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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS'  
SELF-PERCEPTION OF ROLE, STUDENT  
ENCOUNTERS AND DUTIES

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Criminology and Criminal Justice

Alexandra Elizabeth Swanty

College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Criminology and Criminal Justice Department

August 2023

This Thesis by: Alexandra Swanty

Entitled: *An examination of school resource officers' self-perception of role, student encounters and duties*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the degree of Master of the Arts in College of Humanities and Social Sciences in Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

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## ABSTRACT

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As the rates of school shootings and school violence rise, the effectiveness of school resource officers (SROs) has come into question. As of now, there is no nationwide standard for the role and duties of school resource officers. Therefore, these differ from state to state and even school district to school district. One variable that had yet to be examined was the impact that location has on the roles of school resource officers. From this, three different school resource officer roles were identified: teaching-based role, community-based role, and law enforcement-based role. To determine the relationship between these variables, an online self-report study of school resource officers was conducted. Seventy-eight school resource officers answered questions regarding their perception of their role, their duties, and the interactions they have with students. Three regression models were run on the results, each examining a different role. The results from this survey showed that there is no relationship between location and role of SRO. The results also found that female school resource officers are more likely to take on a teaching-based role than males. This study emphasizes the need for a nationwide standard for the role and duties of school resource officers, and further examination of the relationship between location and roles of SROs.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the City of Denver began phasing out the use of school resource officers (SROs) in all K-12 public schools. The highly disproportionate number of students of color coming into contact with these school resource officers led to this decision. It is possible that other school districts in Colorado will soon begin follow their lead (Fennell, 2021). When youth are exposed to the criminal justice system while still in school, it may set them up for future criminality (Pigott et al., 2018). This phenomenon has been dubbed “The School-to-Prison Pipeline”. The debate on whether SROs contribute to or diminish the School-to-Prison Pipeline is a popular topic. Some research has found evidence that SRO programs are effective and should remain in schools (Higgins et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2011), while other research has shown that SRO programs are not and may cause more harm than good (Curran et al., 2021; Theriot, 2009; Thureau & Smith, 2020). There are also several studies that have found that SRO programs have no effect at all (Broll & Lafferty, 2018; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2011).

SRO programs in the US can be traced back to the first school resource officer program in Flint, Michigan in 1950’s (Theriot & Orme, 2016). These programs gained popularity in the 1990’s as a call for more protection in schools began after the steady rise in the number of school shootings, including the Columbine shooting in 1999 (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Viano et al., 2021). Between 1998 and 2003, there was a 30% rise in the number of schools reporting having a school resource officers (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). As of 2018, it is estimated that there are

between 14,000 and 20,000 SROs in the US and 61.4 percent of schools have at least one security staff member employed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). SROs are typically contracted through local law enforcement agencies and are tasked with patrolling the schools to protect students/faculty to create safer learning environments, deter/prevent delinquency, and handle the students who have broken the law or their schools' specific policies (James & McCallion, 2013; Theriot & Anfara Jr., 2011; Weiler & Cray, 2011). In some school districts, the SROs are also used to help educate students on topics such as crime and substance abuse (James & McCallion, 2013; Theriot & Anfara Jr., 2011).

There are several reasons that people argue to keep school resource officers in schools. Zhang et al. (2016) argues that for students to successfully learn and for teachers to teach effectively, they need to feel safe in their schools. Many people feel more at ease knowing that police officers are patrolling schools protecting their children (Benigni, 2004). Several scholars argue that while these officers are keeping students safe, they are also building a foundation of trust and fostering positive relationships between students and law enforcement (Higgins et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2011).

There are also many arguments against the use of school resource officers. School resource officers use a significant amount of discretion in schools when deciding whether to make an arrest (Pigott et al., 2018; Theriot, 2009). Some scholars have questioned whether school resource officers use this discretion to discriminate against certain juveniles based on their race, sex, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or disabilities (Merkwae, 2015; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Theriot, 2009). Data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that minority students and students with disabilities are arrested at school and referred to law enforcement far more often than White students without disabilities (Merkwae, 2015). Some

scholars make the argument that the high level of discretion that SROs possess can lead to students being charged and arrested for activities that may be considered normal student behaviors, such as disrupting class or pushing another student (Theriot, 2009). Several scholars believe that school resource officers introduce students to the juvenile justice system due to incidents could have simply been handled by school administration instead (Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Theriot, 2009). One study found that since the implementation of school resource officer programs, there has been an increase in the number of juveniles being referred to the criminal justice system for charges such as assault, disorderly conduct, and drug offenses (Ryan et al., 2018).

All of these arguments were taken into consideration while designing this study. The argument against SRO programs due to the disproportionate number of racial/ethnic minorities coming into contact with SROs will be evaluated in this study, as well as argument for SRO programs regarding fostering positive relationships between youth and law enforcement. The goal of this study aims to fill in the gaps in the existing literature and provide more context to help determine whether discrepancies exist between the roles of SRO's based on location. This study can also pave the way for future studies to determine why SRO's see their roles differently, and what factors may be associated with this.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many researchers have examined SRO programs, and their different aspects and outcomes. While there have been studies conducted on a wide variety of SRO program related topics, this review will focus on seven major themes from the literature. The themes are as follows: the role of SROs, the School-to-Prison Pipeline, discretion of SROs, students' perceptions of SROs, the community's perception of SROs, the effect that SRO programs have on crime and violence, and the intersection of crime and location. In this review, the history behind SRO programs will be examined, and then the existing literature on the programs will be discussed.

#### **History of School Resource Officers**

There is no consensus on when/where SRO programs began, but in general, they are credited to one in Flint, Michigan that began around 1953 (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Since 1970, there has been a steady rise in school shootings and those resulting in casualties (Viano et al., 2021). During this time, media coverage was also on the rise, creating an increase in public fear (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). After a surge of school shootings that occurred between 1990 and 2000, including the highly publicized Columbine High School shooting in 1999, the call for more protection in schools strengthened. This is when SRO programs really began to take hold (James & McCallion, 2013; Theriot & Orme, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2017).

After the Sandy Hook shooting, government interest in SRO programs was renewed (James & McCallion, 2013). President Obama made reducing gun violence a priority, and in

2013 he directed the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services to allot more grants towards placing SROs in schools. In 2014, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) awarded over 61 million dollars to research on improving school safety and SRO initiatives (Wolfe et al., 2017).

There is no single definition of an SRO. In fact, James and McCallion (2013) found that the federal government has two different definitions. The first is defined under the legislation that authorized the COPS program (Streets Act of 1968, 1998):

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

There is also the definition created by the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (1994):

...a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department to a local educational agency to work in collaboration with schools and community based organizations to—

(A) educate students in crime and illegal drug use prevention and safety; (B) develop or expand community justice initiatives for students; and (C) train students in conflict resolution, restorative justice, and crime and illegal drug use awareness.

Since there is no single definition of an SRO, there is confusion and differing opinions surrounding what the role of SROs is and should be. There are some that argue that SRO programs should be teaching/mentoring based, while others argue that they should be law enforcement based (Curran et al., 2019). Weiler and Cray (2011) argue that for SRO programs to be effective, school administration and the SRO need to clearly understand each other's roles. They also state that if an SRO's role is clearly defined, the safety of schools increases. When Barnes (2016) conducted interviews with SROs, even the SROs themselves acknowledged that often teachers and school administrators do not understand what their role is and how to utilize them correctly.

Schlosser (2014) wanted to examine the different perceptions that SROs have on what their roles are. The author examined whether SRO programs allow for SROs to be mentors, teachers, and counselors while also allowing them to perform their law enforcement responsibilities, and whether these multiple roles conflict with each other. The SRO at the school examined was also a Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officer, and so they wanted to determine whether the SRO programs goals be influenced by the DARE programs goals. DARE is a drug use prevention program designed for schools, and its officers are widely tasked with being mentors and educators on the topic of drug and alcohol abuse (Schlosser, 2014). The author shadowed this officer at their school for a full day and conducted four in person interviews with staff at the school and the police chief. The author also examined documentation of what both the school and the police department each defined the SROs role as. Results

showed that the law enforcement role of the SRO overshadows the role of mentor, counselor, and teacher, even though these roles are accomplished as well. From the interviews with school staff and the police chief, the author found that what they believe the role of the SRO is differs. Some believe that the role is revolves more around law enforcement, while others believe it revolves more around counseling.

Curran et al. (2019) found similar results regarding role confusion in their study on the role of SROs by conducting interviews with 47 SROs in two different school districts and asked them questions on how they discipline students and how they handle safety/security measures, and whether this is in line with how the school is structured. An SRO was shadowed by some of the researchers, and 49 focus groups were conducted with school staff and parents to examine what their thoughts on SROs were. From all the data, it was discovered that the view of the role of the SROs tended to be less about discipline, and more about keeping students safe. It was also found that the officers used a wide array of discipline measures. Overall, the authors concluded that a SROs role is complex, and the idea of what the role should be is very different from person to person and officer to officer.

Fisher and Devlin (2019) outlined three types of SROs with different roles and aimed to determine whether these different roles influenced crime rates in the schools. The different types are: Low Engagement, Reactionary, and Full Triad. How these different types are determined depends on how likely they are to engage in crime related activities (e.g. arrest, security, discipline), and how likely they are to engage in proactive activities (e.g. mentoring, teaching, prevention). The Low Engagement SROs are unlikely to take part in either of the activities. The Reactionary SROs are unlikely to take part in proactive activities but will conduct the crime related activities. The Full Triad SROs will take part in both activities.

After examining data from 850 schools that took part in the SSCS, the authors found an interesting mixture of results. They found that schools with Reactionary type SROs had significantly higher rates of crime/violence, but these SROs were more likely to take care of these crimes in the school rather than making an arrest. Schools with Full Triad SROs had significantly lower crime/violence rates, but these SROs were more likely to make an arrest rather than take care of the incidents inside the school.

Lynch et al. (2016) aimed to find whether the role of SROs changes depending on the amount of social and educational disadvantage in the schools. They used data from the SSCS on surveys submitted by 1,669 principals who reported having full-time SROs in their schools. Common roles of SROs, such as security enforcement and patrol/mentoring students, were compared to variables measuring disadvantage, such as how much crime is occurring in the community where the school is located. The authors found that when the level of disadvantage in schools is higher, SROs are more likely to act as law enforcement rather than mentors/educators.

Anjali et al. (2021) wanted to determine how SROs and School Security Professionals (SSPs) describe the climate of their schools, how they interact with students who have experienced traumatic incidents, and how their differing roles may affect these perspectives. SSPs differ from SROs because they are not sworn officers of a police department, they are employed through the school district. The authors collected data from a larger previous study researching trauma-informed care training with 95 SROs/SSPs. After each training log, the SROs/SSPs were asked open ended questions regarding the training they had experienced. From the responses, the authors had several major findings. The first was that SROs/SSPs positively affect how students feel regarding physical and psychological safety. The authors believe that this is largely due to many of the SROs/SSPs feeling that creating a positive school climate is



important in making sure students feel safe. Many officers also acknowledged that being empathetic to their students, deciphering the causes of behavior, acting as mentors/teachers/listeners, and establishing trust were very important in doing their jobs well.

It is clear from this research that the role of SROs is not clearly defined, which makes it hard to determine what the goals and objectives of the program are and should be. Yet, these programs continue to be funded, and much of this funding is funneled through the Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. This will be discussed further in the next section.

### **Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS)**

Community-oriented policing (COP) is a less traditional approach to policing that uses community involvement in crime prevention. This type of policing not only been shown to slightly reduce crime, but to also increase community trust in the police (Gill et al., 2014). Gill et al. (2014) did not find in their systematic review on 25 prior studies on COP that COP reduced crime and public fear of crime, but it did increase public satisfaction in police. This translates to schools as well. Increasing community-police relations through creating relationships with youth is one of the goals of SRO programs (Finn et al., 2005).

The Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program was initiated through the Title I of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Its goal is to create more opportunities for community policing across the US (James, 2013). After the Columbine shooting in 1999, Congress allotted \$180 million in funding per year to the COPS program (James & McCallion, 2013). Funding for the program has fluctuated through the years, and in 2014, a request was made by President Obama for \$150 million in funding for the Comprehensive Schools Safety Program as part of the COPS program. This funding was used to bring more SROs, counselors, social workers, and other school safety administrators into

schools. The money also went towards creating safety plans and crisis intervention teams for schools (James & McCallion, 2013). It could be argued that an increase in school resource officers due to the COPS program could lead to a higher number of arrests happening in schools. This could contribute to what is referred to as The School-to-Prison Pipeline. This will be discussed further in the next section.

### **The School-to-Prison Pipeline and School Resource Officer Discretion**

The School-to-Prison Pipeline is the terminology used to describe the phenomena of youth entering the criminal justice system from the school system. It has also been referred by other names, such as “the school to jail nexus” (Turner & Beneke, 2020). There are scholars that argue that SRO programs are contributing to higher rates of students being arrested in school, therefore higher rates of students getting involved in the criminal justice system at a young age (Pigott et al., 2018; Theriot, 2009; Weiler & Cray, 2011). These scholars argue that there are many of these arrests are unnecessary, and that the behaviors that students are being arrested for could be handled by the schools themselves instead of bringing in law enforcement. Weiler and Cray (2011) believe that if students are being arrested more often than necessary, it undermines the true value of an SRO and may reduce students feeling of safety in their schools.

Theriot (2009) conducted a longitudinal study where he compared thirteen middle and high schools with SROs to fifteen without SROs for three years. Theriot (2009) aimed to determine whether having SROs in schools contributes to the School-to-Prison Pipeline by criminalizing normal student behaviors. The study compared the arrest rates of the schools with and without SROs, and throughout the three years they were conducting the study, there were 1,012 arrests of 878 students. Schools with SROs had 122.1% more arrests than schools without. Theriot believes that the charge of “disorderly conduct” is a very broad charge and is much up to

the SROs discretion. This charge is used significantly more in schools with SROs and may just be a way of criminalizing normal student behaviors (e.g., interrupting in class). The author also found that there is a significant relationship between arrests and economic disadvantage/race/ethnicity.

Pigott et al. (2018) used the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSCOS) to analyze the arrests made by school resource officers. The authors examined questions from the survey that asked about crime in schools and how many were reported to police, the number of SROs, and the demographics/characteristics of the schools. The authors found very different results from Theriot (2009). Pigott et al. (2018) found that when SROs are in schools, the number of arrests and removals of students from schools are much lower than the schools without SROs. They did find, however, that the arrest rates of minority/disabled students were higher than White/abled students.

Fisher and Hennessy (2016) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis on the relationship between SROs and exclusionary discipline in high schools. After conducting their search for articles that fit their parameters, the authors found seven articles. From the authors analysis of these seven articles, they found that SRO are associated with a significantly higher number of exclusionary disciplines. They believe this to be the case for several reasons. The first is that the presence of SROs leads to an increase in the number of students found engaging in delinquency. The second is that having SROs in schools increases behavioral problems in students.

Wolf (2013) surveyed 46 SROs in Delaware to gain insight on their decision-making habits and processes. Wolf asked the SROs questions regarding how they decide to make arrests and how they determine which behaviors warrant discipline. Wolf found that SROs use high

amounts of discretion in their decision making, and that students' past behaviors, whether schools have ways other than arrest to discipline a student, and exigent circumstances play a huge part in whether the officer will choose to arrest them or not. Many officers reported that even when there was plenty of evidence to make an arrest, they would occasionally choose not to.

### **Student Perceptions of School Resource Officers**

While there are many purposes that having an SRO in schools serves, one often overlooked but very important, is improving students' feelings of safety while in school (Curran et al., 2021). Students' perceptions of SROs should also be considered because interactions with their SRO may affect how they view police in general (Jackson, 2002). There have been several studies that examined whether this goal is being achieved with differing outcomes (Anjali et al., 2021; Curran et al., 2021; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016).

Theriot and Orme (2016) conducted a study in which they surveyed 1,956 middle and high school students to determine students' feelings of safety at schools where SROs are present. The survey included questions surrounding how students felt about school, how they felt about the safety of their school, how they felt about the SRO assigned to their school and police in general, the violence in their schools, and their interactions with the SRO. The study did not find that interactions with SROs and feelings of safety were significantly related, but the study did find that when students had higher opinions of their SRO, they felt safer in school.

Curran et al. (2021) conducted a similar study where students were surveyed. The authors wanted to determine whether a relationship exists between the interactions that students have with SROs and their feelings of safety at school and the discipline they receive. They also wanted to determine whether those students' relationships vary based on their demographic

characteristics and their year in school. The authors surveyed students from grades four to twelve from 25 different schools and conducted interviews with students in grades four to eight. From the data, the authors found that there was no relationship between the number of interactions students have with an SRO and the trust, comfort, and feelings of safety that the students have in them, but the authors did find that there was a relationship between students feeling of trust and comfort in their SRO and their feelings of safety at school. The authors also found little evidence that there is a relationship between race/ethnicity and students' relationships with SROs.

Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) took their study a step further by considering race in addition to the relationship between SROs and students' feelings of safety. They examined data on 126,868 students from the Minnesota Student Survey, and specifically analyzed the questions regarding SROs. The authors found that students felt significantly safer in their schools when the school had an SRO, but when they broke the data down further and specifically looked at race, this was no longer the case. Minority students (American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, multiple races, and Hispanic) had significantly more negative perceptions of their SROs.

Jackson (2002) surveyed 271 students on their perceptions of their SRO to determine whether having an SRO in their school influences their perception of police in general, their perception of offending, and their perception of being identified. From the data, the authors found that while SROs were present to protect students and be a deterrent for violence/delinquency, students viewed them as threatening. Students felt as though they could not move about freely and have open conversations. The author found that having SROs in schools does not change students' perceptions on law enforcement in general, their perception of identification, or perceptions of delinquency. The author did find, however, that SROs do deter assaults from occurring in schools.

## **Community Opinion on School Resource Officer Programs**

How the community and other stakeholders view SRO programs is important information to collect as SRO programs become increasingly more prevalent (Wood & Hampton, 2021). It is important to understand if the program is working for those who it is intending to help, because if it is not, then it is ineffective (Rossi et al., 2004). Community members/stakeholders can be school administrators, teachers, students, parents, politicians, the general public, etc. There have been several studies have examined different members of the communities' opinions on SRO programs (Turner & Beneke, 2020; Wolfe et al., 2017; Viano et al., 2021; Wood & Hampton, 2021).

In a research study conducted by Wolfe et al. (2017), the authors examined the perceptions of SROs from the view of school administrators. To collect their data, they mailed a survey to every public-school principal in South Carolina. Out of the 1,086 principals who were mailed anonymous surveys, 487 were returned. The authors used five dependent variables: SRO legitimacy, support for SROs, SRO effectiveness, trust in SROs, and satisfaction with SROs. The authors used two categories of independent variables: administrator variables (procedural justice, such as SROs treatment of students and the administrator's satisfaction with the SROs decision making) and school characteristics.

From their analysis, the authors came to three important conclusions. The first is that school administrators have a large amount of trust in SROs. The second is that the administrators find SROs to be effective in improving school safety. The third is that they are more satisfied with the job performance of the SROs when they agree with the SROs decisions. The authors argue that due to these findings, procedural justice is an important factor in administrator's satisfaction of SROs and positively influences their legitimacy. They also state that when

administrators believe that when SROs are fair and treat students well, they are more likely to advocate for SROs presence in schools.

Turner and Beneke (2020) aimed to determine why a certain unnamed city in the U.S., which is known for being politically progressive, continued their SRO programs despite current movements regarding unethical treatment of minority groups by police officers. The authors used secondary data from a previous study in which policymaking was studied in this city for three years. In this prior study, the authors conducted interviews with educational advocates, SRO committee members, and school board members. They also took field notes in community and school board meetings and analyzed documents to collect their data.

From their data, the authors discovered there were two main arguments that reoccurred discussing the SRO programs. The “race radical view of SROs” (Turner & Beneke, 2020, p. 227) stated that SROs perpetuate violence and criminalize students of color. Those who share this view argue that students of color experience more harm and higher rates of fear when there are SROs in schools. Many of the community members who share this view, argue that SRO programs should be defunded, and that the funds could be redistributed towards hiring social workers/school counselors, and helping with cost of food or housing for impoverished families.

There was also the “neoliberal therapeutic view of SROs” (Turner & Beneke, 2020, p. 229). Those who share this view believe that SROs serve as mentors and counselors and are also helping students recover from the trauma they experience as low-income students of color. Those who share this view advocate for SRO programs, stating that they care about the students they serve, and that discipline takes a back seat in what SROs actually accomplish. They argue that SROs are not the problem, that the problem lies in the teachers who “don’t give a damn about

our kids” (Turner & Beneke, p. 231). The authors found that this viewpoint is the one that prevails in this city, which is why the programs have not been dissolved.

Viano et al. (2021) wanted to determine what factors lead to the rapid investment in SROs in elementary schools that occurred only a few days after the Sandy Hook shooting. The authors conducted interviews and focus groups with school staff/administrators, parents, members of the Sheriff’s Departments, school district officials, and the SROs themselves. They also looked at documents for secondary data. There were also some predetermined questions asked, but the focus groups remained open for conversation to occur. The interviews and focus groups were designed to talk about the participants view on school safety/security, the SROs role and use, the history behind the SRO program in that county, and the process in which those SROs were implemented.

After analyzing the data, the authors found that many respondents in this particular county were calling for teachers to be armed, and that SRO program was an alternative solution provided by the school district. The results also showed that school district officials thought these programs would be good for teaching students to trust law enforcement, and never considered the idea that not all officers can be trusted (the idea of “a few bad apples”).

Wood and Hampton (2021) wanted to examine teachers’ perspectives on SROs. They surveyed a sample of 3,970 teachers from an unnamed midwestern state. The authors used a Qualtrics survey and asked them questions regarding safety/security and demographics. Sixty three percent of the teachers reported that their school employed an SRO. From the survey they found that most teacher rate their schools as safe. The teachers in the survey who reported having an SRO in their school, on average, felt safer knowing that an SRO was present. However, they reported that their students felt less safe.



### **School Resource Officers' Effect on Crime and Violence**

Whether or not SROs are effective in reducing/preventing crime and violence is another debate concerning the effectiveness of SRO programs (Gottfredson et al., 2020). Na and Gottfredson (2011) aimed to end this debate by examining whether SROs influence the rates of crime and violence in schools, and whether a school would respond differently to crime and violence if there is an SRO in their school. The authors used secondary data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSCS), and 470 schools were analyzed. After analyzing the data, the authors found no relationship between crime/violence rates and having an SRO in the school. They also found that when schools increase SRO presence in the school, they had higher rates of non-violent crimes and drug/weapon charges. The authors found no relationship between race/ethnicity/special education and treatment from SROs.

Jennings et al. (2011) conducted a similar study, in which they wanted to examine the relationship between violent incidents inside schools and security measures including SROs. Like Na and Gottfredson (2011), Jennings et al. (2011) also used the SSCS and analyzed a sample of 932 high schools. From the data, the authors found that when law enforcement is present in schools, there are lower reports of serious school violence. SROs were also more effective at deterring violent crime than other safety measures, such as security cameras or metal detectors.

To examine the effect SROs have on crime and violence longitudinally, Gottfredson et al. (2020) conducted a 20-month study on 105 California schools to determine whether the recent increase in the number of SROs being integrated into schools influenced crime rates and response to crime in those schools. Thirty three of the 105 schools had increased the number of SROs on staff and 72 of them had not. The authors used secondary self-report data from the law

enforcement agencies themselves, and administrative data from the schools. It was discovered that when there is an increase in SRO presence in schools, there is an increase in weapon/drug offenses and disciplinary actions. There was no relationship between SRO presence and violent offenses.

Citizens for Juvenile Justice (2020) conducted a report in which they examined whether SROs in Massachusetts were helping or harming the students. After analyzing prior research from several decades, this report found that when SROs are present in schools, students are being arrested more frequently for offenses that would not normally be considered criminal. The report also found that the officers have virtually no effect on school safety. The report found that SROs were only able to successfully intervene in two out of 200-gun violence incidents that occurred at schools. The report also found that when SROs are present, student academic success is significantly negatively impacted. It also found that while minority students are only 27% of the population of students in the United States, they represent 64% of all student arrests.

Broll and Lafferty (2018) wanted to look at a slightly different aspect of crime than the above studies: bullying. They aimed to determine if having SROs in schools decreases bullying rates. The authors used the SSCS and analyzed the questions regarding bullying rates, presence of SROs, and any teaching/training on bullying that school staff was receiving. From the data, the authors found that 31% of middle and 55% of high schools were reporting high rates of bullying (more than one incident a week). SROs were not found to have a relationship with the number of bullying incidents in any of the schools. The authors found that school staff receiving bullying prevention did have a significantly positive relationship with decrease in bullying. Based on the findings from the above studies, a theoretical framework can be established.

### **Policing, Crime, and Location**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2022, 20% of the population of the U.S. lives in rural areas, a 0.7% increase from 2010 (Barrett, 2022). Most of the criminological research to date has focused mainly on crime in urban areas, even though rural police agencies greatly outnumber urban agencies (Carrington et al., 2014; Cebulak, 2004; Pelfrey, 2007). From the research that has been conducted, it is clear that there is a significant difference between policing and crime in rural versus urban areas. Ward et al. (2022) found that differences between rural and urban policing can be attributed to smaller budgets, less trust in government, differences in types of crimes, distance, and acquaintance density. Cebulak (2004) had similar findings. They found that there are some crimes that are specific to rural areas (such as theft of farm animals), rural residents are more suspicious of government and rates of child abuse are higher in rural areas. Cebulak (2004) also found that crimes that used to be mainly attributed to urban areas have been expanding into rural areas. For example, drug use is becoming a much larger issue in rural areas. Several studies have found that because rural communities tend to be closer knit, rural officers use more informal techniques and a sizeable amount of discretion while in the field (Brock et al., 2001; Pelfrey, 2007).

Brock et al. (2001) conducted a study to compare crime trends in two rural Midwest regions. One region was further than 300 miles from the metropolitan Midwest and one was near it. They used newspaper archives to find their data and compare the types of crimes between the two counties. The authors found that there were higher rates of drug offending in the near metropolitan region. The more rural region was found to have higher rates of violent offenses. The authors conclude that there may be a higher number of drug offenses in less rural areas because their policing agencies may have more drug awareness and that the residents may have

more access to illicit drugs. There is yet to be research conducted on how location can affect crime in schools and whether the roles of SROs change based on the location of the schools. This could provide valuable information pertaining to how crime differs in different locations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cohen and Felson's Routine Activity Theory is the theoretical foundation this research is based on. Routine Activity Theory states that for a crime to occur, there are three elements that need to be present at the same place/time: the lack of a capable guardian, a motivated offender, and a suitable target (Cohen & Felson, 1979). SROs act as a capable guardian and are a deterrent for motivated offenders inside the schools. Oftentimes hallways, cafeterias, and the outside of the building are left unsupervised. Having an SRO present in these areas could help to deter students from engaging in delinquent behaviors. Through interviewing SROs about their roles and perceptions, some light can be shed on whether officers view themselves as the same type of guardian, or if there is some discrepancy. Insight can also be gained on whether SROs believe that they are acting as a capable guardian (whether or not they believe their school is safer when they are present).

### **Conclusion**

The existing research on SRO programs has shown that they have virtually no effect on crime and violence (Broll & Lafferty, 2018; Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2011; Na & Gottfredson, 2011). The literature also shows that the community has many differing opinions on SRO programs. These opinions ranged from some seeing the programs as important and needing to be expanded, to others arguing for them to be completely defunded (Turner & Beneke, 2020; Viano et al., 2021; Wolfe et al., 2017; Wood & Hampton, 2021). The research conducted on students' perceptions of SROs has mixed results.

Three out of the four studies conducted found mixed results when it came to whether students felt safer in their schools (Curran et al., 2021; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016), and Jackson (2002) was the one study that found a significant negative relationship between SROs and students' feelings of safety. The existing literature has also found that SRO discretion significantly contributes to the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Pigott et al., 2018; Theriot, 2009).

The location and student body population of schools has not yet been used as a variable in any prior study related to school resource officers, but geographical location and population are both variables that have been used in many other studies linked to crime and law enforcement (Battin & Crowl, 2017; Brock et al., 2001; Christens & Speer, 2005; Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Rukus et al., 2017; Weisheit & Wells, 2005). In several of those studies, geographic location and population have been shown to influence what types of crime are happening in certain areas, and how that crime is handled by law enforcement. This study examines these variables in terms of how they relate to SRO's and SRO programs to determine the association between SRO discretion, SRO's view their roles in schools, and the location of the schools they work in.

This study addresses the following question:

- Q1 Is there an association between how SROs perceive their role and the location of their school district?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe the sample used for the study and the data collection method used to obtain the results. It will then go over the survey measures used to measure the demographics and each independent and dependent variable. The chapter will end by going over the validity and reliability of the survey.

#### **Sample and Data Collection**

To gain participants for this study, a convenience sample was used. School resource officers were contacted in two ways. The first and most effective way was through the social media site LinkedIn. To find participants on this site, the keywords searched were “school resource officer,” “school safety officer,” and “school security professional.” When someone identified on their profile that they work in one of these professions, they were sent a message asking them to take the survey (for full message, see the Appendix).

The second way participants were recruited was through a listserv of law enforcement departments in Colorado obtained by safteysource.com. Through this listserv, the direct phone numbers of police chiefs in all 146 municipal police departments in the state of Colorado were obtained. These numbers were called directly, and when the chief of the department said they would pass the survey onto their SRO, an email was sent to an email provided (for the recruitment email, see the appendix). Participants were contacted between the months of May and July of 2022.

## **Survey Design**

Data was collected for this study through a self-administered online survey through the survey platform, Qualtrics. The survey was designed to accumulate data on the SROs role and location. Collecting data through the use of surveys has been used in many prior studies examining SROs (Broll & Lafferty, 2018; Curran et al., 2021; Fisher & Devlin, 2019; Jackson, 2002; Jennings et al., 2011; Lynch et al., 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018; Pigott et al., 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016; Wolf, 2013; Wolfe et al., 2017; Wood & Hampton, 2021). For this survey, there were a total of 18 questions, 17 of which were related directly to the study and one asking whether the SRO would like to share any additional information (for the full survey, see the appendix).

## **Survey Measures**

### **Measures for Demographics**

In the survey, participants were asked nine questions regarding demographics. Demographic data was collected for several reasons. First, gender and race acted as independent variables for the regression models, helping to determine their relationship to perceived role and treatment of students. Second, insight into the difference in race, ethnicity, and gender of the SRO sample used for this study is an asset for gaining a deeper understanding of the population of SROs in general. The response categories for the question regarding race were copied from the US Census Bureau (2021), and participants were given the option to select more than one to identify as bi-racial.

The participants were also asked whether they were sworn law enforcement officers. This question was asked to explore whether there is consistency in whether school resource officers are sworn law enforcement officers across urban and non-urban areas. If the participants

answered that they are sworn law enforcement officers, the survey went on to ask about their rank and how long they have served as a sworn officer. If the participant answered that they are not a sworn officer, the questions regarding rank and years served were skipped.

The next survey question asks how long the participant has served as a school resource officer. The question after addresses what the participants official title is. This question gives interesting insight into whether there is variation in the title of the job based on location.

### **Measures for Independent Variables**

The independent variable for this study is the location of the school district that the school resource officers serve. In the survey, participants were asked whether they consider the school district they serve to be rural, urban, or somewhere in between. The US Census Bureau defines urban as an area with 50,000 or more residents, urban clusters as an area of 2,500-49,999 residents, and rural as an area with less than 2,500 residents (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Since this study relies heavily on the SRO's self-perception, no definitions for these were provided to the participants. After data collection, the categories were recoded which combined "rural" and "somewhere in between" and created "non-urban". This was due to the disproportionately high number of respondents reporting that they worked in urban areas, and this recoding provided a more even number of respondents in these two new categories. Participants were then asked what state they currently live and work in. This question was asked to determine whether there was a wide range of states being reached through this data collection method.

### **Measures for Dependent Variables**

Three different distinct role categories were created to determine SROs perception of role. These role categories were created based on research conducted by Schlosser (2014) and Fisher and Devlin (2019) on how roles of SROs can differ. The first category is



teaching/mentoring based. The officers whose role falls into this category tend to focus on educating students on things such as the school safety or the law. This role also takes on a mentoring/counseling aspect, with the officers helping students in crisis and mentoring students who are getting into trouble frequently. These officers will focus less on punishment zero-tolerance practices and more on educating students on making better choices and making amends. The second category is community based. The officers whose roll falls into this category work alongside the students and school faculty to create policies and practices that make the school safer. They rely on communication between themselves and those they are working to protect. The third category is law enforcement based. The officers whose role falls into this category focus more strictly on upholding the law/school policies inside schools and other traditional aspects of policing. These officers are less concerned with bonding with students and teaching/mentoring them.

Three questions were asked to examine SRO perception of their role. The first question examining role asked participants how often they participated in certain activities during a typical school year in the school district they serve (question 11). The response categories were a scale of never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. Four of the activities are associated with the teaching/mentoring based role. These activities were: (a) “teaching students (e.g. drug awareness, school safety, crime prevention)”, (b) “Mentoring students”, (c) “Counseling students (e.g. helping a student who is in emotional distress)”, and (i) “Making positive connections with students”. Five of the activities are associated with the community-based role. These activities were: (d) “Working with students to identify problems in the schools”, (e) “Working with students to address problems in the school”, (f) “Working with school staff to identify problems

in the schools”, (g) “Working with school staff to address problems in the school”, and (h) “Working with school staff to define discipline policies in the schools”.

The second question examining role was another question regarding how often SROs participate in certain activities (question 12), with the response categories being on a scale of daily, weekly, monthly, every few months, yearly, and never. There were eight activities associated with the law enforcement-based role. These activities were: (a) “Arrest students”, (b) “Physically separate students”, (c) “Put students in handcuffs”, (d) “Expel students”, (e) “Patrol school grounds”, (f) “Write tickets”, (g) “Put students in a physical hold”, and (h) “Verbally reprimand students when they do something wrong”. Activity (i), “Have conversations with students when they do something wrong”, is associated with the teaching/mentoring-based role. Activity (j), “Have students write apology letters when they do something wrong”, is associated with the community-based role.

The third question examining role asked, “Do you carry any of the following while on duty in schools? (check all that apply)” (question 14). The options were, (a) “Aerosol spray (e.g. pepper spray or mace), (b) “Physical restraints (e.g. handcuffs), (c) “Firearm”, (d) “Electroshock weapon (e.g. Taser)”, and (e) “Baton/asp”. This question was directly associated with the law-enforcement-based role.

The dependent variables were determined through summated scales. Summated scales are created through asking questions with no “correct answers”, and the response categories are usually measured on a Likert scale. The responses to each question are combined and an average score is determined. For the purpose of this study, a higher score on the summated scale for each question meant higher association.

## **Qualitative Items**

Several open-ended questions were added to the survey to collect additional information. Participants were asked what they felt their main duties are as an SRO. They were also asked if there were any duties they feel should not be the job of a school resource officer. At the end of the survey, there was an open space for participants to share any additional information pertaining to their position as an SRO.

## **Research Design**

The research design used for this study was cross-sectional. Cross-sectional designs are used to capture data about a specific population during one point in time. If optimized correctly, cross-sectional designs are also useful in ruling out other possible explanations of the data (Spector, 2019). The purpose of this study was to see the current perceptions that SROs have, and therefore a longitudinal study was not needed.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Validity is important in quantitative research to make sure that the instrument that is being used to measure the variables is measuring what it is supposed to. To examine the validity of this survey, face validity and construct validity needed to be used. Construct validity is used to ensure that the instrument being used for measurement is correctly being used for the concept you are measuring. Face validity looks at the surface level of the measures to make sure that the content makes sense and is suitable for measurement (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

Construct validity was an important aspect of this research due to there being no definition of the role of SROs, so there is no direct way to measure it. Construct validity was used to make sure that the survey questions developed use the relevant existing knowledge to correctly measure role. Based on the prior research, it seemed that SRO roles can be broken

down into three different categories (Fisher & Devlin, 2019; Lynch et al., 2016). This includes law enforcement based, teaching/mentoring based, and community based. These categories were used for the purpose of this study. Face validity was used to determine whether the survey questions make sense and were directly related to the topic. To establish the validity of this survey, a team of two qualified academics thoroughly scrutinized the questions and concluded they are valid.

Reliability is also a very important tool in research because it is used to make sure the measurements are consistent and will produce the same results when retested on multiple occasions. Since there is only one data set in this study, internal consistency was used to measure reliability. The internal consistency method uses Cronbach's alpha and is a single test administration. We determined that if the level is 0.7 or higher, the survey questions will be considered acceptable and good measurements. After running the data, Cronbach's Alpha for question 11 (the first question assessing role) is .839. Therefore, this question is an acceptable and good measurement of role. The Cronbach's Alpha for question 12 (the second question assessing role) is .742. Therefore, this question is also an acceptable and good measurement of role.

## CHAPTER IV

## ANALYSIS

**Results**

The target number of participants for this study was 100-150. The actual number of participants recruited were 88. Through LinkedIn, 264 officers were sent messages, and of those 85 responded to the survey. Through the listserv of police departments, direct contact was made with 23 departments. Out of the 23, three participants were gained. Of the 88 SROs who began the survey, 74 (84.1%) completed the survey. Those respondents who did not answer the question regarding where their school district was located were removed from the data set. This left a final sample of 78 to be used for the study, 88.6% of the original sample.

**Descriptive Statistics****Table 4.1***Demographic Data for Urban and Non-Urban School Resource Officers*

Variable	Urban: (n%)	Non-Urban: (n%)	Total (%)
Gender:			N: 78
Male	30 (49.2)	31 (50.8)	61 (78.2)
Female	7 (43.8)	9 (52.2)	16 (20.5)
Prefer not to answer	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Race:			N: 78
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Black or African American	7 (77.8)	2 (22.2)	9 (11.5)
White	29 (45.3)	35 (54.7)	64 (82.1)
Prefer not to answer	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Bi-racial	0 (0)	3 (100)	3 (3.8)

**Table 4.1, continued**

*Demographic Data for Urban and Non-Urban School Resource Officers*

Variable	Urban: (n%)	Non-Urban: (n%)	Total (%)
Ethnicity:			N: 78
Hispanic or Latino	3 (42.9)	4 (57.1)	7 (9)
Non-Hispanic/Latino	35 (45.7)	36 (54.3)	70 (91)
Sworn law enforcement officer:			N: 78
Yes	34 (48.6)	36 (51.4)	70 (89.7)
No	4 (50)	4 (50)	8 (10.3)
Length in years law enforcement officer:			N: 78
1 to 10 years	6 (50)	6 (50)	12 (15.4)
11 to 20 years	9 (45)	11 (55)	18 (23.1)
21 to 30 years	7 (50)	7 (50)	16 (20.5)
31 to 40 years	2 (50)	2 (50)	3 (3.8)
Did not answer			29 (37.2)
Current rank:			N: 78
Officer, detective, or corporal	24 (52.2)	22 (47.8)	46 (59)
Sergeant, lieutenant, or captain	2 (16.7)	5 (83.3)	7 (9)
Deputy chief, assistant chief, or chief	2 (50)	2 (50)	4 (5.1)
Other	10 (61.5)	3 (38.5)	13 (16.7)
Did not answer			8 (10.3)
Length in years as an SRO:			N: 78
Less than a year	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	3 (3.8)
1 to 10 years	31 (50)	31 (50)	62 (79.5)
11 to 20 years	3 (27.3)	8 (72.7)	11 (14.1)
31 to 40 years	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Did not answer			1 (1.3)
Official title:			N: 78
School resource officer	29 (45.3)	35 (54.7)	64 (82.1)
School safety officer	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Other	5 (41.7)	7 (58.3)	12 (15.4)
Did not answer			1 (1.3)
State:			N: 78
Arizona	0 (0)	1 (100)	1 (1.3)
California	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Colorado	3 (60)	2 (40)	5 (6.4)

**Table 4.1, continued***Demographic Data for Urban and Non-Urban School Resource Officers*

Variable	Urban: (n%)	Non-Urban: (n%)	Total (%)
State:			
Connecticut	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	3 (3.8)
Florida	2 (100)	0 (0)	2 (2.6)
Georgia	7 (70)	3 (30)	10 (12.8)
Illinois	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Indiana	2 (50)	2 (50)	4 (5.1)
Kansas	1 (50)	1 (50)	2 (2.6)
Kentucky	0 (0)	2 (100)	2 (2.6)
Maine	0 (0)	1 (100)	1 (1.3)
Massachusetts	0 (0)	1 (100)	1 (1.3)
Minnesota	1 (50)	1 (50)	2 (2.6)
Mississippi	0 (0)	2 (100)	2 (2.6)
Missouri	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
Nebraska	0 (0)	1 (100)	1 (1.3)
New Hampshire	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	3 (3.8)
New Jersey	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	3 (3.8)
New York	0 (0)	3 (100)	3 (3.8)
North Carolina	3 (100)	0 (0)	3 (3.8)
Ohio	1 (25)	3 (75)	4 (5.1)
Oklahoma	2 (100)	0 (0)	2 (2.6)
Pennsylvania	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	3 (3.8)
Rhode Island	1 (100)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)
South Carolina	1 (50)	1 (50)	2 (2.6)
Tennessee	3 (60)	2 (40)	5 (6.4)
Texas	2 (40)	3 (60)	5 (6.4)
Virginia	0 (0)	1 (100)	1 (1.3)
Wyoming	1 (50)	1 (50)	2 (2.6)
Did not answer			2 (2.6)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>37 (47.4)</b>	<b>41 (52.5)</b>	<b>78 (100)</b>

**Table 4.2***Descriptives for Community-Based Role*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Working with students to identify problems within the school(s)	3.66	0.832
Working with students to address problems within the school(s)	3.62	0.855
Working with school staff to identify problems within the school(s)	4.20	0.721
Working with school staff to address problems within the school(s)	4.20	0.721
Working with school staff to define discipline policies in the school(s)	2.47	1.259
Have a student write an apology letter when they do something wrong.	1.68	2.021
<b>*Total</b>	<b>3.47</b>	<b>0.67</b>

Note. (range 1-5: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always)

*\*a score of 1 indicates complete lack of community-based role, with a 5 indicating a complete community-based role*



**Table 4.3***Descriptives for Teaching-Based Role*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Teaching students	3.77	0.924
Mentoring students	4.30	0.789
Counseling students	4.09	0.725
Making positive connections with students	4.74	0.525
Have a conversation with a student when they do something wrong	2.15	1.043
<b>*Total</b>	<b>3.77</b>	<b>0.44</b>

Note. (range 1-5: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always)

\*a score of 1 indicates a complete lack of teaching-based role, with a 5 indicating a complete teaching-based role

**Table 4.4***Descriptives for Law Enforcement-Based Role*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Arrest students	3.12	1.835
Physically separate students	2.78	1.706
Put students in handcuffs	2.66	2.191
Expel students	0.59	1.433
Patrol school grounds	1.01	0.116
Write tickets	2.63	1.997
Put students in a physical hold	2.58	2.204
Verbally reprimand students when they do something wrong	2.36	1.420
*Total	2.20	0.85

Note. (range 0-5: 0 = never, 1 = daily, 2 = weekly, 3 = monthly, 4 = every few months, 5 = yearly)

\*a score of 0 indicates complete lack of law enforcement role, with a 5 indicating a complete law enforcement role

### Multiple Regression Analysis

The data from the survey was analyzed through multiple regression analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) analysis program. Multiple regression is used to compare one dependent variable to multiple independent variables. For this study, three regression models were run. The three models were for each perceived role (teaching/mentoring based, community based, and law enforcement based). These models determined the answer to the first research question. The models are as follows:

Model 1-  $Y_{(\text{role of SRO-community based})} = mx1_{(\text{location of school})} + mx2_{(\text{race of SRO})} + mx3_{(\text{gender of SRO})} + b$

Model 2-  $Y_{(\text{role of SRO- teaching/mentoring based})} = mx1_{(\text{location of school})} + mx2_{(\text{race of SRO})} + mx3_{(\text{gender of SRO})} + b$

Model 3-  $Y_{(\text{role of SRO- law enforcement based})} = mx1_{(\text{location of school})} + mx2_{(\text{race of SRO})} + mx3_{(\text{gender of SRO})} + b$

To create these regression models, several variables were recoded. Since most respondents identified themselves as male, the variable for gender was recoded into “male” and “non-male”. This changed the frequency to 61 (78.2%) participants identified as male and 17 (21.8%) participants identified as non-male. Since most respondents identified themselves as White, the variable for race was coded into “White” and “non-White”. This changed the frequency to 64 (82.1%) participants identified as White, and 14 (17.9%) participants identified as non-White. For the location variable, the categories of rural and between rural and urban were combined and a new category, “non-urban”, was created. This changed the frequency to 37 (47.4%) participants identifying their school as urban, and 41 (52.6%) participants identifying their school as non-urban.

After running the models, two out of three models were found to be statistically significant. To determine the impact of the *beta* value for each model, Cohen’s categorizations of effect sizes were used. Cohen stated that effect sizes for *beta* are as follows: 0.10-0.29 are small, 0.30-0.49 are medium, and 0.50 or greater are large (Cohen, 1988).

### **Model 1**

The dependent variable for model one was community-based role. In model one, the overall model was not determined to be significant with an  $r^2$  of 0.0008, accounting for only 0.08% of the variance in community-based roles. Of the three independent variables (location, gender, and race), none yielded statistical significance (see table 4.5).

**Table 4.5***Regression Table for Dependent Variable: Community-Based Role*

	<i>Intercept</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Non-urban	0.097	0.161	0.427	NS
Non-male	0.294	0.200	0.145	NS
Non-white	-0.039	0.216	0.858	NS
Constant	3.358	0.127	<0.001	

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Note. DV = Community Based Role

$r^2$  adjusted = 0.004

\* $p < .05$

### **Model 2**

The dependent variable for model two was teaching-based. In model two, the overall model was determined to be significant with an  $r^2$  value of 0.094, accounting for 9.4% of the variance in teaching-based roles. Of the three independent variables, only gender was statistically significant (see table 4.6). The *beta* value of gender (non-male) is 0.326, and the B-coefficient is 1.532. In this model, the higher the *beta* value, the more strongly related to the teaching-based role. This means that on the teaching-based role orientation scale, gender has a medium impact. From this model, it can be deduced that SROs that identified as non-male tended to take on teaching/mentoring based roles more often than SROs who identified as male.

**Table 4.6***Regression Table for Dependent Variable: Teaching-Based Role*

	<i>Intercept</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Non-urban	0.098	0.101	0.337	NS
Non-male*	0.377	0.126	0.004*	0.336
Non-white	0.020	0.137	0.884	NS
Constant	3.643	0.080	<0.001	

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Note. DV = Teaching Based Role

$r^2$  adjusted = 0.097

\*p < .05

### **Model 3**

The dependent variable for model three was law enforcement based. In model three, the overall model was determined to not be significant with an  $r^2$  value of 0.053, accounting for 5.3% of the variance in law-enforcement based roles. Of the three independent variables (location, gender, and race), none yielded statistical significance (see table 4.7).

**Table 4.7***Regression Table for Dependent Variable: Law Enforcement-Based Role*

	<i>Intercept</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Non-urban	-0.156	0.206	0.451	NS
Non-male	0.332	0.253	0.195	NS
Non-white	0.312	0.274	0.260	NS
Constant	2.162	0.163	<0.001	

*Note:* DV = Law Enforcement Based Roler<sup>2</sup> adjusted = 0.053

\*p &lt; .05

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

#### **Discussion**

The goal of this research was to determine whether there is an association between the role of SROs and the location of the school district in which they work. Three different SRO role classifications were identified; law-enforcement based, teaching-based, and community-based.

#### **Community-Based Role**

The first regression model examined the community-based role and showed no statistical significance. This meant location, gender, and race are not associated with the community-based role. The community-based role consists of SROs including school staff, administrators, and students to identify and address problems within the schools. One major reason this could be the case came directly from question 17 on the survey, “Are there any tasks or duties you feel should not be the job of a school resource officer?”. Sixty-nine participants answered this question, and more than half of the respondents (36) wrote about how defining, creating, and enforcing school policies should not be part of their jobs. One SRO wrote, “School discipline is not the issue of the SRO. That should be handled by the school with the SRO only stepping in when the student is disrupting other students’ class time or it becomes a crime or danger to others” (Respondent 36, Non-Male, Non-Urban). Another respondent wrote, “School based discipline or the enforcement of school based policies should never be the focus of a SRO. While we can certainly act as an informal counselor to motivate a student to do better for themselves; we

should not be blurring the boundary between law enforcement and educational process”  
(Respondent 63, Male, Non-Urban).

The data showed that most SROs are sworn law enforcement officers, which can explain why they do not get involved with school policy/discipline. They are not school faculty and are therefore not required to be involved in these areas. Some of the SROs felt differently, however. Nineteen respondents wrote that they do not shy away from any tasks. One respondent wrote, “I’m part of the school community and therefore part of the team. I will do anything needed to assist the teachers and staff” (Respondent 55, Male, Non-Urban). While another stated, “No not at all. We are not just protecting but adding a different scope of building each scholar individually” (Respondent 78, Male, Urban).

It is also important to note that five participants mentioned specific aspects of community policing in their response to the question, “What are your main duties as a school resource officer?”. One respondent wrote, “Ensure the safety and security of the school and its environs (especially from outside threats), Mentor and build positive relationships with students, work with school staff to identify issues and employ alternative actions to avoid charging students with criminal acts” (Respondent 53, Male, Urban).

Prior studies on the connection between policing styles and gender/race have mixed results. There are some studies that have found that non-male law enforcement officers tend to display “softer” policing styles, which include less use of force and more informal policing (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Violanti et al., 2016). There are also studies that show the opposite, that non-male law enforcement officers’ behaviors and policing styles do not significantly differ from males (Kakar, 2002; Paoline & Terrill, 2008). More specifically, Black and Kari (2009) found that minority males take on community-based roles more often, which



contradicts Schuck's findings (2014), which were that higher rates of women in law enforcement agencies is correlated to more community policing practices. Studies conducted on SROs do not focus on the race/gender of the officers themselves, only of the students they serve. The current study found no association between community-based role and gender/race. It is important to note the large race gap in the participants. While there is representation in the sample, a significant majority of participants, 82.1%, identified as White. This is the case for gender as well, with 78.2% of participants identifying as male.

### **Teaching-Based Role**

Model two found that SROs who identified as non-male tend to take on more teaching-based roles than SROs who identified as male. This confirms the findings from a study conducted by Kelly and Swezey (2015). From their study of 53 SROs, the authors found that female SROs focused less time on their law enforcement duties and more time on their teaching/mentoring duties as compared to male SROs. Non-males did make up a very small percentage of the SROs in this study (21.8%), which needs to be considered when discussing these results. A more representative sample may have led to different data.

Model two found that location and race had no relationship to teaching-based role. Just like community-based role, this can be associated with the mixed findings from previous studies. Again, the lack of race representation in the study could also be a factor in these results. More research is needed to gain an understanding of the relationship between these variables.

### **Law Enforcement-Based Role**

The third regression model examined the law enforcement-based role and showed no statistical significance. This meant location, gender, and race are not associated with the law enforcement-based role. This contradicts findings from prior studies. In prior studies, it has been

found that law enforcement officers in non-urban areas tend to use more informal techniques and more discretion than law enforcement officers in urban areas (Brock et al., 2001; Pelfrey, 2007; Weisheit et al., 1994). Even so, not much research has been conducted on the difference between urban and non-urban policing. There have been several studies that have examined the difference in types of crimes and the difference in how police operate, but not much on police roles themselves. The role of a traditional law enforcement officer and an SRO are different, but they do share a lot of overlap. This study also found that a majority of participants were sworn law enforcement officers. More research should be conducted to understand why differences in policing differ for traditional law enforcement officers based on location but not SROs.

### **Additional Findings**

Several other notable findings came from this study. Seventy-four respondents answered the question, “How well do you think the students in your school district understand what your role in their school is?”. 47.3% answered very well, 39.2% answered “Well”, and 13.5% answered “Slightly well”. This data shows that less than 50% of the SROs in this study that responded to this question perceive their students as having a perfect understanding of what their role in the school is.

The question, “What are your main duties as a school resource officer?” also provided some interesting insights. 76 participants answered this question. The duty that was most frequently written about was safety/security, with 59 respondents stating that this was an important aspect of their job. The next was mentoring with 27 respondents. The next was building positive relationships with students, families, and school staff, with 22 respondents. The next highest was teaching, with 19 respondents. Other interesting duties that were written about were being a deterrent for crime/delinquency, teaching D.A.R.E, and bringing in a comfort dog

for students. One SRO even wrote about the School-to-Prison Pipeline when describing what their main duties are, “To protect students from formally entering the juvenile justice system and steering them away from the “school-to-prison-and-deportation” pipeline...” (Respondent 9, Male, Urban).

The question, “In a typical school year, what are the top three crimes you arrest students for in your school district?”, yielded 73 responses and 22 different crimes were discussed. The top three crimes in non-urban school districts were assault, drug use/possession, and harassment. The top three in urban school districts were assault, drug use/possession, and weapon possession. There were significant similarities in the crimes participants shared. Non-urban SROs shared several different crimes than urban SROs: threats of terrorism, larceny, truancy, and operation of a motor vehicle. The only crime difference that urban SROs shared was running away.

The conclusion of the survey was, “Feel free to use the space provided below to share additional feedback you have about your role, experiences, or other relevant information pertaining to your position as a school resource officer”. There were 39 responses to this. Nine respondents discussed how they loved their job as an SRO and some of these even wrote about how it was the best part of their career. One participant wrote, “I loved my career. I miss it every day and the impact those kids had on me. Making a difference is so important when you can give the students someone to look up to. Be the change and one day at a time make a difference” (Respondent 39, Non-Male, Urban).

Another interesting trend in responses was three participants mentioned that SROs need to have specific traits to be effective in schools. One respondent wrote, “While the officer assigned to an SRO/SPO role needs to have a very specific mission-oriented outlook,

personality, and character, the potential is tremendous for changing the course of lives”  
(Respondent 22, Male, Non-Urban).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Based on the results from this study, it can be determined that location has no effect on the role of an SRO. None of the three models showed any relationship between the roles and location of school district. These results are interesting considering that prior research has shown there is a difference between urban and non-urban policing. While the role of an SRO is vastly different from the role of a traditional law enforcement officer, the jobs do share some overlap. It could be beneficial to conduct this study on a larger scale to determine whether a larger sample size can change these results.

Based on the data collected from the question, “How well do you think the students in your school district understand what your role in their school is?”, it could be argued that students need more education on what an SROs role is in their school. One way this could be achieved is by having the SRO come to their class and explain their role to the students themselves. Not only would this help educate the students on their role, but also give the SRO an opportunity to meet the kids they are sworn to protect and form bonds with them. It could also provide the students with a chance to get to see their SRO as less of an intimidating authority figure and more as a protector and confidant, and this could lead to students being more willing to come to the SRO when they witness a crime or are having an issue and need help.

The answers to the question, “What are your main duties as a school resource officer?” showed that there is significant variation in what an SRO believes their role is from district to district. This is very interesting considering the significant similarities in the crimes students are arrested for. These results are an indication that there could be a need for a consistent national

standard for the main duties of an SRO. This could also be beneficial in helping students learn what an SROs role is in their school.

There were a few limitations to this study. The targeted sample size was 100-150, but only 78 completed surveys were obtained. Also, while there was representation in the study both in the gender and race categories, the sample was still largely White and male. From this, several recommendations for future research can be made. Replicating this study with a larger sample size could lead to a more representative sample for gender and race and therefore more representative results. Looking at this study on a larger scale with state-by-state comparisons could prove beneficial as well. Determining whether SROs in different states operate on different policing styles could also help determine whether there is a need for a consistent national standard for SROs needs to be established. State by state comparison could provide important results politically as well. For example, if one was to compare the SROs perceptions of role in California (a typically blue state) to Alabama (a typically red state), it could yield interesting results.

This study has added to the collection of previous research in several ways. There have previously been no studies addressing role of SROs and location of school districts. The role of SROs in general has not been studied often. The results from this study can be used to begin the discussion of why the role of SROs needs to be more consistent throughout schools across the United States, and how a national standard can be established. The results can also contribute to the data on how students in urban versus non-urban areas are treated in school. The data received from the open-ended questions included in this study can also give more of an in depth insight into how SROs perceive themselves, their role, and their students.

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APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF  
**NORTHERN COLORADO**

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**Institutional Review Board**

Date: 03/09/2022

Principal Investigator: Alex Swanty

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 03/09/2022

Protocol Number: [2202036059](#)

Protocol Title: Using the perspective of school resource officers to assess their role and treatment of students

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

**As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:**

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. \*You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website – <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,



Nicole Morse

Research Compliance Manager



APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT AND SURVEY



## Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

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**Title of Research Study:** An examination of school resource officers' self-perception of role, student encounters, and duties

**Researcher:** Alexandra Swanty, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice  
Phone number: (970) 443-7982      Email: alexandra.swanty@unco.edu

**Research Advisor:** Kyle Ward, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice  
Phone number: (970) 351-1071      Email: kyle.ward@unco.edu

**Procedures:** We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey that will take about 5-10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be confidential.

You will not be asked your name, and you will not be asked any questions about your personal identifiers.

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between how school resource officers view their role, how students are disciplined, and the geographic locations of their school districts.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Alexandra Swanty at alexandra.swanty@unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639; 970-351-1910.

**Voluntary Participation:** Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. **By completing this survey, you are giving your permission to be included as a participant in this study.**

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

- I have read the above and AGREE to take part in this study
- I DO NOT wish to take part in this study

*The following questions are regarding your demographics.*

1. Which of the following do you identify with?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Non-binary/third gender
  - d. Prefer not to answer
  - e. Other (please specify):
2. Which race do you identify with? Select all that apply
  - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - e. White
  - f. Prefer not to answer
  - g. Other (please specify):
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. Hispanic/Latino
  - b. Non-Hispanic/Latino
4. Are you a sworn law enforcement officer?
  - a. Yes

- b. No
5. How long (in years) have you been a sworn law enforcement officer?
6. What is your current rank?
- a. Officer
  - b. Detective
  - c. Corporal
  - d. Sergeant
  - e. Lieutenant
  - f. Captain
  - g. Deputy chief
  - h. Assistant chief
  - i. Chief
  - j. Other (please specify):
7. How long (in years) have you been a school resource officer?
8. What is your official title?
- a. School resource officer
  - b. School safety officer
  - c. School security professional
  - d. Other (please specify):
9. What state do you currently live and work in?

*The following question is regarding the school district you serve. If you serve more than one school district, answer for the school district you spend the most time in.*

10. Would you consider the district you spend the most time in to be rural, urban, or somewhere in between?

- a. Rural
- b. Urban
- c. Between rural and urban
- d. Other (please specify):

*The following questions are regarding your role as a school resource officer.*

11. During a typical school year, how often do you participate in the following in your school district? (Answer on a scale of never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always).

- a. Teaching students (e.g. drug awareness, school safety, crime prevention)
- b. Mentoring students
- c. Counseling students (e.g. helping a student who is in emotional distress)
- d. Working with students to identify problems in the schools
- e. Working with students to address problems in the schools
- f. Working with school staff to identify problems in the schools
- g. Working with school staff to address problems in the schools
- h. Working with school staff to define discipline policies in the schools
- i. Make positive connections with students

12. In a typical school year, how often do you do the following in your school district? (Answer on a scale of daily, weekly, monthly, every few months, yearly, never)

- a. Arrest students
- b. Physically separate students
- c. Put students in handcuffs
- d. Expel students
- e. Patrol school grounds
- f. Write tickets
- g. Put a student in a physical hold
- h. Verbally reprimand students when they do something wrong
- i. Have conversations with students when they do something wrong
- j. Have students write apology letters when they do something wrong

13. In a typical school year, what are the top three crimes you arrest students for in your school district?

14. Do you carry any of the following while on duty in schools? (check all that apply)

- a. Aerosol spray (e.g. pepper spray or mace)
- b. Physical restraints (e.g. handcuffs)
- c. Firearm
- d. Electroshock weapon (e.g. Taser)
- e. Baton/asp

15. How well do you think the students in your school district understand what your role in their school is?

- a. Not well
- b. Slightly well
- c. Well

d. Very well

16. What are your main duties as a school resource officer?

17. Are there any tasks or duties that you feel should not be the job of a school resource officer?

18. Feel free to use the space provided below to share additional feedback you have about your role, experiences, or other relevant information pertaining to your position as a school resource officer.

APPENDIX C  
RECRUITMENT LETTERS



**Recruitment letter for LinkedIn**

“Hello!

My name is Alexandra Swanty, and I am a student from the University of Northern Colorado obtaining my master’s degree in Criminology/Criminal Justice. I am writing to you to ask you to participate in my research study about the role of school resource officers.

The objective of this research is to assess the relationship between how a school resource officer views their role, how they handle violations of laws and school codes, and the geographic location of the school they work in. This research is attempting to expand on prior research done on the role of school resource officers by including the location of the school, which has not been attempted before.

The study is confidential, and you will not be asked your name, just what state you live/work in. Participation is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time. If you understand the study and would like to participate, please complete the survey by clicking the link below. The survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey includes 18 questions concerning the location of the school district you are assigned to and you and your students’ perception of your role. Your answers will be confidential, so please answer honestly and to the best of your ability. Thank you for your participation.”

**Recruitment email to police departments/listserv**

“Please forward this email to the school resource officer(s) of this department.

Hello!

You are receiving this email because you have been identified as a school resource officer. My name is Alexandra Swanty, and I am a student from the University of Northern Colorado obtaining my master’s degree in Criminology/Criminal Justice. I am writing to you to ask you to participate in my research study about the role of school resource officers.

The objective of this research is to assess the relationship between how a school resource officer views their role, how they handle violations of laws and school codes, and the geographic location of the school they work in. This research is attempting to expand on prior research done on the role of school resource officers by including the location of the school, which has not been attempted before.

The study is confidential, and you will not be asked your name or any personal identifiers. Participation is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time. If you understand the study and would like to participate, please complete the survey by clicking the link below. The survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey includes 18 questions concerning the location of the school district you are assigned to and you and your students’ perception of your role. Your answers will be confidential, so please answer honestly and to the best of your ability. Thank you for your participation.”