



# UNDERSTANDING HOW AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS FROM THE MIDWEST MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT POLICE PRESENCE IN US SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

*Since the 1950s, police presence in American schools has increased in the form of school resource officers (SROs). Some schools have elected to staff SROs on their school grounds, while others have chosen to avoid police presence at their school site. It is poorly understood how school administrators make decisions about staffing SROs in their schools and what the perceived impact of the SROs is on the school environment. This research attempts to understand how school administrators make decisions about whether to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs in their schools. The recent historical use of police in American schools is reviewed while utilizing the policy streams model as a theoretical lens. This qualitative, interview-based case study examined how 10 midwestern k-12 school districts decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. Analyzed data offered comprehensive insights into the decision-making processes and key factors involved. Findings revealed the influence of student safety, emotional triggers, and budget considerations on administrators' choices regarding SRO presence.*

**Keywords:** arrest rates, school district administrators, mental health, policing, school resource officers

## Introduction

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, police presence in American society has extended into American public schools. Police who are embedded in schools are known as school resource officers (SROs). The presence of SROs is consonant with the general direction of law enforcement in the United States, and this approach to policing has resulted in one of the highest incarceration rates in the world as well as a growing visible presence of armed police officers in many areas of public life (Lurigio, 2024). The presence of SROs in American schools significantly influences the safety and security of educational environments, which directly impacts the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality education (Elfert, 2019). Providing safe environments for students to learn is a global concern. Therefore, understanding how American school administrators, who lead some of the most heavily policed schools in the world, make decisions about SRO presence may be instructive for education professionals in many countries who are attempting to provide equitable educational opportunities within secure school sites.

The decision-making processes regarding adding, eliminating, or maintaining SROs within school districts, however, are poorly understood. This qualitative, interview-based case study posed the following question: How do American school district administrators navigate decisions about whether to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs in their schools? The findings from this study are presented and suggest that the future of SROs in American schools is undecided, driven by local events and concerns rather than national policy initiatives.

The researchers convey a brief history of policing in American schools while employing Kingdon's (2003) policy streams model as a theoretical framework to gain insight into how the leaders in this study made decisions. Kingdon's policy streams model has been previously applied as a theoretical framework in other research to understand the progress of initiatives relating to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals in education (Sumida, 2017).

In light of the steady increase in police presence in American schools over the last few decades, it is still unknown how school administrators make decisions regarding the introduction of police presence into schools and what is driving the most recent increases of SROs in American public schools. Also unknown is the impact that SROs have on the perceived total school environment. Therefore, as policymakers consider responses to maintaining schools as safe and productive learning environments, it is important to understand why American schools are experiencing an overall increase in SROs, how administrators weigh decisions about whether to introduce SROs to their schools, and what impact SROs are perceived to have on the school environment. These are the issues that the research addresses.

### *The History of SROs and the Policy Streams Model*

The history of SROs in the United States originated in Flint, Michigan, during the 1950s with the goal of encouraging positive relationships between police officers and local youth, and reducing criminal activities (Scherer, 2022). Originally, a police presence in schools was viewed as a response to the perceived juvenile delinquency crisis of the 1950s (Gilbert, 1986). As the concept gained traction, other communities, cities, and states began incorporating SROs into their school districts in the ensuing decades (McKenna & Petrosino, 2022).

By the 1980s, juvenile delinquency, the original justification for SROs had become an outdated concept that no longer captured the problems that were perceived to have besieged American youth. The mid-1980s saw the introduction of the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program. The national DARE movement significantly increased the presence of SROs in schools, while raising the specter of illegal drugs as a new rationale for police presence in schools. Supported by federal funding (*Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act of 1989*, 1989), DARE became widely implemented in schools, providing money for substance abuse prevention education as well as the placement of SROs into local schools. Despite its popularity, academic studies revealed that DARE actually had minimal impact on reducing drug use among students (Ingraham, 2017). Nevertheless, the program persisted, with over \$1 billion allocated to it by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms over its lifetime (Bureau of Tobacco, Alcohol, Firearms, and Explosives, 2015). Because of DARE, the presence of police in schools proliferated across the United States with these school-based police officers being considered part of Reagan's "War on Drugs." Eventually, the DARE program came under increasing scrutiny, with critics leveling the claim that the program was used to desensitize children to the aggressive policing tactics that would become routine in the ensuing decades (Felker-Kantor, 2024). DARE lost US federal funding in 1998 and entered a period of contraction, eventually formally closing in 2009 with a mixed legacy. Multiple studies found no relationship between drug use and the presence of DARE officers, leading to questions about the effectiveness of the program (West & O'Neal, 2004).

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the American political consensus surrounding drugs as well as school safety had evolved in identifiable ways. The Obama administration, recognizing that the "War on Drugs" had failed, emphasized more lenient policies for those convicted of drug offenses (Porter, 2012). Simultaneously, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, the first of many mass school shootings in the United States, signaled a new and persistent problem in American schools. The Columbine mass shooting shattered the perception of schools as safe environments for students and signaled that school-based gun violence, rather than drugs,

would be the new primary justification for placing SROs in schools. The Center for Public Integrity (2021) reported that between 1999 and 2005, the federal government distributed over \$750 million in funding to hire almost 7,000 SROs nationwide in a stated attempt to stem the increasing wave of school shootings.

The history of SROs in American schools is readily understood by applying Kingdon's (2003) policy streams model as an explanation for how problems are understood, and relevant public policies are decided on and applied as solutions. The policy streams model suggests that there are three different streams: The problem stream, the politics stream, and the proposal stream. According to Kingdon (2003), if these three streams converge, a policy window is created that allows changes or advances in policymaking. All streams need to reach optimal conditions for policy change to occur.

In Kingdon's (2003) view, the problem stream reaches an optimal condition when "people define conditions as problems by comparing current conditions with their values concerning more ideal states of affairs" (p. 19). Justifications for increasing police presence, such as juvenile delinquency, the drug problem, and school shootings, are all focusing events. According to Kingdon (2003) problems "need a little push to get the attention of people in and around government" (pp. 94–95). Once a problem is identified and framed then, the political stream will activate, building broad recognition that an "issue" is understood as a "problem." This building of public pressure then creates the conditions for the proposal stream to solicit remedies for the problem in the form of policies. When all of this occurs within a relatively short timeframe, a policy window occurs that allows change.

If the policy streams model is applied to the case of SROs, it is clear that the problem stream in the 1950s was juvenile delinquency. The political stream consisted of public pressure to solve this perceived problem. The policy proposal stream was the introduction of SROs into schools. Once SROs were introduced into schools, the policy proposal stream as it relates to safety concerns in schools, became relatively fixed, as SROs represented a ready policy solution for any future perceived problems. So, in the 1980s when the problem stream and political stream combined to introduce the idea that the War on Drugs, rather than juvenile delinquency, was the pressing "youth problem" to be solved in the United States, SROs were a convenient policy proposal to address the new problem.

As the War on Drugs was ending, the mass shooting events in US schools caused a new political reality, introducing school gun violence as the most critical safety problem to be solved in schools. The simultaneous change in drug enforcement policy in the US, combined with an increase in school shootings ushered in a new problem stream (school gun violence) while creating a new political stream (political pressure to address school shootings in some way). The convergence of these streams caused a new policy proposal window to materialize. This resulted in an ever-greater commitment to the placement of SROs in American schools while focusing their attention on the prevention of school shootings rather than drug prevention. In 2022, a full 46% of public schools in the United States reported having an SRO on-premises, while an additional 25% of public schools indicated that they had non-police security personnel (Kirby, 2024). Through Kingdon's (2003) model, we can clearly establish why police presence in American schools has increased.

Despite an increase in federal funding for SROs across the United States, police presence is not mandated from above. After all, educational policymaking in America occurs in partnership between the local schools, state governments, and the US federal government. According to US government figures, 4.3% of SRO funding came from US federal government grants while 78.6 came directly from local school district budgets and the rest from local or state government sources (Davis, 2022). While Kingdon's model is useful in understanding the increasing prevalence of SROs on school grounds; individual administrators, despite the convergence of the policy streams model, continue to make a variety of decisions about SROs.

Kingdon's (2003) concept of bureaucratic knowledge is useful in understanding how the overall movement of governmental policies can be redirected or stopped completely. Bureaucratic knowledge is, by definition, "local knowledge", which is "often implicit or tacitly held by citizens in a community" (Nugroho et al., 2018, p. 37). The findings of this research complicate Kingdon's (2003) policy streams approach as it applies to this issue and offers novel insights about the limits of the federal government to affect local school policies in any education system where power is shared between multiple levels.

Despite having a knowledge of how SROs originated and why their use has expanded in US schools, the factors that individual school administrators take into account in staffing SROs at the local level are not well understood. Simply put, while some school administrators continue to add SROs to their school sites, others elect to discontinue their services. This research attempts to clarify why school administrators are making contrary decisions, in the face of an overall trend to increase SROs in local schools. Using Kingdon (2003) as a theoretical framework, this research investigates how American school district administrators navigate decisions about whether to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs in their schools.

## Research Methodology

### *Background*

This research utilized a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005). A qualitative case study approach was appropriate as a methodological strategy in this research as it allowed the researchers to deeply understand how school administrators made SRO staffing determinations by collecting rich descriptive narrative interview data. This approach allowed for a thorough understanding of how school administrators arrived at staffing decisions regarding SROs.

### *Sample*

To address the question of how school administrators make decisions about the presence of SROs on their school grounds, the researchers sampled American school administrators from the Midwest. The researchers contacted over 100 administrators via email inviting participation. Ten administrators returned the email invitation and agreed to participate. The administrators represented a variety of districts including urban and suburban. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic composition of the school district administrators relevant to this study.

**Table 1**  
*Study Sample of School District Administrators' Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Race	Years as District Administrator	SROs in District
Suburban School Administrator A	Male	White	10	Yes
Suburban School Administrator B	Female	White	1	Yes
Suburban School Administrator C	Female	Black	7	No
Suburban School Administrator D	Female	White	32	Yes
Suburban School Administrator E	Male	Asian	5	Yes
Suburban School Administrator F	Male	White	7	Yes
Urban School Administrator A	Female	White	5	Yes
Urban School Administrator B	Female	Biracial	4	No
Urban School Administrator C	Female	Black	4	No
Urban School Administrator D	Male	White	10	Yes

### *Instrument*

The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews as the main instrument of data collection and triangulated interview data with other sources described below. In addition to answering basic demographic questions, all participants were interviewed about their decision-making processes related to adding, maintaining, or eliminating SROs within their schools. Table 2 provides an overview of the researcher's interview questions.

**Table 2**  
*Interview Questions*

Category	Question
Years in School Administrator Role	How many years have you worked in a school administrator role?
Total Years working in Education	What is the total number of years working as a professional in an educational setting?
Ethnicity and Race	May I ask you to identify your ethnicity and race?
General Decision-Making	Please describe, generally speaking, your decision-making processes regarding your school or school system.
SRO Management	Please describe the decision-making process that you use to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.
Stakeholders Involved	Who else is involved with these decisions?
Contributing Factors	What other factors contribute to the decisions?
Data Usage	What kinds of data do you use when you make decisions about SROs?
Data Sources	Where do you find the data?
SRO Effectiveness	Given this data, are SROs effective in your school?
Addressing the School-to-Prison Pipeline	What steps are taken to ensure that SROs do not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline or proportionate discipline?
Performance Evaluation	If an SRO is deemed ineffective in a school, is there a process in place for school officials to evaluate and assess their performance and make decisions?
Alternative Programs	Are there any alternative programs instead of SROs being considered? If yes, what are they?
Communication Procedures	Are there specific procedures in place for communication between the principal or administration and SROs? If so, please explain.
Stakeholder Input	Do you or a district administrator gather input from students, parents, and teachers when making decisions related to SROs or SRO programs?
Policy Guidance	Are there policies that guide your decision-making regarding the involvement of SROs in disciplinary and non-disciplinary matters?

Because the researchers utilized a semi-structured interview approach, the researchers were able to ask all participants probing follow-up questions in order to completely understand and capture the unique perspective and situation of each participant.

### *Data Collection*

Each participant was interviewed via an internet conferencing application such as Zoom. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration. In addition to the pre-planned research questions, the researchers requested for participants to clarify and elaborate on the situations they described at their schools. This interview procedure was pursued in order to gain thick descriptions of how these administrators decided whether to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs in their school buildings.

The triangulated data collection strategy also included validating participant-provided school district data by reviewing the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) database as well as the Ohio Department of Education database (9 of the 10 participants were located in the State of Ohio). Data gleaned from these external databases were utilized in the case study to verify



details about the Midwestern school districts in this case study. The filtered school district data confirmed enrollment rates, the number of SROs employed, and reported incidents of school safety issues. This data played a crucial role in triangulating and confirming the accuracy of the information presented about the districts. The final element of the data collection strategy was a review of school district policies, processes, and public records related to suspensions, expulsions, disciplinary practices, and SROs. We reviewed these records after conducting participant interviews and examining NCES data. Through this strategy, we were able to verify responses from participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. As the data were collected, we applied open coding with short words or phrases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data was analyzed utilizing the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Categories that emerged from the data included demographics, leadership styles, enrollment, disciplinary strategies, and decision-making processes. Through the analysis process, the researchers employed a comprehensive analytic approach to derive valuable findings and meaningful interpretations from the research (Bingham, 2023).

The data analyzed in this study were obtained directly from the interviews and supplemented by information from the Ohio Department of Education. Data from the Ohio Department of Education provided additional context, offering valuable information about the realities faced in urban versus suburban schools. This approach ensured a better understanding when comparing and contrasting the responses of school administrators.

### *Validity and Reliability*

The researchers employed triangulation to increase the reliability of the findings of this study. Data and characterizations provided by participants in the semi-structured interviews were validated by the aforementioned review of external databases including IES as well as data from the Ohio Department of Education. The researchers also employed peer debriefing during the data collection and analysis process. The researchers constantly reviewed data, seeking to confirm and challenge the interpretation of data and confirmation of research findings. Peer debriefing is a tool that can increase the validity of research findings (Spall, 1998).

## **Research Results**

Three key findings emerged from the interview data in this study of urban and suburban education administrators' decision-making regarding whether to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs.

First, students' physical safety and mental well-being were of paramount concern for Midwestern school district administrators as they made these decisions. They prioritized creating secure learning environments where students could thrive without fear.

Second, some administrators, in making decisions about SROs, were acutely aware of the potential for emotional triggers in their students and communities, given the presence of SROs in their schools. These emotional triggers encompassed a range of responses, including increased incidents of violence in schools, community outrage, and legal action. Each of these had the potential to harm students' emotional well-being and negatively impact their school performance.

Third, cost factors were an essential consideration in administrators' decision-making processes to eliminate or maintain SROs. School district administrators, as they attempted to

meet the safety needs of their students, felt an obligation to weigh the financial implications of eliminating or maintaining SROs. The urban schools in this study reported needing to navigate meager budgets when making decisions about SRO staffing. Suburban schools, while considering the financial implications associated with SROs, did not report budget constraints in the same way as their urban counterparts. Table 3 presents the interview findings, themes, and interview results.

**Table 3**  
*Interview Findings Summary*

Key Findings	Themes	Interview Data Summary
Safety and Well-being of Students	Physical Safety	School district administrators reported the importance of students' sense of safety
	Mental well-being	School district administrators reported the importance of students' sense of mental well-being
Avoiding Emotional Triggers for Students	Emotional well-being	Stressors for students
	Impact on school performance	Interferes with the student's ability to learn
Cost Factors	Budget constraints	SROs eliminated due to budget restraints
	Resource allocations	Resources with local police and grants

### *Safety and Well-being of Students*

In deciding to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs, the dual focus of Midwestern school district administrators on the presence of SROs as enhancing students' physical safety and mental well-being, while also triggering emotional responses that potentially interfere with students' emotional well-being and school performance, may appear contradictory. On one hand, this study showed that the presence of SROs, particularly in urban schools, contributed to students feeling uncomfortable and fearful. On the other hand, school district administrators saw SROs as key contributors to shaping safe and secure learning environments. The awareness of SROs as a kind of "double-edged sword" was characteristic of participants in the study.

A more subtle understanding emerged as we examined urban schools with lower academic ratings and more diverse demographics from the Department of Education (2021) compared to their suburban counterparts. The Urban schools in this study perceived they were faced with heightened safety concerns compared to suburban schools, so the responsibility of administrators to address students' basic physiological and safety needs was heightened. In urban schools, resource officers were hired to create secure learning environments, laying the foundations for students to focus on their education and overall well-being. However, urban administrators also reported that students may experience emotional triggers in response to the presence of SROs within their educational environment.

Another aspect of Safety and Well-being recognized the practical aspects of implementing SROs. In partnership with SROs, some administrators strategically navigated cost factors to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of SROs. This involved exploring cost-effective alternatives, such as seeking external funding sources and engaging in community partnerships to mitigate financial burdens on the school districts while still prioritizing the safety and well-being of students.



School district administrators considered student safety and well-being as primary factors in their decision to add an SRO. Although they recognized the potential benefits of having an SRO, such as providing immediate responses to emergencies and deterring criminal activities, administrators did not conduct a comprehensive review of the current security environment. Rather, their decision was primarily based on the assumption that having an SRO would enhance the overall well-being of students. They did not extensively analyze incident reports, engage in detailed discussions with local law enforcement, or examine evidence about SROs from other districts. Rather, the decision to add or maintain an SRO was driven by a general perception that the presence of an SRO would create a safer and more supportive learning environment, directly contributing to student well-being and performance. Administrators also considered feedback from teachers and parents, reinforcing the belief that an SRO would positively impact the school climate. The administrators themselves perceived that their district's parents supported SROs. Suburban School Administrator A confided:

It is what our community wanted. When things happen nationally, the reaction from our families and others, we have to ask ourselves, what are we going to do in order to make our schools safer? There is a perception that having additional law enforcement in the building can help make people safer.

The conversation ended, punctuated by a solemn, monotone voice from Suburban Administrator A, "If there were no school shootings, we would not need SROs." Suburban Administrator A summarized that security, financial considerations, and perception were the driving factors behind the decision to add SROs.

"Success" is how Urban School Administrator A described the utilization of the SRO that had worked there even before Administrator A was employed. The terms, sad and crying, were used to describe the SRO's departure as the news spread of their recent promotion. The collaborative efforts described by Administrator A and the SRO were remarkably successful and grew into a professional friendship due to the respect each of them had for their profession and most of all for putting the students in the district first. The students felt a sense of comfort as the SRO sat with them at lunch and built a rapport with their families. When asked to describe the students' perspective of SROs, Urban School Administrator A did not hesitate and replied, "Trustworthy, protector, safe."

According to Suburban School Administrator B, the SRO has proved to be highly effective, even in handling seemingly minor tasks such as managing traffic during morning hours. Their presence outside the middle school ensured smooth traffic flow, allowing buses to depart promptly, and ensuring students arrived on time. Inside the elementary school, the SROs engaged in conversations with students, fostering positive relationships. Suburban Administrator B's voice overflowed with delight as they exclaimed:

They're high-fiving them, it's adorable! They're building that relationship at a young age. The students think this is school and they're interacting with me in a positive way. That's been helpful. Then, they are like, okay. And at our high school and our middle school, we also see the advantage of them if we're needed if a student has an issue.

Additionally, Suburban School Administrator B highlighted another advantage of having SROs in the building: the opportunity for parents to file police reports on school premises. It eliminated the need for parents to reach out to external authorities and offered them a sense of safety and familiarity. Overall, the presence of SROs has had a profoundly positive impact on the community, as noted by Suburban School Administrator B during the interview.

Suburban School Administrator D provided one particularly poignant data point. Suburban Administrator D explained that the reason for her return from retirement was due

to her former district had experienced a devastating mass shooting. Tragically, the incident resulted in the loss of four students and left seven others wounded, with one teacher sustaining injuries during the shooting event. In response, the school administration collectively decided to intensify school security measures. The district added SROs across the 10 buildings throughout the district. Suburban School Administrator D shared the tragic incident, softly stating the impact, “We doubled our school resource officers, doubled our security, doubled our efforts around everything.” The ripple effects of the tragedy resulted in a decline in district enrollment. The district superintendent, who was present during the shooting, elected to end his career due to the personal trauma associated with the event.

Suburban School Administrator C voiced that there was no need for SROs, so the decision was not to add SROs. Suburban School Administrator C confirmed, “We don’t make decisions without data to support it and are committed to looking at our data to justify why we might do it.” The decision to not add SROs was supported by the data, even though there may be a perceived pressure on school administrators to have an SRO. Additional specific comments were made that adding SROs would cause more of a negative impact and harm to students’ safety and well-being. The interviewee stressed that every decision the district made was data-driven and represented the district’s commitment to basing its choices and strategies on information and evidence to achieve school safety.

Suburban School Administrator C said that the school district never hired SROs. The depth of this interview was interesting as their input shed light on the collaborative efforts between board members and the community. By incorporating their concerns as one factor, they decided that SROs were deemed unnecessary based on data, and their alternative approach would affect the school district’s sense of security and overall well-being.

Suburban School Administrator C ensured that decisions were not made in the absence of supporting data, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based decision-making in their governance. They recognize the significance of relying on data-driving insights to shape policies and prioritize the safety and well-being of their students. Suburban School Administrator C indicated, “Our very own data told us that our students of color were disproportionately disciplined for the same or similar infractions as their White counterparts.” It was further stated by Suburban School Administrator C, “And our numbers are telling us this is not the direction we need to go.” Therefore, the Board of Education was committed to making informed decisions that align with their commitment to student well-being through data-driven decision-making for school safety measures, along with open communications with city officials and the local Police Department.

Suburban School Administrator D agreed with Suburban School Administrator C but emphasized the well-being of students as a top priority in decision-making stating, “We’ve also increased both quality and the quantity of other security services in addition to SROs and we have installed or are about to install seven days a week 24 hours a day Artificial Intelligence (AI) to check for weapons and other critical events.” The conversation continued that the school district will be the first in the state to utilize a new form of AI. Suburban School Administrator D added, “AI can detect weapons through clothing, and pick up audio surveillance of a gunshot. We will know the decibels of a gunshot versus a firecracker. It surveys the perimeter and interior of the building, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.” Suburban School Administrator D stated that students feel SROs are, “Friendly, trustworthy, and safe.” The administrator acknowledged that there are not enough SROs to cover an entire district and emphasized the need for increased staffing to ensure that all schools benefit from the presence of SROs. While SROs are highly valued, this administrator believed that expanding SRO presence would strengthen the overall sense of security and support for students.

*Avoiding Emotional Triggers for Students*

A perspective from Urban School Administrator B confirmed that when deciding to add or eliminate, the board of education had to step back and re-evaluate what was best for the district along with the police department, which was also undergoing budgetary issues. More importantly, Urban School Administrator B confirmed, “SROs were causing trauma and triggers [in students], regardless of who the police officer was, it was just that [their] presence.” Consequently, the perceptions of SROs shifted negatively, despite any prior mentorship students had experienced. For these reasons, the urban school district eliminated SROs as documented in this case study.

Suburban School Administrator E monitored a thriving educational institution with a student population of 3,600 students, with the expectation of continued enrollment increases. Supporting their commitment to academic excellence, this institution has garnered unparalleled recognition, receiving a flawless five out of five-star rating from the Department of Education, the highest attainable accolade in the state. Suburban School Administrator E described the students’ perception of SROs, “Our students love our SRO. He was nominated to be Pie in the Face this year, which is a big thing in our schools. We have a really good relationship with our school resource officer.”

The researcher and school District administrator further engaged in a discussion regarding the effectiveness of SROs. The school administrator admitted, “If the person that is the SRO wants to be there and is there for kids, their position can be effective; but if it’s just a patrol cop coming in to be an SRO by force because their captain told them, I feel that it is not effective.”

Urban School Administrator C, from the largest school district in a Midwestern state, shed light on the diverse relationships between students and SROs within the school environment. To a portion of students, SROs served as positive role models and sources of support, fostering a sense of safety and trust within the school community. These students appreciated the presence of SROs as a means of promoting a secure learning environment. As Urban School Administrator C acknowledged there was “No one tool fix” in the decision-making process that needed to be addressed for the students in the district.

Moreover, Urban School Administrator C shared, “Other students, they’re seen as a trigger, they’re seen as unsupported.” These students and their families have expressed their concerns due to events that unfolded in the media. Subsequently, the Board of Education eliminated SROs because they recognized students felt SROs were triggers and training for cultural competency needed to be established. Urban School Administrator C believed that if a student safety council were established, the students would have input in creating a safe environment, ensuring their voices were heard on school safety.

Underscoring the different realities at work between the urban and suburban districts in this sample, Urban School District Administrator D revealed, “Most kids in urban cities have negative thoughts that are bad about SROs. They think, they just want to throw Daddy back in jail.”

Emotional triggers did not become evident to the administrators until SROs were already in place, leading school district administrators to reconsider their decision to retain them. Initially, the presence of SROs was intended to enhance school safety and foster positive relationships between students and law enforcement. However, over time, concerns emerged from students and the community about the negative emotional impact of having SROs in schools. Many students, particularly those from marginalized communities, reported feeling targeted or intimidated, which led to increased stress and anxiety.

The voices of students and feedback from the broader community highlighted that the presence of SROs was causing emotional distress and negatively affecting the school environment. Parents and community members expressed concerns about the psychological

impact on students, pointing out that the presence of law enforcement officers could make students feel criminalized for minor infractions. In response to concerns about the emotional distress and negative effects within the school environment, administrators decided to eliminate the SRO positions. The focus shifted towards eliminating the positions without providing alternative strategies.

### *Cost Factors*

Another reason midwestern school district administrators decided to eliminate SROs was because SROs presented a financial burden on the school district as their pay often came directly from the school district's budget. Urban School Administrator D was asked why they eliminated SROs; the immediate reply was "Cost."

The decision to eliminate or maintain SROs varied between urban and suburban school districts due to contrasting financial circumstances. Urban districts faced cost restraints, which influenced their decision to eliminate SRO positions. The financial limitations stemmed from budget constraints and a lack of additional funding sources. In contrast, suburban districts did not face the same financial limitations, mostly due to greater flexibility associated with generating higher dollars from local property taxes as well as access to safe school grants. While the urban districts in this sample had higher per-pupil spending, a much greater portion of this funding was federal in nature, tied to specific activities and programs that could not be spent on SROs. Consequently, the suburban districts in this sample were able to maintain SRO positions without significant financial strain. The disparity in financial resources played a crucial role in shaping the decisions of urban and suburban school administrators regarding the presence of SROs in their respective districts.

Unlike urban school districts, suburban schools have more flexibility in allocating budgets across different expense categories. Suburban School Administrator F proudly stated, "As cost is not a limiting factor, the school district can prioritize safety to a greater extent, resulting in a safer environment for all. Through a partnership with the local police department, the district successfully maintained multiple full-time SROs." This administrator emphasized that SROs were "an incredible deal" financially for his district.

### *Summary of Key Findings*

This case study reveals why Midwestern school district administrators add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. This case study found that factors influencing decisions about SROs pertain to safety & well-being for students, triggers for students, and cost factors. The categories themselves came into play at different times, with administrators weighing different factors when deciding whether to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs as demonstrated in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
*Summary of Key Findings*

	How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Add SROs?	How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Eliminate SROs?	How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Maintain SROs?
Safety and Well-being for Students	X	X	
Students Emotional Triggers		X	
Cost Factors		X	X

## Discussion

In this study, the research revealed that local administrators had various justifications for deciding to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The school administrators in this study added SROs to increase students' safety and well-being. The school administrators in this study considered cost factors in deciding whether to maintain their SROs. Justifying the decision to eliminate SROs was more complicated.

While the direction of American public policy has tended to see SROs as the primary policy solution to the problem of school violence, the findings in this study suggest that administrators in the local bureaucracy play an essential role in facilitating or stopping policy initiatives or movements from above. Although it is clear that a policy window has been created to introduce more SROs in US schools, administrators at local levels make a variety of decisions in practice. Some administrators in this study decreased SRO presence in their schools. It is important to fully flesh out why, in the face of an overwhelming movement to increase SROs, some administrators are choosing the opposite path.

Student well-being was one key justification for the decision to eliminate an SRO. Because the presence of SROs is intended to increase student safety, the justification of student well-being for adding an SRO is self-explanatory; however, the administrators in this sample also indicated that student well-being was a consideration in their decision to eliminate SROs. The administrators who eliminated SROs in this study were located in urban districts. They indicated that the mere presence of law enforcement officers in the school made students feel less safe due to difficult or traumatic past interactions with police. While the administrators framed this decision to eliminate the SRO in terms of "Student Well-Being," it was also tied to what they perceived as emotional triggers. For these administrators, emotional triggers were not considered or did not become evident until SROs were already in place at the school site. Emotional triggers, while closely related to student well-being, are a distinct finding as one or a few students' emotional triggers do not constitute a general lack of well-being. What the urban administrators in our sample described, however, were many individual emotional triggers that then constituted an environment that was perceived as being unsafe due to the presence of SROs.

In addition to considering emotional triggers and student well-being, a significant part of the decision to eliminate SROs in urban schools is related to financial constraints. These districts faced a much different financial environment compared to suburban schools in the sample that had abundant resources. Urban districts faced budgetary pressures that compelled them to make difficult choices about allocating limited funds. SROs are expensive to maintain, involving not just salaries for officers but also health insurance and equipment costs. In contrast, suburban schools with greater resources found it easier to justify the expense of SROs.

This does not necessarily mean that suburban schools are immune to scrutiny regarding their use of SROs. Despite having relatively well-funded schools, some suburban districts may also reevaluate the role of law enforcement on school grounds considering alternative approaches to school safety that prioritize community engagement and mental health support over an SRO presence. Ultimately, both urban and suburban schools reported that they critically assessed the need for SROs weighing the costs against the potential benefits for student well-being and general safety.

The findings in this study both reflect and inform Kingdon's (2003) policy streams model by demonstrating the ability of bureaucratic decision-makers in a decentralized system to steer policymaking away from the overall direction of education policy. While the policy streams model can accurately explain the overall increase in SROs in schools, it does not fully account for decisions made contrary to policy proposals in a system where power is shared at various levels.



Existing research confirms that the implementation of federal or national policies is often subject to the interpretation of local bureaucrats (Nugroho et. al., 2018). One view of this localization of knowledge might suggest that local school administrators serve a gatekeeping function, choosing to alternatively facilitate or stymie policy initiatives/incentives from above. In this interpretation, local school administrators are simply viewed as intransigently exercising power over their local schools, each holding the keys to a small kingdom.

A more credible interpretation of the findings in this study, however, accepts that the local situation in US schools is highly variable between urban and suburban schools. In the American context, federal policy or incentives wielded in education are clumsy and inexact tools to address even commonly agreed-upon problems such as school violence (Curran et al., 2019). In this view, the responsibility for the disconnect between the intent of federal policymakers and implementation at the local level lies with policymakers at the national level who failed to fully understand the variety of local conditions.

The participants in this study were neither seeking to facilitate or block national policies or incentives. The administrators in this study were attempting to address local safety concerns at their school sites in a way that increased the actual level of safety as well as the perceived level of safety which included avoiding emotional triggers on the part of their students, all while staying within a budget. The administrators in this case study were responding to local concerns and conditions. The participants were receptive and responsive to federal incentives to hire and maintain SROs, but they were not receptive to these incentives if they believed that the presence of an SRO would decrease students' sense of well-being or trigger negative emotional responses for their students.

## Conclusions and Implications

This qualitative study of 10 American school administrators from the Midwest found that administrators considered the safety & well-being for students, triggers for students, and cost factors when making decisions about whether to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs in their schools. While the overall SRO presence continues to expand in American schools, there are exceptions. Due to power and funding being shared between federal, state, and local levels in the American education system, introducing or maintaining an SRO is not a foregone conclusion in every local school district. Local administrators continue to apply their knowledge of their own school populations and budgets in ways that result in a variety of policy outcomes driven by different rationales.

As policymakers in education systems worldwide plot how to implement sustainable development goals (SDGs) relating to providing sustainable and equitable educational opportunities, it is wise to consider that well-laid plans are subject to the local conditions, factors, and personalities in decentralized systems. In the United States, a safe school environment is a prerequisite to providing equitable educational opportunities. The participants in this study disagreed on the efficacy of the policy solution (SROs). This suggests that in order to move toward progress on SDGs in decentralized systems, it is important to have an understanding of the local context and thoroughly consider whether a given funding model will attain an acceptable level of policy compliance. A thorough understanding of local policies, concerns, and conditions increases the likelihood that policy proposals are implemented effectively and consistently.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.



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