

Policy Article Review 2: School Resource Officers

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Wolfe, E. S., Chrusciel, M.M., Rojek, J., Hansen, A., & Kaminski, J. R. (2017). Procedural justice, legitimacy, and school principals' evaluations of school resource officers: Support, perceived effectiveness, trust, and satisfaction. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 28(2), 107-138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887403415573565>

In accordance with the most recent active school shooter events and the School Resource Officers Save Lives Act, there has been a heightened demand to better secure school environments to reduce on-school violence. The widespread implementation of school resource officers (SROs) as a response to school safety concerns has been highly favored amongst policymakers and the public, but SROs are still not implemented in every school at the rate they should be while recalling previous devastating events (Wolfe et al., 2017). Within the research article, the authors examined the identified gap by focusing on how key school stakeholders perceive SROs effectiveness and legitimacy rather than previous research that only examined their overall effectiveness on school crime and safety concerns (Wolfe et al., 2017). By not shifting the focus of research, it is unclear what factors influence school stakeholder perceptions, and it ultimately hinders the creditability and reliability of SRO programs along with diminishing federal funding.

To provide empirical data to support the claim that SROs are effective, trustworthy, and should have a close working relationship with school stakeholders, the researchers utilized a quantitative research method to gather data along with theoretical frameworks. The procedural justice theory was used to clarify the findings of stakeholder perception in that the theory stipulates that individuals who perceived law enforcement in a positive manner and believe they are just and fair are most likely to perceive officers as legitimate authority figures (Wolfe et al., 2017). Furthermore, mailed surveys were distributed to school administrators in South Carolina public schools. The surveys contained Likert Scale questions that required participants to rank

their responses on a scale of one to four. Wolfe et al., (2017) received a forty four percent response rate which can be considered to be low and a potential research limitation being that the survey was distributed to over one thousand public school administrators across the state. The research clearly identified and defined the dependent variables as SRO legitimacy, support, effectiveness, trust, and satisfaction along with the independent variables as school administrator and school characteristics (Wolfe et al., 2017). To summarize the research findings, Wolfe et al., (2017) found forty-one percent of principal evaluations deemed SROs legitimate. The theoretical framework found a statistically significant and positive relationship with SRO legitimacy. Additionally, the logistic regression used to assess SRO effectiveness found that school administrators would support policy that would implement at least one SRO in each school if entirely funded by the school district. The theoretical framework highlighted that increased support would result in a twenty-five percent increase in SROs because of established authority figures. Lastly, while measuring trust and satisfaction, the regression model found that trust is the highest ranked influencing factor. Trust between SROs, students, and faculty members are significant in the fact that if trust is maintained and visible, the student body will be more satisfied in the SRO perception of being fair, respectful, honest, and capable of performing necessary safety duties.

Trust and legitimacy should never be discounted in policy development. The data and findings support the hypothesis that strengthened relationships between SROs and school administrators can lead to additional behaviors such as voluntary compliance and the partnership with local law enforcement agencies while also enhancing school security (Wolfe et al., 2017). The additional support and trust from school stakeholders also effectively influences implementation and funding. SROs are more applicable within the school environment as they

serve as security and mentors rather than patrol officers who serve as a visible deterrent against offending students (Wolfe et al., 2017). As a result, the researchers clearly identified the problem, focus, research methods, and findings to support the necessity of implementing SROs in all schools.

A growing body of literature over time has accepted and affirmed the necessity of implementing SROs in all schools, yet the implementation rate is substantially low. To further support this, Finn et al., (2005) conducted nineteen case studies of implemented SRO programs from 1999 to 2002. Each case study was efficiently constructed to show critical aspects of how the program is monitored and evaluated, effectiveness, socioeconomic characteristics, percentages of activities SROs participated in and lead, and additional critical data such as school crime rates, graduation rates, and counseling. The purpose of providing an in-depth analysis of nineteen case studies was to highlight the successes, failures, effectiveness, and limitations to implementing SROs in various diverse locations to provide lessons learned and policy implications for future research studies (Fin et al., 2005). Within the body of the research, the researchers labeled the school districts one through nineteen, but redacted the names and locations of the schools. While critiquing the research, it would have been beneficial for the intended audience to understand if these case studies were high-risk or vulnerable populations or even if the sample was chosen at random. Even though an in-depth analysis was provided for each case study which included the districts population and school population, it would have been effective to show what districts were being studied to see if the focus needs to shift to different geographical locations to compare and contrast trends amongst school districts.

As each district focused on different areas of school security, for the purpose of this discussion, only district two will be discussed. District two was a rural school district where the

SRO program focused on school security assessments rather than matters of deterring mal behavior (Finn et al., 2005). The appointed SRO sat on the school board's security committee and assisted the district with upgrading the school's video surveillance system to better monitor the school grounds and ensured the safety of students and staff. Additionally, the appointed SRO worked closely with key school stakeholders and had a reputation of being legitimate, effective, trustworthy, and resourceful which were influencing factors that contributed to a successful SRO program in the previous study (Finn et al., 2005; Wolfe et al., 2017). With a positive SRO-school stakeholder relationship and containing the necessary SRO qualities, district two reported a significant decrease in violent school crimes, drug and alcohol usage, and on-campus threats over the course of four years (Finn et al., 2005). An additional district two finding was the increased graduation rate post SRO implementation. Finn et al., (2005) found prior to the SRO program, the average graduation rate was approximately eighty percent. The post SRO program reported a significant graduation increase by twelve percent where the rate was approximately ninety-two percent (Finn et al., 2005). The theoretical framework defined in Wolfe et al's., (2017) study can be applied within the context of this case study in the fact the appointed SRO was perceived in a positive manner and believe they are just, fair, and a legitimate authority figure, which in turn, contributed to a successfully implemented SRO program (Finn et al., 2005; Wolfe et al., 2017). As the data has shown its success and effectiveness, district two with the support of students, faculty, and administrators have found alternate funding streams to cover the cost of maintaining SRO programs, but as taxes began to increase, the SRO program was defunded and reallocated to build another school within the district (Finn et al., 2005). Thus, furthering the implementation gap and increasing the risk of active school shooters and on school

violent crimes. This further highlights the necessity of federal funding to maintain preventative safety measures.

In contrast to the previously discussed studies, Gottfredson et al., (2020) conducted a study on SRO programs, but found contradictory findings as to why SRO programs are not effective. To support the hypothesis that SRO programs are not effective, Gottfredson et al., (2020) gathered and analyzed data from thirty-three public schools that increased SRO appointees (comparison schools) that were awarded funding to increase the program and at the same time examined an additional seventy-two schools that did not increase SRO appointees (treatment schools) and were not awarded funding in California. Using a mixed method approach, the researchers found that comparison schools reported an increase in drug crimes, weapon crimes, and violent crimes as well as an increase in law enforcement responses to serious crime and school disorder. On the other hand, treatment schools found no change or a slight decrease in reported school crimes. (Gottfredson et al., 2020). Additionally, administrative and self-reported data from comparison schools also found that increased SRO appointees were not effective in related programs as they did not identify, assess, and prevent violent crimes taking place even though the numbers of SRO reports recorded increased (Gottfredson et al., 2020). In essence, increased SRO appointees were reporting all crime and not solely focusing on suspicious or delinquent behavior. In fact, SRO programs were originally a response to the growing violent crimes committed by juveniles in the early 80s but was not a direct response to active school shooters that make up only three percent of violent school crime statistics (Gottfredson et al., 2020). This statement made by the researchers is contradictory to their studying findings. If SRO programs were a response to the growing in-school violent crime rates, then an increase in SRO appointees should effectively identify, assess, and prevent violent

crimes, yet the study found a significant increase. This contradictory statement can also be further explained as a limitation to the overall study.

Gottfredson et al., (2020) utilized a mixed method approach, yet no quantitative data was included to provide further data to the hypotheses made. Instead, the results only provided a qualitative analysis in that they were found ineffective (Gottfredson et al., 2020). Tables were utilized in the research too but they only displayed p values and coefficients that made it unclear how it specifically answered or supported the claims made. It is recommended to either replicate the study and use a different source of extracting how the data was analyzed if that data type was not provided to address the limitations. To make the research clearer and more concise, percentages of the number of SROs appointed and percentages of the crime increase would have made the results more significant and more presentable to the intended audience. Results similar to Wolfe et al., (2017) and Finn et al., (2005) would not only allow for trends to be efficiently compared and contrasted, but it will also allow for the local government to make informative decisions on grants, policy implantation, and training and exercise. A growing body of literature has shown that federal funding for SROs has become uncertain which required state-level funding to increase to maintain implemented programs. As several state legislatures have increased funding, many have not which had eliminated programs altogether or only have a scarce amount (Wolfe et al., 2017, Finn et al., 2005, Gottfredson et al., 2020). While making critical policy decisions in terms of funding and grants, it is essential that policymakers have reliable, valid, and concise research to make informative decisions.

Following recent tragedies such as the Uvalde school shooting and the Parkland school shooting, widespread attention has been given to SRO implementation as a social trend response in better securing school environments and preventing in-school violence. As SRO programs

depend on grants to support the program, research on the effectiveness of the appointee and the related programs is critical for policymakers to make informative decisions. Research also not only needs to support if SRO programs are effective or not, but also needs quantitative data to compare and contrast trends, types of programs, and the fluctuation of school crime statistics.

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