juvenile justice sanctions but also emphasized that they prided themselves on exhausting all other measures before resorting to filing criminal charges against juveniles. Further, many of the SROs went so far to say that if SROs were concerned with obtaining statistics, such as juvenile arrests, citations, and police reports, it would be unfair to the students. In fact, many of the SROs prided themselves on not being concerned with obtaining statistics and ignoring “quotas” that are oftentimes important to the success of patrol officers.

Charges are the last resort. If I didn't have to, I certainly wouldn't. We're not stat driven, you know, there's no quotas because if there was, I would be out of a job a long time ago. –Officer S

Well, the majority of the time, if I didn't have to arrest anybody, that's fine. Never wanted to arrest anybody. A lot of those factors are often out of our control though. We're not, obviously we're not getting called for the minor things, so its relatively significant when we're getting called. A fight for instance, if there's an assault that takes

place, most of those decisions aren't within my realm of control. So we talk to the parents and we try to mediate the issue because it happened once, it could happen again. Let's make sure the issues resolved and it doesn't happen again. But if parents are adamant and want to press charges, we submit the paperwork and we go through with it. –Officer S

Some of the SROs emphasized not wanting students to be “hit twice” for an issue by being punished by both the school and the criminal justice system. In instances in which a student could face consequences from both the school and the criminal justice system, it was better for the school to handle the situation, as long as it was not a serious criminal offense.

I try to give them like a perspective of hey if the school is bringing you something to your attention leave it as a school matter, the school is trying to investigate it. But if you don't, but if it steps to my needs you're then you're gonna look at personal charges from my perspective, from my end, then also disciplinary action from the school. So its kinda best if the school wants you to deal with the school, deal with the school, you don't wanna get hit twice you know on the same kinda thing. So you don't wanna get suspended and also get charged on the same kinda crime. –Officer B

The only time that I got involved in the disciplinary process was when it looked like there was gonna be a criminal investigation. And that goes along with discussing what each others' roles are. So I wouldn't sit in on disciplinary matters. If a student didn't turn in an assignment or was yelling at his teacher in class, no one ever called me for that, and they knew not to. If it involved an assault, a theft, something like that and it would turn into a criminal matter, often times I would sit in during that disciplinary process with the assistant principal and the student. I wouldn't say anything. And then when they concluded, then I'd take over if probable cause rose up so I could actually do something. –Officer S

Some of the SROs claimed that this preference for utilizing alternatives to formal criminal justice sanctions in the school setting was largely attributed to the fact that they were dealing with juveniles rather than adults. Several SROs expressed that they were sympathetic to juveniles when they made bad decisions because they were still in the developmental stages of life.

Kids have bumps in the road, it's a learning experience. So when they break the law its like an educational thing, you know. If they get it right and then they correct the habit, then they . . . it's a learned behavior. So, I have more tolerance dealing with juveniles breaking the law just 'cause they don't know, its like the unknown, versus an adult, the same age as me, that knows right from wrong but chooses to stay in the wrong path. –Officer P

The blurred lines between school discipline and crime

While nearly all of the SROs interviewed expressed a preference for utilizing alternatives to formal juvenile justice sanctions when appropriate, several of the officers noted that it is oftentimes difficult to determine at what point an issue must transfer from the realm of school discipline and into the hands of law enforcement officers for a criminal investigation. Despite the fact that there is a memorandum of understanding in place between the school district and the police department outlining which duties are those of school administration and which responsibilities are those of SROs, many of the SROs expressed frustration that school administration did not understand what SROs legally can and cannot do.

Sometimes I have to check them [school administrators] and say this isn't something you can press charges on. They're just like a lot of the general public. They watch TV, they think they know the law. And what they see on TV may not be what I'm able to do in the building itself. Even though I've been to a school before, not necessarily mine, but the principal wanted to press charges because he was the principal and this was an assault. 'You didn't see it. You weren't involved with it. It's up to the victim and the parents.' So little things like that. –Officer J

The administrators expect you to get into a lot of stuff you shouldn't be getting into. In other words, sort of non-law enforcement-related type stuff. Now I don't have a problem with that if it's something that may help a kid out. But do not call me over and ask me to tell a kid to pull his pants up. Don't call me over and tell a kid, 'Officer F, he refuses to give me his cell phone and is breaking school policy.' And a lot of times I look at them and say I cannot help you. That is not a police matter. –Officer F

Some of the SROs felt as though school administrators attempted to utilize the officers as a scare tactic in order to gain compliance from students who violated school rules or were simply misbehaving. Many of the SROs noted that school administration attempted to misuse the SROs as an extension of school discipline. In many cases, the SROs had to be frank with their school administrators and explain that a crime had not occurred and therefore the SRO could not involve themselves in the incident.

The actual disciplinary process when they give punishment we are not involved. When they want us to try and be a hall monitor, or they want us to be a lunch monitor. Stuff like that. Or if a kids acting up. 'Oh, he's trespassing. You need to take him away.' No, we're not . . . that's what they try to get us to do all the time. And we just try and say, 'yeah, we're not doing that. It doesn't warrant a criminal charge.' –Officer E

Some of the SROs believed that school administrators' inability to understand the difference between criminal activity and student misbehavior made the job of the SRO significantly more difficult. In some cases, SROs went so far as to say that school administrators infringed upon students' rights by attempting to make criminal issues out of non-criminal incidents. A few of the officers even noted that in instances in which they informed school administrators that SROs could not be involved because a crime had not taken place, the SRO was accused of not doing their job or simply being lazy.

I had that the other day. I told 'em, 'why am I charging him for an incident you guys created?' And they looked at me like, 'what do you mean?' 'Well, you guys created this problem, you better deal with it. I alleviated the problem by getting him out of the area, which worked. Myself and my partner talked him out.' 'Well, you're not doing your job. We're gonna call somebody else.' 'Said, go ahead. And then when we take this to court and you guys violated his rights . . . 'oh wait I'm not doing it.' –Officer E

Many of the SROs indicated that having conversations with their administrators about what SROs legally can and cannot do was necessary in order to ensure that the school and the police department were on the same page with regard to who was responsible overseeing what aspect of the school site, and to ensure that students' rights were not being inadvertently violated by the school or the SRO.

The majority of it is educating the educators. If they call us there for something, first and foremost we tell 'em, well obviously you know if it's a safety issue where they're lashing out and assaulting teachers, we've got our criminal offense and we can step in no problem. If it's just something where they're breaking an administrative rule we have to let 'em know that 'hey until you decide this kid isn't allowed to be here and they need to leave, there's only so much we can do.' We can ask 'em, we can ask to gain compliance, but until they've got the law violation there's nothing you know, really we can do other than be a voice of reason for 'em. –Officer R

We wear all the hats

Many of the SROs noted that it was difficult to quantify their job and that their position was oftentimes disregarded because those who are unfamiliar with the position do not realize that SROs are expected to perform several functions that are typically not done by patrol officers. Several of the SROs described the ability to perform a multitude of tasks as "wearing all the hats." Many of the SROs said that they "wear all the hats" because they view themselves as simply another adult in the building who is there to serve the students and school community.

When you're in a school setting, you wear all the hats. I mean, I can be up front with all the ladies [office staff] taking care of something completely different; if someone walks up to the front desk and has a question, I end up handling it. Whether it be a kid trying to find a teacher, I mean, I just . . . you know, I just, you just end up . . . because you're an adult in the building, and you're dealing with kids. –Officer P

You can't quantify it that way because there's so many things that we do, so many different hats that we wear in the building, and its stuff that you can't put a number to it. If they wanted me to jot down a slash mark for every time I've dealt with a social media issue or some girl drama or some boy drama or boyfriend/girlfriend drama or whatever it may be umm I would have a boat load of statistics. But we don't keep statistics like that you know. –Officer K

Many of the SROs believed that it took a particular mind-set to be a SRO because of all of the expectations that need to be met by so many different people in the school community. Some of the SROs likened their role of assigned SROs to that of a mayor in charge of their own small city because they were responsible for their own unique community within the school setting. Additionally, many of the SROs believed that it was their responsibility to provide counseling to students who approached them with some sort of concern or students who the SRO could benefit from a positive interaction with another adult.

It does take a different, a person with a different mindset, the ability to kind of wrap your head around a different aspect of policing to do school resource job . . . you don't realize until you get in the job how many different facets and hats that you have to wear. I constantly get phone calls from the school or from the admin or emails this is going on, this person, deal with this, so its almost like you're the mayor of your own little 2400-student population, and you're trying to take care of everything. –Officer L

There's been plenty of times when kids haven't wanted to talk to their counselor and come to me instead about bullying issues and stuff like that, and you know, 'can I come to your office? Can we talk you know, during lunch or something like that?' I'm like, 'yeah that's fine.' You know, because I kinda wanna be there and help guide 'em through. –Officer T

In addition to viewing themselves as counselors, some of the SROs viewed themselves as somewhat of a surrogate parent to some students, particularly to those who did not have a good relationship with one or both parents, were involved in the foster care system, or did not have a mother or father. This was a particularly dominant theme among male SROs when dealing with male students who did not have fathers in the home. Some of the officers remarked that prior to accepting this assignment they did not feel as though they would be expected to work in this capacity of a parental figure as a school resource officer but believed it to be an important aspect of the assignment.

That's one thing I realized when I left patrol is once you go into that aspect of law enforcement [school resource officer] you're not just a police officer. You're a dad to some of . . . like some of these kids that don't have dad's, you're everything. It's completely true. You know, sometimes a kid will just come up to you and they want to talk to you, you pretty much just go, 'alright.' –Officer N

In addition to performing the supplemental roles of counselors and surrogate parents, the SROs interviewed noted that they did a significant amount of classroom teaching as well. All of the SROs within the agency are expected to teach a course mandated by the state's Attorney General's Office aimed to educate teens on their rights and responsibilities when interacting with law enforcement. The SROs are expected to teach this course once a semester for approximately three weeks as part of the graduation requirements for students. Many of the SROs enjoyed being able to teach this course and stated that it allowed for them to get to know some of the students with whom they may not otherwise come into contact and allowed for students to ask SROs questions about the law and other legal matters.

We teach the state course. I love to teach. Why I didn't become a teacher, I don't know. Mentorship, just like I said, people cuss us out one year, then the next year they're hangin' out wanting to be our buddies. That's the positive mentorship I see. –Officer E

Sometimes teachers will ask me to come in and speak to their health classes when they're going through risky behaviors. Drivers ed. classes will sometimes ask me to come in, you know, when they're doing their stuff on DUIs or driving under the influence. PE classes will do the same. They usually have the unit on impaired driving for PE and I'll take the drunk goggles down, you know, make them walk the line with the goggles on. You know, spend ten or 15 minutes with each of those classes while they're doing that." –Officer K

I've done a lot of stuff as a detective so I tell all the government teachers, hey when you're doing constitutional amendment, 4th and 5th, I can come in and talk to you because I've got cases that have been through the court of appeals and everything from when I was in homicide and robbery, so I get to interact with kids a lot during those things and talk about those kind of issues. –Officer Q

Discussion

These findings highlight what one police department is doing amid concerns about SROs facilitating a link between schools and the juvenile justice system by selecting officers who are oriented toward working with youth, willing to implement alternatives to harsh juvenile justice sanctions, and understanding of the critical role that SROs play in determining such outcomes. Additionally, findings also demonstrate the importance of SROs refraining from involvement in school discipline and knowing where the role of school administrators end and SROs begin. Despite the persistent claim that SROs are responsible for contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline through involvement in school discipline and the hypercriminalization of student misbehavior, these findings suggest that school administrators may also play a role in this process by attempting to involve SROs in non-criminal incidents. This is consistent with May et al. (2016) whose research findings highlight the critical and often overlooked role that school administrators play in referring students to the juvenile justice system.

Implications for public policy

The expectations for SROs are largely at odds with the authoritarian stereotypes commonly associated with patrol officers (Rhodes & Clinkinbeard, 2020). As such, it is critical to select officers who are will not attempt to use the school setting as an opportunity to engage in overly punitive behaviors. Additionally, the SRO assignment is appealing due to regular daytime hours, overtime pay, opportunities to dress in civilian clothes, and relief from patrol duty (Finn et al., 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to select an officer for this assignment whose motivations for the assignment is on serving youth and keeping students out of the juvenile justice system whenever possible. Police departments should be mindful about which officers they select to fill this position, and if they do not have an officer who meets these standards, they should hire specifically for an SRO in order to obtain someone who does.

This research also highlights the importance of providing SROs with SRO-specific training. The SROs in this study were all highly trained, as they all had to complete a 40-hour SRO school offered by the state, attend an annual three-day regional school safety and security conference, and participate in recurring, annual departmental training prior to the start of every academic year. While there have been significant changes in state laws within the last 20 years, only 24 states and Washington, D. C. have passed laws addressing SRO-specific training (Strategies for Youth, 2019).

Finally, these findings highlight the importance of schools and police departments having a shared understanding of what a SRO should and should not do, particularly since many of the SROs in this study lamented that their school administrators wanted them to overstep their legal boundaries or be used as a scare tactic to gain compliance from students for trivial offenses. This can be accomplished through a memorandum of understanding (MOUs) outlining these roles and expectations to be reviewed annually and updated when necessary. Only 15 states require schools and law enforcement agencies implement a detailed MOU outlining the roles and expectations of the SRO before their assignment takes affect (Strategies for Youth, 2019). School administrators may also benefit from training to better understand what SROs are legally can and cannot do, as well as established clear lines of communication channels between the SRO's law enforcement agency administration and school administration.

Limitations and directions for future research

The current study highlights what one SRO program is doing to address concerns about SROs facilitating a link between schools and the juvenile justice system. While this study included qualitative data from SROs, input from school administrators as well as quantitative data on the number of students referred to the juvenile justice system would provide a more accurate picture of whether the SROs are doing their part to reduce the extent to which they refer students to the juvenile justice system.

Additionally, school- and district-level arrest data from neighboring school districts combined with qualitative data from SROs in those school districts would strengthen our understanding of the role that SROs play in facilitating the school-to-prison pipeline. Future research should incorporate quantitative data on school-based referrals to the juvenile justice system in the school district examined in this study, in addition to qualitative data from SROs in neighboring school districts and quantitative data on school-based juvenile justice referrals in those districts.

Partnerships between school districts and police departments are currently being called into question, amid calls to defund the police and remove police from schools entirely. While there are many potential benefits to having SROs in schools, these benefits run the risk of being overshadowed by punitive measures. In order for SROs to continue to operate in schools across the country, they must be able to do so in a way that does not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Note

1. Prior to conducting these interviews, approval was granted by the University's Human Subjects Review Committee, and authorization to conduct these interviews was obtained from the Chief of Police and the Superintendent of Schools. The SROs were informed of the voluntary and confidential nature of this study and were provided with the option of withdrawing from the study at any time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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