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School Climate, Student Discipline, and the Implementation of School Resource Officers

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## Executive Summary

School resource officers (SROs) continue to be one of the most common approaches that schools use to promote safety. SROs are meant to prevent crime in schools, but also to build relationships with students and school personnel and act as a resource for conveying law-related information. Critics of SROs suggest that they perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline and have particularly negative consequences for students of color. In spite of these potential advantages and disadvantages of using SROs in schools, research on the effects of SROs has generally lagged behind, particularly in regard to outcomes beyond those related to crime and punishment. The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of implementing SROs on outcomes related to school climate and suspension rates, with particular attention to racial differences in these effects and the role of school context. This study also examines how SROs perceive their roles and responsibilities and how these may be shaped by school contexts.

To accomplish this, this study relies on both quantitative and qualitative data from a single large school district in the Midwest. The quantitative data rely on district administrative records from the 1999-2000 through 2015-16 school years related to (a) SRO implementation dates, (b) school climate survey data, (c) annual school suspension rates, and (d) measures of school context including school size, racial composition, and poverty rates. Quantitative data analyses consisted of a series of fixed effects models that modeled change over time in the dependent variables associated with SRO implementation. The qualitative data come from interviews with 26 SROs and SRO supervisors in the district, representing nearly all of the individuals employed as SROs. Qualitative data analyses consisted of multiple rounds of open and axial coding to facilitate the identification of multiple themes related to SROs' roles and perceptions of their school environment.

The data analyses showed that implementing SROs had mixed relationships with school climate outcomes. These relationships depended on the particular dimensions of school climate that were measured, the race of the respondents, and measures of school context. Additionally, implementing SROs was associated with decreases in suspension rates of White students, but not overall suspension rates, suspension rates of Black students, or Black-White racial disparities in suspension rates. Notably, these relationships were each contingent on measures of school context. All of the quantitative analyses should be interpreted with caution, however, given that there were only a small number of schools that implemented SROs during the time covered by the data.

The qualitative findings indicated that SROs' roles and activities were largely motivated by three overarching themes: being unpredictable, maintaining a presence, and building rapport. Further qualitative analyses found that SROs perceived the students themselves as the main threat to the school, and to a lesser extent were concerned about intruders and environment-based threats. These perceptions of threats appear to be motivated in part by the racial composition of the schools.

The findings from this study add to a growing body of empirical literature suggesting that the impacts of SROs on students and schools are variable and depend in part on school context. Given this, policymakers and school leaders should pay close attention to the needs of schools and how SROs are expected to address those needs. Schools would also benefit from collecting data to assess the impact of SROs on a variety of different school domains. This is perhaps particularly important to address through an equity lens to ensure that any benefits or drawbacks of implementing SROs affect all students equally and do not perpetuate existing inequalities.

## Introduction

Schools are a foundational socializing institution for youth in the United States, and experiences in school can have lasting effects outside of school (Eccles and Roeser, 2011). School climate is one malleable factor that can play an important role in shaping students' behaviors and experiences in school (Cook, Gottfredson, & Na, 2010; Gottfredson, 2001; Hirschi, 1969). School climate refers to the "patterns of people's experiences of school and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013, p. 358). Although school climate is a multidimensional construct that has been operationalized in multiple ways, there are some dimensions of school climate that appear across multiple conceptualizations of the construct, and consistently have been shown to be particularly important for shaping student behavior. For example, the strength of students' attachment to the school is predictive of students' engagement in problem behavior (Cook et al., 2010; Hirschi, 1969). Indicators of the strength of students' attachment to school include their relationships with teachers, other adults, and peers in the school, their overall sense of belonging at school, and their feelings of safety at school. Students who have stronger bonds to the school are more likely to adhere to the school's social order, and are consequently expected to engage in lower rates of problem behavior (Tyler, 1990). In this way, school climate can function as a mechanism of informal social control.

In recent years, however, schools have increasingly begun to rely on more formalized control mechanisms in schools, including implementing security personnel in schools (Addington, 2009; Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). For example, in 1999, 54% of students ages 12 to 18 nationwide reported the presence of security personnel in their schools;

this grew to 70% by 2013. One particularly common form of security personnel is the school resource officer (SRO)—a sworn police officer assigned to a particular school or district. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the largest professional organization of SROs, the roles and responsibilities of SROs can be categorized within three broad functions: law enforcement officer, educator, and informal counselor (Canady, James, & Nease, 2012). As law enforcement officers, SROs are responsible for preventing, detecting, and removing illegal behaviors from the school. As educators, SROs teach courses and train both students and teachers in topics related to legal issues, safety, drug and gang resistance, and other related topics. As informal counselors, SROs may develop relationships with students and help them deal with legal problems or function as mentors for students. Although not all the roles and responsibilities of SROs may be readily understood as mechanisms of formal control (e.g., educator or informal counselor), SROs themselves most commonly view themselves as law enforcement officers first (Swayze & Buskovich, 2014), suggesting that their formal control functions may be particularly salient in their orientation to their jobs and how they function in schools.

Although informal and formal control mechanisms have implicitly overlapping goals (i.e., reducing problem behavior), it is largely unknown how these different systems of control relate to one another in school contexts. On one hand, because their goals are consistent, students in schools that have implemented formal control mechanisms (e.g., school resource officers) might perceive stronger informal social control mechanisms (e.g., school climate) as well. Such a finding would indicate that the presence of formal control mechanisms may enhance school climate and consequently improve student behavior. On the other hand, schools' reliance on more formalized systems of control may have a negative effect on traditional informal

approaches to social control such as school climate. For example, if the presence of school resource officers leads to the outsourcing of school discipline from schools to law enforcement agencies and juvenile courts, students may feel less safe at school, and have a decreased sense of belonging (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Theriot, 2016). Similarly, if teachers and other school personnel cede the task of monitoring student behaviors to school resource officers, this may signal to students that their teachers are not willing to invest in students to improve their behavior, and therefore lead to weaker relationships between students and teachers (Devine, 1996). Such dynamics would likely limit the effectiveness of school climate as an informal social control mechanism, potentially increasing student problem behaviors in the school.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

There are contrasting theoretical expectations about the relationship between SRO implementation and student discipline. On one hand, rational choice models of crime deterrence suggest that SROs may reduce student discipline by deterring negative behaviors that might merit some form of discipline. For example, routine activity theory indicates that crimes occur when there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). As a formal control mechanism, SROs could function as capable guardians, thereby removing one of the necessary conditions for crime to occur. Similarly, theories of deterrence suggest that potential offenders are less likely to offend when they are more certain that their behaviors will be detected and punished (Becker, 1968). The presence of SROs may increase the consistency of the detection of problem behaviors, and therefore reduce the likelihood that students will engage in them. SROs may also prevent student problem behaviors by acting as sources of informal social control. According to the NASRO triad model, SROs act as both educators and informal counselors in the school setting, roles which allow them to build

relationships with students. When students have stronger bonds to adults in the school, they are more inclined to align their behavior with the expectations of those adults in an effort to gain favor with them (Hirschi, 1969). Therefore, if SROs are able to build strong relationships with students, they may act as an informal social control mechanism that prevents problem behaviors.

On the other hand, some theories suggest that implementing SROs may increase student exclusions by increasing the severity of punishments or reducing already effective forms of deterrence. For example, theories of criminalization suggest that placing SROs in schools leads to an outsourcing of discipline from schools to police departments and juvenile courts, where disciplinary actions may be more exclusionary in nature than those that would have occurred in school in the absence of SROs (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006). Because SROs are trained in crime detection and law enforcement, they may be more likely than other adults in the school to define student problem behaviors as criminal acts, thereby increasing the likelihood of processing the offending behaviors in the juvenile justice system (Kupchik, 2010). This process would likely lead to an increase in the severity of student discipline. Moreover, a more punitive process such as this is likely to be perceived as unfair by students. Procedural justice theory indicates that when rules are perceived as unfair, students are less likely to follow them (Tyler, 1990). Therefore, any highly punitive disciplinary system attributable to the presence of SROs may unintentionally erode students' perceptions of the fairness of school rules, thereby decreasing the likelihood of following them.

It is also possible that the presence of SROs may increase student exclusions by weakening traditional forms of informal social control such as those frequently characterized as dimensions of school climate. For example, SROs may take over the role of behavior management that formerly belonged to teachers, thereby causing a decrease in teachers' sense of

responsibility for controlling students' behavior and consequently leading to fragmented relationships between students and teachers (Cook et al., 2010; Devine, 1996). Students who have poorer relationships with their teachers may become less invested in conforming to teachers' expectations and therefore may engage in more problem behaviors. Another way that SROs may weaken informal social control in schools is by altering the norms around student behavior. The implementation of SROs may signal to students that their school is unsafe and in need of monitoring, thereby creating negative expectancy effects that unintentionally encourage the very sorts of problem behaviors that SROs were meant to prevent. This process would likely weaken social norms that traditionally discouraged students from engaging in problem behaviors and lead to higher levels of problem behavior in schools.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Although there are theoretical reasons to expect SROs to affect school climate, few studies have examined this relationship, and we are unaware of any studies that have used longitudinal data to address it. However, extant research provides some support for the notion that the presence of SROs may weaken school climate. For example, ethnographic work in New York City schools examined the effects of having police officers in a set of particularly violent schools (Devine, 1996). This study found that the implementation of police officers created a dynamic where teachers were responsible for teaching and police officers were responsible for managing student behavior. Thus, when students misbehaved in class, the teachers would frequently call on a police officer to address the behavior rather than addressing it themselves. This led to weakened student-teacher relationships as teachers were increasingly invested in only the academic well-being of students, and turned over concerns about students' behavioral well-being to police officers. Subsequent quantitative research has corroborated this finding. For

example, survey research from one school district revealed that students who had more interactions with SROs felt less connected to the school, although they did report better perceptions of SROs (Theriot, 2016). Similarly, findings from a nationally representative survey of 12- to 18-year-old students suggested that students in schools with security personnel were more likely to report poorer relationships with their teachers (Fisher, Gardella, & Tanner-Smith, 2016). However, these two studies used cross-sectional data, thus obfuscating the direction of the effects and precluding any causal inferences. For example, it is possible that students who felt less connected to the school were more likely to engage in problem behaviors, thus increasing the likelihood of interacting with SROs. The study proposed here extends the literature on the relation between SRO implementation and school climate using longitudinal data that permits stronger conclusions about this relationship.

The literature on the effects of SROs on student discipline is somewhat more developed than that pertaining to school climate. Several studies have used longitudinal data with a comparison group to estimate these effects. For example, a study by Rich-Shea (2010) compared six years of suspension rates in 14 public high schools with SROs and 11 without SROs, although all schools with SROs had them for the entirety of the study's timeframe. Although the analyses were only descriptive, the overall trends suggested that SRO presence was associated with higher suspension rates. In a similar study, Barnes (2008) used five waves of data (one before SRO implementation) on schools' rates of reported crimes for assault, possession of a controlled substance, robbery, and weapon possession in schools that implemented SROs during the time of the study and a nonequivalent group that did not. SRO implementation was unrelated to any of the reported crime rates. Another study used two waves of data from a national sample of schools (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). One group of schools implemented police officers

(including, but not limited to SROs) between the two measurements, and the other did not. Findings indicated that implementing police was associated with more recorded weapon and drug crime and more non-serious violence reported to police, but none of the other results were statistically significant, including more traditional measures of student discipline. Finally, a study of Tennessee high schools used multiple waves of suspension data from both before and after SRO implementation in treatment schools that implemented SROs during the study and matched comparison schools that did not (Fisher, 2016). This study found that SRO implementation was associated with decreased overall suspension rates and those for Black students, but not with White students or racial disparities in suspension rates.

Although these studies use quasi-experimental methods, they still have methodological limitations that preclude strong causal inferences and suggest that more research is still needed in this area. For example, one of the studies cited above had no data on schools before they implemented SROs (Rich-Shea, 2010), and two others only had one data point (Barnes, 2010; Na & Gottfredson, 2013), precluding the estimation of any trends in student discipline before SRO implementation. Although the fourth study did measure pre-implementation trends (Fisher, 2016), the comparison group in this study included schools with and without SROs, as did another of the more methodologically rigorous studies (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). It would be more useful to have a comparison group consisting of only schools without SROs rather than combining schools that were early implementers of SROs with those that never adopted SROs. The study proposed here study seeks to build on the existing base of literature by estimating trends in school climate and student discipline before and after SRO implementation using a matched group of comparison schools that never implemented SROs.

Another goal of the study proposed here is to examine expected heterogeneity in the

effects of SROs. While much of the research to date has examined the overall effects of SRO implementation, the impact of SROs is likely not the same for all students and in all schools. For example, SROs may have a different impact on students of color than their White peers, potentially creating a sense of fear at school and leading to more severe sanctions for student problem behaviors (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006). Although few studies have examined the differences in SRO impacts across student race within schools, some initial evidence suggests that their effect on suspensions follows a different pattern for White students than Black students (Fisher, 2016). In addition to differences within schools, differences across schools may be associated with differential impacts of SROs on school climate and student discipline. SROs are more frequently used in schools with larger proportions of students of color, low-income students, and in urban schools suggesting that any effects that SROs have may be disproportionately borne by students in schools characterized by higher levels of disadvantage (Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Robers et al., 2016; Steinka-Fry, Fisher, & Tanner-Smith, 2016). Findings suggest that SROs in schools with high levels of disadvantage are associated with higher rates of student discipline, particularly when the school has a more punitive approach to discipline, whereas the opposite is true in schools with low levels of disadvantage (Fisher, 2016). Therefore, this study will examine whether and the extent to which SROs have different effects on school climate and student discipline across different school contexts.

An additional source of variability in the effects of SROs on school climate and student discipline may be the particular roles and responsibilities of SROs within schools. Findings from reports funded by the Department of Justice indicated that SROs' roles tend to fall on a continuum with law enforcement on one end and education and informal counseling on the other (Finn et al., 2005; Travis & Coon, 2005). An SRO's particular place on the continuum is

determined by an assortment of factors including the SRO's personality, the needs of the school, and the memorandum of understanding between the school system and the local law enforcement agency. Therefore, significant heterogeneity exists in SROs' roles across schools. Moreover, different roles are associated with different outcomes in terms of student discipline (Swartz, Osborne, Higgins, & Dawson-Edwards, 2015). For example, one study found that SROs who were more involved with non-law enforcement activities (e.g., informal counseling of students) were associated with higher rates of recording student crimes and reporting non-serious violent and property crimes to the police (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2016). Another study found that SROs were more likely to be involved in maintaining student discipline in more disadvantaged schools (Fisher, 2016). In light of these findings, the current study will also examine how SROs' roles and responsibilities relate to school climate and student discipline, as well as how school context shapes the roles and responsibilities of SROs.

### **Research Questions**

This study leveraged secondary data on school climate and student discipline that have been collected by a large school district in the Midwest United States annually since the 2000-01 school year. These data can be disaggregated by race, permitting us to examine differential effects of SROs across different racial groups. We supplemented these data with additional data about school context to examine additional potential sources of variability in the effects of SROs. Additionally, we conducted interviews with SROs to examine how their roles and responsibilities relate to school climate, student discipline, and school context. Because existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research findings do not provide clear direction about the relationships between SRO implementation and either school climate or student discipline, this study was guided by a series of research questions rather than directional hypothesis. The

research questions are as follows:

***Research Question #1:*** What is the relationship between SRO implementation and dimensions of school climate?

***Research Question #2:*** What is the relationship between SRO implementation and student discipline?

***Research Question #3:*** Do these relationships vary by race?

***Research Question #4:*** Do these relationships vary by school context as measured by levels of disadvantage?

***Research Question #5:*** Are SROs' roles associated with differences in school climate and student discipline?

***Research Question #6:*** How does school context shape SROs' roles and responsibilities?

The first four research questions are addressed using quantitative data and analyses and the final two research questions are addressed using qualitative data and analyses.

## **Method**

### **Setting**

The data for this study came from a single large school district in the U.S. Midwest. The district had approximately 150 schools and serves approximately 100,000 students who came from diverse backgrounds. About 50% of the students were White, 35 percent were Black, and 15 percent were Latinx or another race/ethnicity. Similarly, students in the district came from families with a wide range of socioeconomic statuses; 60% of students district-wide were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of poverty. The district used a school assignment plan based on socio-economic status to distribute students across the city in a more equitable way. Even with this, a recent analysis found the district had high racial/ethnic disparities in areas of school climate, discipline, college and career readiness, and literacy.

### **Quantitative Data**

**School climate.** The district has been collecting data on school climate from every school in the district since the year 2000. The school climate data has been collected through surveys administered to every student, parent, and school personnel member, although response rates differed across stakeholders. In a recent iteration of the survey, there was a 96.8% response rate among elementary school students, a 92.0% response rate among middle school students, a 83.8% response rate among high school students, a 33.6% response rate among parents, a 97.0% response rate among certified school employees, and a 74.1% response rate among classified school employees. Although school climate data had been collected as early as the 1990's, the only data made available to the researchers began in the 2005-06 school year. Moreover, the data collection instrument was significantly overhauled in the 2007-08 school year, making the items included on the surveys from the two prior years not readily comparable to the items from

subsequent data collection efforts. Therefore, the sample used in this study represents an attempted district-wide census of multiple stakeholders for nine consecutive years from the 2007-08 through the 2015-16 school years. There were 130 schools that provided school climate data across all of these waves. School climate data were aggregated to the school level and provided as school means. This study used three different measures from each school for each survey item: (a) overall mean; (b) mean for White students; (c) mean for Black students.<sup>1</sup>

**School suspensions.** The school district provided school-level out-of-school suspension counts and rates for each school year from 1999-2000 through 2015-16 for (a) all students, (b) White students, and (c) Black students.<sup>1</sup> These counts and rates measured the number of suspensions per school year (not the number of students suspended or the number of days suspended). When the district provided counts for a given school year, these were transformed into rates by dividing the total number of suspensions by the school's total enrollment as recorded by the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD). Counts for White and Black students were transformed into rates by dividing by the total number of White and Black students, respectively, enrolled in the school as recorded by the CCD. There were 131 schools that provided suspension data across all of these waves.

## **Measures**

**SRO presence.** The main independent variable was the presence of SROs. This variable came from a list supplied by the school district that included the year(s) that each school in the district had an SRO assigned to the school. In this district, no school had more than one SRO at a time and each SRO was assigned on a full-time basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we proposed to also look at data for Hispanic students, there were too few schools with data for Hispanic students.

**Student perceptions of school climate.** The second set of dependent variables included measures of four different aspects of students' perceptions of school climate: sense of belonging, student voice, relationships with adults, and perception of safety. All items were continuous variables that represented school-level aggregates for (a) all students, (b) White students, and (c) Black students. The original survey items were measured on a scale of 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*). The wording of some survey items varied slightly across grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high) and across years. The items listed below were used to create mean scales.

Sense of belonging was measured by four items, including the following: (a) I really like other students in my school; (b) I feel that I belong in my school; (c) I feel like I am part of my school community; and (d) My school has a caring and supportive environment for students.

Student voice was measured by four items, including the following: (a) I can give opinions in class that disagree with the opinions of other students; (b) My teachers respect my opinion in class even if it disagrees with their opinions; (c) I feel I can disagree openly with my teachers about events in the news; and (d) I often talk about events in the news with my teachers.

Students' relationships with adults was measured by four items for the years 2008-2010, including the following: (a) I receive guidance and support from adults at my school; (b) I feel my teachers really care about me; (c) My school has a caring and supportive environment for students; and (d) I believe I can talk with my counselor. In subsequent years, three additional items were also included: (a) There is at least one adult at my school whom I feel I can trust; (b) When I have a problem, there is at least one adult at my school whom I can talk about my problem; and (c) There is at least one adult at my school who says positive things to me often.

Perception of safety was measured by seven items, including the following: (a) I feel safe walking to and from school; (b) I feel safe outside the building before and after school; (c) I feel safe at school; (d) At my school, I feel bullying is not a problem; (e) At my school, I feel Internet bullying is not a problem; (f) The adults in my school take care of safety problems quickly; and (g) I believe the adults in my school will take care of any unsafe situation. Note that in 2008, the following item was not part of the survey and was thus not included in the scale: At my school, I feel Internet bullying is not a problem.

**Parent perceptions of school climate.** The third set of dependent variables included measures of three different aspects of parents' perceptions of school climate: sense of belonging, relationships with adults, and perception of safety. All items were continuous variables that represented school-level aggregates for (a) all parent, (b) White parents, and (c) Black parents. The original survey items were measured on a scale of 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*). The wording of some survey items varied slightly across years. The items listed below were used to create mean scales.

Parents' perceptions of their child's sense of belonging was measured with three items: (a) My child feels strong ties with other students in his/her school; (b) My child's peer group is well thought of by members of other peer groups; (c) My child feels like a part of his/her school community.

Parents' perceptions of their child's relationships with adults was measured with seven items: (a) I feel the teachers at my child's school really care about him/her; (b) I believe my child can talk with his/her counselor or dean; (c) My child's school provides a caring and supportive environment; (d) The principal at my child's school provides effective leadership; (e) Teachers at my child's school provide effective instruction; (f) My child receives individual attention from

the teachers to help him/her; (g) A variety of guidance and support services is available to my child.

Perceptions of safety was measured with four items in 2008: (a) I believe my child feels safe walking to and from school; (b) I believe my child feels safe outside the building before and after school; (c) I believe my child feels safe and secure at school; (d) At my child's school I feel bullying is a big problem. This fourth item was reverse coded before creating scales. In subsequent years, two additional items were added: (a) At my child's school, I feel physical bullying is not a problem; (b) At my child's school, I feel internet bullying is not a problem.

**Teacher perceptions of school climate.** The fourth set of dependent variables included measures of three different aspects of teachers' perceptions of school climate: sense of belonging, relationships with adults, and perception of safety. All items were continuous variables that represented school-level aggregates for (a) all teachers, (b) White teachers, and (c) Black teachers. The original survey items were measured on a scale of 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*). The wording of some survey items varied slightly across years. The items listed below were used to create mean scales.

Teachers' interpersonal relationships was measured with nine items: (a) I feel the teachers at my school really care about their students; (b) I believe students at my school can talk with their counselor or dean; (c) My school provides a caring and supportive environment for students; (d) Teachers at my school provide effective instruction; (e) At my school, teachers provide individual attention to help the students; (f) I have opportunities to talk to my students about their school progress; (g) My colleagues and I work together effectively to advance student learning; (h) I really like the staff in my school; (i) My group of colleagues at school is well thought of by other faculty and staff.

Teachers' perceptions of safety was measured by seven items in 2008: (a) I feel safe on my way to and from work; (b) I feel safe outside the building before and after school; (c) I feel safe and secure at my school; (d) Safety concerns, when reported, are handled in a timely manner; (e) Adults in my school intervene in any unsafe situation they observe; (f) I would intervene in any unsafe situation I observe; (g) At my school, I feel bullying is not a problem. In subsequent years, two additional items were added: (a) At my school, I feel physical bullying is not a problem; (b) At my school, I feel Internet bullying is not a problem.

Job satisfaction was measured with three items: (a) The superintendent and central office administrators provide effective leadership; (b) My principal provides effective leadership; (c) I am very satisfied with my school.

**Staff perceptions of school climate.** The fifth set of dependent variables included measures of three different aspects of staff perceptions of school climate: sense of belonging, relationships with adults, and perception of safety. All items were continuous variables that represented school-level aggregates for (a) all staff, (b) White staff, and (c) Black staff. The original survey items were measured on a scale of 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*). The wording of some survey items varied slightly across years. The items listed below were used to create mean scales.

Staff's interpersonal relationships was measured with nine items: (a) I feel the teachers at my school really care about their students; (b) I believe students at my school can talk with their counselor or dean; (c) My school provides a caring and supportive environment for students; (d) Teachers at my school provide effective instruction; (e) At my school, teachers provide individual attention to help the students; (f) At my school, teachers talk to students about their

school progress; (g) My colleagues together effectively; (h) I like the staff at work; (i) My group of colleagues at school is well thought of by other faculty and staff.

Staff's perceptions of safety was measured by seven items in 2008: (a) I feel safe on my way to and from work; (b) I feel safe outside the building before and after school; (c) I feel safe and secure at my school; (d) Safety concerns, when reported, are handled in a timely manner; (e) Adults in my school intervene in any unsafe situation they observe; (f) I would intervene in any unsafe situation I observe; (g) At my school, I feel bullying is not a problem. In subsequent years, two additional items were added: (a) At my school, I feel physical bullying is not a problem; (b) At my school, I feel Internet bullying is not a problem.

Job satisfaction was measured with three items: (a) The superintendent and central office administrators provide effective leadership; (b) My principal provides effective leadership; (c) I am very satisfied with my school.

**Suspension rates.** The first set of dependent variables included overall school suspension rates, the suspension rates of White students, and the suspension rates of Black students. All suspension rates were multiplied by 1,000 so that the measures represented the number of suspensions per 1,000 students in each school.

**Moderators.** Three moderators related to school context were used in this study. First, school racial composition was measured as the percent of Black students in the school as calculated from data in the CCD. Second, school size was measured as the total enrollment of the school as reported in the CCD. Third, school-level poverty was measured as the percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) as reported in the CCD. Each of these moderators is time varying such that the value for each variable was calculated at each wave.

Although the original proposal included a fourth moderator (i.e., urbanicity), there was no variability in this variable in the schools with SROs so it was dropped from the analysis.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The quantitative data analyses in this study consisted of a series of school fixed effects models. These models can be interpreted as the relationship between the change in whether a school had an SRO and the change in the dependent variable. The research questions pertaining to moderation were answered using multiplicative interaction terms. All significant interactions were plotted to aid with interpretation.

Although the original proposal outlined an analytic approach that combined the use of propensity score matching and multiple group piecewise latent growth curve modeling, attempts at analytic approach proved unsuccessful due to issues of nonconvergence in the latent growth curve models, perhaps due in part to the combination of a relatively small sample size with a relatively complicated model. The shift to fixed effects models has two major advantages over the originally proposed approach. First, it controls for all time-constant school characteristics—whether measured or unmeasured. Second, it provides within-school estimates rather than between-school estimates. Together, these advantages allow for stronger causal inferences than the original approach would have.

### **Qualitative Data and Participants**

Districtwide, 30 schools had SROs at the time of data collection. SROs were primarily found in middle and high schools with only two elementary schools having an SRO. SROs were drawn from four different law enforcement agencies located near the district, including three local police agencies and the county Sheriff's department. After receiving permission from the district and law enforcement agencies, the SROs in the study were contacted and invited to

participate in an interview. Out of the 30 potential SROs, 26 agreed to participate; thus, this study's sample represents nearly full coverage of the SROs in the district. Most of the SROs were male (80.7%), nearly all were White, and the majority came from local police agencies ( $n = 20$ ) with only a few from the county Sheriff's department ( $n = 6$ ). Many of the SROs were mid-career officers who had considerable experience in other positions. However, a few of the SROs were in the beginning stages of their career and the SRO position was their first assignment, and a few others were toward the end of their careers.

The interviews covered a wide range of topics including SROs' daily activities, major roles and responsibilities, job-related training, and their perspectives on job duties. The interviews lasted an average of 62 minutes. The study used a semi-structured interview strategy to minimize restriction on the interviewee and to elicit natural answers from the respondent. Interview protocols were developed from prior literature on SRO activities (Covert, 2007; Neiman, Murphy, Swain, Thomas, Parmer, Chaney & Hansen, 2015; Rippetoe, 2009) and from conversations with local stakeholders. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To preserve confidentiality, the research team redacted names and any other potentially identifiable information from the interview transcriptions.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The coding strategies applied in this study align with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The research team used the qualitative software package, Nvivo 11, to conduct coding procedures and generate themes through both open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Authors began the process by having two members of the team open code transcripts and solidify a set of codes that would be the basis for further analyses. Within the different codes, the authors analyzed the data for emerging themes, followed by research team discussions for any

discrepancies in the findings. The team then produced a set of axial codes by formulating themes into concepts through theoretical or logical reasoning. The axial coding scheme was reapplied to the transcripts which were then recoded with the new axial coding scheme.

## Results: SRO Implementation and School Climate

### SRO Implementation and Students' Perceptions of School Climate

**Sense of belonging.** The models predicting all students' sense of belonging found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in students' sense of belonging, either with or without control variables. However, there were significant interactions with percent Black and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 1, in schools with small percentages of Black students, adding an SRO was associated with improved sense of belonging, whereas in schools with larger percentages of Black students, the opposite pattern emerged. Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, in schools with small percentages of FRPL eligibility, adding an SRO was associated with improved sense of belonging, whereas in schools with larger percentages of FRPL eligibility, the opposite pattern emerged.

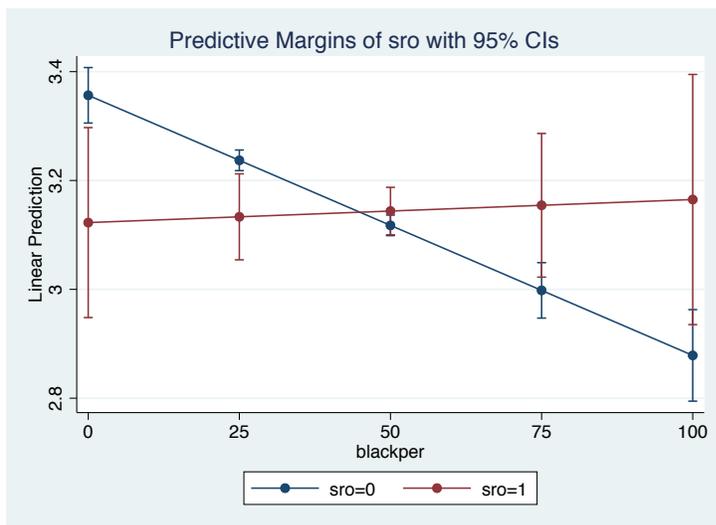


Figure 1. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting All Students' Sense of Belonging

The models predicting White students' sense of belonging found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in students' sense of belonging, either with or without control variables. There were no significant interactions either.

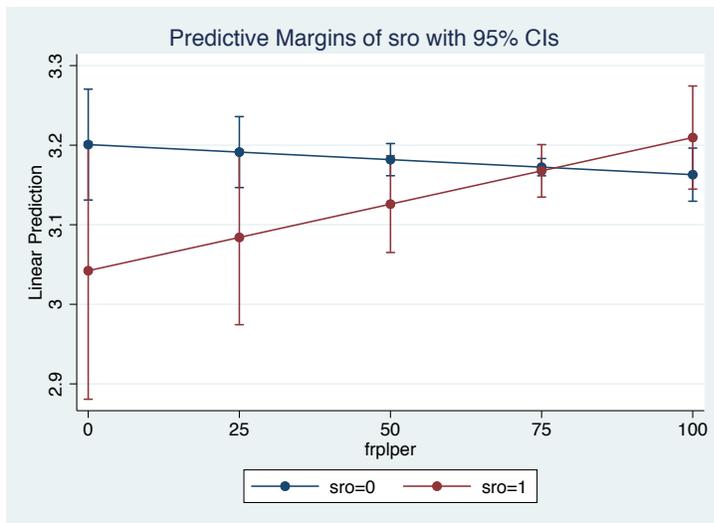


Figure 2. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting All Students’ Sense of Belonging

The models predicting Black students’ sense of belonging found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in students’ sense of belonging, either with or without control variables. However, there were significant interactions with percent Black and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 3, in schools with small percentages of Black students, adding an SRO was associated with improved sense of belonging among Black students, whereas in schools with larger percentages of Black students, the opposite pattern emerged. Similarly, as shown in Figure 4, in schools with small percentages of FRPL eligibility, adding an SRO was associated with improved sense of belonging among Black students, whereas in schools with larger percentages of FRPL eligibility, the opposite pattern emerged.

**Relationships with adults.** The models predicting all students’ relationships with adults found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and small improvements in students’ relationships with adults, both with ( $b = 0.03, p < .05$ ) and without control variables ( $b = 0.05, p < .01$ ). There were no significant interactions in these models.

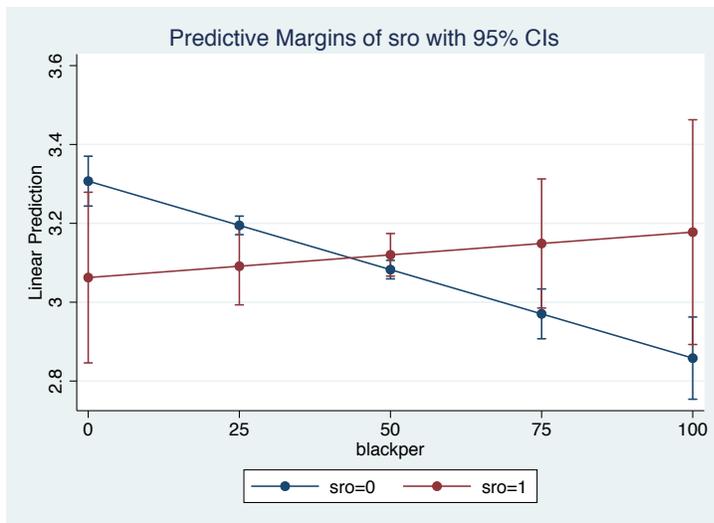


Figure 3. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting Black Students' Sense of Belonging

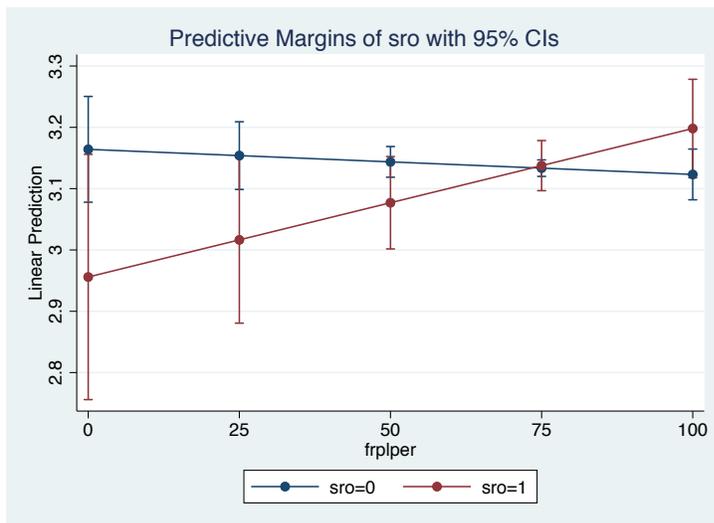


Figure 4. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting Black Students' Sense of Belonging

The models predicting White students' relationships with adults found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and small improvements in students' relationships with adults, both with ( $b = 0.04, p < .05$ ) and without control variables ( $b = 0.05, p < .05$ ). There was also a significant interaction effect between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 5, adding an SRO in larger schools had a stronger effect on White students' relationships with adults than in smaller schools. No other interactions were statistically

significant.

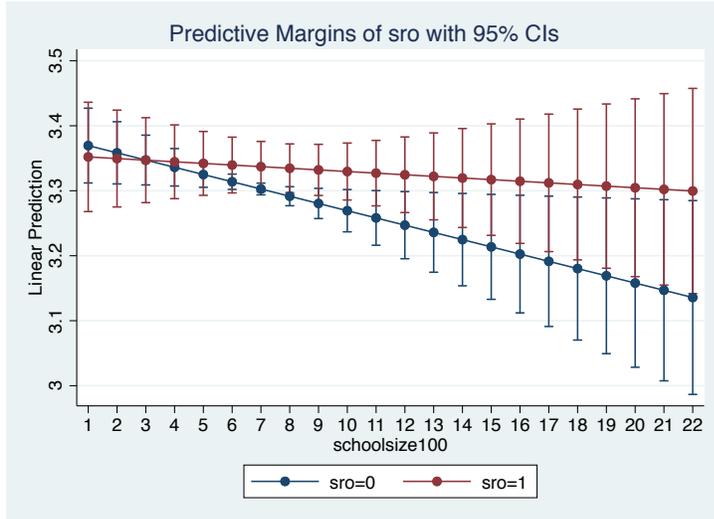


Figure 5. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting White Students' Adult Relationships

The models predicting Black students' relationships with adults found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and small improvements in students' relationships with adults in the model without control variables ( $b = 0.04, p < .05$ ). There were no significant interactions in these models.

**Perceptions of safety.** The model predicting all students' perceptions of safety found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and decreases in students' perceptions of safety in the model without control variables ( $b = -0.04, p < .05$ ). Additionally, there was a significant interaction between implementing SROs and the percent of Black students in the school. As shown in Figure 6, adding SROs in schools with larger percentages of Black students had a more beneficial effect on students' perceptions of safety, whereas adding SROs in schools with smaller percentages of Black students had a more detrimental effect. No other interactions were statistically significant.

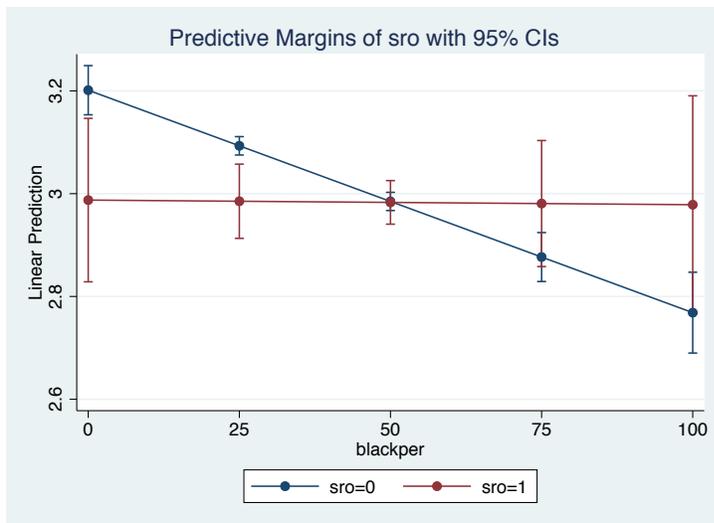


Figure 6. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting All Students' Perceptions of Safety

The models using data from only White and only Black students found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in students' perceptions of safety, either with or without control variables. There were no significant interactions either.

**Student voice.** The models predicting all students' sense of voice found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in students' sense of voice, either with or without control variables. There were no significant interactions either. This same pattern held true for the models using data from only White and only Black students as well.

### SRO implementation and Parents' Perceptions of School Climate

**Child's sense of belonging.** The models predicting all parents' perceptions of their child's sense of belonging found no significant overall relationship between changes in SRO presence and changes in perceptions of their child's sense of belonging, either with or without control variables. There were no significant interactions either. This same pattern held true for the models using data from only White and only Black parents as well.

**Child's relationships with adults.** The models predicting all parents' perceptions of their child's relationships with adults found no significant overall relationship between changes

in SRO presence and changes in perceptions of their child’s relationships with adults, either with or without control variables. There were no significant interactions either. This same pattern held true for the models using data from only White and only Black parents as well.

**Child’s perceptions of safety.** The model predicting all parents’ perceptions of their child’s perceptions of safety found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and decreases in students’ perceptions of safety in the models with ( $b = -0.05, p < .05$ ) and without control variables ( $b = -0.05, p < .05$ ). There was also a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 7, adding an SRO in larger schools had a more detrimental effect on parents’ perceptions of their child’s perceptions of safety compared to smaller schools.

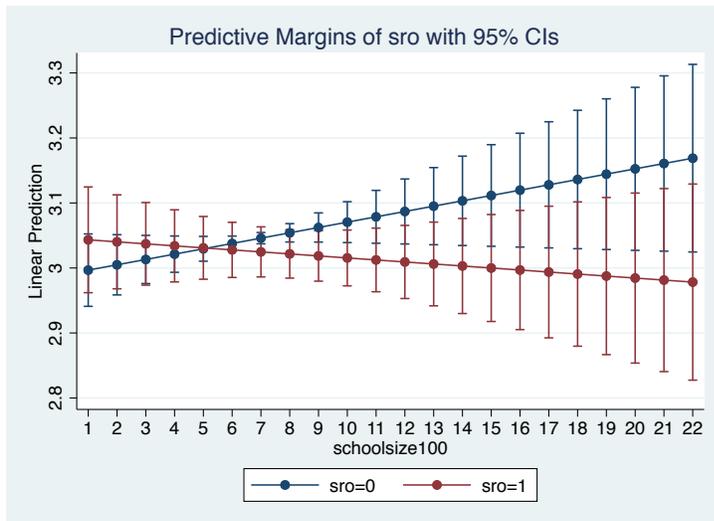


Figure 7. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting All Parents’ Perceptions of Safety

The models predicting White parents’ perceptions of their child’s perceptions of safety found no significant relationship between adding an SRO and perceptions of safety in the models with or without control variables. There was, however, a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 8, adding an SRO in larger schools had a more detrimental effect on White parents’ perceptions of their child’s perceptions of safety

compared to smaller schools. There was also a significant interaction between SRO implementation and the percent of Black students in the school. As shown in Figure 9, implementing SROs in schools with larger percentages of Black students was associated with increases in perceptions of safety whereas the opposite was true in schools with smaller percentages of Black students. There were no other significant interactions.

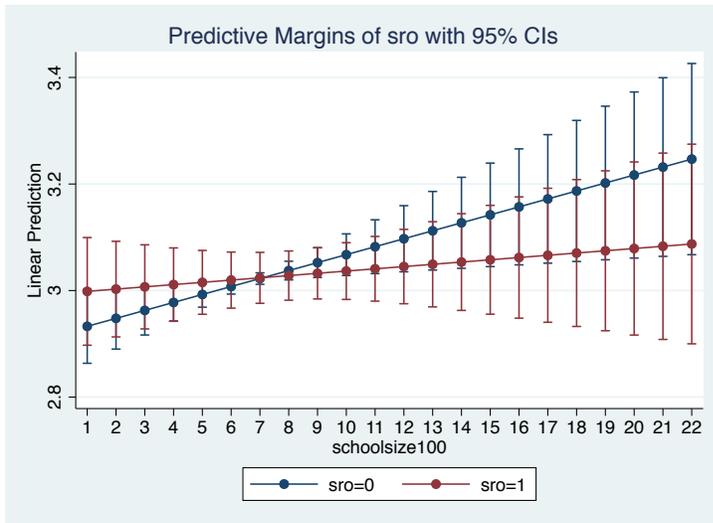


Figure 8. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting White Parents' Perceptions of Safety

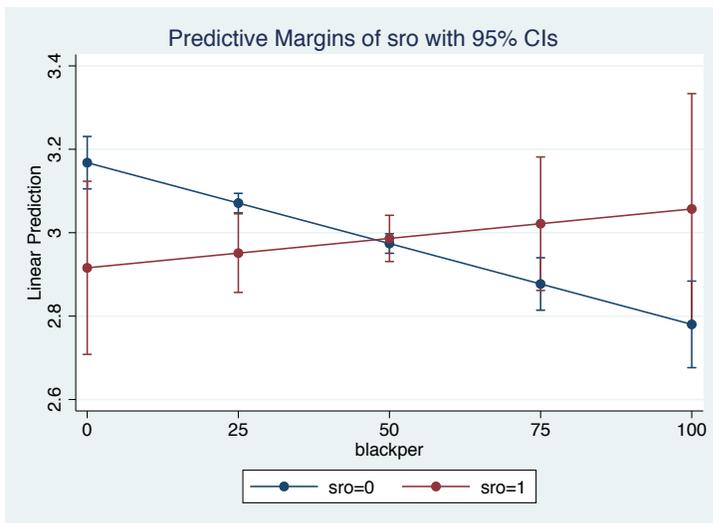


Figure 9. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting White Parents' Perceptions of Safety

The model predicting Black parents' perceptions of their child's perceptions of safety

found a significant overall relationship between adding an SRO and decreases in students' perceptions of safety in the models with ( $b = -0.08, p < .05$ ) and without control variables ( $b = -0.07, p < .05$ ). There was also a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 10, adding an SRO in larger schools had a more detrimental effect on Black parents' perceptions of their child's perceptions of safety compared to smaller schools. There were no other significant interactions.

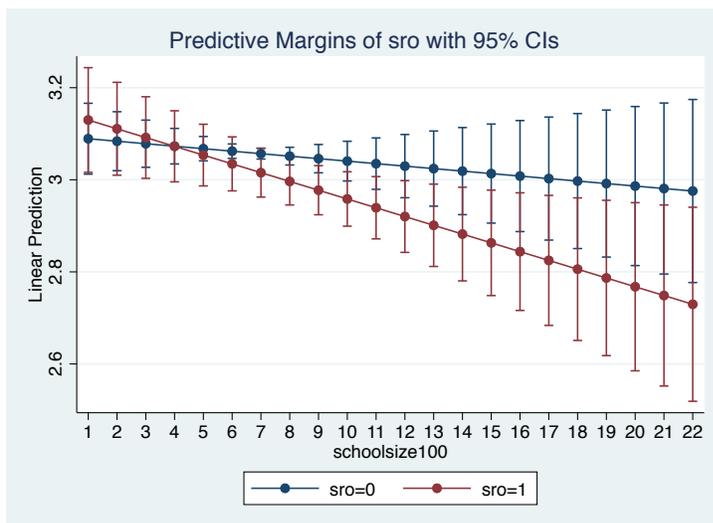


Figure 10. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting Black Parents' Perceptions of Safety

### SRO implementation and Teachers' Perceptions of School Climate

**Interpersonal relationships.** The models predicting teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships found no overall statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' interpersonal relationships. However, there was a significant interaction between SRO implementation and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 11, adding SROs in schools with low percentages of FRPL was associated with decreases in teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships, but this was not the case in schools with higher percentages of FRPL. There were no other significant interactions.

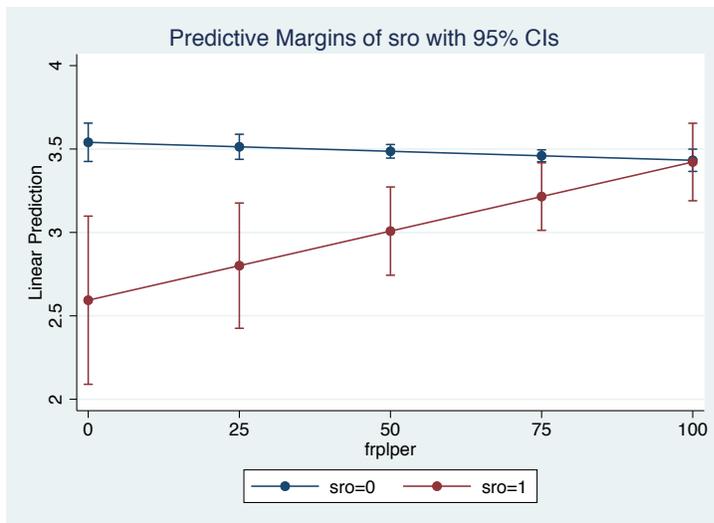


Figure 11. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting All Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships

The models predicting White teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships found no overall statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' interpersonal relationships. However, there was a significant interaction between SRO implementation and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 12, adding SROs in schools with low percentages of FRPL was associated with decreases in White teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships, but this was not the case in schools with higher percentages of FRPL. There were no other significant interactions.

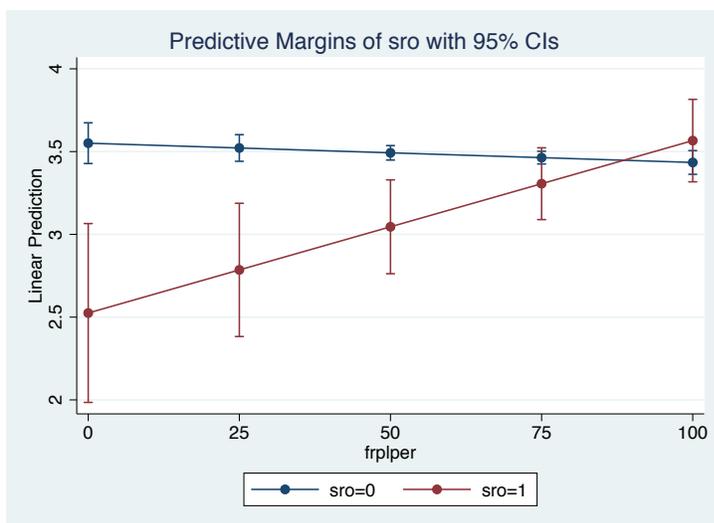


Figure 12. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting White Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships

The models predicting Black teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships found no overall statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' interpersonal relationships. However, there was a significant interaction between SRO implementation and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 13, adding SROs in schools with low percentages of FRPL was associated with decreases in Black teachers' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships, but this was not the case in schools with higher percentages of FRPL. There were no other significant interactions.

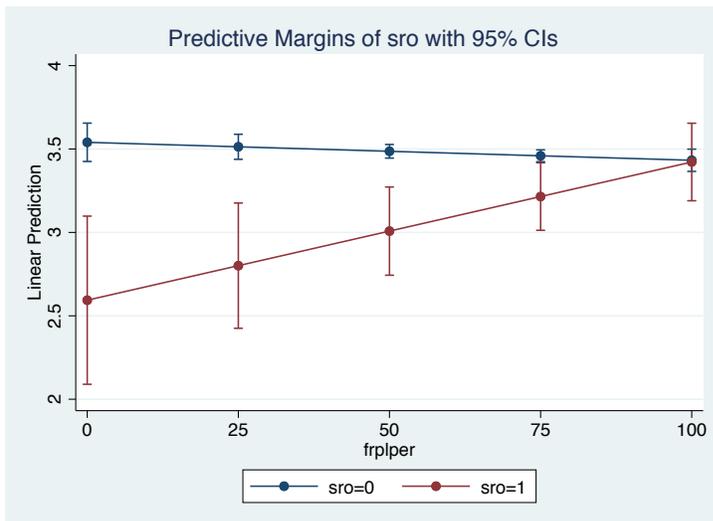


Figure 13. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting Black Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships

**Perceptions of safety.** The models predicting teachers' perceptions of safety found no overall statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' perceptions of safety. However, there was a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 14, implementing SROs in larger schools was associated with decreases in teachers' perceptions of safety whereas the opposite was true in smaller schools. There was also a significant interaction between implementing SROs and the percent of

Black students in the school. As shown in Figure 15, implementing SROs in schools with larger percentages of Black students was associated with improved perceptions of safety among teachers whereas the opposite was true in schools with smaller percentages of Black students. There were no other significant interactions.

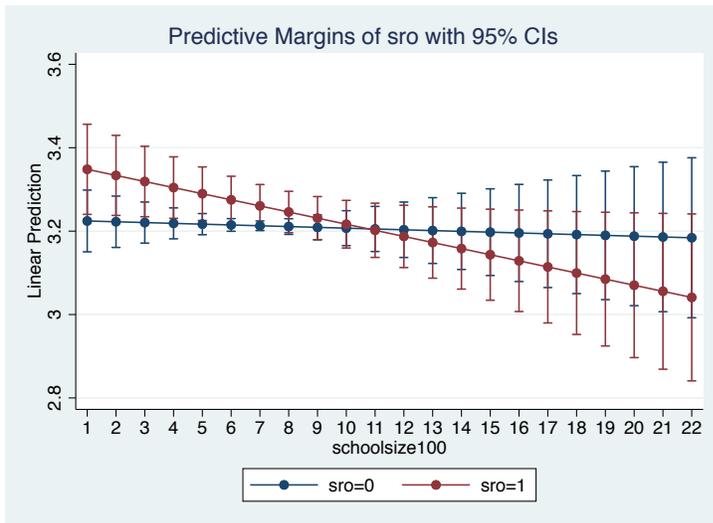


Figure 14. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting All Teachers' Perceptions of Safety

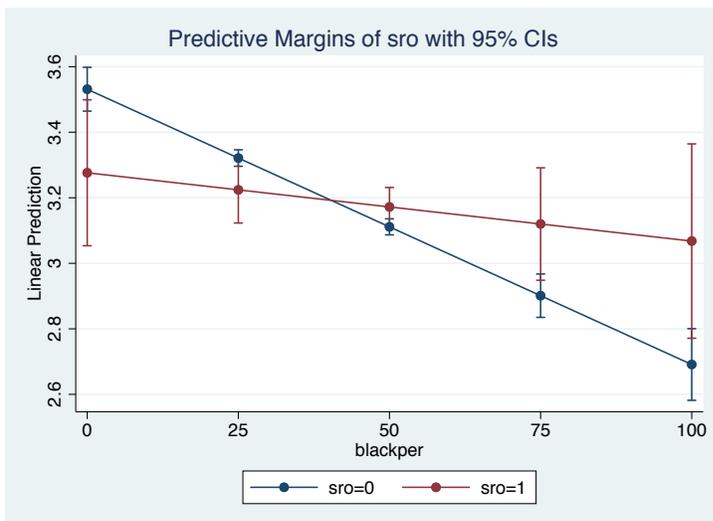


Figure 15. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting All Teachers' Perceptions of Safety

The models predicting White teachers' perceptions of safety found no overall statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' perceptions of safety.

However, there was a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 16, implementing SROs in larger schools was associated with decreases in White teachers' perceptions of safety whereas the opposite was true in smaller schools. There was also a significant interaction between implementing SROs and the percent of Black students in the school. As shown in Figure 17, implementing SROs in schools with larger percentages of Black students was associated with improved perceptions of safety among White teachers whereas the opposite was true in schools with smaller percentages of Black students. There was also a significant interaction between implementing SROs and percent FRPL. As shown in Figure 18, implementing SROs in schools with larger percentages of FRPL was associated with improved perceptions of safety among White teachers whereas the opposite was true in schools with smaller percentages of FRPL.

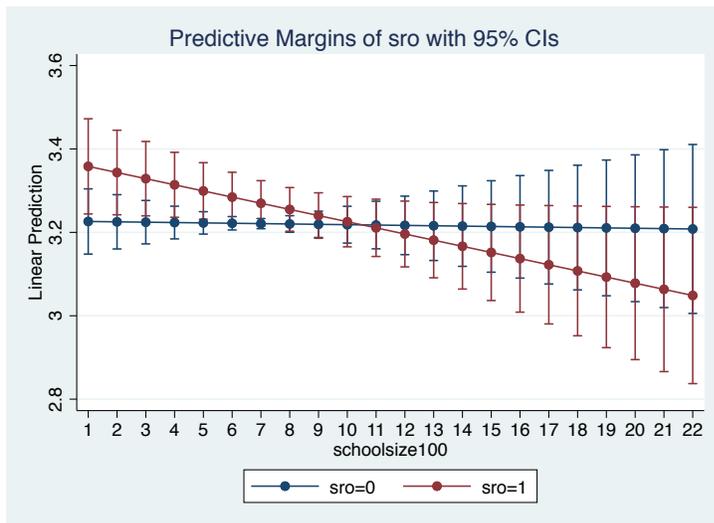


Figure 16. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting White Teachers' Perceptions of Safety

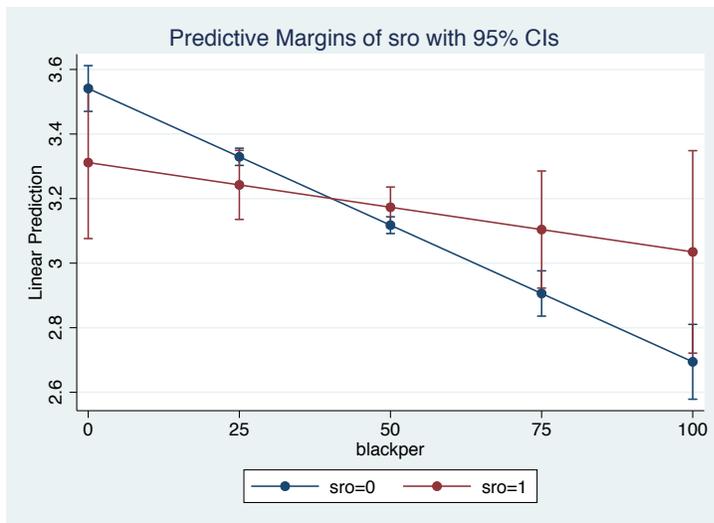


Figure 17. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting White Teachers' Perceptions of Safety

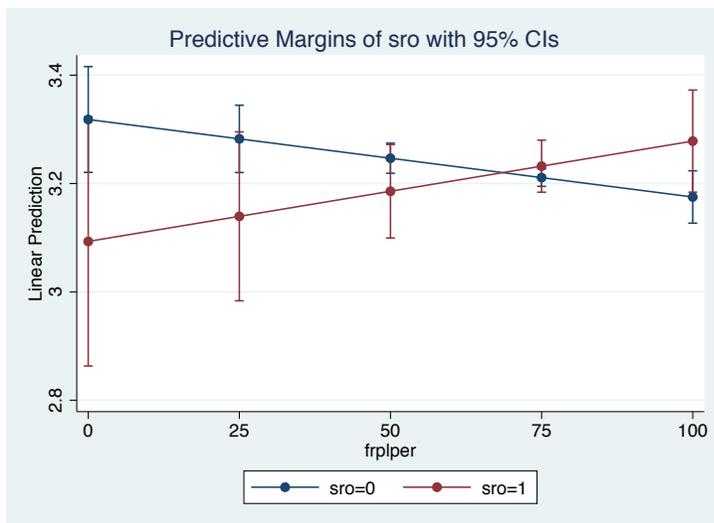


Figure 18. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting White Teachers' Perceptions of Safety

There was no statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and Black teachers' perceptions of safety, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either.

**Job satisfaction.** In the models predicting job satisfaction among all teachers, there was no statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and teachers' job

satisfaction, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either. This same pattern held true for the models using data from only White and only Black teachers as well.

### SRO implementation and Staff's Perceptions of School Climate

**Interpersonal relationships.** In the models predicting interpersonal relationships among all staff, there was no statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and staff's interpersonal relationships, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either. This same pattern held true for the models using data from only White and only Black staff as well.

**Perceptions of safety.** In the models predicting perceptions of safety among all staff, implementing SROs was associated with poorer perceptions of safety both in the model without ( $b = -0.08, p < .05$ ) and with controls ( $b = -0.06, p < .05$ ). There was also a significant interaction between SRO implementation and school size. As shown in Figure 19, implementing SROs in larger schools was associated with decreased perceptions of safety, whereas this was not the case in smaller schools. There were no other statistically significant interactions.

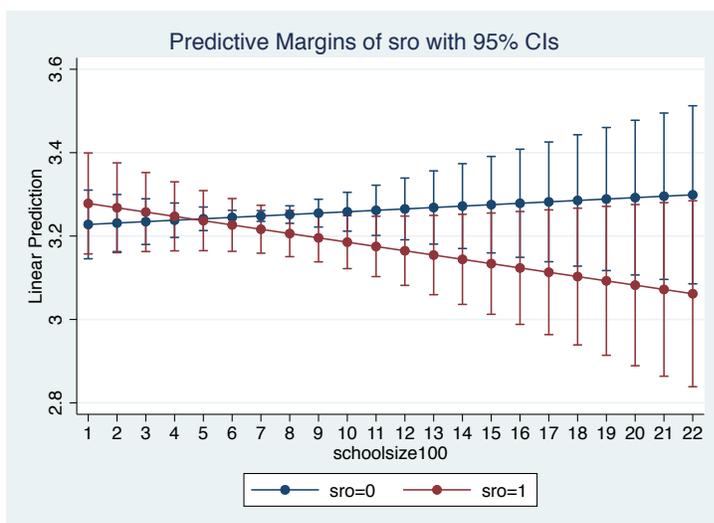


Figure 19. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting All Staff's Perceptions of Safety

In the models predicting perceptions of safety among White staff, implementing SROs was associated with poorer perceptions of safety both in the model without ( $b = -0.10, p < .05$ ) and with controls ( $b = -0.08, p < .05$ ). There were no statistically significant interactions.

In the models predicting perceptions of safety among Black staff, there was no statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and staff's perceptions of safety, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either.

**Job satisfaction.** In the models predicting job satisfaction among all staff, implementing SROs was associated with poorer job satisfaction in the model without controls ( $b = -0.07, p < .05$ ). There were no statistically significant interactions.

In the models predicting job satisfaction among White staff, implementing SROs was associated with poorer job satisfaction in the model without controls ( $b = -0.08, p < .05$ ). There were no statistically significant interactions.

In the models predicting job satisfaction among Black staff, there was no statistically significant relationship between implementing SROs and Black staff's job satisfaction, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either.

## **Results: SRO Implementation and Suspension**

### **Overall Suspensions**

Implementing SROs was not statistically significantly associated with rates of suspension in models either without or with control variables. Additionally, as shown in Figure 20, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension depended on school size. In larger schools, implementing SROs was significantly associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In smaller schools, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension rates. Similarly, as shown in Figure 21, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of Black students at school. In schools with smaller percentages of Black students, implementing SROs was significantly associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In schools with larger percentages of Black students, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension. Lastly, as shown in Figure 22, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of FRPL eligibility. In schools with smaller percentages of FRPL eligibility, implementing SROs was associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In schools with larger percentages of FRPL eligibility, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension rates.

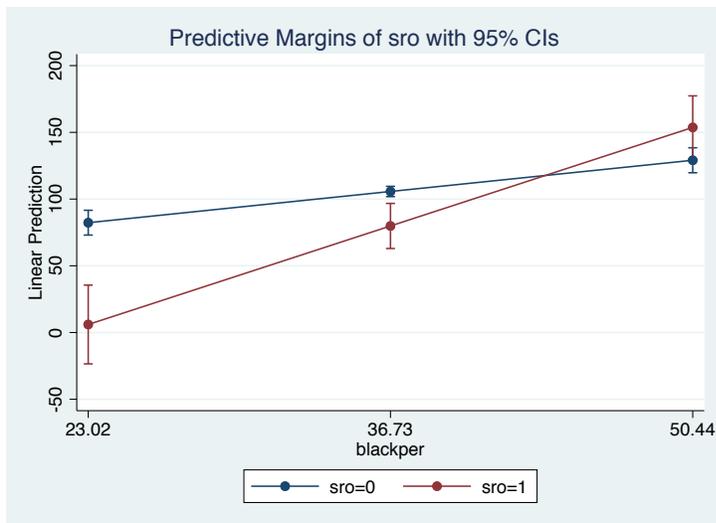


Figure 20. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting Overall Suspension Rates

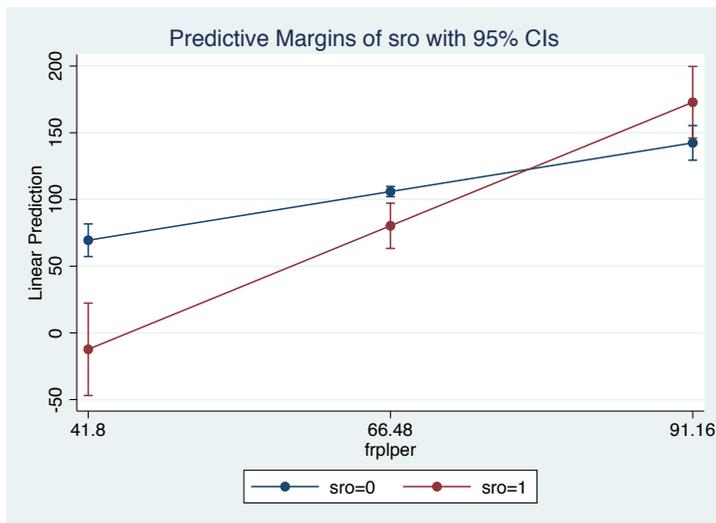


Figure 21. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting Overall Suspension Rates

### White Suspensions

Implementing SROs was negatively and significantly associated with rates of suspension in both the models without ( $b = -19.91, p < .01$ ) and with controls ( $b = -31.66, p < .001$ ).

Additionally, as shown in Figure 23, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension depended on school size. In larger schools, implementing SROs was significantly associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In smaller schools,

however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension rates. Similarly, as shown in Figure 23, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of Black students at school. In schools with smaller percentages of Black students, implementing SROs was significantly associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In schools with larger percentages of Black students, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension. Lastly, as shown in Figure 24, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of FRPL eligibility. In schools with smaller percentages of FRPL eligibility, implementing SROs was associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In schools with larger percentages of FRPL eligibility, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension.

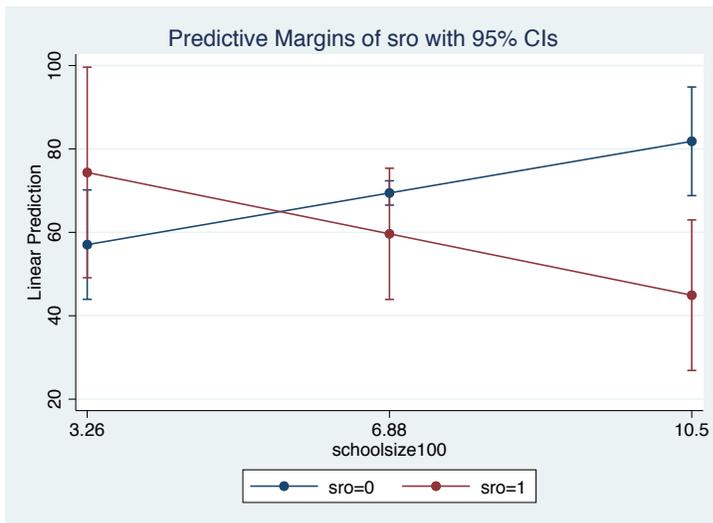


Figure 22. Interaction of SRO and School Size Predicting White Suspension Rates

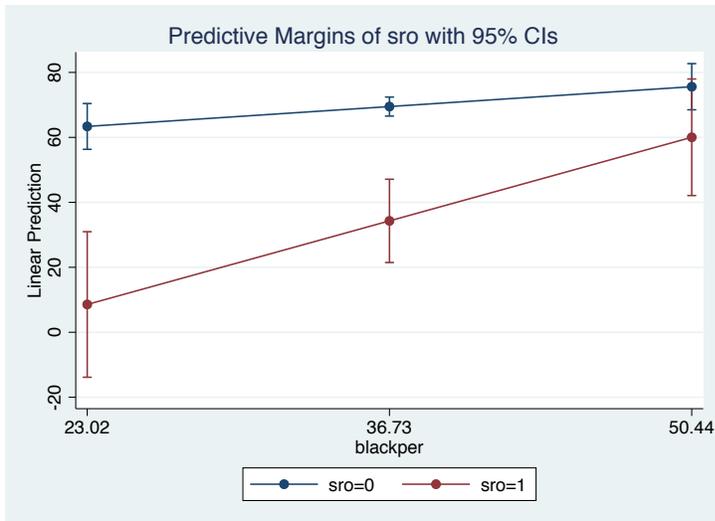


Figure 23. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting White Suspension Rates

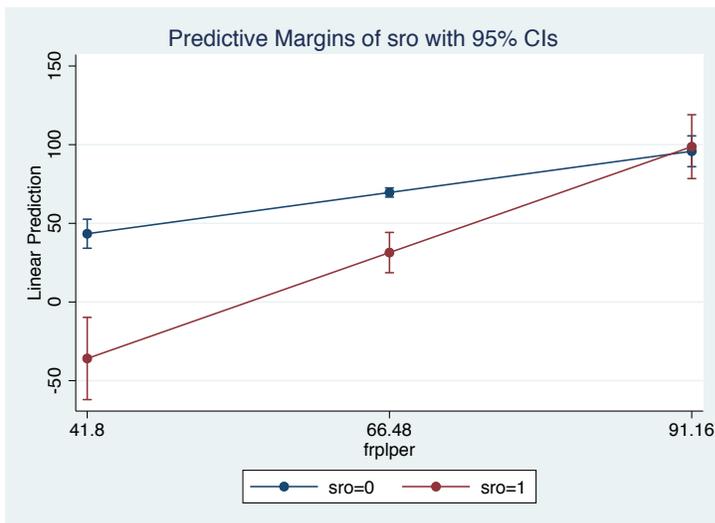


Figure 24. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting White Suspension Rates

### Black Suspensions

Implementing SROs was not statistically significantly associated with Black students' suspension rates in the models with or without control variables. However, as shown in Figure 25, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of Black students at school. In schools with smaller percentages of Black students, implementing SROs was associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without

SROs. In schools with larger percentages of Black students, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension rates. Additionally, as shown in Figure 26, the relationship between SRO implementation and rates of suspension also depended on the percentage of FRPL eligibility. In schools with smaller percentages of FRPL eligibility, implementing SROs was associated with lower suspension rates relative to schools without SROs. In schools with larger percentages of FRPL eligibility, however, implementing SROs was not associated with suspension rates.

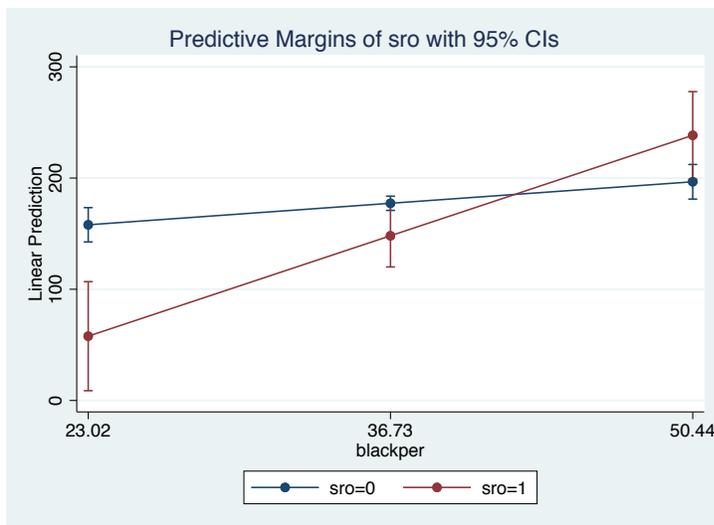
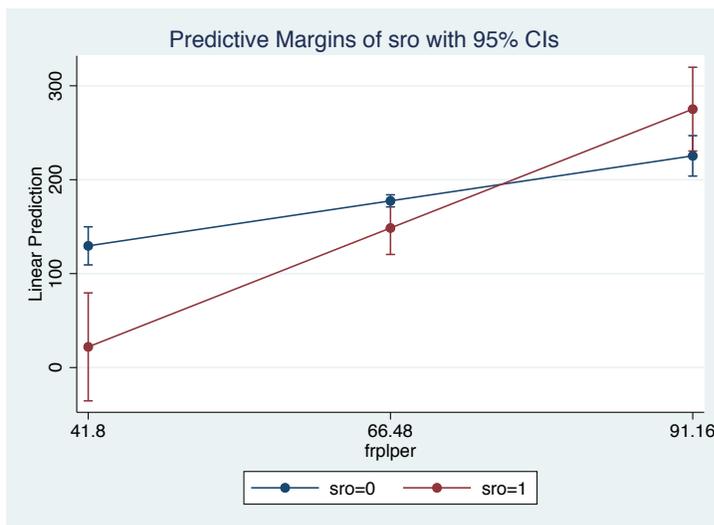


Figure 25. Interaction of SRO and Percent Black Predicting Black Suspension Rates



*Figure 26. Interaction of SRO and Percent FRPL Predicting Black Suspension Rates*

### **Black-White Disparity in Suspensions**

The next set of models analyzed the relationship between SRO implementation and the disparity between White and Black students' suspension rates, measured as a rate ratio. Implementing SROs was not associated with changes to schools' Black-White disparity in suspension rates, either in the model with or without controls. There were no statistically significant interactions either.

## **Results: SROs' Roles, School Climate, and Suspension**

Although the original intention of this study was to quantitatively examine how SROs' roles in schools conditioned the impact of their implementation on the outcomes related to school climate and suspension rates, the high turnover rates among the SROs in the district did not permit us to learn about the roles of the SROs that were originally implemented in the schools, only the SROs currently occupying those positions (which was only infrequently the same SRO who was originally implemented there). Instead, we focus here on how SROs described their various activities throughout the day, as well as the philosophies and priorities that guided those actions. Although this qualitative analysis is unable to explicitly link SROs' roles to outcomes related to school climate and suspension, it does have implications for understanding how SROs' actions may affect various aspects of school climate as well as suspension and other school discipline processes and outcomes.

The following sections provide three separate chronologies—one for each prominent theme—progressing throughout SROs' typical day. This technique serves to distinguish between the activities that SROs engage in, the motivations influencing these activities, and how these activities fluctuate on a daily basis. This approach goes beyond simply describing the roles that SROs occupy and how they interpret their duties. Instead, it helps to emphasize how these roles and duties vary during specific times of day. We identified three distinct themes: efforts to remain unpredictable, efforts to establish presence, and efforts to build rapport. Further, each of these themes were characterized to varying degrees by five distinct timeframes in which SROs carried out their duties: arrival, class time, lunch, class transitions, and dismissal.

### **Efforts to Remain Unpredictable**

The most prevalent theme throughout these data involved efforts aimed at maintaining a sense of unpredictability at school. These efforts ranged from altering morning “beats” to sporadically changing the manner in which hallways were patrolled while class was in session. The purpose of this was often central to the idea that students or potential intruders could “case” a given officer if their routine was too consistent or predictable. This appeared to be important to officers because they believed delinquent and criminal behaviors could be prevented if an individual intent on doing wrong could not pinpoint the location of an officer. Thus, SROs’ behavior was partially guided by a crime-prevention mentality.

**Arrival.** At the beginning of each school day, the majority of SROs emphasized the importance of being unpredictable in an effort to prevent students from misbehaving, whether it be in the form of fighting, smoking cigarettes, using drugs, or engaging in other types of disorderly conduct. This rationale appeared to be guided by a preventative strategy, aimed at causing students to feel less comfortable engaging in various antisocial behaviors. Thus, officers believed that students would be less inclined to misbehave if they were unable to predict a given officer’s location. This theme was rather consistent throughout interviews with the articulated purpose of ensuring that students were unable to identify an officer’s routine. A statement from one SRO captured this point well:

I try not to keep a routine, because I don't want anyone getting comfortable with what I do. Sometimes I'll be out in the lobby in the morning. Sometimes I'll be out in the back loading dock where the car riders are being dropped off. Sometimes I'll be out in the senior parking lot. I want to make sure I'm somewhere different. It keeps them off center. You keep them off kilter a little bit, because they never know where you're going to be at. It makes them nervous.

**Class Time.** The previous excerpt helps to emphasize how and why officers were unpredictable during the time students were arriving at school. In a similar vein, SROs continued to stress the importance of being unpredictable during the time students were in class. However,

these efforts differed from arrival as SROs did not remain unpredictable for the same reasons. For example, during class, officers reported moving across school property in an irregular fashion to ensure nothing inappropriate was occurring, rather than for the purpose of preventing specific behaviors such as smoking and fighting. One officer explained, "...sporadically throughout the day I'll walk through the hallways to make sure nothing's going on that shouldn't be happening in there." Another officer provided the following statement that appears to partially capture this point, as well:

I make my rounds. I never do it the same way every day. One day I'll start over on the west side. One day I'll start on the east side. One day I'll start on the south side. One day I'll start out on the practice fields. Go through the dugouts and everything.

These officers' statements are clearly based on the need to maintain a sense of unpredictability, but unlike arrival, they fail to distinguish a particular behavior that is being targeted for prevention.

**Lunch Time.** Moving forward in the day, although officers reported spending most of their time in cafeterias during lunch periods, remaining unpredictable continued to be one of SROs' primary concerns. Similar to arrival, officers explained a series of potential consequences associated with forming a routine during this time. They suggested that various antisocial behaviors could simply be displaced to other locations within the school if students were able to determine areas that were not being monitored during lunch periods. One SRO explained, "They tried to make it to where a lot of us would stay in the cafeteria during lunch. That's always a bad thing because they know where you're going to be." In other words, this officer was concerned that students would engage in unwanted behaviors outside the cafeteria. Another officer provided the following statement, reinforcing this idea:

They'll go in to the cafeteria so I usually spend most of my time in the cafeteria

however, I try not to have too much of a pattern. In other words, somebody can just pick up on how he's always gonna be here at this time so let's do this at that time, whatever.

These excerpts clearly indicate that officers were concerned with the displacement of antisocial behavior during lunch, and that they attempted to remain unpredictable as a result.

**Class Transitions.** Similarly, officers also expressed the importance of being unpredictable while students were transitioning between classes. However, the factors motivating unpredictability during class transitions differed from other parts of the day because these instances were less frequently reported and not for the explicit purpose of prevention. Rather, several officers provided statements indicating their patrol strategies were simply sporadic and intended to keep students from identifying a routine. This is an important distinction because officers did not mention specific areas in which they stationed themselves (e.g., front doors, restrooms, cafeteria, etc.). Instead, they described how they were mobile and patrolled various locations throughout the school. For example, one officer explained, “When that bell rings, I just pick a hallway, and I'm usually at a different spot every time. I don't want anybody to know my routine.”. This example helps to illustrate how officers adapted their efforts to be unpredictable based on the circumstances at hand. In other words, seeing as how students are moving throughout the school during this time, officers did not identify specific areas in which they staged themselves.

**Dismissal.** In the same light, during dismissal, SROs no longer emphasized the importance of unpredictability and adapted their efforts to target more prominent concerns. In fact, none of the officers that were interviewed directly mentioned the need to remain unpredictable as students were leaving school property. Instead, SROs began to focus on two

other themes, establishing presence and building rapport with students, especially those remaining at school for various reasons, such as awaiting transportation.

### **Efforts to Establish Presence**

Another prevalent theme throughout these data involved efforts aimed at establishing presence at school. These efforts ranged from being visible as students entered the building to patrolling hallways during class transitions. Similar to unpredictability, the purpose of establishing presence was central to the idea that certain behaviors could be prevented if students, or parents in some instances, were aware of an officer's presence at school. This was an important concern to SROs because they believed the risk associated with these behaviors could be mitigated by making it a point to be seen throughout the school. Thus, officers' behavior continued to be partially guided by a crime-prevention mentality.

**Arrival.** Although SROs described the value in being unpredictable during arrival, they balanced this by making their visibility a clear priority each morning. In other words, although it was important for officers to alter their routines, they still believed it was necessary to establish their presence during the time students were arriving at school. The purpose in establishing this presence during arrival appeared to be similar to that which was described regarding unpredictability—the prevention of crime and misbehavior. The following statement appears to capture this point, suggesting presence is sufficient in preventing disruptive behavior:

Just so it's officer presence, as soon as they come they're seeing that I'm there. Maybe if they have some thoughts in their head about doing things they shouldn't be doing that they'll see me and it might change those thoughts for the whole day.

The previous statement does well in illustrating how officers believed their presence had the potential to influence students' behavior during arrival. Thus, it appears that the purpose of establishing this presence was guided by a preventative mindset.

**Class Time.** This idea was consistent throughout the time students were in class. For example, one officer explained, “Sometimes I will, I'll peek in and wave when I know there's been an issue there, just to let them know, ‘Hey, somebody's around.’”. Officers also reported establishing a presence near the entrance of schools to deter potentially disruptive behavior on behalf of parents. In this example, the same officer stated, “I like to stay visible and I like to stay in the open as much as I can just because if a parent does come in, I'm usually right there in the front and I'm the first one they see.” Overall, it appeared that the purpose of establishing presence during class time was similar to that described during arrival, with the exception of also establishing a presence near the entrance of schools.

**Lunch Time.** Aligning with arrival and class time, SROs also worked to establish their presence during lunch periods. Officers made it clear that the purpose of establishing presence during lunch was to prevent potentially disruptive behavior. For instance, one officer explained, “If I can be there, it usually keeps kids from boiling over, just from my presence...” The same officer also suggested that his absence often resulted in altercations, as seen in following statement: “...I try to spend the majority of the lunch time in the cafeteria and that keeps fights from happening. I've noticed that if a fight is gonna happen in the cafeteria, it's usually when I'm not there.” Overall, efforts to establish presence during lunch periods continued to be a function of preventing disruptive behavior, specifically fighting among students.

**Class Transitions.** Moving forward in the day, maintaining a presence continued to be an important aspect of SROs’ duties during transitions between classes. Although this theme was less prevalent during this time, it was still consistent throughout interviews with SROs. Similar to unpredictability during class transitions, a meaningful distinction was that officers did not report staging themselves in specific locations when establishing presence and were instead

patrolling the school. For example, one officer stated, “Then I go up and down the hallways, so I’m seen throughout the hallways so maybe there’s no fights or anything like that.” In a sense, this quote suggests that two themes (i.e., presence and unpredictability) overlap during transitional periods. This is because officers reported engaging in similar activities, such as patrolling hallways, in an effort to accomplish different goals. On one hand, SROs sought to prevent fights during transitions. On the other hand, officers simply did not want students to develop and understanding of their routine.

**Dismissal.** Unlike the absence of unpredictability during dismissal, several SROs emphasized the importance of being present and around students as they left school property. Again, the most prominent reason for maintaining this presence appeared to be that officers believed it would prevent fighting and altercations among students. One officer explained, “We have more problems with the walkers because they always wanna fight. So, at the end of the day, when the bell rings, I’m usually out front, in front of the school just hanging out.” Several other officers also described specific locations in which they would stage themselves during this time. For example, another officer stated, “At the end of the day the bell rings at 2:20. I try to either go to the bus loading dock, or out by the athletic field.” Although the reason that this particular SRO described staging himself at these locations is unclear, the primary takeaway is that officers once again described establishing presence in specific areas during dismissal.

### **Efforts to Build Rapport**

A final theme that emerged from these data involved efforts aimed at building rapport with members of the school community. These efforts ranged from greeting students as they entered the school to eating lunch with students and helping with homework. Unlike the previous two themes, the purpose of building rapport within the school community was not centered on

prevention. Instead, officers described the importance of simply building positive relationships with students, faculty, staff, and even parents. A number of officers suggested that forming these relationships could produce more effective learning environments and potentially result in less antisocial behavior while simultaneously improving the image of law enforcement.

**Arrival.** For example, several SROs performed small gestures to build rapport with members of the school community and promote positive behavior during arrival. A number of officers described instances in which they interacted with students and teachers as they arrived at school. These interactions included daily greetings and other techniques used to establish and build rapport (e.g., high-fives, telling jokes). Rapport building was somewhat different from simply establishing a presence because these efforts were focused on interacting with students in a way that resulted in the development of relationships, as opposed to simply ensuring students were made aware of an officer's presence. One officer provided the following statement, demonstrating this point:

I'll be out here at the front door greeting them, saying good morning, high fives, fist bumps. Trying to say good morning in about 10 different languages. So, you know, it gets them smiling, gets them going in a good mood I think.

This excerpt helps to highlight various techniques that officers report using in their efforts to build rapport during arrival.

**Class Time.** In a similar vein, SROs also reported building rapport with students and teachers in a variety of ways while class was in session. For example, several officers described times in which they patrolled the school and encountered students in the hallway. Others explained they occasionally entered classrooms to talk with students about ongoing issues. One SRO stated, "...I'm all for that, I have no problem as long as the teacher wants me in there, I have no problem coming in and talking to the students." There were also instances in which

officers explained how they move to different areas within the school to talk with staff members who were not actively engaged (e.g., principals, teachers, security guards) during this timeframe. These interactions appear to confirm that SROs believe one of their primary missions is to build rapport within the school community. The following quote from one officer helps to illustrate this point:

A lot of times, I'll walk out, I'll do a couple laps around the hall. And in the hall, different teachers at different times are always out there, letting the kids go use the restroom or get drinks and stuff like that. I'll go out there and they'll be all excited: "It's Officer <name redacted>!" You know, high fives and everything else.

This statement helps to demonstrate that efforts to build rapport were not exclusive to students, but that officers sought to connect with all members of the school community when given the opportunity.

**Lunch Time.** On the contrary, however, SROs reported engaging primarily with students during lunch periods. Additionally, some of these interactions went beyond simply conversing with students—as seen during arrival and class time—and became more personal. For instance, a number of officers described helping students with homework and making an effort to sit down and eat lunch with them. One officer described, “So if they're having problems, they'll bring their math homework and they're like, ‘Can you help me with this?’ And I'm like, ‘Sure.’ So we go sit at a separate table and while they're eating, we're doing the problems.” Although this type of interaction was fairly common, other officers provided more general accounts of building rapport, and described how they focused on simply mingling with students during lunch. For instance, another SRO explained, “And right after that, I have all the kids that want to come eat lunch with me. So then we filter that in for about an hour.” Based on these examples, it is

somewhat apparent that SROs understood lunch as the most essential part of the day in regard to building rapport and connecting with students on a personal level.

**Class Transitions.** As for class transitions—similar to that described regarding unpredictability and presence—one of the key differences from previous time frames involved the area in which officers were located inside schools when building rapport. This appeared to have a considerable effect on SROs’ ability to connect with students. For example, during arrival most officers were staged at entrances or drop-off locations, and during lunch they were located primarily in cafeterias. During transitions, however, SROs did not report staging themselves in specific locations. Most officers explained how they patrolled hallways throughout the school to converse with students and faculty in an effort to build rapport. One officer explained, “A lot of times, I’m always in the hallways during class change and stuff of that nature just to say hi...”. Although this quote resembles those involving presence, it also appears to highlight this officer’s desire to build rapport with students during transitions between classes.

**Dismissal.** Descriptions of rapport building were far less common during dismissal. In fact, only one officer described interacting with students during this time. As one could imagine though, many students are eager to return home after being dismissed from school. This inherently limits officers’ ability to build rapport seeing as how fewer students are on school property. In one instance, however, an officer reported spending several hours with students after school on a regular basis: “Then at the end of the day, kids want to come play basketball or just hang out. That takes a couple, two, three hours”. Although this officer did not explicitly cite developing rapport as the purpose of this interaction, it can be surmised that this SRO is establishing rapport with students during this time.

Ultimately, each of the prominent themes—unpredictability, presence, and rapport building—were present to varying degrees throughout officers’ descriptions of a typical day. These results can be generally divided into three sets of findings. First, efforts aimed at being unpredictable were emphasized more heavily during arrival; establishing presence was emphasized moderately throughout each timeframe; and efforts to build rapport were most prevalent during lunch periods. Second, the importance of unpredictability appeared to be based on a deterrent philosophy; presence was a basis for guardianship and limited opportunities for crime; and rapport building was aimed at fostering a positive image of law enforcement through interactions with students. Third, officers tended to be more mobile during class time and transitions between classes in comparison to arrival, lunch, and dismissal.

## **Results: School Context and SROs' Roles and Responsibilities**

The only major contextual contributor we found that shaped SROs' roles and responsibilities was the grade level of the school (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). The SROs at the two elementary schools tended to be less involved with law enforcement duties within the school than the SROs at the middle and high schools.

We did find, however, that the ways SROs talked about the threats to their school varied by school racial composition. Although we were unable to assess through our interviews whether SROs' actions were also shaped by the racial composition of the schools, it would stand to reason that SROs are likely to act differently based on the different types of threats they perceive. Generally, SROs understood threats across three broad categories: student-based, intruder-based, and environment-based threats. However, there were clear distinctions in which of these potential threats were of greatest concern

### **Student-Based Threat**

The first broad category of threats conceptualized by SROs focused on students. Student-based threat spanned a few thematic categories. SROs suggested that student aggression—threatening or physical behavior from a student towards another student, staff or the SRO themselves—was a potential threat to the school. SROs discussed aggression between students as being the most common form of student-based threat, though physical aggression towards school personnel was seen as the most serious form. SROs in both settings also mentioned substance use, student self-harm, and bringing weapons to school as potential threats. Generally, SROs described student-based threat as a certainty, not a possibility. These SROs described the school environment as tense and chaotic, wherein school personnel were at risk of losing control of the students at any given moment:

The student body, I would say for the most part, they have behavior issues. It's a public school. Majority of the kids don't have good upbringing. They know they can get away with stuff in the school. They know exactly that the school ... The school system has really gone downhill over the last several years. I mean, it's to the point where it's, I'll be honest with you, it's a joke. There's no education as much as there is behavior management. That's all schools are anymore.

The SROs tended to identify students' poor upbringing or other cultural and family deficits as the reason for violence and aggression. Though neither students' race nor ethnicity was explicitly mentioned, the SRO does refer to family breakdown, a common racialized trope (e.g., Moynihan 1965; see Muhammad 2011).

The SROs' descriptions of student threats often located the source of threat within individual students who were beyond control; they discussed the threats that come from "kids who create chaos":

Well, I guess one of the difficult things is for me is in a public-school setting, in a public-school district, has a no expel policy is to see kids who create chaos, who create concern in the building, but they don't do anything with them.

SROs suggested that the behaviors of students who "create chaos" are the result of multiple factors, including the characteristics of the surrounding community, a failure of parents to effectively instill virtue and value in their children, and an ever-lenient school system that has become less about education and more about managing behavior. Again, although the SROs did not explicitly mention race, the rationale they gave can easily be read as racially-coded language. Another SRO explained how chaos in the schools is a result of students' deficits:

But majority of the time is we're having to deal with out-of-control kids and kids who are very disrespectful and don't know how to function properly in society... My role in the school is shaped because of the fact that being that it's tense and chaotic, I have to constantly keep my eyes on and trying to keep things broken up or try to keep people from ... I try to educate them on if somebody disrespects you, the solution isn't to go up and punch 'em in the face. We're trying to keep that ... Conflict resolution skills ... They have no conflict resolution skills. It's violence. That's it.

The SRO's articulation of students responding to disrespect with violence and their lack of conflict resolution skills mirrors cultural codes espoused by low-income communities of color that are structurally barred from participating in the economy of broader society (Anderson, 1994). These cultural codes are inextricably tied into race and socioeconomic status, suggesting that these demographic features likely shaped SROs' perceptions about exactly which students were the ones causing chaos and lacking conflict resolution skills.

### **Intruder-Based Threat**

A second major type of threat that SROs discussed was intruder-based threat. At times, SROs described a potential intruder as a shooter ready to enter the school building and cause widespread harm to staff and students. At other times, SROs described intruders as those whose presence was unwarranted, but it was unknown if the individual's intent was to cause imminent harm. Regardless of whether the intruder was defined as a school shooter or otherwise, SROs viewed intruders as a potential threat to students and school personnel. SROs expressed fewer concerns about intruder-based threat than student-based threats. Even though the SROs primarily discussed students as the main source of threat, they did take the potential for a school shooter seriously:

Whenever a kid asks me something like that, I make sure I explain this is why this ...  
"Why do you have to carry a gun in here." "Because, if someone else comes through one of these doors with a gun, I need to be able to deal with that and not run. I'm not running. I need to deal with that to keep you safe."

However, the SROs were careful not to overestimate the likelihood of intruder-based threat occurring:

So, yeah people start talking about school safety and police officers policing the schools and threats to a school campus... The first thing that pops in their mind is a school shooting. You know, somebody coming in with a gun shooting people. Yeah, sure that's a threat, but on a day to day basis, that's not imminent threat. That's not an immediate threat to the campus, or the kids, or the staff or me.

In short, the SROs briefly mentioned protecting students from school shooters and intruders, but were much more concerned about student-based threats.

### **Environment-Based Threat**

Environment-based threats are the third category of threats that the SROs identified. This category of threats consists of issues that emanated from the surroundings, either immediate or the community context, and that posed some type of potential danger for school personnel or students. SROs identified different aspects of the school grounds that could pose dangers, such as having a school building located on a busy road, or the risk of severe weather. SROs at times suggested individuals from the school community (other than students) may pose potential danger. For example, SROs brought up the potential to encounter irate parents who may require SRO intervention. SROs also expressed concern about individuals from the community who may wander onto the grounds despite being unaffiliated with the school, and discussed the need to redirect them away from the school.

SROs rarely discussed environment-based threats, focusing on environment-based threats less than either two other threat categories. When they did discuss environment-based threats, they often involved the possibility of dealing with irate parents: “a lot of times we’ll get parents coming in here that are upset or irate with the school, and then we’ll have to step in and escort them out maybe.” SROs discussed irate parents as an occasional occurrence, and one that required SROs to step in and potentially escort the parent out of the school.

Other environment-based threats that the SROs mentioned included reckless drivers in the parking lot and strangers wandering onto the school campus: “We had a couple weeks ago a guy living in a car in the back parking lot. I had to get that towed off. That’s about it.” Some SROs reported the importance of taking stock of the school campus surroundings to lookout for

community members that were occupying space on school grounds, but had no intention of entering the school building. However, the SROs did not address these environment-based threats in detail, but rather mentioned them as threats that were infrequent and uncommon, though still possible.

We find it unsurprising that we saw relatively less concern about environment-based threats. This is because, like their concern about intruders, concern about environment-based threat is rooted in a focus on protecting vulnerable students from outside forces that may harm them, a perspective that contrasts sharply with the SROs' vision of responsibility and threat among the primarily low-income youth of color they work with, which appeared to motivate their overwhelming concern with student-based threats.

### **Cross-School Comparisons**

We also examined within-district differences by schools' racial composition. To accomplish this, we identified the schools within the district in the highest and lowest quartiles of the percent of White students and reanalyzed the data using only these schools, making comparisons between schools in the top and bottom quartiles of percent White students.

Within the district, the sample of bottom quartile White schools had an average of 33% White students, whereas the top quartile had an average of 56% White students. The SROs in the two quartiles had quite different understandings of the threats to their schools. Although student-based threats were the most salient threat for both groups of schools (there were again only passing comments about intruder-based threats), these threats were explained quite differently in terms of both the forms that they took and the reasons for the threats. Specifically, in the top quartile White schools, SROs were primarily concerned about disruptive behaviors and rule violations, with little concern about criminal behaviors from students. Even these potential

criminal behaviors, though, were explained as resulting from mental health issues or the heightened emotional states that occur in adolescence. In the bottom quartile White schools, on the other hand, SROs considered weapons, violence, and more serious (criminal) behavior as the primary student-based threats to the schools, and explained these threats largely in terms of the “troubled” neighborhoods and families that the students came from. They also were concerned about community violence encroaching onto the school campus. These findings suggest that within the district, SROs understood threats differently according to the racial composition of their own schools, which may in turn affect their roles and responsibilities within the schools.

## Conclusion

Although SROs have been common in schools for decades, research on their impacts on students and schools is still growing. This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the impacts of SROs on school climate and suspension rates with particular attention to differences by race (i.e., Black and White) and school context (i.e., school size, percent Black, and percent FRPL eligible). The results of a series of school fixed effects models indicated that adding SROs to schools was not consistently related to either beneficial or detrimental outcomes related to school climate or suspension rates. Instead, some outcomes improved, others worsened, and others showed no statistically significant change attributable to implementing SROs. Moreover, the relationship between implementing SROs and changes in the various outcomes included in this study often—but not always—depended on measures of school context, indicating that implementing SROs was related to the outcomes differently consistent across schools.

Some insight into these dynamics is offered by the study's qualitative findings. First, SROs in this sample were clearly concerned about preventing crime and misbehavior, focusing on maintaining a presence in spaces where they thought trouble might occur while simultaneously being unpredictable in their location so that potential offenders would never be able to know exactly where the officer would be—or more importantly—would not be stationed. For the most part, the sorts of problem behaviors that SROs were concerned about were those that might be committed by students including fighting, drugs, rule violations, and a variety of other potential problem behaviors. However, the SROs did not understand the threats to the school in the same way across schools. In schools with larger percentages of White students, SROs were mostly concerned about rule violations and viewed misbehavior as part of a

normative part of adolescent development. In contrast, SROs in schools with the smallest percentages of White students were most concerned about violent and criminal behaviors and attributed these potential threats to the students' poor upbringings, families, and communities, using some language that reflected racial tropes about Black people.

Together, these findings point to the need for both policymakers and practitioners to consider local needs and strategies as they think about issues related to school safety, climate, discipline, and SROs. If one assumes that—in line with the findings from this study as well as prior research—the effect of implementing SROs is likely to differ across different schools, then considering a school's particular needs and assets in conjunction with the decision about whether to implement SROs is likely to be a beneficial approach for maximizing benefits and minimizing drawbacks. It is also possible that some of the benefits of SROs (e.g., improving student-adult relationships) may be accomplished by hiring other professionals such as school social workers that may not bring the same potential drawbacks that SROs might. Of course, SROs have particular training and abilities in law enforcement that other school-based professionals do not, so schools ought to weigh carefully what their needs are.

Schools considering adding SROs are likely to benefit from clearly defining and articulating their needs, being specific about whether and how SROs will or will not address those needs, designing a strategy for SROs' roles and activities that will target the expressed needs and avoiding mission creep, and considering what other solutions besides or in addition to SROs might help the schools achieve their goals. When the needs have been fully addressed, schools then ought to consider whether the strategies they have chosen to use are still needed. Incorporating the voice of multiple stakeholders in these decision-making processes (e.g.,

teachers, students, parents, staff) is likely to be beneficial for identifying potential unintended negative consequences, generating buy-in, and ensuring equitable outcomes.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be noted when considering its internal and external validity. First, the decision to implement SROs in this school district is largely made at the school level, meaning that schools that decided to implement SROs are those that considered having an SRO an important need. This means that schools that implemented SROs are likely to be quite different from those that did not. Because the fixed effects modeling approach used in this study analyzes within-school change, the findings are most applicable to those schools that implemented SROs rather than those that did not. Second, the quantitative findings are based on annual data that may mask meaningful changes within a single school year. Third, the coefficients that estimate the relationship between SRO implementation and the variety of outcomes included in this study are based on a small number of schools that implemented SRO during the timeframe for which the data used in this study were available. This is particularly true for the school climate outcomes that were restricted to a smaller set of years due to changes in the survey instrument. Fourth, to our knowledge, the measures of various dimensions of school climate did not come from validated instruments and thus may not reflect the best measurement of school climate that exists. Fifth, individual-level data were not available for this study, precluding us from estimating within-school differences aside from those using data aggregated by subgroup. There is likely important variability that is lost because of this limitation.

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