


# The Alignment Between Community Policing and the Work of School Resource Officers

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## Abstract

Despite a growing literature showing the ineffectiveness of school resource officers (SROs) for reducing school crime, their use is widespread. Some of this ineffectiveness may arise from SROs' experiences of role conflict due to their multi-faceted roles and conflicting expectations associated with following two authority structures. Community policing (CP) may offer a unifying perspective that can address some of these barriers. The current study uses data from 119 qualitative interviews with SROs from three U.S. states to examine the extent to which SROs' activities align with three dimensions of CP: community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational adaptation. This study finds that SROs' described activities align well with these dimensions, suggesting that a CP framework may be a strong model for organizing and describing the work of SROs. This framework can be viewed as an initial proof of concept, and research may elaborate on the framework and assess its utility.

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Amid nationwide protests against police brutality in the United States throughout 2020, calls to defund the police echoed from coast to coast. School-based police quickly became one of the targets of this movement, with several large school districts ending contracts with local law enforcement agencies, including those in Minneapolis, Denver, Portland, OR, and others. At the same time, other districts such as Chicago Public Schools voted not to make similar decisions, maintaining the possibility of having school-based policing in the district. One of the most common forms of school-based policing is school resource officers (SROs) who are sworn law enforcement officers assigned to a school or set of schools. National estimates from 2017–2018 indicate that 61% of public schools (including 84% of public high schools) employ at least one security guard, SRO, or other law enforcement officer, with most of these being SROs (Wang et al., 2020). Until 2020, the number of SROs had continued to expand despite a growing body of research evidence questioning their effectiveness and finding negative unintended consequences in terms of racial equity and the criminalization of schools and students (Fisher & Devlin, 2020; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Kupchik et al., 2020; Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Nolan, 2011; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2016; Theriot, 2009; Weisburst, 2019).

Although there may be many reasons for these negative effects, including broad structural conditions that have led to the criminalization of schools and student behavior (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Simon, 2007), there may also be more localized causes of the negative impacts of SROs on students and schools. Prior research indicates that there is no unifying conceptual framework that governs the work of SROs, potentially leading to conflict and misunderstanding that can have negative consequences for students and schools. For example, role conflict is a common experience of SROs (Javdani, 2019; McKenna & Pollock, 2014; Schlosser, 2014), where their multi-faceted roles call for different responses to a given situation. Moreover, there is the potential for conflicting expectations about the appropriate roles and activities of SROs between the two different authority structures in which they are embedded: schools and law enforcement agencies (Finn et al., 2005). The work of SROs is largely based on local decisions coupled with guidance from professional SRO organizations and state- and national-level trainings. The recommendations provided by these organizations and training initiatives seem to be guided primarily by practitioners and not by scientific research evidence. To our knowledge, there is not a broad, evidence-based framework for understanding and guiding the work of SROs.

One framework that may be useful for conceptualizing and guiding the work of SROs is community policing (CP), a comprehensive reform movement that emphasizes the importance of police officers working together with citizens to prevent and respond to crime, disorder, and other community problems. Community policing has been

conceptualized by some scholars as having three broad dimensions: community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational adaptation. Although this framework has not been examined in a school policing context, these dimensions appear to translate well to policing in schools. For schools that choose to have SROs, developing robust partnerships between police and schools is critical to ensure that members of both organizations can work together successfully in the same space. Problem-solving by SROs is important for preventing and reducing crime, violence, and other problems in schools. Finally, SROs must share authority with school administrators, necessitating some element of organizational adaptation. Given the apparent alignment between the core dimensions of CP and the work of SROs, CP may be a useful framework for guiding the work of SROs who have largely been operating without a coherent, evidence-based, strategic framework.

However, research evidence has not yet tied SRO activities to a broader CP framework, thus it is not yet clear whether SROs' roles and activities align with the core dimensions of CP. Although some evidence finds that relationship-building is central to the work of SROs (Broll & Howells, 2019), less is known about how the work of SROs reflects other elements of CP. This study examines the extent to which the three principal dimensions of CP manifest in the work of SROs as they describe it. To do so, we draw on qualitative interviews with 119 SROs from three U.S. states. Based on this interview data, we examine the extent to which the three dimensions of CP are reflected in how the SROs describe their work. Our findings are useful for understanding how SROs' work aligns with the three principal dimensions of CP. These findings may in turn be useful for framing and shaping the work that SROs do in schools.

## School Policing

Until the summer of 2020, the number of police officers assigned to K-12 schools in the United States has continued to grow. This growth, although relatively steady for decades, has been further propelled by high-profile gun violence incidents in schools, including events in Parkland, FL and Santa Fe, TX in which armed individuals killed 17 and 10 people, respectively, within only a few months of each other in 2018. The idea of placing officers in schools is not new. The first known instance of a law enforcement officer being assigned to a school full time was in the early 1950s (e.g., Coon & Travis, 2012; Patterson, 2007; Weiler & Cray, 2011). However, it was not until the 1990s that school policing programs expanded rapidly. Stemming from the notion that youth crime was rising and buttressed by the Columbine tragedy in 1999, the U.S. government began to fund the adoption of school policing programs under its Office of Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS). By 2005, COPS had funded more than 6000 new police officers to work in schools (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). Community-Oriented Policing Services continues to fund SROs.<sup>1</sup>

Although the idea of assigning police officers to schools has spread widely, there is little agreement and consistency about the appropriate roles and work activities of police assigned to schools, with many critics suggesting that police should not be in

schools at all (Advancement Project & Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018). Research has found that SROs perform both law enforcement and non-law enforcement roles (Coon & Travis, 2012; Finn et al., 2005; Kennedy, 2001; McDaniel, 2001). For instance, the triad model—described by the National Association of SRO—has conceptualized the roles of SROs as comprising three central functions: law enforcer, educator, and mentor/role model (Canady et al., 2012). Research using primarily descriptive methods has largely corroborated this three-pronged conceptualization (Coon & Traivs, 2012; Kennedy, 2001; McDaniel, 2001; Weiler & Cray, 2011). Studies suggest that SROs spend the majority of their time as law enforcers (Coon & Travis, 2005; McDaniel, 2001; McKenna et al., 2016), but also engage in informal counseling and education (Canady et al., 2012; Weiler & Cray, 2011). However, recent qualitative research has shown that SROs report often engaging in tasks that fall outside of the triad model, such as maintaining building security or acting as a social worker or surrogate parent (Curran et al., 2019; McKenna et al., 2016). These tasks may not be captured by traditional conceptualizations of SRO activities. As the empirical research evidence on SROs continues to grow, it may be appropriate to move beyond these basic role categories for understanding SROs' work and to incorporate broader conceptual frameworks.

One reason why such frameworks may be useful is that the various roles of SROs may clash with one another and therefore produce role conflict (Katz & Kahn, 1978). For instance, role conflict can emerge between mentorship and law enforcement, when officers acting in a mentoring capacity win student trust and then use the information to make arrests (Brown, 2006; Nolan, 2011; Schlosser, 2014). There are several potential explanations for role conflict among SROs. For instance, some SRO roles—especially mentor and educator—differ widely from the training and usual work of patrol officers. Second, there may also be a tension between a more traditional policing philosophy and the actions or tasks of SROs. Similarly, public expectations of SROs may focus heavily on crime-control (e.g., stopping school shooters), whereas educators may focus much more heavily on order maintenance and relationship-building.

Beyond role conflict for individual SROs, there may also be conflicting ideas about these issues between law enforcement agencies and school districts. Thus, researchers have emphasized the need for a strategic framework to guide the development of school policing programs, including formal agreements between police agencies and school districts outlining the details of how SRO programs will operate (e.g., Atkinson, 2002; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Finn, et al., 2005; Kim & Geronimo, 2009). Despite these calls for guidance, research shows a lack of consistency and structure in how school policing programs have been established and implemented throughout the country (Finn et al., 2005). Part of this may be due to variation in local preferences and expectations for school policing initiatives. However, part of it may also be due to a lack of clear guidance from funding agencies, school policing experts, and other sources of innovation about the most appropriate structures and philosophies underlying these initiatives. The research and reform literature on CP provides a useful point of departure

for thinking about the role of SROs and the underlying structures and philosophies that may help police and schools to facilitate those roles.

## Community Policing

Community policing is a comprehensive police reform strategy that encourages police to partner with their communities in addressing crime, disorder, and other community problems (Cordner, 1997, 2014; Greene, 2000; Kelling & Moore, 1989). Community policing is often viewed as a mechanism for improving relationships between police and the public, especially in communities where those relationships are strained. Because the CP movement is so broad, local adaptations of it differ widely. This heterogeneity in its implementation has led some to question whether its meaning is too broad (Crank & Langworthy, 1996). Others argue that the movement's breadth is part of its strength (Scheider et al., 2009). The definition of CP developed by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2014, p. 3) encompasses this breadth: "Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime." The elements of CP in this definition are consistent with those outlined by scholars who study the CP movement. For instance, several scholars have adopted definitions of CP that contain three dimensions: community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational adaptation (Maguire, 2021; Maguire et al., 1997; Mastrofski, 2006; Wells & Maguire, 2009). Below we discuss each of these dimensions.

The first dimension of CP is *community partnerships*. This dimension includes a variety of activities and initiatives in which police work closely with the community to improve crime, disorder, and other key outcomes. These activities acknowledge that police cannot achieve public safety on their own; they must work closely with various community partners to achieve their goals. The second dimension is *problem-solving*, which emphasizes a highly focused, proactive approach to policing (Goldstein, 1990; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). This dimension requires police to select substantive community problems, analyze them carefully, and develop focused, multi-faceted solutions to those problems, preferably with their community partners. The third dimension is *organizational adaptation*. Although the first two dimensions focus externally on the community, organizational adaptation focuses internally on the police agency itself. The primary concern of organizational adaptation is ensuring the proper alignment of "organizational management, structure, personnel, and information systems to support community partnerships and proactive problem solving" (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014, p. 3; also see Wells & Maguire, 2009; Zhao, 1996).

Research on the effectiveness of CP suggests that it can have a number of promising effects, although like many reform efforts, it is not a panacea. A meta-analysis of studies estimating the effectiveness of CP found that initiatives focusing primarily on community partnerships improved people's satisfaction with the police as well as their

perceptions of community disorder and police legitimacy (Gill et al., 2014). However, the meta-analysis found no statistically significant effects of CP on crime or fear, even though some individual studies did find such effects (Gill et al., 2014). Another meta-analysis found that problem-solving initiatives significantly reduced crime and disorder but had limited effects on fear and perceived legitimacy of police (Hinkle et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings reveal that the two external dimensions of CP—community partnerships and problem-solving—both produce beneficial effects though these effects differ from one another. At the same time, the evaluation literature on CP has identified a variety of implementation challenges that deserve careful attention (Maguire, 2021).

To what extent does the three-dimensional conceptual framework of CP align with the work of SROs? Although prior research has identified the importance of relationship-building for SROs (Broll & Howells, 2019), research has not yet examined whether CP is a good reflection of the work that SROs do. Given the lack of a clear conceptual framework for understanding school policing, coupled with the intuitive alignment of CP with the roles and work assignments of SROs (including the fact that COPS has funded so many SRO programs), we examine the application of CP to policing in schools. Using data from multiple data collection efforts, this paper investigates the extent to which SROs' descriptions of their roles and responsibilities align with the three dimensions of CP. To our knowledge, research has not yet examined the alignment between CP and school policing in spite of the potential implications for both research and practice. These include delineating expectations about appropriate SRO activities; improving relationships between police and their various constituencies in schools (such as students, parents, teachers, and administrators); solving substantive problems within schools that are associated with crime, disorder, and fear; and determining the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of SRO programs.

## Method

The qualitative data used in this study come from interviews with 119 SROs conducted as part of four separate data collection efforts in multiple U.S. locations that were selected due to the research teams' existing relationships with schools and law enforcement agencies. Because of confidentiality agreements with the local school districts and law enforcement agencies, we do not identify the specific communities or agencies whose officers we interviewed. See [Table 1](#) for information about the four sites and the SROs interviewed.

The first data collection effort took place in Texas in 2013–2014, and was designed to study SROs in school districts that had their own police department. The Texas Education Code authorizes Independent School Districts in Texas to either contract for police services with a local police or sheriff's agency or establish and run their own police department. A district that chooses to establish and operate its own police department must follow the same process as any other local police agency and go through an application and commissioning process with the Texas Commission on Law

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Districts and Officers From the Four Samples.

	Texas Sample 1	Texas Sample 2	Southern Sample	Midwestern Sample
<i>Date of data collection</i>	2013–2014	2016	2017–2018	2017–2018
<i>Urbanicity</i>	24% Urban, 46% Suburban, and 30% Rural	30% Urban, 40% Suburban, and 30% Rural	Primarily suburban and rural	Primarily urban and some suburban
<i>Secondary School</i>	62%	58%	47%	92%
<i>Elementary School</i>	15%	31%	51%	8%
<i>Officer is white</i>	65%	84%	90%	81%
<i>Department</i>	100% from school district run police departments	50% from school district run departments and 50% from local police/sheriff's departments	One county sheriff's office	77% from local police departments, 23% from county sheriff's office
<i>Percent using MOU</i>	Unknown	Unknown	100%	100%
<i>Notes</i>	23% of the officers in this study were either administrative or covered both elementary and secondary	11% of the officers in this study were either administrative or covered both elementary and secondary		

Note. MOU = memoranda of understanding.

Enforcement. Once approved, the district typically hires a chief of police that reports to the school district superintendent. The department is under the full control of the school district, but follows the same guidelines and accountability standards as all other licensed police agencies in the state.

The second data collection effort occurred in Texas in 2016, with the purpose of understanding the roles of SROs. These two Texas-based studies were unrelated. The third data collection effort took place in 2017–2018 in a suburban county in the Southern United States as part of a broader project designed to assess county-wide school safety efforts, including the work of SROs. The fourth data collection effort happened in 2017 in an urban school district the Midwest United States as part of a broader study examining the roles and impacts of SROs on school climate and

discipline. Across all four data collection efforts, the interviews lasted about 60 min on average and covered a variety of topics associated with the self-reported roles and work activities of the officers. [Supplementary Appendix A](#) provides details about the four subsamples used in this study. The interviews were guided by protocols that included a mix of structured and semi-structured interview questions. [Supplementary Appendix B](#) provides the protocols used in all four data collection efforts.

For all four subsamples, the research team transcribed the interviews and multiple coders read through the transcripts to identify salient themes for each project using open-coding strategies that aligned with grounded theory qualitative coding procedures ([Charmaz, 2006](#); [Corbin & Strauss, 2014](#)); in some of the data sets, this open coding took place in combination with themes the researchers identified a priori. These coding processes involved an iterative, inductive, open-coding approach that resulted in a list of *in vivo* emergent codes. The coders relied on the constant comparative method ([Glaser, 1965](#)) to ensure that codes were applied consistently and aligned well with the definition of the code. None of these four separate data analysis processes identified CP (or its three core dimensions) as a code that emerged from the data, but they did reveal several codes that were conceptually related to CP (e.g., SRO-administrator relationships and non-law enforcement roles). These codes provided a baseline from which the analyses for the current study began.

For the purposes of the current study, the researchers engaged in a selective coding process ([Holton, 2007](#)) involving all material of potential relevance to the research question about SROs and CP. We understood the SROs' community to be broad and somewhat amorphous, including the individuals in and around the school, the school building and grounds, and other related individuals, structures, and systems that were connected to the school or school district.<sup>2</sup> To identify the codes that could contain information relevant to the three dimensions of CP, the first two authors reviewed each code and its definition, erring on the side of including rather than excluding codes that were questionable. For example, this process led to the inclusion of codes such as *SRO-Student Relationships* and *Perceptions of Safety*. After identifying these codes, the first two authors reviewed the text across all those codes and used axial coding ([Charmaz, 2006](#)) to identify themes related to the three dimensions of CP outlined above. The researchers met multiple times to discuss the major themes that they found in the data in an effort to refine the core ideas within each theme and to accurately capture any variability across the four research sites.

The results that follow represent combined findings from across four subsamples. The themes and quotes from participants included below were selected for their representativeness across all sites unless otherwise noted. Because the three dimensions of CP are closely related and overlap at times, some of the themes and individual quotations identified in the data may represent multiple dimensions of CP. Although we have categorized the themes under a single dimension, this should not imply that evidence presented in the discussion of one dimension is not applicable to the findings from another dimension. For example, the first theme detailed in the next section—collaborative development of officer roles—touches on elements of both community partnerships and organizational adaptation.



## Results

### *Community Partnerships*

Our interview data revealed numerous examples of SROs discussing community partnerships in the school setting. Specifically, the following themes are useful for drawing inferences about the nature and quality of community partnerships: (1) collaborative development of officer roles, (2) roles beyond a law enforcer, (3) the focus on improving the perceptions of the police, and (4) the use of more collaborative responses to student misconduct.

*Collaborative development of officer roles.* One theme that emerged from the interviews pertained to how officers' roles and responsibilities in the school environment were established. Many officers indicated that the development of their roles and responsibilities was a collaborative effort between school administrators (e.g., superintendent or campus principal), police command staff (e.g., chief of police and/or other ranking officer), and the school board. The following statements by officers illustrate the dynamics of these working relationships:

School discipline and law enforcement are handled at a school-level with both law enforcement officers and the administration working together. It is key for administration and police to work together and keep each other informed of all incidents going on at the campus. (Suburban middle school, Texas Study 1 SRO 25)

Well, it took me a long, uh, uh, a little while because, you know, I was new a SRO and then I knew there were some things I could do and some things that I need to run by the principal. I didn't act on my own like you do alone and things like that, so. Um, but it ... I think it turned out smooth. There's a learning process. And as the year went on, uh, with me and all the teachers and everything, we had a good workin' relationship. (Middle/high school, Southern SRO 40)

Another SRO expressed mild frustration about not having a more collaborative approach to defining and explaining officers' roles:

Yeah, they could actually have a meeting probably and talk about this is what we handle and the school security handle, as far as the school system. This is what the school system handles and the school security handles, and these are the type of issues that the police officer handles, which is completely different. It's just like being in society. We handle the criminal things. We don't handle the admin things. (High school, Midwest SRO 14)

These statements illustrate that SROs perceived a strong collaboration between police and schools in defining the appropriate roles of SROs. This theme illustrates collaborative partnerships between law enforcement and schools, demonstrating a close alignment to the community partnerships dimension of CP. These roles and

responsibilities may be established collaboratively to ensure that problems experienced in the specific school or district are addressed. Partnerships between law enforcement and schools are based on the principle that public safety is a collaborative endeavor, and not the sole responsibility of law enforcement.

*Roles beyond a law enforcer.* Officers also reported being involved in non-law enforcement roles. This is common among SROs nationwide, with many SROs engaged in activities such as mentoring students (Padgett et al., 2020) and connecting students and families to resources (Travis & Coon, 2005). In fact, relatively few SROs are engaged only in law enforcement tasks (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Fisher & Devlin, 2020). Beyond their interactions with students at school, officers conducted home visits and encouraged parental involvement. These roles encompassed other actions and duties that aimed at providing a higher quality of life for the student by connecting them with resources at school or home. One officer explained the problems students often have in their personal lives and suggested home visits as a possible intervention: “*We often encounter other problems students have—bad parents, no clothes, no home, so we should conduct home visits if needed*” (Suburban high school, Texas Study 1 SRO 01). Another officer explained how they try to connect students to various resources to help them:

If they need certain help with whatever I can refer them to the appropriate resource, depending on what they're wanting to do. That is a big part of what we do is to go supply the resources that they need. (Middle school, Midwest SRO 04)

In addition to these roles that resemble those of a social worker, officers described one of their functions in the school environment as being relationship builders. This role included building relationships with students, but also with staff, parents, and outside agencies that support school safety. Officers discussed how they had regular conversations with these different groups in order to strengthen relationships. For instance, one officer described the importance of, and their role in, building relationships,

Networking is huge in the school environment – between the fire department and the police department and the teachers and the students and just creating a very solid web of network and know that all that is interconnected, and it affects one another and that you have to keep that network tight. In the streets, it's all about stats. In the school, it's about a tight web of a network where you're truly being a resource all the way across the board. It's really what I do. I find problems and I find solutions for them and most of the time I'm not the solution, but I can find you the solution or the resource that makes sense. (Rural high school, Texas study 2 SRO 01)

Other officers described how they build these relationships, particularly with students:

I make it a point to get to know the staff and students. It's not that hard if you want to get to know them. Just walking around the campus, making sure I'm visible to the staff, to the students, saying hello if there's a kid in the hallway or just saying, "How's your morning going?" Just general police presence, and also following up with the administrators to see if there's any ongoing problems I can help them with. (Suburban middle school, Texas study 1 SRO 13)

Just- you just communicate at little things, you know. High fives, talk to them, ask them how their day is, because some of these kids, nobody ever asks them how they are. Or how their day's going. Or why would they even care for that matter. So, when somebody does, and actually shows legit interest in it, then that makes them pay attention. (High school, Southern SRO 04)

Last Monday, we had open gym where we just come in and just play ball. I said, "You guys want a break? We're just going to come in, we're just going to play ball." I slipped my shoes and shorts on and I played with them. They're like, "Coach, we didn't know you could play." I said, "Man, let's play. Let's have some fun." They loved it. Those are the things that kids need. We've got to give it to them. I'm not saying every SRO should go play basketball, but I'm saying that these are the ways that I have reached these kids. (High school, Midwest SRO 07)

Again, like the development of officer roles in the school environment, this theme highlights the focus on engagement and building partnerships in the school setting. Although not their only roles, some of the officers reported that their roles directly supported building partnerships with students and staff to collaboratively address safety.

*Improving perceptions of the police.* Officers also frequently reported that they sought to improve perceptions of the police through positive interactions with students. Officers noted that having a positive relationship with students when they are young could have lasting impacts on their perceptions of police later in life. One officer described how they built that positive relationship with students, and the potential long-term impacts of that relationship:

I play with them uh and I want to build the rapport uh that will help build a relationship when they grow up, because police has been uh police has not maintained a very good name recently, for themselves so hopefully when these kids will grow up they will have a positive relationship with the police department. (Elementary school, Southern SRO 07)

Another officer noted that although some students may have negative perceptions of police, their work in schools can create another view of officers:

I guess the most important that I work on, it's kind of a mixture of a couple, really, that hit the top of the list. For one it's to build the relationship with the kids. I need them to see me

as a person and a human, not just an officer in blue, because my main focus is to humanize the badge because a lot of these kids ... they're either seeing ... especially some of the neighborhood they come from, they're either seeing the police a lot, and it's in a negative manner, or they're coming to their house and, of course, that's in a negative manner if mom or dad, or momma's boyfriend or daddy's girlfriend, gets locked up and the police come in, and then they're not going to see the police in a good manner because the runs pretty much going to be negative. The run that they're dispatched to is going to be a negative manner, so they're not going to see the officer being funny and light and joking and all that. I humanize that part to show that we're just human. We're just people, and I just have a job. (Middle school, Midwest SRO 09)

Like the other themes identified thus far, improving the perceptions of police was a task that SROs reported doing through partnerships with and engagement of students. Officers spoke about fostering positive relationships with students in hopes of forming improved perceptions of police more generally. In turn, these relationships could turn into partnerships between police and students who shared the mutual goal of a safe and supportive school environment.

*Use of more collaborative responses to student misconduct.* A final theme that emerged regarding the community partnerships dimension of CP was the importance of having a collaborative set of responses to student misconduct. In support of this theme, officers discussed the use of more supportive and engaging responses to student misconduct that aimed to address the root cause of the issue. Noticeably, officers noted the effectiveness of counseling and other school-focused approaches to handling misconduct, arguably more of a community approach, as opposed to traditional legal responses. For instance, several officers talked about informally counseling/mentoring students to address misconduct:

I remove them from class and speak to them about what is going on... I get both sides of the story to understand the situation. You have to make them [students] think about their actions and help them to understand why it is wrong. (Suburban middle school, Texas study 1 SRO 03)

The first thing that I try and do is remove them from the classroom. Let's— for example, let's say Bobby. I'll say, Bobby, I need you to come with me for a minute, please. Usually, I'll have the student walk out of the room with me and—without incident. As we're on our way to the office or to the counselor's office, wherever it might be that we're going, then I'll talk to them along the way. I'll ask them what the problem is, what's going on. Try to get a better understanding behind the behavior. Hopefully this helps me and the school staff help them a little better. (Rural middle school, Texas study 2 SRO 04)

Other officers noted why they think this approach is most effective, which almost always reflected the need to get others involved in a collaborative response to the misbehavior:

Being in a school allows us sit down and have a conversation with a kid, get the point across that you can either stop what they're doing or what's going to happen to them, the consequences. If we don't have a probable cause for arrest, we can have that conversation and talk to the parents. The parents know us. Talk to the admin, they can provide consequences. It's a formal but less formal way of I guess, having some effect on social control. The school allows us to do this and hopefully correct the behavior before it gets any worse. (Urban high school, Texas study 2 SRO 14)

Another officer describes the use of school-based responses to misconduct and why they prefer collaborating with educators to respond to issues of misconduct:

When we can, we try to get the school and parents involvement. For me personally, the biggest bang is getting parent involvement so they can work it out with the school. If I can get the parents involved and get this quashed to where it doesn't have to be a criminal thing, it may be a report but as far as filing charges, if we can get it handled on the school level, then I would rather do that. I would rather do just about anything before we actually file charges on a kid. (Rural elementary/secondary school, Texas study 2 SRO 16)

This officer noted that a school-based response is sometimes most appropriate:

You have to use a lot of restraint when responding to student issues. Don't go back to their level, don't try to grab them just because you're a cop and you have the right to. Don't try to grab them and make them do what you want to do because you're going to get into a struggle, and that struggle, you're not going to be able to justify why you got into the struggle. If we can't reason with them, we let administration know and let them handle it administratively. The best way that we can. It is sometimes best for everyone to let the school handle it, the student, the officer, and the community. The school has different resources and training they can use to handle the issue. (Suburban high school, Texas study 2 SRO 16)

## ***Problem-Solving***

There were two major ways that SROs evoked the dimension of problem-solving: (a) identifying specific problems in schools that need to be addressed, and (b) active problem-solving. These themes are described in more detail below.

*Identifying specific problems that need to be addressed.* School resource officers frequently reported the need to address specific types of crime or threatening/problem behaviors without going into detail about the methods used to address those problems. The presence of these specific problems suggests that problem-solving approaches may be an appropriate option in school settings, even in those instances where it is not clear whether officers are currently using those approaches. For example, high-profile school shootings often incite fear in parents, school leaders, and policymakers. These fears

prompted many schools to implement SROs. In fact, one of the four sites in this study implemented dozens of SROs in the months immediately following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School with the charge of maintaining the safety and security of the school buildings. In this vein, many officers viewed their main purpose as protecting the school against those who would seek to harm students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Officers described numerous other types of specific problems or issues that needed their attention. Some schools were plagued by particularly high rates of misbehavior, and officers understood that they were expected to address these issues. For example:

The main issue we deal with has to be theft. A lot of theft, locker room theft and theft of cell phones. Students can be careless with their belongings, and it seems there is always someone who want to take it. We do a lot of theft cases. (Suburban high school, Texas study 2 SRO 02)

Yeah, drug offenses seem to be our biggest issue on campus. I wouldn't say a lot of students are doing drugs, but we have our drug users and our dealers that are always bringing drugs on campus. It is usually just pot and sometimes pills. Not sure why, but pills have become common lately on our campus. (Urban high school, Texas study 2 SRO 08)

Assaults are pretty common on campus as well. It is usually a he-said-she-said and then talking trash turns into a fight or an assault. Sometimes both kids want to fight and other times we have one aggressor. They are always because of some rumor or drama going on. (Suburban middle school, Texas study 1 SRO 02)

Officers identified a variety of specific problems that required attention. In some cases, it was not clear whether officers were using the types of comprehensive problem-solving approaches called for in the reform literature (Goldstein, 1990). However, the presence of specific types of problems suggests that a problem-solving approach may be a useful option for structuring the work of SRO and providing a framework for assessing their performance.

**Active problem-solving.** Beyond simply describing certain problems, some officers also reported engaging in a variety of active problem-solving efforts. In fact, 84% of U.S. school principals with SROs in their schools report that SROs engage in problem-solving as part of their responsibilities (Padgett et al., 2020). In our sample, these sorts of problem-solving behaviors frequently focused on responding to problematic behaviors. For example, the following officer used security cameras to address problems with fighting and thefts:

So I mean there's certain things that I see. Like, it's just stuff like that. It's not just people skipping or anything. I play them back and watch fights, play back and watch and see who picked up whose phone and walked off with it. It's, uh, it's actually helped me solve a lot of things. Like it helped me solve the people who were coming through and stealing credit

cards and money out of people's cars. It helped me find a stolen phone. Helped me find a stolen backpack, stuff like that, so it's a huge help. I just usually, if I watch a little bit I can catch a glimpse of something. (High school, Southern SRO 29)

Another officer explained their role in solving problems related to students acting out or even trying to run from the school in the middle of the day:

Officer: If I've got a child having an issue, then I'll assist, um, my principal and my assistant principal with that. Um, we've just got some kids that, be it a mental, be it a physical issue where they sometimes check out, and they have issues, and they need to go on a walk around the school, we follow them to make sure that they're not gonna try to leave the building, to leave school, or anything else. Just, um, just depends on what is going on with that child at that time, so.

Interviewer: Can you describe to me how that, um, happens? Like does the-, do you get a call from the assistant principal, or like what-

Speaker 2: We will get a call on the radio, saying that either our friend's going on a walk, or if we're needed in a certain grade hallway, um, just to assist with the student.

Speaker 1: And you would describe it as shadowing them? Are you interacting with them at all?

Speaker 2: Um, I'm not. I leave that up to the principal and the assistant principal. I really ki-, I'm there literally just as a bit of a support if needed. Um, I have some kids that have traumatic pasts, and so they, sometimes their only way with dealing with a stressor is trying to leave. Whether it's leave the building, um, leave the room they're in, or whatever. So a lot of times, I'm holding doors, trying to keep the child in. Just until they, they work through that in their mind. (Elementary school; Southern SRO 25)

Others noted that their problem-solving focus in the school would shift to address whatever problems arose. As such, many of the officers embraced a dynamic conception of their role depending on what was needed. For example, one officer described their role very succinctly: *"My role is really just being available and not being tied down to one specific thing"* (Rural high school, Texas study 2 SRO 01).

Other officers described a similar function in the school environment,

My role is to get to know the kids, help the kids that I can, and take care of any law violations that comes up. I do this in a lot of different ways. I may sit and talk with kids in the lunchroom, teach their class, give them a hug, whatever I can do I will do. How I handle issues is different every day depending on the situation. I am here as a resource to the

school so I need to be able to adapt. (Suburban elementary/secondary school; Texas study 2 SRO 03)

I do a little bit of everything on campus. For instance, teachers know that... if there is something criminal or something going on, that I can also help them with that too. I always try to help in any way that I can. (Rural middle school, Texas study 2 SRO 04)

Our impression from the qualitative data is that the officers in our sample tended to have a limited understanding of the full breadth of problem-solving methods, but they did engage in certain types of problem-solving activities. This finding is consistent with the study of problem-solving in policing more generally, which finds that many efforts to apply the concept are either superficial or missing key reform elements (Braga & Weisburd, 2006; Maguire et al., 2015). Nonetheless, given the research evidence on the effectiveness of problem-solving generally (Hinkle, et al., 2020), and in schools more specifically (Kenney & Watson, 1996), encouraging and training police officers to engage in more comprehensive and collaborative problem-solving efforts would appear to be a worthwhile investment.

### *Organizational Adaptation*

*Shared authority.* Organizational adaptation is the internal dimension of CP that supports community partnerships and problem-solving, the two external dimensions. In generalized policing settings, organizational adaptation involves making changes within police agencies such as improving internal communications and adopting more flexible deployment plans, more innovative performance measures, and decentralized decision-making. These examples may not have clear parallels in schools, but the officers in our study nevertheless reported multiple ways in which organizational adaptation supported their work in schools. The clearest evidence of organizational adaptation was the officers' position at the nexus of two different authority structures: schools and law enforcement agencies. As such, the officers surrendered a degree of authority to administrators within an institution that likely had little to no formal training in policing or criminal justice more broadly. One officer explained:

I think most of the concerns were from the administration wondering, you know, the administrators, they're so used to being in charge of the entire school building but they weren't in charge of this or us. That was the biggest problem that we had is trying to define exactly what the SROs' responsibilities were inside the elementary school. And who they reported to... We work for the sheriff's office. And we're law enforcement officers and there's a lot of things that we can't get involved in that they do, you know? I mean, we are the government. We represent the government... It ran pretty smoothly other than that we had to define exactly what our responsibilities were. (Elementary school, Southern SRO 16)



This theme of shared authority was common, but also revealed some clear distinctions. School resource officers repeatedly noted that school administrators had final authority over matters of school discipline, but the SROs had more autonomy when it came to law violations. Although there is clearly some room for interpretation in whether to interpret some behaviors as law violations, this distinction was nevertheless one commonly made by the SROs in this study.

Moreover, officers expressed clearly that they respected and were willing to follow the wishes of school-based authorities in matters that were aligned with their job duties, and sometimes even when these issues extended beyond what would be a typical assignment for an SRO. For example, one officer was willing to pitch in with setting up school events for the sake of building relationships, even though it had nothing to do with the official job description:

And so at the beginning, like if we have any kind of event, you know, my principals will say, you know, I know it's not in your job description, I know it's not but, you know, if you can see, sometimes we get tied up with things, can you just make sure we set, can you set up the cones? I was like okay. You know, it's a team environment. Like I tried to say, okay, I'm so used to working in a team atmosphere it's like okay, I know you guys are a team and I know I'm kind of on my own little island but yeah, I still am, you know, I still consider myself part of this team and and part of the Sheriff's department team. (Middle school, Southern SRO 03)

In spite of this desire to be part of the school administration "team," there was never a sense that officers were subordinate to the school administrators; rather, these relationships were often portrayed as partnerships in which each person (i.e., officers and administrators) might have final authority over different decisions. This is reflective of a flattened authority structure that often occurs in law enforcement agencies that support CP. One officer described this flattened authority structure particularly well:

I have a different principal. But, when your administrators are involved with what the SRO does ... And, I've told the principal I'm not doing anything unless an administrator was there. Nothing. I don't care what it is. Unless a kid just wants to talk to me. Of course, then I'll be, "What's on your mind?" As far as taking a kid into custody, I'm not doing it unless an administrator is there. I'm not doing this, I'm not going to the jail, I'm not going to safe place, I'm doing any of that unless an administrator is there first. And, I call the parents. Everybody knows what's going on, and the radio. Everybody knows what's going on. That's just better way of doing it. (High school, Midwest SRO 07)

As shown, this flattened authority was useful for maintaining positive working relationships, but one officer reported that it actually allowed them to do their job better:

I was part of the school staff. I was considered part of staff. I sat in in their Monday morning meetings and if it pertained to me, I interjected. If it didn't, I sat back and learned.

I was treated like a campus administrator. They taught me how the school works. It really helped me do my job better. (Suburban high school, Texas study 2 SRO 02)

For some officers, the importance of working with school staff included not just administrators, but also teachers. This officer discussed their relationships with teachers and how it influenced what they do on campus:

I think I work well with our teachers, which is important to them understanding what I do and what they do. It's completely relative [teachers' understanding of what the officer does] to how close they are to me. I mean if a teacher doesn't have a lot of contact with me, you know, maybe they have a really good classroom management and just deal with really upper level kids, they probably really don't know what I do. It is important that they know what I do, so I try to let them know when I have the chance. (Suburban middle school, Texas study 1 SRO 02)

Overall, the officers highlighted the importance of school staff and law enforcement officers being integrated in terms of what they do on campus to address issues. That is, officers appreciated being involved—at least as observers—with the school side of things, while officers also wanted school staff to be familiar with what they can and cannot do on campus. Additionally, this theme highlights that SROs viewed this collaborative working environment that integrates two authority structures to be helpful for the school.

*Memoranda of understanding.* Perhaps one reason for SROs' willingness to comply with both authority structures was the use of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between the school districts and law enforcement agencies. These MOUs were legal agreements between both institutions that articulated to varying degrees the roles and responsibilities of SROs. Although there was heterogeneity in the extent to how SROs perceived the MOUs—ranging from simply a legal document to a formal articulation of what they should and should not be doing in schools—having this formal agreement in place seemed to make SROs more willing to comply with a non-law enforcement authority than they might have otherwise.

We have this memorandum with the school that clearly defines what a law-enfor- SRO is here for, and what they can and can't do. And it's, we actually meet with the captain of our division comes here, when we're first put here, and talks to the principal or assistant principal, and makes sure there's a clear understanding of where our two, um, our two prior- like our priorities are. And we all sign- I sign it, and make it clear. So that's the big thing is, when it's school, school-related discipline, that's the teacher, I mean the administrator's priority. When it's law enforcement, I interact, but we do keep, we try to keep a, um, the communication that we're on the same page. (Elementary school, Southern SRO 20)

...at the beginning of every school year I give them a copy of the memorandum of agreement between [DISTRICT] and [AGENCY], and then they also give them a copy of [AGENCY's] SOP, Standard Operating Procedures, on what we're to do. It has what we are doing and what we're not doing. So they all have a copy and that's all the administrators, all the guidance counselors, all the [positive behavior interventions and supports] people, all the security people. They all have the same information and they know what I can do and what I can't do. Okay? Like I said, we have a good working relationship between. (Middle school, Midwest SRO 18)

These MOUs provided a formal agreement that explained to school personnel how the officers were supposed to be integrated into the school and were a useful source for maintaining strong working relationships even in the presence of multiple authority structures.

*School resource officers' autonomy.* Another way that organizational adaptation was articulated by the SROs was in the high degree of autonomy or discretion that most SROs had within the school. Rather than simply following orders, they were given a wide berth to conduct their work as they deemed appropriate. For example, one officer explained:

I don't have a checklist or anything, um, which is kind of empowering. It's sort of like, okay I can, I make my own schedule and I make my own you know, like my uh, my staff with, my command staff will tell you, you're adults. And you know, you, everything is what you make of it. You can either just do nothing or you can do everything. (Middle school, Southern SRO 03)

This sense of autonomy even led some SROs to suggest changes to policies and practices that they thought might be beneficial. Several SROs reported finding ways to make their schools safer and reporting those to school leadership:

Um, so when I first came in I am kind of like a detail person. Um, when I first came into the school I was looking at all the doors and there's a lot of doors that, um, like see like how ours locks from the inside? You actually have to go outside the classroom to lock the door, and that doesn't make sense to me from the tactical point of view. So if there's someone shooting you're going to leave your classroom to go outside and lock the door? That doesn't make sense. So, I kind of brought that up and we kinda looked at some ... Some different systems that we can get because we ... Like I said, we are reconstructing the whole building. So, um, I think the principal is pretty good about listening to my ideas about that. (Elementary school, Southern SRO 13)

Officers believed that their ability to work autonomously was critical to their ability to be successful because issues varied from school-to-school, and even from day to day within the same school. One officer explained the importance of this particularly well: *"My boundaries are ultimately determined by me. When an officer gets on campus and*

*assesses the needs of the students, they set up the tempo on how issues will be addressed” (Suburban high school, Texas study 1 SRO 05).*

## Discussion and Conclusion

Given the intuitive link between school policing and CP, this study sought to examine the alignment between three key dimensions of CP and the roles and work activities of police officers assigned to schools. To accomplish this, we analyzed qualitative data from interviews with 119 SROs from four separate data collection efforts. Our analysis examined the extent to which the roles and work activities described by these officers aligned with three dimensions of CP: community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational adaptation. The results indicated that each of these dimensions was evident in how SROs described their roles and activities in schools. As demonstrated by the individual quotes, these themes appeared across multiple sites regardless of the research design, interview protocol, geography, or type of law enforcement agency; this likely speaks to a high degree of transferability of the findings to other settings.

Recent research has demonstrated that the triad model of school policing may not fully capture the roles and work activities of police officers in schools (Higgins et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2016). Our findings reveal that CP may provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding these phenomena. A CP framework integrates the roles and work activities that fall outside the scope of the triad model but are salient parts of the job of an SRO. This framework could serve as a useful tool for both police and school administrators. In response to the rapid growth of school policing programs, researchers have highlighted the need for a conceptual model to facilitate and guide the implementation of programs (Cray & Weiler, 2011). A CP model, structured around the three key dimensions examined in this paper, may provide administrators in schools with SROs a clearer sense of the roles and work activities of SROs, as well as an understanding of the broader conceptual foundation underlying these practices.

In addition, using CP as a conceptual framework for understanding the roles of police officers in schools may help resolve some of the role conflict and tension that has been documented among SROs. Currently, these officers may draw haphazardly from various philosophies or models when thinking about their position in schools, including their goals, roles, boundaries, and activities. For example, SROs may understand their position in terms of public or political expectations (i.e., crime-control), even though they engage in a wide variety of activities that may have little to do with these expectations. Patrolling the exterior of a building and searching for vulnerable access points (e.g., open doors) may not make sense within a triad model that defines law enforcement in reactive terms, but these activities do make sense through a CP lens, in which officers seek to *prevent* crime and not simply respond to it after the fact. Similarly, although sharing high-fives and colloquialisms with students makes only superficial sense in the triad model which views officers as mentors, it makes much more sense from a CP perspective in which public perceptions of police are paramount for establishing solid community partnerships. A CP framework may provide a more

robust conceptual model for school policing that can guide SROs' behaviors, philosophies, and allow the relevant stakeholders to develop a common understanding of why the SROs are present and doing what they are doing.

Although we found that the roles and work activities of SROs align with the dimensions of CP, it is useful to anticipate the potential obstacles and shortcomings of such an approach. For instance, one obstacle to relying on a CP model may be the challenges associated with measuring performance, whereas conventional practice relies on crime-control metrics to evaluate officer performance in schools (arrests, weapons removed, etc.), a CP approach would require considerably more sophisticated and nuanced assessments. From a CP perspective, officer performance measures would rely on numerous metrics such as crime, disorder, fear, police legitimacy, and quality of life. Adapting this type of multi-faceted performance measurement strategy for schools may be challenging, but may improve practice in schools that choose to have SROs.

Implementing a CP framework for shaping the roles and activities of SROs could also unintentionally exacerbate the tendency to adopt zero-tolerance policies in schools. In the community, zero-tolerance policing is exemplified by a range of practices that aim to punish minor offenses harshly in order to improve the general quality of life. The most well-known examples of zero-tolerance policing are based on the broken windows thesis (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Some interpretations of the broken windows thesis have resulted in officers using aggressive street tactics to curb minor offenses and reduce urban decay. These initiatives are sometimes inaccurately described as CP initiatives. Certain schools have jumped on the bandwagon and adopted zero-tolerance policies to prevent the presence of weapons and to address a range of other behaviors (Skiba & Knesting, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Many scholars have criticized these zero-tolerance approaches, arguing that *broken windows* policing is a misapplication of problem-solving principles. Moreover, these approaches often conflict with the community partnerships dimension of CP (Greene, 2000). Schools seeking to adopt a CP approach should recognize the risks of incorporating zero-tolerance principles into their operationalization of CP. Genuine applications of CP in schools will honor the dimensions of CP outlined in this paper and rely only sparingly on arrests, citations, and use of force in situations where there are no reasonable alternatives.

The findings reported here also have implications for future research and evaluation. We have provided a conceptual framework useful for thinking about the roles and work activities of SROs. This application of the framework can be viewed as an initial proof of concept, but more research is necessary to elaborate on the details of the framework and assess its validity and utility. Although our approach was qualitative, there are benefits to examining the CP framework in schools using a variety of research methods, including quantitative methods that could estimate the prevalence of various roles and work activities in school policing. Mixed methods research could provide a fuller and more robust understanding of the issues and patterns discussed in this paper. We can also envision pilot projects intended to test the implementation and impact of an explicit CP framework in schools.

## Limitations

This study's findings should be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, this study relies exclusively on the voices of SROs, which likely presents a biased perspective that may not be shared by students, parents, and other members of the school community. These voices are important and future research would certainly benefit from explicit engagement with them, particularly with Black and Latino students who are most likely to experience the negative effects of SROs (Crosse et al., 2021; Homer & Fisher, 2020; Weisburst, 2019). Second, these data were interpreted by a team of researchers who bring a specific set of life experiences and areas of expertise to the data, inevitably shaping the data analysis and interpretation of findings. Other research teams' replication of these findings would lend further credibility to the findings. Third, due to the gap in time between data collection and the data analysis, the findings from this study did not go through any member checking with the SROs who participated in the study."

## Conclusion

This paper was written at a time when there was a national movement to defund the police and remove police officers from schools. Critics of school policing raise genuine concerns about racial disparities in policing and the role of police in facilitating a school-to-prison pipeline. There is evidence to support the validity of these concerns. As communities grapple with whether to defund the police and remove police from schools, serious questions remain about whether to embrace abolitionist or reform perspectives. For those who embrace a reform perspective on the role and work activities of SROs, we suggest that it may be worthwhile to consider a CP framework. Asking police officers in schools to embrace community partnerships, solve chronic problems that reduce quality of life, and share authority with school leaders and staff may represent a viable option for addressing these important issues.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/supportingsafeschools>
2. This issue of what constitutes the community has come up in the broader community policing literature. For example, Seagrave (1996) and Correia (2000) both argue that the term “community” is amorphous and underdeveloped in the community policing reform literature. The definition of community in the context of SROs is similarly amorphous here, and is likely to differ both among schools within the same district and across different districts.

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