“A social worker…teacher…principal -- we’re everybody”: The School Police Officer Role in Schools

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Abstract

The current study explored the experiences and activities of school resource officers (SROs) in an urban school district. Twenty-eight SROs completed a survey assessing their roles in schools and a focus group explored how the SROs build relationships with students and the types of student concerns they help resolve. Themes from the focus group included the SROs' attempts to navigate change in policies and procedures in the school system; the community contexts of the school system and its impact on SRO duties; and role ambiguity, including differences in how SROs perceived their roles within schools compared to how others saw them. Study findings call attention to underlying tensions between SROs and positive youth development in an era where SRO presence in schools is highly debated.

Keywords: school resource officers, school policing, school safety, student support

“A social worker…teacher…principal -- we’re everybody”: The School Police Officer Role in Schools

Despite ongoing controversy about police officers unnecessarily using deadly force in national headlines continues, including the murder of 16-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant who called for help after being threatened by peers, the securitization of educational spaces (Madfis et al., 2021; Turner & Beneke, 2020), has become increasingly common. School Police Officers or School Resource Officers (SROs) are defined by the United States Department of Justice (2021) as "sworn law enforcement officers responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools.” In addition to the incidents in the broader community, there have also been instances in the media of SROs using unnecessary force and taking drastic measures such as the officer in North Carolina middle school who treated a student with undue aggression (Lamb, 2021) and the officer in Florida who zip tied the wrists of a 6-year-old and arrested her after she threw a tantrum (Zaveri, 2020). SROs presence in schools has increased over time with almost half of schools in the United States having an assigned officer (Musu-Gillette, 2018). Over 72% of high schools and 36% of elementary schools have an SRO (Institute of Education Science, 2019). Yet, placement in schools has yielded mixed outcomes and raised some concerns about the securitization of educational spaces for students (Edwards, 2021; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Madfis et al., 2021). Some studies have found that SROs are associated with various aspects of school climate including higher perceptions of safety for students (Curran et al., 2021; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2018). However, Black students have been found to feel less safe in schools with SROs (Lacoe, 2015; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2018; Theriot & Orme, 2016). Other studies demonstrate an overall heightened sense of danger for students in schools with SROs (Curran et al., 2021) and that SRO presence may be associated with higher levels of exclusionary discipline

(Fisher & Hennessy, 2016) and increased reports of crime (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). These negative findings call into question the securitization of schools and the increase in SROs that has been a response to “exaggerated fears and moral panics over youth violence” and other political and societal discourses (Madfis et al., 2021, p. 191). Restorative justice practices (Turner & Beneke, 2020), school-based mental health, and evidence-based violence prevention programs that expand the definition of school safety to center race and intersectional identities (Edwards, 2021) are thought to be important alternatives to the current approach to school policing and disciplining (Madis et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2021).

Some of the mixed evidence supporting or refuting claims regarding the benefits of officer placement in schools may have to do with officers serving in diverse and sometimes ambiguous roles. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) identifies the roles of SROs as teachers, informal counselors as well as law enforcement officers (NASRO, n.d.). When SROs enact responsibilities that fall under all three types of roles, they are considered to be implementing a “full triad” model. In practice, the expectations for SRO positions are often unclear to both SROs and school community members or variable depending upon school assignment or administrator. In addition, SROs are often called upon for discipline issues even when no law has been broken (Counts et al., 2018; Curran et al., 2019; Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Pigott et al., 2018). This role ambiguity may lead to officers feeling less clear on their job function and expectations and create conflict when SROs and school community members have differing views regarding their roles. Such a situation may in turn create more leeway for them to use their authority in ways that are inappropriate, unjustified, or prone to bias enactment. SRO role ambiguity has particular implications for Black students, as they disproportionately report unfair treatment during interactions with law enforcement (Dennison &

Finkeldey, 2021). It is critical to ensure that students' needs, and especially the needs of Black students, are guiding SRO training and work expectations. Importantly, SROs have reported feeling equipped to work with adolescents, but were less likely than "beat or area patrol officers" to report understanding why Black youth may not trust police (Fix et al., 2021).

There is a proliferation of data on outcomes associated with SROs in schools, but less is known about the daily work experiences of SROs. The current study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the role of SROs in schools from their own perspective. Using mixed methods, including online survey responses and qualitative data collected during a focus group with SROs, the present study explores how officers make meaning of their role in the sociocultural context of the schools and neighborhoods in which their work. Our findings yield insights into officer perspectives and have implications for future research and practice to better define the SRO role in schools.

History and Roles of SROs

Policy changes and increases in mass shootings have been attributed to the increase in SROs (Counts et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2018; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Specifically, legislation such as the Safe Schools Act of 1994 and an amendment in 1998 to the Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, which provided funding to Department of Justice's "Cops in Schools" grant program, have contributed to the growth of police officers assigned to work in school buildings (Counts et al., 2018). Initially, officers who worked in schools were most often supervised by a law enforcement agency, but shifts in roles, policies, and expectations resulted in more officers now being supervised by school or district level-administrators (Counts et al., 2018). However, there is regional variation, and overall only 4% of officers (n = 456) in a recent statewide study

of SROs reported being employed by a school system and the remaining officers working for either a Sheriff's department or police department (Glenn et al., 2019).

NASRO makes recommendations for SRO training and provides trainings as well; however, many SROs receive no formal training, and few states even have certification requirements for officers (Counts et al., 2018; USDOE, 2021). This lack of clear certification requirements and formal training may contribute to role ambiguity (Ryan et al., 2018). In one survey of SROs, many respondents reported that additional training before starting their job and better access to training would have been useful (Glenn et al., 2019). Further, in interviews with SROs and other school security professionals, they reported little training on trauma-informed approaches to working with students (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021).

Few studies have used qualitative or mixed-methods to examine the role of SROs in school. Forber-Pratt and colleagues (2021) explored how SROs and school security professionals engaged in trauma-informed practices and found that officers view their roles as extending beyond the NASRO triad to also include roles such as mentoring and treating students like family. In another qualitative study of 45 SROs in a large urban school district, the majority of officers reported serving in a law enforcement role (91%), whereas 31% of officers also engaged in educator activities and 62% acted as informal counselors (Ghavami et al., 2021). Specific responsibilities included involvement in managing crime (93%), interpersonal conflict (78%), mental health issues (60%), and social media threats (73%) (Ghavami et al., 2021). In contrast, a different found that a majority (79%) of SROs representing 50 schools across two school districts reported minimal involvement in disciplining students though qualitative findings suggested that they were often involved in "nuanced ways" (Curran et al., 2019, p. 33). Of note, one mixed-methods study using survey, interview, and observational data found that SROs in urban schools

and high schools were more likely to serve in the traditional law enforcement role, though officers whose roles aligned most with the community policing model (e.g., building relationships, partnerships, addressing community issues) engaged in more service, mentoring, and teaching (Rhodes, 2019, p. 498).

As one would expect, the various SRO roles are associated with different outcomes. A study utilizing national, longitudinal data examining SROs roles characterized as "low engagement" (i.e., officers taking on minimal responsibilities in schools), "reactionary" (i.e., those who primarily engaged in school discipline and law enforcement responsibilities), or "full-triad" (i.e., NASRO responsibilities) found that the reactionary role was associated with increased nonserious violent and property crimes (Fisher & Devlin, 2020). Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) also found that SROs in the law enforcement role (i.e., reactionary) recorded more crimes than schools without SROs. When officers are following the NASRO "triad" model of 1) teaching, 2) mentoring, and 3) informal counseling, schools report increases in reported crimes by students but lower instances of nonserious violent crimes, like property theft. Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) theorized that the full-triad model of SRO results in deeper relationships with students which may lead to students feeling more comfortable with SROs, and as such are more likely to disclose crimes or go to an SRO for support when there is an issue. These findings speak to how the varied roles of an SRO can have a differential impact on a school community.

Current Study

The current study adds to existing research that examines the role of SROs in schools. Through the use of survey and focus group data, the current study sought to explore the daily experiences and activities of school police in an urban school district. We use the term *school police* to describe participants in our study because this was the official title of the SROs in the

study population. Survey data (*n* = 28) were used to examine perceptions of the daily activities that school police should be engaging in, the skills and expertise that are needed in a trained school police officer, and the personal characteristics they believed were essential for school police officers to have in order to be successful in promoting school safety and positive youth outcomes. A focus group (*n* = 5) with a smaller sub-sample of school police was held to better understand how they execute the daily activities of their job, including how they resolve problems in the school building and how they build relationships with students. The focus group also sought to understand the supports and challenges school police face in effectively executing their job responsibilities.

Method

Context

This study took place during the evaluation of the Coping Power in the City (CPIC) intervention (Thomas et al., 2021). CPIC was a comprehensive and multi-component, contextually adapted, evidence-based intervention with the goal of increasing safety and reducing rates of violence, discipline problems, and related mental health concerns in an urban school district. One of the central aims of the CPIC project was to provide a training series that would promote school police officers' knowledge and skills related to working effectively with adolescents in urban schools. The following trainings were offered to school police officers: (1) Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA; Kingston et al., 2009), (2) threat assessment and related de-escalation techniques in schools (Cornell et al., 2009); and (3) racial literacy training in the context of serving and building positive relationships with urban African American adolescents (Stevenson, 2014). All data from this study were collected following these trainings.

Sample

All school police officers in the partnering school district (*n* = 117) were eligible to participate in the survey and focus group, but only 84 officers were physically present at the training during which active recruitment for survey and focus group participation took place. The partnering urban school district was located in the Mid-Atlantic region and annually serves approximately 80,000 students in primary and secondary schools, employing over 5,000 teachers. The student population for the district was 83% African American, 7% Hispanic, and 5% English language learners, and the percentage of students receiving reduced or free-meals, indicator of student socioeconomic status, was 84%. The force was created in the early 1990s and officers serve both primary and secondary schools. Officers on the School Police Force (SPF) who responded to the School Police Survey (*N* = 28) were 28.6% female (8 officers); the remainder identified as male (see table 1 for sample demographics). Ages were primarily between 41-60 years old (75%), and no officers identified as 30 years old or younger. Officers primarily either grew up (42.9%), currently lived (3.6%), or both grew up and currently lived (35.7%) in the school district at the time of the survey. Most officers had been in the profession for nearly a decade or more; 78.6% indicated service as a school police officer for nine or more years. Six officers from the SPF participated in the focus group. All focus group participants were Black or African American, three were male, and three were female. Of those officers who participated in the focus group and answered the online survey (*n* = 5), all five officers reported being over age 40. All five reported growing up in the school district, and three reported still living there. All reported having been in law enforcement as a school police officer for 9 or more years.

Procedure

Survey data was collected from the SPF officers during project sponsored trainings that were conducted in spring 2016 and fall 2017 as well as a separate group of officers that engaged in the focus group described below in fall 2018. The focus group was conducted with school police officers in November 2018 at the school district's headquarters building in a private room during regular workday hours. The focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes. All study materials received approval from the authors' institutional review board (IRB#4437).

Measures

For the school officer survey, items were drawn from the Law Enforcement Priorities measure (Lambert & McGinty, 2002). The Law Enforcement Priorities measure is used to assess officers' perceived job roles in schools and the necessary skills and characteristics of a school police officer to be effective in his or her job. Items asked about priority *job roles* (How much of a priority should it be for school police to engage in the following roles? - e.g., participate in court proceedings pertaining to law violations on school) and officer priority *characteristics* (What characteristics do you believe are important for school police officers to have in order to be successful in promoting school safety and positive youth outcomes in <removed for confidentiality> schools? – e.g., being a strong disciplinarian). Response options on the job roles and characteristics scales ranged from 1 (Not a priority) to 5 (Essential). Cronbach's alpha for the job roles scale was $\alpha = .803$ and for the characteristics scale was $\alpha = .796$.

The focus group protocol was designed to understand how the school police officers connect and build relationships with students; the types of problems they are called in to resolve; their existing training landscape, including requirements, supports, and partners in place; and the feasibility and acceptability of training opportunities that could be offered in the future. For

example, participants were asked questions such as: "*What is a typical day like for a school police officer in your school district?*," "*How do you and your fellow officers reach out to connect to and build relationships with students?*" and "*What are some examples of student behaviors and incidents that you are called on to respond to in your school?*" Follow-up probing questions were used to elicit a full and detailed description of their role in the school building.

Analysis

For quantitative results presented, responses were dichotomized such that the lower range (1-2) were grouped and the upper range (3-5) were grouped. Lower range scores indicated that participant did not consider the mentioned role or personal characteristics as having a high priority in their profession, whereas upper range scores indicated that the participant considered the mentioned role or personal characteristics as being a high priority in their profession. Frequencies (n) and percentages were then tabled at the item-level. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Individually, team members individually read the focus group transcript three times, flagged compelling comments, and noted emerging themes in the margins or in a shared separate document. The team members then met to discuss the emerging themes they individually constructed. Related themes were grouped together into categories and further discussed, noting patterns and relationships. As analysis proceeded, a final list of themes and subcategories were agreed upon by the team.

Results

Descriptive results from the survey of SPF officers are presented in Table 2. Analysis of the focus group transcript data provided further insight into the study sample school police officers' perceptions for their work environment and job roles. The officers discussed the history of policing within the school system; the community, social, and physical context of the school

system; their perceptions of the challenges within the system; and how their perceptions of their roles within schools compare to how others see them. Data are organized according to emergent themes, with direct quotes that exemplify these themes. Qualitative themes are further corroborated by specific findings from the SPF survey.

Community, Social, and Physical Context

In the focus groups, officers discussed the changes that have occurred in the physical zoning of schools in their district. Over the years, many changes had been made to the physical boundaries for student placement in neighborhood schools. The officers discussed how these changes to zoning influenced the dynamics both between groups of students within the schools and between students and community members. For example, one officer expressed that middle school aged students may not be developmentally ready to attend a school outside of their neighborhood. Another officer described a situation where the race and ethnicity of students was vastly different from that of the school's surrounding community. In her words:

> So my school is in [removed]. Very, very racist neighborhood. And there have been several run ins in the neighborhood with children in the community. Which is one reason why [removed] didn't want these kids back up in their neighborhood. Because they said they goin come up here, they goin act like animals, they goin tear up our stuff, they goin do blah-blah-blah-blah. And they still stuck in their racist mentality.

She went on to share:

> I've had situations as far as, community members have tried to assault our students, and got the cowboy stuff beat outta them. Because the kids were in a fight against each other, right? When the neighborhood guys came out and tried to get in it against our kids and our kids band up.

Some officers agreed that students would be better off going to school in their own community by saying, “you don't have no problems there because everybody go there lives in the community. Start busing Black kids in [removed], all hell would break loose over there.” In contrast, a few other officers felt that when students are mature enough, they should be able to, “get out and see different.” In assessing the importance of their own racial and ethnic match with their students, and living in the same community they serve, among the broader sample of officers who responded to the survey, 73% of officers felt it was a priority for school police officers to live in the community served, and 45% agreed that it was important for school police officers to be the same race or ethnicity as the majority of the students in their school. 100% of officers, however, related that it was a priority for school police officers to be sensitive to the cultural differences present in their school communities.

Navigating Change in the Sociocultural Context

Woven into the conversation about the role of the school police officers were references to the history of the relationship between the school police force and the school system. The officers described how, in the past, there was a lot more freedom in how they were able to execute their jobs. They described feeling limited or restricted by recent policies related to their role. Past relational practices like giving a student a ride home from school or taking a student to McDonald’s are now considered contrary to policy. One officer described it this way:

> We've been given instructions and rules on when our job duties and all that ... long time ago, you might could do whatever. But now, they don't want us to do all of that. They want us to stay in our lane. And so you only gotta tell me once to stay in my lane, and that's where I'ma stay.

Officers expressed frustration with these new polices and an almost nostalgic yearning for the past. Several officers provided anecdotes about their fondness and respect for longstanding school administrators as compared to newer, younger administrators. For example, one participant told a story about an older White female school principal walking through a neighborhood with high crime rates to a student's house without any fear because she had personally taught many of the residents. When asked about this behavior, the principal simply said, "Every drug dealer in this neighborhood, I taught. I wish one of them would." Participants described a "great change" in the way newer administrators and teachers relate to their school communities. As one participant stated, "People don't understand, that's what's missing in the schools. You got teachers and principals that don't understand where the hell they work at. As you say, they don't know their clients. You don't know your clients." Similarly, in the survey, officers endorsed at high levels that having compassion about the difficulties that young people face and being concerned about the lives of young people was a high priority in order to be successful in promoting school safety and positive youth outcomes. Officers also endorsed at high levels and that mentoring students and supporting student and families' access to community services when needed was an essential aspect of their job.

Perceptions of Problems in Schools

Over the course of the focus group, officers spent a substantial amount of time sharing their thoughts about greater problems in the schools that impact the daily realities of their job. Many of their criticisms were directed at principals and classroom teachers in their schools. Participants felt some school staff lacked control or the ability to manage challenging student behavior in their classrooms. This was consistent with survey findings, which showed that 77% felt it was not a priority or was a low priority to provide assistance to teachers in handling

classroom discipline issues as they arise. Officers lamented that when things got out of their control, the school police are called in. For example, one officer provided this story:

> The principal tells the secretary to tell the police to come over, get the kid. So now, we have a procedure in communication. "So what is he doing?" "Oh, he running around the school." "Did you contact the parent?" "Oh, we're going to but I was told to call [you]." Then sometimes I slip. I say, "Well, what you want the school police to do?" "Come get him up outta here." "And take him where?"

Participants perceived that many school staff either lacked empathy for students' personal situations or were not interested in addressing the root causes of their challenging behaviors. 100% of the school police officers in our sample, in contrast, believed that these sorts of characteristics (i.e., being able to nonjudgmentally relate students, display compassion, be friendly, and a good listener) were essential to their roles. Officers described trying to help students confront underlying challenges that posed obstacles to their school success. One story included a student who had missed a lot of school due to having baby and came back to school to try to graduate.

> So [removed] goes and talks to the teacher and says, "What can we do to help this girl get caught up? You know, she had a baby. We can try to get her done." He said, "Oh, nothing." He said, "You didn't know if she had a baby?" He said, "Well, I don't want to know her like that." … And that's the problem. They just wanna teach them but don't understand it comes with a lot more baggage. It comes with a lot more baggage.

Another poignant example of the need for teachers to understand the root causes of students' challenging behaviors was provided by a male officer,

> She wasn't just fighting to be fighting. She was fighting because they was talking about her, because she would come to school clothes messed up. And no one in the school, because all the teachers down at [removed] come from [removed local college name], no one in the school could relate to this young girl. No one could deal with her. No one knew what she was going through, no one knew what she came through.

In general, participants felt that teachers and school staff need to do more for their students, "It gots to start there. It has to start there in the school with the people that's teaching them in the school." Instead of devoting their time and effort to relationship building with students, the officers felt that school staff at times made decisions that further contributed to safety concerns, and perhaps made their jobs more challenging. One officer offered the following example:

> So during lunch times, the students are allowed to leave out of the cafeteria, supposedly to the rear parking lot, and to hang out on the athletic fields. Which gives them a path to walk off the campus, go to McDonald's, go to other locations. So my mindset is, now I'm gonna have the robbery calls come in. And we're gonna have the illicit activity if we're not on top of it. Gambling, other things they get into. So I place myself out there in that area, so I can gauge and watch, and put my hands on stuff before it even kicks off.

While this officer was expressing genuine concerns about the implications of the administrator's decision making, the assumption that students will commit crimes in the community also reveals deficit thinking about the character of students in their care.

Role Ambiguity

One of the goals of the focus group was to understand the daily duties of the school police force. In analyzing the qualitative data, we began to uncover differences in how they

perceive their role compared to how others see it. We delineate below how the officers see their role in the school and how they believe students, administrators, teachers, and parents see it.

How Officers See Themselves

Participants described many of the activities they engage in daily. Their range of tasks and responsibilities depended upon the principal at their assigned school who called on them for various needs. These needs could include responding to fights, deescalating arguments between students, deescalating situations between students and teachers, and deterring disruptive student behavior. Officers shared that they are often reactive to the demands of each day as opposed to going in with specific goals for each day. They expressed shared resentment about the ambiguity and expansiveness of their roles, "We get stolen car. It could be something going on at home, common assaults, aggravated assaults, everything you can name of. We a police officer. We are a social worker. We are the teacher. We can be the principal. We're everybody."

Officers shared that they felt one of their main tasks was to build relationships with students. They did this by listening to them and putting themselves in their students' shoes. One officer stated, "put yourself in the situation that the children is in. You know, know what these children go through in the morning, know what they go through in the afternoon... you can't build a relationship with them when you put yourself on your high horse." Officers explained that students know when adults are being disingenuous with them stating that, "Children can see through phoniness. You know, when you're talking to children, you have to have empathy with them from the beginning." The officer went to explain this further,

> And they will call you out. See, you can be from suburban and come in urban, think you can [expletive] with them. "aw, no. He phony. She phony as I don't know what. But that dude

right there? Homeboy keep it real." And until you establish that respectful relationship, because you can't [expletive meaning be fake with] these kids this day and time.

Officers prioritize building relationships with students, which in turn helps these officers address problems in the school. One officer recounted how the strong relationship he built with a student helped get to the root cause of her frequent conflicts with students:

> …. you gotta start building those type of relationships with these kids, because they gonna open up to you. They gon do what they gotta do, and then later on when they get grown, they will find you out, sort you out, and say, "thank you, I would not be here if it wasn't for you." So that's why you gotta build those relationships.

This sentiment was also reflected in the counselor-like personal characteristics they endorsed at high levels as essential in Table 2 (e.g., ability to relate to students, be a good listener, be concerned about young people, be compassionate, be friendly).

How Officers Think Students See School Police

Participants discussed the positive and negative ways students view them. First, because their uniform is very similar to the local city police force uniform, officers felt that many students are initially wary or agitated by their presence in the school: "as soon as they see this blue uniform it makes them more agitated" and "some of the kids just don't want to talk to the police." However, participants shared that with relationship building and consistent interactions with students, students start to trust them more. "You have kids in the school that would say, you the only police officer I like. I don't like the rest of them police officers. But I like you." Officers described building relationships with students rooted in trust and support:

> I do have students that come visit me regularly, like daily, to talk about whatever. Sometimes it's not even anything. But they'll seek me out to say, "Officer [removed], you

> know, last night was a good night." Whatever, whatever. Or, "Officer [removed], this what I heard, it's gon be a fight over on [removed]." Or, "Officer [removed], such and such and such and such can hurt me. Can you tell her to leave me alone?"

Another participant confirmed the strong relationally supportive, rather than disciplinary, presence of school police officers within their respective communities. This participant retold a story about how an unknown youth came to her school to start a fight with one of the students at her school. The officer sat down with the youth and found out what school she went to. The officer called the school police officer at that school, explained the situation, and escorted the student back to her home school. She shared, "that had more of an effect than me putting handcuffs on her and arresting her, because next she's gotta deal with [fellow officer], who's waiting for her on the other side." This was consistent with findings from the SFP survey, where officers less frequently endorsed that it was a priority to be in a punitive or disciplinary role in relation to students (relative to their endorsement of other roles and characteristics). Nearly 20% indicated that investigating violations and arresting students was not a priority or was a low priority in their role and the same percent set monitoring halls, parking lots, and other areas as a low- or non-priority. In addition, 77% indicated it was a low- or non-priority to handle classroom discipline issues, and 24% endorsed being a strong disciplinarian was a low- or non-priority.

How Officers Think Administrators and Teachers See School Police

Officers noted many reasons they are called in to assist with students. Many of these reasons do not pertain to crimes, rather to problems with classroom management or "unruly" students. As such, officers related being employed as a deterrent for negative student behaviors:

> I feel like they may try to use me to be like the Big Bad Wolf. "Officer [removed], can you come, because this boy got a lighter?" Like, it's not a crime to be in possession of a lighter.

> It's against the school rule, but it's not a crime. So why are you calling the police? Like what do you want me to do with him?"

One officer admitted that some principals, reaching a breaking point with students, come to them as a last resort. “So some principals, they'll be right there with you and fight the battle. Some, if it's the same kid, they just throw they hands up, ‘Go to school police, go to school police.’ How she was saying, come get this kid and scare them.” Of the perceived job roles listed in Table 2, school police officers were least likely to rate helping to handle such classroom discipline issues as essential to success in their role.

How Officers Think Parents See School Police

Officers also discussed their interactions with parents of students in the school system. Similar to teachers and administrators, parents also reached out to school police officers for duties outside of their job role.

> I got a parent call, 15 year old son don’t want to go to school. Said, “Ma’am, what you want the school police to do?” “I just need some help.” “Did you call for wraparound service.” She said, “well I called this.” She was telling me the places she called. I’m saying, okay she must know what she’s talking about. I got a number, and gave it to her. I said, “Ma’am, call this number.” It was a crisis hotline. I said, “call me back. If it works, we’ll see what’s next.”…But I felt kinda sorry. She at her wits end, maybe about to lose her job. Because her son, 15 years old out there selling crack, don’t want to go to school.

However, participants seemed to have empathy for parents of students and leveraged their relationships with students’ parents when problems came up in school. Nearly 100% of the school police officers in turn related that building relationships with parents and making community-based referrals for students and families were essential to their role. In dealing with a

fight at school, an officer described a situation where the student's mother was called to come pick up her daughter. The officer reflected that the student never got in trouble again at the school. Officers also shared that they did not think teachers and school administrators reach out to parents enough. One officer shared that he believes some school staff make incorrect assumptions about parent involvement, "But it's a lot of times, people feel that everybody don't have a parent. Just because Terry's a idiot in the class, and you call his mama, and she don't do nothing, don't mean you [can't] call my mama because my mama coming."

Discussion

Results from the survey and focus group with school police officers provided insight into the daily responsibilities and role of officers in this school district. Participants shared frustration about their role ambiguity and their use as a deterrent for negative student behavior. Participants also shared critiques of other school staff and their relationships with students.

Navigating the Community and Socio-Cultural Context

Participants discussed a range of issues in the community, social, and physical context that affects their role in schools. These issues are consistent with previous research conducted by Ghavami and colleagues (2021) which posits a bioecological model to illustrate how multiple contexts (e.g., community, historical) influence how school police officers enact their roles. Whereas in the Ghavami et al. (2021) study, officers perceived that mainly socioeconomic factors in the community context (i.e., the mesosystem) contributed to the student-related issues they experienced, officers in our study additionally highlighted the significance of race. Specifically, officers in our study shared negative perceptions of some neighborhoods where racist White residents did not want the Black students or officers present in the neighborhood because of their race and/or socioeconomic status, which they in turn related to a strained

relationship between the schools and neighborhoods. Although it is not exactly clear what caused neighborhood residents to have a negative view of the schools, school closures and zoning changes in urban areas are fairly common and can result in changes in the demographics of the schools versus neighborhood (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). Research also shows that gentrification (i.e., the process by which poorer neighborhoods improve housing and draw new business but displace current residents following White and higher-SES families' in-migration), does not necessarily result in integration of their children into neighborhood schools (Bischoff & Tach, 2018; Candipan, 2019). These factors could have contributed to the strained relationship that participants described. Whatever the contributing factors to such socio-cultural conflicts, school police officers in our sample related an importance in being attuned to the differences that caused them. Future research could further explore these mesosystem factors (e.g., school closures, school choice, redistricting), how they impact the job-related experiences of school police officers, and moreover, how they shape student and staff perceptions of a school's climate (Gaias et al., 2018).

During the focus group, participants discussed an evolving and tenuous relationship between the school police force and the school district, or the exosystem (Ghavami et al., 2021). Similar to certain officers in Ghavami et al.'s (2021) sample, our sample's participants expressed frustration about increased oversight of the strategies they employ to relate to and influence students. Within the sociopolitical context of our study's participants, tension related to top-down oversight has also emerged in reaction to controversial events concerning officers' ability to use more lethal forms of force to resolve potential school threats. Namely, two years before this study, a school police officer was arrested for assaulting a student who he thought was an intruder. Additionally, twice within the last decade a bill had been introduced before the local

city council that would allow school police to carry service weapons (i.e., firearms) in school buildings while classes are in session. Both times the bill failed to win enough votes from the city council amid protests from students, parents, and police force members. Though not discussed during the focus group, this context is relevant to consider in interpreting officers' perceptions of their roles in schools.

Role Ambiguity and Conflict

As demonstrated in previous research (Fisher & Devlin, 2020; Ghavami et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2019), officers in our study were called upon to perform multiple different roles within their school context. Our study uniquely highlighted the job role conflict (House & Rizzo, 1972) and tension that resulted when officers perceived their role differently than other school staff. Whereas the NASRO supports the implementation of responsibilities associated with the full-triad model (i.e. roles as an educator, counselor, and law enforcement officers; NASRO, n.d.) and emerging research details positive outcomes associated with the implementation of this full model (Devlin & Fisher, 2021; Fisher & Devlin, 2020), officers in our study expressed concerns about being viewed as an educator and some aspects of an informal counselor. Survey data from participants also showed that officers believe assisting teachers in handling classroom discipline issues is a low priority in their daily roles. Yet, in the focus groups, officers indicated their frustration that this was one of the primary ways that school staff want to employ them in the school building. These disciplinary responsibilities contradict NASRO's 2015 position statement which prohibits "SROs from becoming involved in formal school discipline situations that are the responsibility of school administrators." It is clear that more alignment in job roles and responsibilities is needed within this school district. It is possible this role misalignment is the result of widespread changes in the use of SROs throughout the country. The majority of the

officers in the current study had been working in their role for nine or more years. As a result, a districtwide understanding of their job description and role expectations may have shifted over time or not been clearly communicated to new school administrators. Regardless of the source of this role misalignment, the NASRO guidelines may serve as a useful reference point to determine what responsibilities school police officers should assume within their schools.

Moreover, although our study's officers identified the importance of skills related to roles spanning the full-triad, it is unclear if they received sufficient training to enact these roles. Officers recounted stories of building relationships with students and mentoring them and expressed the essential nature of these skills to their roles, but never referenced formal training in these skills. At times officers voiced pessimism about the relevance of the formalized trainings they received. This lack of formal training is consistent with study conclusions by Counts and colleagues (2018), who found a significant lack of regulation and training requirements for officers across the country. In their study, only six states provided specific criteria regarding the specific amount and type of training officers needed to work with students.

Finally, a recent study conducted in North Carolina middle schools found that having an SRO in the school is associated with harsher disciplinary punishments for students, specifically for Black, male, and students with disabilities (Sorensen et al., 2021). Described as a community policing model, the North Carolina study reported a positive effect of the presence of SROs on firearm-related offenses, but schools also observed overall increases in suspensions, expulsions, police referrals and arrests. Another study found the mere officer presence in a high school sample was associated with higher numbers of non-violent and serious violent incidents reported to police, while officer presence plus engagement in prevention tasks (e.g., mentoring, teaching) was associated with a lower number of non-violent incidents reported to police (Stevens et al.,

2021). Officers' work to solely address disciplinary issues may also contribute to deficit thinking about students and the criminalization of otherwise mundane student behaviors (Higgins et al., 2021). In this study, one officer described some students as troublemakers and described taking steps to prevent criminal behavior off school grounds. This instance may also illustrate the inherent tension, i.e. to at times apply a crime prevention lens to a youth development context, in the diverse roles SPOs assume. Providing additional training regarding positive youth development, cultural inclusion, and anti-bias training, and supports for officers to navigate the multiple (sometimes conflicting) roles they assume, may have potential to interrupt officers' deficit views and change the way that they respond to the behaviors of students in their care.

Limitations

The generalization and transferability of study findings are limited given the small number of participants and its unique demographics. All officers who participated in the focus group identified as Black or African American and were working in middle or high schools with majority Black or African American students. Furthermore, the majority of the police officers who completed the survey reported growing up in the school district that they served and over 25% of the sample was female. It is not clear if these officer characteristics are consistent with school resources officers in other school districts. In addition, even though the focus group protocol did not explicitly ask participants about their role in the school, this information emerged through discussion among participants and with the facilitator, which suggests the salience of the issue of role ambiguity for participating officers. Finally, as is the nature of focus groups, anonymity could not be provided to participants. Given that participants were known to each other and work in collaboration with each other, it is possible that officers may have felt limited in their ability to completely express themselves.

Conclusions

Our study's findings suggest the importance of clarity related to the roles, responsibilities, and trainings and supports for school police officers. A national discussion and movement to defund school police departments within the United States (Cowan et al., 2021) makes this historical moment an especially salient one to work towards greater clarity and consensus on the beneficial role of police in schools, if any. Given that roles of school police officers have changed over time and that misaligned perceptions of these roles contributes to job role conflict, greater agreement between districts, administrators, teachers, parents, and students related to schools' needs and school police officers' roles is critical. It must be addressed whether officers are appropriately trained to fulfill these roles, whether adequate training is feasible, or if these roles are better fulfilled by licensed clinical or counseling school staff. Guides to support this as an informed decision-making process are much needed in the field.

Diverting resources from school police towards alternatives to policing, such as hiring additional licensed counseling staff, may be a solution in many school communities to advance school safety. However, some school communities, including students and parents as decision-makers, view the presence of a school police officer as preferable in those cases where, by law, a police officer must be called, citing the importance of being able to turn to a compassionate school police officer who knows the students (Markovich, 2021) and who is well-trained in youth development, mental health, and de-escalation and crisis intervention techniques (Thomas, 2021), rather than a local police officer from outside the school. In cases where a school district and local community determine that school police are necessary on-site and that they should function at least in part in a counseling role, formal trainings of all officers to increase knowledge and skills will be essential (Counts et al., 2018). More specialized trainings may

equip SPOs with the skills necessary to sensitively and responsively navigate the complex sociocultural contexts that schools and their communities present. School police officers and administration should work towards a consensus on SPO roles and responsibilities at the school-level as well to communicate them clearly to students, staff, and parents within each school community.

With respect to SPOs' experiences and attitudes related to the specific roles they assume, we still have much to learn from research. While SPOs are gradually being encouraged to assume multiple roles (e.g., law enforcement, counselor, educator; NASRO, 2020) and emerging research suggests that school environments benefit when they do (e.g., (Fisher & Devlin, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021), it is unclear what SPOs think and feel about their evolving roles. Also unclear is the extent to which SPOs feel prepared to perform a wider range of professional activities associated with the full-triad model. Do they feel that it is feasible to perform all these roles within their contexts? If not, what are the barriers to implementation? How do they navigate possible role conflict that remains? Future research that examines these avenues of inquiry would help further deepen our understanding of SPOs' work-related experiences. Additionally, investigation related to which types of trainings would best prepare SPOs to enact a full-triad model of job responsibilities may help to bridge the skill gap that SPOs may encounter as they are expected to assume roles which require a more diverse skillset.

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Table 1. School Police Officer Demographics

	N (%)
Gender	
Male	20 (71.4)
Female	8 (28.6)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African American	25 (92.6)
Other	2 (7.4)
Age	
20-30 years old	0 (0.0)
31-40 years old	4 (14.3)
41-50 years old	14 (50.0)
51-60 years old	7 (25.0)
60+ years old	3 (10.7)
How many years have you worked as a school police officer?	
First year	1 (3.6)
1-3 years	1 (3.6)
4-8 years	4 (14.3)
9 or more years	22 (78.6)
How many years have you worked in law enforcement?	
First year	1 (3.6)
1-3 years	1 (3.6)
4-8 years	3 (10.7)
9 or more years	23 (82.1)
Do you live in <school district>?	
No, and I did not grow up in <school district>	5 (17.9)
No, but I grew up in <school district>	12 (42.9)
Yes, and I grew up in <school district>	10 (35.7)
Yes, but I did not grow up in <school district>	1 (3.6)
What is your combined household annual income level?	
Less than $45,000	1 (3.7)
$45,001-$60,000	7 (25.9)
$60,001-$80,000	4 (14.8)
$80,001-$100,000	3 (11.1)
$100,001+	12 (44.4)

Table 2. School Police Officer Prioritization of Job Roles and Personal Characteristics

	Not a priority or low priority
Job Roles	*N* (%)
Assist school administrator with investigation of delinquent activities (e.g., thefts, fights, drugs)	0 (0.0)
Provide consultation to principal on systemic changes to needed to improve school safety	1 (3.2)
Provide consultation and education to community members on safety issues	2 (6.4)
Investigate violations and make arrests	6 (19.4)
Assist with investigation of bomb threats and other emergency threats	0 (0.0)
Participate in court proceedings pertaining to law violations on school	1 (3.2)
Notify appropriate law enforcement agencies when violations occur	1 (3.2)
Provide assistance to teachers in handling classroom discipline issues as they arise	24 (77.4)
Mentor students or otherwise serve as a positive role model	0 (0.0)
Reach out to parents to build relationships	0 (0.0)
Monitor halls, parking lots, and other areas	6 (19.4)
Lead extracurricular activities (e.g., basketball coach)	4 (13.3.)
Make referrals for students and families to receive community services when needed	1 (3.2)
Personal Characteristics	*N* (%)
Ability to relate to students and school staff with in a non-judgmental way	0 (0.0)
Little tolerance for violations of school rules	4 (13.8)
Compassionate about difficulties young people face	0 (0.0)
Friendly with students	0 (0.0)
A good listener	0 (0.0)
Concerned about the lives young people	0 (0.0)
Sensitive to cultural differences	0 (0.0)
Resourceful in implementing new preventive strategies, programs, and ideas	1 (3.4)
Having a strong spiritual foundation	5 (17.2)
Living in the community served	8 (27.6)
Being of the same racial/ethnic background as the majority of the student population	16 (55.2)
Being a strong disciplinarian	7 (24.1)