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## Parents' Perceptions on the Impact that SROs Have on School Safety

John Mayfield  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

John Mayfield

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2021

Abstract

Parents' Perceptions on the Impact that SROs Have on School Safety

by

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MS, University of Central Florida, 2014

BA, University of Central Florida, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

School Resource Officers (SROs) are an essential element in school safety and an even more critical component in the field of community-orientated policing. While numerous research studies have examined SROs from many different lenses, none have examined the impact that SROs have on school safety through a parents' lens. The purpose of this quantitative nonexperimental study was to examine parents' perceptions on the impact that SROs have on school safety through an online survey accessible to parents through SurveyMonkey. The research question's goal was to answer two fundamental questions, to examine the degree that parents support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12, and parents' perceptions of school safety due to the presence of an SRO in Seminole County Schools K-12. The survey yielded enough results to satisfy the power analysis. However, in the end, upon review of the univariate and bivariate outcomes, it was evident that there was insufficient variability and a lack of significance to move forward with a multivariate analysis. Despite setbacks due to COVID-19, mainly low response rates, the survey still gathered valuable data that did show favorable support from parents who supported SROs in their child's public school. The findings have implications for positive social change by suggesting that parents in Seminole County Public Schools in Florida do support their local law enforcement officers conducting SRO duties in their child's school on a daily basis.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family and friends for their continued support and encouragement throughout this rigorous process.

## Acknowledgments

The completion of this dissertation is a tribute to those who supported and challenged me throughout this process to finish my dissertation successfully. I have had the opportunity to meet numerous people who have helped and contributed to my growth on this doctoral journey, including professors, classmates, and friends. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have worked with my Chair Dr. Mary Brown and my committee member, Dr. David Milen. I am thankful for their time, advice, and feedback during this process. I also thank Dr. Mike Klemp-North, my URR member, for his role in completing my dissertation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

School safety is an issue that has recently been making headlines across the United States. Children are one of the most precious and vulnerable classes in society; therefore, society tends to go out of its way to put safeguards in place to help protect this vulnerable class. However, have lawmakers completed their due diligence in implementing policies that affect this particular class, or have they considered parents' opinions when making these life-changing policies?

In this study, I examined one Central Florida school district to obtain parents' perceptions in school safety through an online survey that asked these parents about their perceptions school resource officers (SROs) have on school safety. The study did address a current gap in research that investigated the perceptions of parents as it relates to the role of SROs in school safety. While previous literature addressed the relationship between SROs and student perceptions, as seen in Theriot (2013), Theriot (2016), Pentek and Eisenberg (2018), and Shuler-Ivey (2012), there is a void in the literature that examined parents perceptions of SROs on school safety. Such perceptions are a critical lens that must be addressed to identify if policymakers are making the right decisions regarding school safety. The purpose of this quantitative study was to assist policymakers in making sound decisions, which have the community's best interest in mind.

Chapter 1 provides a synopsis of the background on the rise and increase of law enforcement in schools. Important school safety terms are addressed and defined in this chapter, along with the study's purpose, research questions, and the theoretical

framework. The chapter also presents the scope, assumptions, delimitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background**

Weiler and Cray (2011) provided a brief overview of the introduction of police officers into the public school system. Shaver and Decker (2017) described events that have occurred across the United States that have increased the debate for and against police officers in schools. Shaver and Decker's study demonstrated that when police officers are introduced into public schools, the reports of offenses decrease along with juvenile arrests. Barnes (2016) examined the perspective of police officers in public schools through the eyes of actual security resource officers (SROs) who were working in that capacity and found there is a lack in the correct use of the SRO.

Theriot (2016) examined 12 schools that determined when students have more interactions with police officers in the school setting, they have an overall higher appreciation for police officers who make a positive impact on their campus. Barnert et al. (2015) highlighted some of the negative risk factors such as absent parents or lack of positive role models that juvenile offenders later identified in life as crucial to their success and failures can be mitigated by employing SROs. Furthermore, these studies also suggested youth wanted more discipline and better examples of role models in their lives.

Wolf (2013) studied the increase in arrests concerning SROs assigned to public schools. Preiss et al. (2016) focused on the students' perceptions of having SROs deployed in schools. Watkins and Maume (2012) reviewed school administrator opinions

on the use of SROs in their public schools. Barnes (2016) interviewed SROs who were actively working in an SRO capacity on their views on how the school system unitized them. However, while numerous scholars have studied different aspects of SROs assigned to schools, no researchers have yet addressed the parent's feelings and perceptions on the issue.

### **Problem Statement**

Since the 1990s, the United States has seen a rise in law enforcement officers introduced into the public school system as school resource officers. This response was enacted by several states that wished to address community concerns involving the increasing rates of juvenile crime and delinquency (Johnson, 1999). Media outlets frequently report incidents of violence in K-12 schools, increasing national awareness. In 2012, the Sandy Hook school shooting left 20 children and six adults dead (Jonson, 2017). In the following 6 years, the United States has experienced 63 mass school shootings, resulting in the death of at least one student (Wilson, 2018). While SROs have been previously employed in various schools across the nation, it was the Sandy Hook incident that initiated a wide-scale response and demanded national attention (Eklund et al., 2018). In 2018, the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida left 14 students and three teachers dead, fueling the scrutiny of school safety. As society tries to mitigate school violence and promote school safety, SRO programs nationwide, and specifically in Florida, continue to expand (Brown, 2006; Eklund et al., 2018; Jonson, 2017; Wolf, 2013).

Due to the rising number of violent incidents occurring at schools, the presence of law enforcement and security has risen in the last decade, and school safety has become one of the most important issues facing society in this generation (Eklund et al., 2018). The Indicators of School Crime and Safety illustrated that in the 2005-2006 school year, 36% of schools reported having a law enforcement officer present versus 48% in the 2015-2016 school year. With more than a 10% increase of SRO presence, public schools have fundamentally changed the way in which society views police officers—as a whole—both negatively and positively. Critics argue that having law enforcement officers in public schools creates a "school to prison pipeline" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017; BJS, 2006; Price, 2009). According to the school to prison pipeline theory, there is a positive correlation between the increase in the number of SROs in public schools and the increase of students into the juvenile criminal justice system. The theory suggests that because of zero-tolerance approaches in public schools to address school violence and drug use at school, simple school discipline matters become criminal legal matters (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017; Lynch et al., 2016; Pigott et al., 2017; Price, 2009).

Scholars have studied the relationship between arrests and SROs (Wolf, 2013); student's perceptions (Preiss et al., 2016); school administrators (Watkins & Maume, 2012); and SROs' perceptions (Barnes, 2016). However, scholars have yet to study parent views on the topic of school safety and the law enforcement officer's introduction into the public school system as an SRO.



### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were modeled to align with the research problem and purpose:

RQ1. To what degree do parents support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12?

$H_a1$ . The majority of parents will support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12.

$H_01$ . The majority of parents will not support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12.

RQ2. What are parent's perceptions of school safety due to the presence of an SRO in Seminole County Schools K-12?

$H_a2$ . Parents with a higher socioeconomic status will have a positive perception for School Resource Officers in their child's school, while parents with a lower socioeconomic status will have a negative perception of SROs in their child's school.

$H_02$ . Parents with a higher socioeconomic status will have a negative perception for SROs in their child's school, while parents with a lower socioeconomic status will have a positive perception for SROs in their child's school.

### **Purpose and Significance of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine parent's perceptions of the impact of SROs on school safety, for this is a gap in the current research within this field. In my approach to the study, I did use a nonexperimental quantitative approach focusing on the correlation of the variables under examination. I did examine the perceptions parents

have of SROs in public schools, which have never been studied before outside of Gallup or newspaper polls. The nonexperimental approach allowed for the flexibility to modify two previously used testing instruments to fit the current study. Zullig et al.'s (2017) survey instrument was used to identify school safety perception levels among current students. The questionnaire had a five-point Likert scale and was modified to address the opinions of parents instead of students. Dickerson (2005) used a four-point Likert scale to ask teachers their perceptions of SROs to include general biographical data of the participants. To make the study uniform for all parents and allow me consistency in polling, parents were instructed to only focus on their eldest child's school for the survey if the parent had more than one child attending a Seminole County Public School.

The information was obtained from parents of students from one Central Florida School District, Seminole County Public Schools, using an online survey platform. The Seminole County Public School District was ranked the sixtieth largest school district in the United States, with approximately 67,000 students. When this study was conceptualized, Seminole County Public Schools was the only school district in the Central Florida area that required an SRO at every public school within their county. Seminole County Public Schools and the Seminole County Sheriff's Office were among the first in the Central Florida area to partner together to add full-time SROs to every public school. Therefore, the school district was chosen to be the focus of this study because every public school had already been staffed with a full-time SRO for at least a year prior to the development of this study. Furthermore, Seminole County Public School

demographics closely match those of the most current U.S. Census, making this study a close representation of the U.S. population.

Seminole County Public Schools and the Seminole County Sheriff's Office have been leaders in bridging school safety with community-oriented policing. Seminole County Public Schools, in collaboration with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office and other local city municipalities, have placed an SRO in every school since the beginning of the 2016 school year. According to Seminole County Public Schools (2018), the SRO program is considered one of the most proactive strategies in community-oriented policing and crime prevention.

This research did contribute to filling a gap in the literature by examining the current hole in the research that does not address the parent's perceptions and attitudes toward school safety. This study was unique because other scholars have not studied the topic from a parent's standpoint. This study did provide insight into the parents' thoughts on police officers being introduced into public schools to enhance school safety. Perceptions from this study could assist policymakers in making choices grounded in research about funding options that involve police officers in public schools. The decisions currently being made by politicians are typically immediate reactions to mass shooting incidents in which the long-term consequences have not been studied. Just three weeks after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting in Parkland, Florida, the Florida legislature passed a comprehensive firearms ban prohibiting those 21 years of age and younger from purchasing a firearm that had been signed into law by Governor Rick Scott (Rohrer, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Baumgartner et al. (2014) described punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) as a byproduct of American politics, noting that it rises from the lack of movement in the political process and only occurs when a topic or issue reaches a boiling point. Only when the issue or topic reaches this boiling point or macro-political situation, will the issue or topic be addressed, leading to knee-jerk public policy decisions. PET is essential in this topic of study as the theory pertains to addressing policy once the policies have remained in place and constant for too long. Often these procedures are only changed as knee-jerk reactions to major critical events and incidents, in this case, mass shootings and school shootings. Even though the phenomenon may only occur in one localized community, its impacts are felt through all the law enforcement community (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). For example, the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that took place in Parkland, Florida left 14 students and teachers dead. This event directly influenced a change in Florida Law regarding school safety. Within weeks of the shooting, the Florida Legislature implemented gun restrictions on campus and increased armed personnel in schools without any data to support these restrictions or increases. The new law always requires that every school in Florida have either an SRRO or a school safety officer present (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, 2018).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was that of a nonexperimental quantitative approach. The purpose was to examine the opinions of parents of children who currently attend a

Seminole County public school. This study did include the views of parents of all age levels whose children presently attend a Seminole County Public School. The study was designed to examine those parents' opinions through a number of factors that could affect the variables in different ways. One example would be how parents' socioeconomic or education level could impact their value of SROs in public schools; however, due to factors that are examined in Chapters 4 and 5, that was not accomplished. The analysis was to be conducted using a multiple regression test, testing each of the independent variables (parents' demographical information and the presence of SROs) against the dependent variables (parents' perceptions and support level of SROs in public schools). However, due to factors are examined in Chapters 4 and 5, that again was not accomplished.

### **Definitions**

This study contains terms that can have interchangeable meanings, such as SRO and school resource deputy (SRD), or like terms such as law enforcement officer, police officer, and deputy sheriff. Other terms are utilized that could be construed as industry- or criminal-justice specific; the definitions for this study are as follows:

*Law Enforcement Officer:* A local, state, or federal employee who has attended formal training and certification process, whose primary employment involves the prevention and investigation of crime and the detention of person's suspected of committing crimes.

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act of 2018:* A Florida Law passed in March of 2018 that stemmed from the tragic Marjory Stoneman Douglas

High School Shooting that created \$400 million in funding focusing on school safety, mandates armed personnel in every public school to enhance school safety, prohibits a person under 21 years of age from purchasing a firearm, prohibits bump-fire stocks, and requires a three-day waiting period on all firearms, not just handguns.

*Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET)*: Refers to a theory in the public policy process that relies on feedback before an issue or law is addressed and changed. Typically, the subject or law remained dormant and unchanged for years until a significant life-changing event called the issue or law into question, drawing attention onto the problem once again.

*School-aged child*: Refers to children that are currently enrolled in a Seminole County Public School starting with Kindergarten through Grade 12.

*School resource officer (SRO)*: A career law enforcement officer who works in collaboration with their agency and the school board to achieve enhanced school safety. Typically, SROs have specialized training before being placed in the school resource officer role.

*School safety*: The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2020) defined school safety as “school and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use.”

### **Assumptions**

The assumption for the data collected in this study are that the data values are correct and accurately reflect the real opinions of parents with children in the Seminole

County Public School System. Another assumption is that the data would not be manipulated and were protected when received from the survey site.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was to examine the perceptions of parents of students enrolled in schools within the Seminole County Public Schools system in Seminole County, Florida. The delimitations of the study restrict the data only to Seminole County public schools. Due to data collection restrictions, the study did exclude schools outside of the Seminole County Public school system, such as private schools and parochial schools. To examine the effects that SROs have on school safety through the lens of parents, a quantitative methodology was employed. The goal of the initial research question was to determine what parents feelings are toward SROs being placed in public schools. The initial question did set a simple standard; either the majority of parents support SRO placement in a school, or the majority of parents did not support SROs being placed in schools. The second question addresses a more complex issue, whether parental support of SROs is somehow related to age, race, or socioeconomic status. The second question involved much more review of the survey data provided. During the analysis of all data collected, all information that could have identified a child or parent was removed from data.

### **Limitations**

To eliminate as many biases as possible, the quantitative study was designed to protect the data from extraneous and environmental variables. The study was posted on SurveyMonkey in which parents could participate. The researcher only received the raw

data from SurveyMonkey once the 45-day period to complete the survey had expired for all parents. Other outside variables could have impacted the study. For instance, a study conducted during the period that the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting occurred could have a negative impact on the study due to the inaction of the SRO.

### **Possible Types and Sources**

The data were derived from ratings on the 5-point Likert surveys administered to the parents on the perspectives they have on SROs in the public school system from a Likert-scale online survey.

### **Positive Social Change**

This study can make a positive impact on social change in the community by giving parents a voice by continuing to open the lines of communications among parents, educators, and lawmakers. Furthermore, in this study, I aimed to increase the requirements needed for students and teachers to achieve educational success by having a safe learning environment.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 presented a brief overview of the purposed study to include the background, problem statement, purpose, and intent. In summary, this study did examine parents' perceptions of SROs and the effect they have on school safety. Furthermore, the study did examine if the majority of parents supported or opposed the idea of the placement of SROs in all public schools. However, I was not able to examine if the parent's age, race, or socioeconomic status played a role in support or in lack of support for such a placement.



This nonexperimental quantitative study only used data collected from the survey tool after a 45-day window had expired for parents to participate. The survey was only provided in English. The data were protected using software encryption, and all information that could identify a student or parent was removed from the data set.

Chapter 2 of this study provides a thorough and exhaustive review of all relevant literature and include the framework used for this study. Through an exhaustive review of all the relevant literature, I prove that there is a lack of research and information on parents' perceptions of SROs in public schools.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative case study was to explore parent perceptions of school safety in one Central Florida school district. School safety was the central phenomenon in this study because when school safety is increased, schools become a better learning environment for students. Ripski and Gregory (2009) determined that a student's perception of victimization had a significant impact on the student's school engagement level as well as their reading and math achievements. A study by Perumean-Chaney and Sutton (2013) concluded when schools are considered safe by students, whether that safety is real or perceived, the students show a higher level of academic success. It is imperative that parents of students have a voice in the Security Resource Officer (SRO) Program within their child's school. This open dialogue is essential for improving the efforts to protect children and to foster a safer learning environment. Thus, the research gained from parents' perceptions could be used to develop school safety initiatives in this school district.

This study did examine the relationship among parent feelings, thoughts, and viewpoints of SROs and their effect (impact) on school safety through a nonexperimental quantitative design. Using this approach, I did examine the parent's perceptions of SROs through an online survey utilizing a series of closed-ended questions. The information provided through the survey could provide valuable insight to policymakers on parents' views, thoughts, and feelings toward SROs in their child's school.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The criminology databases used in this study include ProQuest, Criminal Justice Database, National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) Abstracts Database, SAGE Journals, and Bureau of Justice Statistics. Keywords used in the search included *school resource officer, SRO, school police, school safety, police in schools, school violence, school shooting, school to prison pipeline, and punctuated equilibrium theory.*

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Applying various frameworks of social theory is an accepted approach in understanding the behavior of policymakers when enacting laws that affect their constituents. There are many issues that policymakers could take up on a daily basis, but because of the lack of time to deal with every issue, policymakers typically only handle issues that are a macro-political emergency. Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) examines the relationships among politicians, policies, and reasons policies are changed (Baumgartner et al., 2014).

PET is described as a byproduct of American politics because issues often only get addressed by politicians when an event or phenomenon occurs that has statewide or nationwide implications, despite only being a localized event or phenomenon. These events are often handled by politicians quickly due to the widespread media coverage, and politicians are quick to make knee-jerk policy decisions to appease the current public outcry over the event or phenomenon (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2014).

## **Literature Review**

### **Parents' Perceptions**

While research on SROs has included the perceptions of students and faculty, there is a void in the literature related to parent perceptions; therefore, there is a need for a study from their perspective. The public opinion illustrates that parents are concerned about the safety of their children, which is influenced by high-profile incidents.

According to a 1999 Gallup Poll, taken the day after the Columbine High Shooting, 55% of American parents feared for their oldest child's safety at school (McCarthy, 2014). At the time of the 1999 Gallup Poll, the events of Columbine only involved older children, shootings at elementary schools were nonexistent at this point; therefore, the Gallup Poll focused on parents having older children. It is believed that the unusual increase was the result of a continual barrage of coverage by media outlets. Headlines of newspapers and magazines continuously posted articles with survivor and victim accounts of the horrific events. However, in the years after the events of Columbine, parents' fear of sending their child to school would slowly decrease, only to spike after another school shooting (Addington, 2009; Jonson, 2017; McCarthy, 2014). The most recent Gallup Poll data from August 2018 shows that 35% of American parents still fear for their child's safety at school (Jones, 2018).

### **School Safety**

Dickerson (2005) stated that "school safety does not result from luck or magic, but rather it is a consequence of reflection, careful planning, teamwork, training, data analysis, continuous evaluation, and systematic feedback by stakeholders. School safety

is a complex term, not easily be defined" (p. 16). Duke (2002) used two paths to help explain the ideal of school safety, the broad view and the narrow view. The broad view of safety focuses on caring for the physical and psychological safety, meaning that students should be free from being bullied or harassed, freeing them from verbal abuse in school (Duke, 2002). Alternatively, the narrow view of school safety focuses on physical harm incidents such as battery, robbery, and homicide (Duke, 2002). Duke described a "relatively safe school" as a place where every effort has been made to ensure the following key goals are trying to be met:

Students and staff are not fearful, anxious, or preoccupied with self-protection.

Students and staff are free to focus their time and energy on academic achievement and healthy psycho-social development. Daily instruction and other activities are not disrupted by criminal activity and misconduct. Students and staff respect each other, personal and school property, and the mission of the school.

(p. xvii)

As noted by Duke, no school can be entirely safe, but schools can strive to relieve the feelings of students and parents by trying to eliminate factors that would increase a students fear of becoming a victim while at school. These factors could include extra security, fences, gates, metal detectors, and cameras.

### **The Growing Violence in Schools**

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, school violence has a long-term adverse effect on students' physical health and emotional well-being. These adverse effects can affect a students' educational advancement and life goals

because the school setting is where students learn societal norms, values, and cultures, which is why school safety and a student's success outside the classroom are so closely related to positive developments throughout their lifetime (Peguero et al., 2018). During the 1950s, news outlets issued reports of school-aged children running amuck in society, committing crimes such as being involved with gangs, stealing, assaulting persons, and even murdering people in the streets (Duke, 2002). These claims were quickly refuted in 1956 by the National Education Association, which conducted a national study of teachers regarding student's behavior. The study found that 95% of all teachers surveyed stated that their students were well-behaved, with scores ranging from "exceptionally well-behaved" to "reasonably well-behaved" (Duke, 2002).

Subsequently, in 1959, multiple studies in educational journals provided a variety of viewpoints which objected to the declining relationship between student behavior and educators (Duke, 2002). For example, Duke (2002) stated that schools were not only the victims of these problems but also the contributors, and required school attendance laws led to many of the behavior problems that occurred in school by students who did not want to be there. By forcing unwilling children to remain in school, the correlation was made that unwilling students caused more disruptions, which decreased the school's overall safety, which led to poor student performance.

As society moved into the 1960s, parents, teachers, and law enforcement became aware of the upward trend in the national crime statistics, as more juvenile criminal cases started to appear in front of local courts (Duke, 2002). In 1965, it was reported that juvenile courts were handling approximately 697,000 juvenile delinquency cases. In

1967, President Johnson was so concerned with the growing problem that he created the Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. This newly formed commission then formed the Task Force on Juvenile Delinquency to help combat juvenile unrest (Duke, 2002).

During the 1960s, with large-scale protests occurring against the war in Vietnam and civil rights marches, schools did not have to worry about individual student threats coming in the form of violence or attacks, for its chief enemy was large-scale protests and demonstrations that disrupted the learning environment in public schools. The 1969 Survey of Student Unrest in the Nation's High Schools reported that 18% of more than 15,000 students surveyed had experienced disruptions in the school setting. The majority of these protests were not political or ideological, but rather a means to refute the school's restrictions on rules and dress code. By the end of the 1960s, educator minds had been changed. While educators of the 1950s believed that the vast majority of students were well-behaved, educators of the 1960s reported a growing concern with the student population as they seemed to be growing out of control with more thefts, assaults, and the increasing number of school dropouts (Duke, 2002).

During the 1970s, the federal government started to step in and play a more significant role in the juvenile delinquency issues that had surfaced over the past two decades. The government introduced interventions to young school-aged students to reduce crime and drug-use through a number of legislative measures. In 1970, the U.S. Congress passed the Drug Abuse Education Act to combat the growing drug use among school-aged youth. This law developed and funded programs that taught drug awareness,

enhanced teacher training, and provided additional community programs (Duke, 2002). In 1972, the U.S. Congress passed the Drug Abuse Office and Treatment Act, which created a federal agency to coordinate drug abuse prevention efforts. In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. This law was designed to prevent students from dropping out of school, consequently making it harder for schools to suspend and expel students, which was based on the belief that if students were in school, then they would not be out committing crimes during the daytime (Duke, 2002).

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 also mandated that the federal government investigate the increasing problem of crime in schools throughout the United States. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was tasked with completing a comprehensive study to determine the significance of the juvenile school crime problem, the cost associated with school crime, and the potential prevention of this juvenile school crime problem (Duke, 2002).

A survey known as *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* involved three phases of information collection. Phase I involved a survey sent out to more than 4,000 random elementary and secondary school principals. The survey asked school principals to report in detail all disruptive and illegal behavior that occurred at their schools. Phase II involved field agents visiting 642 secondary (junior and senior high) schools. The field agents collected data obtained from the school principals as well as surveying students and teachers. Phase III involved an intensive qualitative study of 10 schools. The schools



selected for Phase III mainly had higher reports of crime and violence (National Institute of Education, 1978).

After four years, the *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* study was released, providing interesting and concerning facts that worried lawmakers. The study reported that 8% of the nation's schools had a severe crime problem, and teenagers were at a greater chance of violence while at schools than in any other place. This violence was particularly alarming considering students spent approximately 25% of their waking hours at school; furthermore, the report stated that 36% of assaults and 40% of robberies involving teenagers occurred during school hours (Duke, 2002; National Institute of Education, 1978).

The *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* study identified multiple issues facing public schools; primarily that school violence was committed by students and not "outsiders" (Peguero et al., 2018). The study found that 22% of all secondary students reported avoiding some restrooms at school because of fear; 16% of students reported avoiding three or more places at school for the same reason; 20% of the students said they are afraid of being hurt or bothered at school at least sometimes; 3% reported that they are afraid most of the time, representing around 600,000 secondary students; 4%, or around 800,000, stayed home from school in the previous month because they were afraid; 12% of the secondary school teachers, representing some 120,000, said they were threatened with injury by students at the school; and 12% of the teachers said they hesitated to confront misbehaving students because of fear. Furthermore, almost half (48%) of the teachers reported that some students had insulted them or made obscene gestures at them

in the last month, 11% of students had reported that something of value had been stolen from them in a typical month, and about 12% reported having an item stolen from them at school in a month's time (National Institute of Education, 1978).

During the 1960s and 1970s, public schools started a downward trend of being declared an unsafe environment for students and teachers. The increase in violent crime was leading to a reduction in public schools' effectiveness on being a safe and positive learning environment for students (Duke, 2002).

The *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* study also found that young teenagers in the cities ran a higher risk of encountering violence in school than elsewhere, except in high crime neighborhoods. The study found that only schools in high crime neighborhoods were safer for students than in the neighborhood. The study also found that the annual cost of school-related crime (vandalism and burglary of school property) was estimated to be approximately \$200 million (National Institute of Education, 1978). Duke (2002) noted that during the time leading up to the *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* study, some cities and local governments had already started to flirt with the idea of security or police officers being more involved in school safety measures by adding security locks to doors, intrusion alarms on windows, and hotlines between schools and local law enforcement.

The 1970s led to the realization that there was a safety problem at public schools in America. As the *Violent Schools-Safe Schools* study pointed out, crime in American public schools was rising the most quickly without any signs of slowing down. The problem had already become such a problem in areas of the United States that local communities had already come up with ways of combating the rising crime rates in

public schools by deploying law enforcement in schools and adding other high tech security features like alarms and anti-intrusion systems (National Institute of Education, 1978).

According to Duke (2002), the Gallup Polls on the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools throughout the 1970s and 1980s identified the lack of discipline in schools as the primary concern for the regular citizen. However, in 1986, a change in the Gallup Polls illustrated a new trend, with the public reporting the use of drugs as the number one issue facing schools, and lack of discipline fell to the second most significant concern for the first time since the survey had been administered (Duke, 2002). For the first time in the nation's history, student drug use had now taken over as the top concern of parents and the general public when it came to school safety.

In the 1980s, the National Center for Education Statistics compiled data from the 1982 *High School and Beyond Study*. The study found that 29% of students polled felt that their school had a problem with fighting, 65% cut classes, 54% had poor attendance, 5% reported attacks or threats against teachers, and 7% of the students polled stated that they did not feel safe at school (Duke, 2002).

A 1983-1984 study of junior and senior high school principals found that the existence of the following problems:

Students had been caught selling illegal drugs in 35% of the schools, thefts of personal items valued over ten dollars had occurred in 82% of the schools, and police have been contacted for law violations in 72% of the schools. (Duke, 2002, p. 11)

In 1984, the United States witnessed a startling increase in juvenile gun-related violence. This violent increase was strongly related to the rising popularity of crack cocaine at the time in urban areas of the United States. This new trend of carrying firearms created an environment of fear, for students were now carrying weapons, typically handguns, for protection against violent drug dealers. This trend became significant because the single issue of violence was now coupled with drug use, creating a two-pronged issue for students. The United States public school system recognized that firearms and drugs were strongly related (Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 1996).

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which provided government funds to combat illegal drug use, which had increased to approximately 4.2 million to 5.8 million Americans (History, 2017). In the same year, First Lady Nancy Reagan launched her "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign to help combat the growing alarm of drug use in the United States, especially the ever-increasing rate of drug use among school-aged children (Duke, 2002).

In 1989, President George H. Bush convened with the nation's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia, for the Education Summit. The goal of the summit was to place the nation's students in the front row of the global classroom. During the summit, multiple educational goals were agreed upon by the governors and the federal government. One goal specifically addressed school safety, stating, "By the year 2000, every school in the United States will free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning" (Duke, 2002).

In the wake of the newly found Education Summit outcomes, school districts had started to introduce "zero tolerance" rules to combat students with drugs, alcohol, and weapons on the school campus, riding the back of First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign that had already been widely publicized. This zero-tolerance approach also targeted students who assaulted other students or staff members, leading to their immediate suspension or expulsion. Schools continued combatting the problem of violence of schools by introducing metal detectors and school resource officers (Duke, 2002).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act authorized funding to assist local schools in developing a school safety plan. However, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act also required each state to have a written law on the books that would expel any student for one year who brought a firearm to school (Duke, 2002).

In the following years, 1993, 1995, 1997, and 1999, only 7 to 8% of students in grades 9 through 12 nationwide reported being victims of violent crimes; but those that included injury or weapons did not change. From 1996 through 1997, 10% of all public schools reported a serious violent crime (BJS, 1999). In the school year 1999-2000, 20% of schools reported serious violent crime. During the school year 2005-2006, 86% of schools were now reporting a serious violent crime (BJS, 2008). Serious violent crimes include murder, rape, battery, suicide, and an attack with a weapon.

During the five periods of 1993 through 1997, the Bureau of Justice found that junior high school teachers were more likely to be the victims of crimes committed by students rather than their high school counterparts. Elementary school teachers were the least likely to be the victim of a crime by a student. In 1993, only 18% of students reported using marijuana in the 30 days before the survey versus 25% of students who reported using it 30 days before the survey in 1995. In 1997, 51% of students surveyed in Grades 9 through 12 reported having at least one alcoholic beverage within the 30 days before the survey (BJS, 1999).

Through the 1990s and into the late 2000s, the government and local school boards have been continually changing and adapting new laws and zero-tolerance approaches toward crime in schools. The methods continue to force schools to address rising crime rates and drug use at public schools by further introducing law enforcement officers into the public-school continuum (Duke, 2002). While Duke (2002) reported that through the 1990s and 2000s, the government took this zero-tolerance policy, there is additional information from other sources that the crackdown on zero-tolerance behavior starts in the 1980s and expanded into the 1990s and 2000s due to large increases in violent crimes and drugs at schools. To address these growing concerns in schools of students cutting class, skipping school, dropping out of school, and engaging in violence and drug activity at schools, the Federal Government combatted increasing school violence, and the rising drug epidemic engendered zero-tolerance measures intended to remove first-time offenders from schools permanently.

In 2009, the Center for Disease Control reported the following information regarding school safety: 5.6% of children nationwide claimed to have carried a weapon on school property at least one day in the 30 days before the survey, 7.7% surveyed stated they were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the last 12 months, 11.1% were in a physical fight on school property during the 12-month period, 19.9% stated they were bullied, and 5% did not go to school because they felt it was unsafe. Furthermore, 4.5% of students claimed to have used alcohol on school property, 4.6% claimed to have used cannabis on school property, and 22.7% stated they were offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on school property within the twelve months before the survey (NASRO, 2012).

During the 2009-2010 school year, there were 33 violent deaths of students, staff, or nonstudents at schools. In the 2012-2013 school year, these numbers rose to 41 homicides and 11 suicides that were school-related. In 2010, it was reported that 828,000 students aged 12-18 had reported being a victim of a crime: 470,000 were thefts, 359,000 were acts of violence, and 91,000 were considered seriously violent incidents (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012; Sullivan & Hausman, 2017).

The latest School Crime Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education for the 2015-2016 school year showed that crime is still a problem in public schools across the nation (US Department of Education, 2017). The report found the following: 39% of schools reported at least one student threat of physical attack without a weapon; 9% of schools reported a physical assault with a weapon; approximately 25% of schools reported at least one incident that involved the possession, use, or distribution of illegal

drugs; 13% of schools reported the use of alcohol on campus; and 10% of schools reported the use of prescription drugs (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The most current information from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Report from March 2018 stated that during the 2015-2016 school year, schools were reporting higher levels of school security, law enforcement, and SROs than in the previous decade from 2005 through 2006. The reports showed that 57% of schools were reporting having security staff present versus ten years ago, with only 42% reporting security staff. The schools' most recent reports showed that law enforcement is present in 48% of the schools and SROs are present in 42% combined to 2005-2006 when only 36% of schools reported a law enforcement officer present and only 32% an SRO present. The BJS report showed that more security and law enforcement personnel were deployed in secondary schools versus primary schools. The BJS reports also showed that a higher rate of primary schools teachers were being reported as being attacked by students versus secondary school teachers, which is a change in other previous reports (BJS, 2018).

As society was moving toward current day events, school systems started taking a stronger approach on school violence because the frequency of school shootings and school violent crimes continued to rise across the nation with no decline in sight. As the increase in violence at schools continues along with continual drug abuse and possession issues, schools and governments start to increase the rate of law enforcement deployed in schools to combat the problem (Jonson, 2017; Sullivan & Hausman, 2017).



## **History of School Shootings**

School shootings in the United States can be traced back to 1840 when University of Virginia School of Law Professor John Anthony Gardner Davis was shot and killed by a student when he stepped outside of his classroom to investigate a disturbance on campus. Davis attempted to remove the rioting student's mask that was concealing his identity when he was shot and killed by the student (University of Virginia, 2019).

While numerous school shootings occurred in the 150 years since the UVA incident, the death tolls were small. It was not until April 20, 1999, when two high schools' seniors wearing trench coats arrived at their high schools armed with handguns, a rifle, shotguns, bombs, and other weapons to inflict an unheard amount of violence upon the student population that the fatalities measured in the double digits. The school was Columbine High School, and the tragic incident left 15 dead counting the perpetrators, 12 students, and one teacher. Since Columbine, school shootings and mass shootings, in general, have started to become a common occurrence in the United States public school system (Addington, 2009; Jonson, 2017).

In 2000, the Pew Research Center published findings that found 71% of parents stated that the violence that occurred at Columbine High School had impacted their feelings on their child's safety while at school. The same survey found that only 40% of parents stated they felt that their child was safe at school, 37% of parents stated that their child's school had upgraded security since Columbine, and 77% of all parents have had a conversation with their child about school shootings after the Columbine incident (Addington, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2000). The events of Columbine affected safety

procedures in schools nationwide. Before Columbine, only schools in urban high crime areas focused on additional security measures like metal detectors, additional school security, security cameras, and gated campuses to combat school violence. Post-Columbine, these school security measures increased into other areas of suburban and rural America (Addington, 2009).

On April 16, 2007, a senior at Virginia Tech was able to murder 32 people. He shot two students in his dormitory and then walked across campus and murdered another 30 students and professors (Jonson, 2017). On December 14, 2012, a 20-year-old male was able to make entry into Sandy Hook Elementary School despite running into locked doors and windows at the school. The male was able to enter the school by shooting out the window. He was equipped with a rifle, two handguns, and a vest filled with ammunition. The shooter killed 20 children, along with six adults (Jonson, 2017).

On May 18, 2018, a seventeen-year-old male student walked into a high school in Santa Fe, Texas. The student was armed with a shotgun and handgun hidden under his trench coat. He killed ten people, eight fellow students, and two teachers, and injured 13 others, including a police officer that confronted the shooter (Perez et al., 2018; Rhor, 2018). On February 14, 2018, a former student opened fire on students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 and injuring another 17 people (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission Report, 2019).

After each one of these school shootings, policies or laws were changed, and safeguards were put in place to help protect students and staff. Before Columbine, law enforcement's response to active shooters situations was to contain the situation and wait

for additional resources. After Columbine, though, law enforcement determined this was no longer the proper response for an active shooter incident (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission Report, 2019).

The Sandy Hook Commission determined that despite the main doors of the school being locked as required, the shooter was still able to gain entry into the school through shooting out the window. The Sandy Hook Commission concluded that several issues could mitigate future incidents of similar nature by changing some of the current policies and laws. Some of the recommendations from the Sandy Hook Commission included mandating main entrances on buildings be forced entry resistant, to being able to unlock a classroom door from the interior of a classroom, changing state law to allow for jurisdiction for all law enforcement officers to respond to similar incidents as needed, and adding mandatory registration of firearms (Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, 2015).

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission Report (2019) found numerous mitigating factors that led to the death or injury of 34 students and staff members. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission found that the school failed to lock exterior doors properly, failed to train on Code Red (Active Shooter) drills in the year prior to the incident, failed to announce a Code Red was active over the school's PA system until the shooter had finished shooting his victims, and numerous additional findings. On March 9, 2018, just three weeks after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting, the Florida legislature passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act. The bill included a comprehensive firearms ban that prohibited adults under the age of 21 from purchasing a firearm and required an armed presence in every public school in the

state of Florida, significantly increasing the law enforcement requirement in schools (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, Fla. House Bill 2018-03; Rohrer, 2018).

The Public Safety Act was enacted months before the release of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission report in January of 2019. In the three weeks after the incident, no time was given for debate or input from parents of students or other community stakeholders. A knee-jerk decision was made that policymakers felt were in the best interest for all citizens of Florida even though the incident was coated with failures by local enforcement that did not help mitigate the chances of this event from occurring. These knee-jerk reactions seem to be the normal way of handling these macro-level political events; tragedy occurs, and overnight, the policy is changed to ease the burden on policymakers from failing to act sooner.

### **School Resource Officers**

While many measures have been taken to increase school safety, one of the most extensive actions taken to combat crime and violence in schools and increase overall school safety is the introduction of SROs in public schools (Sullivan & Hausman, 2017). The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO; 2012) defined an SRO as follows:

A school resource officer, by federal definition, is a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority who is deployed by an employing police department or agency in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.

While the NASRO provides an adequate definition for the term “school resource officer” or SRO, The North Carolina Center for the Prevention of School Violence (CPSV) provides greater detail on the roles that an SRO will have to fulfill by defining the term as the following:

A certified law enforcement officer who is permanently assigned to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools. SROs are intended to function as a comprehensive resource for their school or schools and not merely serve in a typical law enforcement role. Ideally, the SRO is trained to perform three roles: law enforcement officer, law-related counselor, and law-related education teacher. (CPSV, 2011, para. 1)

Lynch et al. (2016) and Barnes (2016) further supported the claim in their research that SROs play multiple roles and provide a number of law enforcement and educational functions to the school continuum.

Trump (1998) stated that safety ranks among one of the top concerns for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Trump reported that school districts had started to increase school security officers as early as the 1970s, and the interest continued to surge during the 1980s. During this period, the nation's public schools saw an increase in the advancement of school security departments, school police departments, and SRO programs. Trump stated he felt that an SRO program model was a "win-win" for schools, communities, and law enforcement agencies because it provides a high-quality service at a cost-effective rate for the community.

An SRO must also be able to interact with students and staff at schools successfully. McDevitt and Panniello (2005) found that out of 907 students surveyed that the majority (92%) of students reported feeling safer at school when they have a positive opinion of their SRO. McDevitt and Panniello continued by stating that SROs who come into a school with the traditional law enforcement approach will not be successful in building the bridges that make students feel safer at school.

### **History of School Resource Officers**

It was not until 1953 that America saw its first recorded instance of police officers being assigned to public schools in Flint, Michigan. The goal of the program used in Flint, Michigan was to advance the relationship between the local police officers and students by having police officers visit schools on a part-time basis (Ryan et al., 2018). After Flint, Michigan, the School Resource Officer program spread throughout the United States to combat the rise of juvenile delinquency and crime through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Later SROs were implemented to help fight the growing number of drugs being used by school-aged children in and out of school. By the late 1980s and to the present day, the goal of the SRO has grown to include protection of students and faculty from mass shootings that have been occurring nationwide (Ryan et al., 2018).

Brown (2006) concluded that SROs' contributions to school safety might only be that of enhancing a student's feelings on safety while at school. However, Brown noted that other research over the decades had proven that when students feel safer at school, they achieve higher academic achievement, which leads to the reduction of crime and delinquency in their communities.

### **Role of School Resource Officers**

The role of an SRO is described through the triad model that consists of three basic principle responsibility areas: educator, informal counselor, and law enforcement officer (Eklund et al., 2018; Lavarello & Trump, 2001; NASRO, 2012; Sullivan & Hausman, 2017). This model allows for the SRO to expand their role to another community-orientated task instead of just being present for increased security. The expansion is done by the SRO visiting classrooms, talking with students about current issues, and giving presentations to students about safety or law enforcement related matters. During the routine daily task of the SRO, officers are often interacting with students, parents, and educational staff, building the community bond that is important in today's policing (Eklund et al., 2018; Weiler & Cray, 2011). However, studies indicate that SRO time is not evenly distributed across these three functions. According to the Justice Policy Institute (2011), SROs spend 48% of their time on law enforcement related matters, 24% of their time on mentoring, 12% of their time on teaching, and 16% on other tasks.

School safety plans started becoming popular as the number of school-related shootings began taking place. In 2013, the White House (President Obama) developed a plan called “Now is the Time” that was aimed at safeguarding America's students. The White House was focused on funding an additional 1,000 SROs and on getting schools to have in place an effective and reliable plan to respond to any unthinkable event like another school shooting (Jonson, 2017; The White House, 2013). The White House cited a 2010 survey that only 84% of public schools had a written response plan in place to

address a school shooting. The survey also found that only 52% of schools that had a written plan had practiced the plan (The White House, 2013).

School safety plans are developed to address issues of physical security and other hazards like a school fire, severe storm, intruder, or act of terrorism against the school or local area. While not every school is the same, the school safety plans are generally designed to address a wide range of possible issues. It is typical for an SRO assigned to a school to undertake a task such as overseeing the school's physical security. Because the background of the SRO is usually rooted in law enforcement matters, the deputies can share a wealth of knowledge in ways to increase school security and safety. SROs in these positions will likely help develop and practice a school's safety plan for emergencies. The development and execution of this school safety plan can be lifesaving for students and staff (Eklund et al., 2018).

A well-developed school safety plan should also cover the basics in school security by controlling access. By doing so, the school is attempting to keep the bad guy out. The basics of controlling access to approve school safety would include making sure that all access points (exterior doors and gates) onto the campus are secured with locking devices and making sure that only qualified persons are gaining access to the school's campus. The school safety plan should also encompass internal school security, which includes limiting unnecessary student movement, issuing identification cards, and making sure interior doors are being locked. While a locked door will not stop an intruder with a purpose, it may deter them or slow them down enough to allow law enforcement time to intervene (Jonson, 2017; National Clearinghouse Educational Facilities, 2008).



The development of school safety plans not only help with preventive measures to prevent potential mass shootings but also help the students and staff prepare for worst-case scenarios that may occur. Teaching students and faculty how to survive a school shooting is giving them a fighting chance during an active shooting or any other type of significant event that may occur on the school's campus. The two main thoughts on response are the traditional lockdown and the multioption response (Jonson, 2017).

The traditional lockdown method involves both students and faculty to shelter in place by locking classroom doors, turning off classroom lights, staying low to the ground, moving away from the center of the room to avoid detection, and waiting until the police arrive (Jonson, 2017; Trump, 2011). The multi-optional response was developed because the traditional response did not address the unique nature of school shootings, that every shooting is different (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The multioptional response uses the traditional lockdown as a step in the process but focuses on giving students and faculty options to avoid the threat. The options are given to students because every school shooting is unique and students cannot just lock down in place in the cafeteria or library, using Columbine and Sandy Hook as an example, where students merely hid under desk and tables for protection. Primarily this method instructs the student or faculty to flee the area of the danger, even if it means leaving campus. If fleeing is not an option, then it recommends locking down in place and barricading doors and windows with anything available like desks and chairs to deter the shooter from entering the room. During the Virginia Tech shooting, student classrooms that barricaded their doors saw less death and injury than the students who

only took a passive approach. Last, the multi-optional response teaches students and faculty to actively resist the shooter by swarming and fighting back in the worst-case scenario (Jonson, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

During the 2015-2016 school year, 95% of schools reported that they had drilled on lockdown procedures, 92% reported that they practiced evacuation procedures, and 76% practiced the only shelter in place procedures (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This change in policy occurred over time due to parents and the public outcry that stemmed from watching countless hours of the media's coverage on school or mass shootings that continued to occur through the United States (Addington, 2009).

### **The Rapid Expansion of School Resource Officers**

According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) report from 2012, America's public schools have become safer as a result of the expansion of SRO programs nationwide. The report cites that since the collection of data from around 1992, there has been a downward trend in school-related crime; juvenile crime has dropped off nearly 50% between 1994 and 2009. As pointed out by NASRO, this trend mirrors the rapid expansion of the SRO programs nationwide. The rapid expansion came about during the 1990s as a result of 15 deadly and highly publicized campus shootings that occurred from 1993 through 1999, most notably the Columbine High School Shooting (Jonson, 2017; NASRO, 2012).

SROs are a logical approach to providing school security. SROs give schools two major selling points over the school's security by delivering deterrence and providing an immediate response. These two reasons have played heavily into why SROs have rapidly

expanded in the public schools (Jonson, 2017). Jonson (2017) reported that only 13% of schools employed SROs in 1994 compared to 51% in 2014. The tremendous rise in SROs was only because of the federal government's ability to push over \$745 million through the Department of Justice and down to local schools (Addington, 2009; Jonson, 2017). The most recent data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) schools that in the school year 2015-2016, 57% of schools reported having security present, 48% reported having a law enforcement officer present, and 42% reported having an SRO present (BJS, 2018).

### **The Effectiveness of School Resource Officers**

Multiple studies have found that SRO programs are successful and that 62% of school administrators stated that hiring SROs was the most effective way to increase school safety. Further, 26% of schools ranked it as the second most effective way to increase school safety (CPSV, 2011; Sullivan & Hausman, 2017). Sullivan and Hausman (2017) cited a two-year study by Justiceworks (2001) that found two-thirds of students and teachers felt unsafe in public schools before the arrival of SROs. Additionally, this study also found that the majority of students and teachers who had unfavorable attitudes against SROs changed once SROs were introduced into schools (Sullivan & Hausman, 2017). In 2001, The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services released a report that stated, "An overwhelming majority of students and staff feel safe at school as a result of school resource officers being present in school buildings" (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

Theriot (2009) studied 28 schools arrest rates, 13 schools with SROs and 15 without SROs, in which it was determined that SROs being present in schools decrease assaults and assaults with weapons while the reports for disorderly conduct increased.

These statistics contradict the theory that SROs in schools led to an increase in reported crime and an increase in overall arrests. Denham (2009) found that 70% of faculty at schools believed that SROs being present led to the decrease in weapons being introduced onto school property. Furthermore, the Denham study found that 70% of faculty also thought that the SROs were doing excellent work (Sullivan & Hausman, 2017).

McDevitt and Panniello (2005) conducted a survey on students on the impact that they felt the SRO had on their school. The study found that when students know the SROs' names and have had conversations with them, they feel more comfortable reporting crimes to the SROs. The study found that it was not the number of interactions the students had with the SRO that made the difference, but the quality of those interactions. This study highlights that an SRO is most effective when students view them in a positive light.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

McGrew (2016) stated that the now popular phrase, school-to-prison pipeline developed from a conference in May of 2003, titled "Reconstructing the School to Prison Pipeline: Charting Intervention Strategies of Prevention and Support for Minority Children." By 2004, McGrew stated the term school-to-prison pipeline was being used in news reports, studies, and even caught the eye of top lawmakers at the national level. Sullivan and Hausman (2017) and Heitzeg (2009) cited harsh discipline policies coupled with zero-tolerance policies that were put in place to reduce criminal behavior. Further, classroom disruptions may be creating a negative school environment, leading to scholars

in opposition of SROs in schools who state that this environment leads to a school-to-prison pipeline effect. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) echoed Sullivan and Hausman's (2017) study, stating that cops in school led to the criminalization and arrest of students for minor school offenses (ACLU, 2017).

Ryan et al. (2018) found that placing untrained SROs in schools along with a poorly implemented SRO program can have adverse effects on the desired outcome of making schools a safer learning environment and can lead to a school-to-prison pipeline effect. Ryan et al. recommended that SROs take a step back from the discipline process and make the schools discipline students for minor offenses.

NASRO revealed that their current school safety model does not foster a "school-to-jail pipeline" mentality. NASRO argued that because they promote interagency teamwork with school officials, and they do this by following the practice of not arresting students for minor disciplinary issues that should be handled by school administrators. NASRO claimed that as the explosion of SROs increased, the juvenile arrest rate throughout the United States decreased (NASRO, 2012).

### **Summary**

Throughout the literature, examples of PET can be seen throughout the rising history of school violence. Specifically, policymakers continually kicked the can down the road, not addressing increasing issues of school violence and other crimes until the issue became a macro-political event. This cycle continued through decades of increasing school violence, property crimes, and mass shootings nationwide; meanwhile, no scholarly attention was directed toward parents' opinions on school safety. This study

will fill the current gap in the current literature and research by furthering the knowledge in school safety and parent opinions of school safety.

This chapter provided the employed search strategy in the development of the study's literature review. The theoretical framework described the foundation of the study through the use of PET. The chapter provided past, current, and relevant information on the topics of school safety, mass shootings at schools, school violence over the past 70 years, and analysis of decisions made by policymakers. The next chapter provides the methodology for the study, along with the research design and rationale used.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this nonexperimental quantitative case study was to explore parent perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward school safety by answering the overarching research question: “Do school resource officers (SRO) being present at public schools impact parents' perceptions of school safety?” I have not found any studies that address the issue of parent perceptions of an SRO's presence on school safety. The study utilized quantitative data gathered from an online survey of parents from the Seminole County, Florida school district. The survey included only closed-ended questions designed to explore parent perceptions of SROs by examining ratings from a 5-point Likert scale with a comment section for parents to leave open-ended comments about the survey. The Seminole County Public School system currently has a full-time SRO assigned to every public school in the county.

The methodology used in answering these questions is presented and discussed in greater detail in this chapter. Chapter 3 contains the following sections: research design and rationale, methodology, data collection, population and participants, instrument and procedures, variables, data analysis plan, ethical procedures, limitations, participants and their roles, the role of the researcher, trustworthiness, and summary.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A quantitative research approach was utilized through the dissemination of an online survey. Plante et al. (1994) stated that both qualitative and quantitative research methods have the means to provide adequate information. Ultimately, the researcher must

select the method that best suits the study. Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that surveys provide a researcher the opportunity to sample an entire population to determine and understand their attitudes, perceptions, and opinions on a given matter.

Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2017) advised using a cross-sectional survey design to obtain a snapshot of the target population's attitudes, perceptions, and opinions at a certain point in time. After analyzing the goals, objections, and purpose of this study, it became clear that the quantitative approach was the most appropriate choice. The survey questions were formatted in two modules that would place the independent variables against the dependent variables through a multiple regression test. The first module sought independent variable information by asking basic demographical information that allowed me to evaluate different levels of disaggregation developed from the main survey questions in the second module. The demographical information sought the sample population's age, race, and socioeconomic status. The second module sought information on the dependent variable by comprising a list of questions based upon a 5-point Likert scale. These questions were formed to obtain the sample populations' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of parents as they relate to school safety and their level of support (or lack of support) toward SROs. The second module was comprised of approximately 10-15 questions.

My overarching research question was: "Do SROs being present at public schools impact parents' perceptions of school safety? The subresearch questions listed next can be used to add to the body of literature.



RQ1. To what degree do parents support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12?

RQ2. What are parent perceptions of school safety due to the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12?

There is a gap in the literature regarding information available on parent perceptions of SROs; therefore, it is imperative to explore the thoughts and feelings of parents on SROs being placed in public schools throughout the State of Florida, specifically Seminole County Public School District in Florida.

### **Data Collection**

The study used primary source data obtained through parent survey results via SurveyMonkey. The decision was made to use SurveyMonkey after reading other dissertations, specifically Daniels (2010), where the author listed several problems while using a hard copy survey. Daniels identified that the respondents not only responded to the questions that were scaled on a Likert Chart; they also provided additional information that was not needed on the hard copy. Daniels reworked the survey and sent it out via SurveyMonkey, and Daniels saw better results in response rates and answers.

The data collection did consist of the researcher administering the survey via SurveyMonkey after receiving approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the assist of Seminole County Public Schools. To increase the response rate, it was requested that Seminole County Public Schools help in disseminating the survey to the parents of Seminole County students. The data collection period was 45 calendar days that allotted a reasonable response window. This time frame allowed

parents to generate responses, thereby adding to the reliability and generalizability of the study.

The participants were given the informed consent statement at the beginning of the survey before any questions were available. The questionnaire did consist of 19 questions pertaining to the parents' demographical information as well as their thoughts and opinions on school safety. The questionnaire was developed using a proven test, the *School Safety Officer Scale* by Zullig et al. (2017), then making the necessary changes to make the test applicable to this survey. My goal was to have at least 10% of the Seminole County Public School's student body's parents respond. For example, if one parent responded and had five children in Seminole County Public Schools, this would account for five of the roughly 67,000 students, even though it was only one respondent. The overall goal of the study was to have at least 10% of the current student body (roughly 6,700 students) parents reply.

The backup data collection method is included in this paragraph, which was supposed to consist of handing out surveys (via paper copies or completed on a tablet) in person at local Seminole County businesses and supermarkets if the Seminole County School Board did not want to participate. The participants were to be given the informed consent statement at the beginning of the survey before any questions were available.

### **Population**

The target population of this study was all parents of students that attend any public school with Grades PreK through 12 in the State of Florida. According to the Florida Department of Education, during the 2018-2019 school year, there were over 2.8

million students enrolled in one of the 73 school districts in Florida (Florida Department of Education, 2020).

### **Sample**

The target population for this study was parents of students that attend one of the 67 schools inside the Seminole County Public School District. The Seminole County School District and the Seminole County Sheriff's Office were among the first in the Central Florida area to lead the initiative in assigning an SRO to every public school in Seminole County before it was mandated by state law after the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Furthermore, the school district is comprised of approximately 67,000 students. This target population was selected due to Seminole County Public Schools demographics closely matching those of the most current U.S. Census, making this study a close representation of the U.S. population.

**Sample Size.** A power analysis for linear regression based on the assumptions of the medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), an alpha of 0.05, and a power of 0.80 for 12 predictors revealed that the sufficient sample size was 44 participants (Faul et al., 2009).

### **Variables**

The study's survey was made up of questions to acquire dependent, independent, and control variables that include but were not limited to demographics, parents and student interaction with the SRO, and parent perceptions of school safety.

## **Dependent Variables**

### ***Degree of Support***

Measuring the degree of parental support in this study would help identify the community position on SROs in public schools in Seminole County. The measure of support was based on a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from *strongly oppose* to *strongly favor*.

### ***Feel Safe***

The variable, feel safe, did measure the degree to which the parent felt that their child was safer with an SRO present. The measure of the parents' feelings was based on a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all safe* to *completely safe*.

### ***Adequate Safety and Security***

The variable, adequate safety and security did measure the degree to which the parent felt the level of safety and security at their child's school was adequate. The measure of the parent's feelings toward the level of safety and security was based on a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all safe* to *completely safe*.

### ***Worry of a School Shooting***

This dependent variable was being polled for future use if needed. It then did not help answer either of the research questions. However, the questions asked parents if they worry about a school shooting occurring at their child's school. The measure of the parent's feelings toward the level of safety and security was based on a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all safe* to *completely safe*.

## **Independent Variables**

### ***Visit Child's School***

Parents were asked: In the last 30 days, how many times have you visited your child's school, for any reason, including drop-off and pick-up? The measure of the parent's response was multiple choice and a range from zero visits to 20 visits.

### ***Seen SRO***

Parents were asked: In the last 30 days, how many times have you seen the SRO at your child's school? The measure of the parent's responses was multiple choice and ranged from zero to 20 or more times.

### ***Interacted with SRO***

Parents were asked: In the last 30 days, how many times have you interacted with the SRO? The measure of the parent's responses was multiple choice and ranged from zero to 20 or more interactions.

### ***Outcome of Interactions***

Parents were asked to describe the interactions, if any, they have had with an SRO. The parent's interactions were measured on a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from *very positive* to *very negative* and did include an option for the parent not having any interactions with the SRO.

## **Control Variables**

### ***Child's School Level***

Parents were asked a multiple-choice question about which level of school their child attends: elementary, middle, or high school. If parents had more than one child

attending different Seminole County Public Schools, they were asked to use their perceptions regarding the oldest child and the SRO assigned to that particular school for their survey. Using the oldest child was only to keep the study uniformed, so parents did not have to decide what child's school to use for the survey if they had multiple children at different schools.

### ***Number of Children***

Parents were asked a multiple-choice question as to how many children they have attending Seminole County Public Schools. The responses ranges from one to five or more children.

### ***Family Unit***

Parents were asked to identify their child's family unit through a multiple-choice question that provided only three responses: *one-parent home*, *two-parent home*, or *other*.

### ***Household Income***

Household income was a categorical variable. Parents were asked a multiple-choice question on the household's current yearly income. The responses ranged from \$0-24,999.00 to \$125,000.00 or greater.

### ***Sex***

Parents were asked to identify their sex with a dichotomous option of male or female.

### ***Age***

Parents were asked to identify their age for the survey. This question was continuous, meaning parents could enter a value between 0 and 99.

***Race***

Parents were asked to best identify their race through answering a multiple-choice question with *White, Black, Native American, Asian, and Other* as responses.

***Ethnicity***

Parents were asked to choose their ethnicity, which was a dichotomous variable of either *Non-Hispanic* or *Hispanic*.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis was conducted using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25.0 (IBM Corp., 2017). This study did employ an ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression model. The OLS regression ran the linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, which did indicate changes in the dependent variable based on a unit change in the independent variable (Field, 2013).

**Limitations**

This study was limited because it did not collect parental information about the parent's perceptions of every single one of their children. The study focused on the total number of children being surveyed to increase the response rate, and the study asked the parent to focus on their oldest child's school for the survey, which was to keep the study consistent along with data collection, making it easier for me when completing the final analysis.

All research conducted was for the purpose of adding something new to a topic that can be complex and complicated. For a researcher to add value to a research topic,

the research limitations were examined. These limitations fell into the following three categories: internal validity, external validity, and ethical considerations.

## **Validity and Reliability**

### **Internal Validity**

Internal validity is critical when trying to establish cause and effect relationships, which are more common in experimental research designs. The typical threats to internal validity are self-selection, assignment bias, history, and maturation (Creswell, 2009; Salkind, 2010). This study did not rely on treatments or interventions of the sample population, which did not affect the internal validity. Furthermore, the data collection technique used in this online survey format through a secured third party (SurveyMonkey) helped to rule out any chances of assignment bias, for there is no contact with the sample group. However, Andres (2010) stated the use of surveys could limit a research study because there is the potential that the survey type, mail or web-based, could result in lower response rates. Regarding issues with history and maturation, Campbell and Stanley (1963) stated when changes are made to the sample to influence the outcome of the survey, then a researcher will have issues with history and maturation (Andres, 2010).

### **External Validity**

External validity refers to the generalizability of a study. Typically, nonexperimental designed studies display a high external validity (Creswell, 2009). In the case of this study, it was impossible to examine every single parent involved in the



student or their individual perceptions, so parents and their perceptions were generalized to group parents into categories based on their perceptions along with other factors.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I only used data collected through a third-party service. To keep all respondents' information personal and secured, there were no questions that asked the names of parents, teachers, SROs, school staff, or students. Through reading the instructions and completing the survey, respondents provided implied consent for the use of their data for the purposes of this study. Again, there was no identifying information included in the final data set, and it was presented in aggregate form.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provided the research methods and rationale for applying a nonexperimental quantitative research design. This chapter detailed the research questions, the variables, and the analytic plan to address the questions asked in this study. Additionally, it covered the data sources, the study's target population, and the study sample. Last, the issues of validity and ethical concerns have also been addressed. The proceeding chapter addresses the results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this quantitative study was to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding parent perceptions on the impact school resource officers (SROs) have on school safety. I wanted to examine the relationship between the different levels of support that parents have for SROs in public schools and further examine if other factors like race, gender, or socioeconomic status played a part in parents' opinions on this topic. The research questions and hypotheses for the study were as follows:

RQ1. To what degree do parents support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12?

$H_a1$ . The majority of parents will support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12.

$H_o1$ . The majority of parents will not support the presence of SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12.

RQ2. What are parent's perceptions of school safety due to the presence of an SROs in Seminole County Schools K-12?

$H_a2$ . Parents with a higher socioeconomic status will have a positive perception for SROs in their child's school, while parents with a lower socioeconomic status will have a negative perception of SROs in their child's school.

$H_o2$ . Parents with a higher socioeconomic status will have a negative perception of SROs in their child's school, while parents with a lower socioeconomic status will have a positive perception of SROs in their child's school.

This chapter includes information about the primary data I used for the study. This chapter also provides the study results, including all levels of analysis in which it was attempted to gain scientifically significant results.

### **Data Collection**

Before collecting study data via SurveyMonkey, I obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB# 12-01-20-0723257). The study data were collected according to the plan outlined in Chapter 3, except for a change in the number of days the survey was accessible for completion. The study's data came from an online survey administered over 45 days, between December 7, 2020 and January 20, 2021. For this study, the survey was distributed thru SurveyMonkey using a variety of methods such as emails and through social media (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). Initially, I intended to survey a broad base of parents of students in Seminole County through online surveys through SurveyMonkey coupled with passing out fliers in person at randomly selected Seminole County Public Schools and local events (e.g., sporting events, farmers markets, grocery stores). However, due to complications arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and a lack of support from organizations in Seminole County, the survey was distributed solely online. In the original plan, the survey was to be administered over 30 days. Due to the Christmas/New Year's break from school approaching in the middle of the survey, the survey was extended from 30 to 45 days before the survey was initially posted. The survey was not extended beyond 45 days. I discussed the possibility of extended the survey with my committee chair and other scholarly peers, and I decided to end the survey at the original 45-day mark as planned.

The survey included questions regarding parent demographics, parent perceptions of school safety, and parent perceptions of SROs. At the time of the survey, approximately 42,800 students were enrolled in K-12 schools in Seminole County, Florida, in face-to-face classroom instruction. However, over 68,000 students were enrolled through all learning levels (e.g., face-to-face, virtual). The Seminole County School Board Staff confirmed this information on February 16, 2021. In total, 100 parents completed the survey.

I imported the survey data into SPSS. Upon reviewing the data, one case was removed because the respondent's child was not enrolled in a school within Seminole County. The final sample size was 99, which was greater than the required sample size of 44, specified by the power analysis.

## **Results**

The analytic plan was to analyze the data using a variety of regression models. The first step of the analysis was to obtain descriptive statistics for each variable. The second step was to construct scales to measure perceptions of school safety and parent-school resource officer interactions. The third step was to conduct bivariate analyses to identify their appropriate use for multivariate regression. Unfortunately, upon review of the univariate and bivariate outcomes, it was evident that there was insufficient variability and a lack of significance to move forward with a multivariate analysis.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the dependent variables: the degree of support, feeling safe, adequate safety and security, and worry of a school shooting. A

5-point Likert Scale was used to determine parents' degree of support, their feelings on security and safety, and worry of future school shootings. The results showed that parents support SROs in Seminole County Public Schools.

Due to the lack of variability, for RQ1, the degree of support for SROs was collapsed into two new categories: *Favor* ( $n = 94$ ) and *oppose* ( $n = 3$ ). Three of the 99 parents surveyed strongly opposed the idea of SROs being stationed in public schools, while ten parents had neutral feelings or somewhat in favor of it. However, 86 parents are strongly in favor of SROs in Seminole County Public Schools.

All parents surveyed reported they felt safe knowing that an SRO is present in their child's school every day. The majority of parents, 65 of the 99 surveyed, reported they felt either highly safe or completely safe when asked how they felt about an SRO being present every day at school.

Only one of the 99 parents surveyed felt there is not currently adequate safety and security at their child's school. The majority of parents, 64 of the 99 surveyed, felt their child was either highly safe or completely safe while attending school.

When parents were asked about their concerns about someone committing a shooting at their child's school, no parent felt their child was completely safe at school. However, only 10 of the 99 parents were either very concerned or highly concerned about someone committing a shooting at their child's school.

**Table 1*****Levels of Support, Safety, and Concern******Dependent Variables***

	Strongly opposed	Somewhat opposed	Neutral	Somewhat in favor	Strongly in favor
Degree of Support	3	0	2	8	86
	Not at all safe	Marginally safe	Moderately safe	Highly safe	Completely safe
Feel safe	0	9	25	41	24
Adequate safety & security	1	7	27	43	21
	Very concerned	Highly concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not concerned	Completely safe
Worry of school shooting	5	5	60	29	0

**Factor Analysis**

To measure the overarching theme, parent perceptions of school safety, the three Likert questions pertaining to parent perceptions of school safety were assessed and transformed into a single continuous scale variable through factor analysis, specifically, principal component analysis (PCA). PCA is the appropriate factor analysis approach when reducing a large number of variables into a subset or single variable (Field, 2013). According to Field (2013), scales are used instead of multiple single-item indicators that represent the same theme. For RQ2, a *perceptions of school safety* factor was constructed with the three following survey questions regarding the dependent variable, parent perceptions of school safety:

1. Do you feel that there is adequate safety and security at your child's school?
2. How safe do you feel your child is at school knowing that a school resource deputy is present every school day?
3. Are you concerned about someone committing a shooting at your child's school?

Through PCA, a factor was obtained. The factor loadings ranged from .607 to .884 (see Table 2). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was  $\alpha = .732$ , which indicates that it is a strong scale, for it is above the threshold of .700. The scale possesses convergent validity, as each of the items on the scale scored above the .4 threshold, while the eigenvalue (1.765) was greater than the threshold of 1.0 and explained 25.216% of the variance.

**Table 2**

***Perceptions of School Safety Factors ( $\alpha=.732$ )***

Item	Factor Loading
Adequate safety & security	.883
Feeling child is safe at school	.859
Worry of a school shooting	.600

Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics for the independent variables: visit child's school, seen SRO, interacted with SRO, outcomes of interactions. A multiple-choice number scale was used to determine how many times parents visited their child's school and the number of times they saw the SRO present. A 6-point Likert Scale was used to rate the parent's interaction with the SRO, ranging from *no interactions* to *very positive interactions*.

The vast majority of parents surveyed, 74 of 99, had at least visited their child's school in the last 30 days, with only 25 parents reporting that they had not visited in the past 30 days. Again, the majority of the parents, 67 of 99, who visited the school in the past 30 days stated they had seen the SRO while visiting the school, but only 28 of the 99 parents stated they had interacted with the SRO.

The interactions outcomes question did not have a 30-day expiration attached to the question; therefore, parents could use past experiences beyond the 30-day threshold. Just over half (45 of 99) of the parents responded that they had never interacted with an SRO at their child's school. Of the 44 parents that reported having an interaction with an SRO at their child's school, eight were considered the interaction neutral, 11 considered it positive, and 35 parents considered the interaction very positive.

**Table 3**

***School visit, SRO sightings, interacted with SRO, and Interactions Outcomes***

*Independent Variables*

	0	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21+
Visit school	25	40	10	8	5	11
Seen SRO	32	38	8	6	5	10
Interacted w/SRO	71	16	5	2	2	3
Interactions outcome	No interactions 45	Very negative 0	Negative 0	Neutral 8	Positive 11	Very positive 35

**Profile of Survey Respondents**

As shown in Table 4, many of the respondents were white, non-Hispanic, female, age 36-44, with 1-2 children enrolled in school, living in a two-parent home. Table 3 illustrates the univariate statistics for the control variables or the respondents' profiles.



Ninety-six percent of respondents were between the ages of 29 and 54 years old, while only 11% of the respondents were males. Nearly 93% of the respondents were White/Caucasian, while only 7 percent considered themselves Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Other. Fourteen percent of the respondents identified their family ethnicity as Hispanic.

### **Factor Analysis**

As with the dependent variable, for RQ1 and RQ2, a Parent-SRO Interactions scale was constructed with the following four survey questions encompassing the independent variable regarding parent-SRO interactions:

1. In the past 30 days, approximately, how many times have you seen the school resource deputy assigned to your child's school?
2. In the past 30 days, approximately, how many times have you interacted with the school resource deputy assigned to your child's school?
3. In the past 30 days, approximately, how many times have you been to your child's school, for any reason?
4. If any, how would you describe your interactions with the school resource deputy assigned to your child's school?

The researcher performed a PCA to identify a composite score. The PCA and scree plot revealed a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 2.848, explaining 40.691% of the variance. The factor loadings ranged from .683 to .856, all of which are above the .4 threshold (see Table 5). The reliability of the factor was established with a Cronbach's alpha of .775.

**Table 4**  
***Parent's Demographical Information***  
***Profile of Survey Respondents (N=99)***

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Respondent Age		
22-28	2	2
29-35	13	13.1
36-44	51	51.5
45-54	31	31.3
55 or older	2	2
Respondent Sex		
Male	11	11.1
Female	88	88.9
Respondent Race		
White/Caucasian	92	92.9
Black/African American	3	3.0
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1.0
Other	3	3.0
Respondent Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic	85	85.9
Hispanic	14	14.1
Number of children enrolled		
1	45	45.5
2	40	40.4
3	12	12.1
4	2	2.0
Respondent household income		
Under \$25,000	2	2.0
Between \$25,001 and \$50,000	11	11.2
Between \$50,001 and \$75,000	10	10.2
Between \$75,001 and \$100,000	11	11.2
Between \$100,001 and \$125,000	20	20.4
Respondent family unit		
One Parent Home	10	10.1
Two Parent Home	67	67.7
Shared Custody-between two homes	21	21.2
Other	1	1.0

**Table 5*****Parent-SRO Interactions Factor ( $\alpha = .775$ )***

Item	Factor Loading
Seen SRO	.860
Interacted with SRO	.845
Been to school	.785
Interactions with SRO	.685

**Bivariate Statistics**

Bivariate analyses were conducted to assess the study variables' associations. For RQ1, as the dependent variable, the degree of support was collapsed into a dichotomous variable, and the independent factor variable, Parent-SRO interactions, were continuous; the appropriate bivariate test was a simple logistic regression. The analysis revealed that the relationship between the two variables was not statistically significant ( $\text{Exp}(B) = .893$ ,  $\text{SE} .631$ ;  $p = .857$ ). For RQ2, a bivariate correlation was used to determine the association between the continuous dependent variable, perceptions of school safety, and the continuous variable, parent-SRO interactions. The analysis revealed that the two variables were not correlated or statistically significant ( $r = .000$ ,  $p = 1.000$ ). As the bivariate analyses for each research question were nonsignificant, it was not appropriate to move to the final phase of multivariate analysis.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 detailed the data collected from parents of school children who attend Seminole County Public Schools. Despite the data set being nonsignificant, the data did show considerable support for SROs in Seminole County Public Schools. The findings

reported that parents like having SROs in their child's school. It also was reported that parents feel safer when they know an SRO will be present in their child's school on a daily basis, and out of all the parents who responded to the survey, not one parent had a negative interaction with an SRO. The findings also reported 92% of parents feel their child's school is either moderately, highly, or completely safe. In Chapter 5, I will identify the conclusions made on the results of the study and provide recommendations for continued future research and policy decisions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 presents conclusions and recommendations for continued research and policy decisions about the study into parent perceptions on the impact that school resource officers (SROs) have on school safety in Seminole County, Florida. The study's goal was to examine and address the gap in research of parents' thoughts and feelings about having armed law enforcement officers present in their child's school on a daily basis. The survey allowed parents to leave comments at the end of the survey, and almost all of those comments were very positive, in favor of SROs. Since the deployment of SROs in public schools, which was first recorded in Flint, Michigan, in 1953, no study has addressed this important issue of parent perceptions of law enforcement officers in public schools (Ryan et al., 2018).

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

#### **Parent's Perceptions on School Resource Officers' Impact on School Safety**

Even though the study's results were nonsignificant, the study still shows overwhelming support from parents in Seminole County on having armed law enforcement officers in their child's public school every day. The study showed that all but one parent currently feels adequate safety and security already exist at their child's school. The study revealed that all parents surveyed felt safer knowing an SRO was present in their child's school. However, when parents were asked how much they worry about a future school shooting, none of them felt their child's school was entirely safe from a future shooting. One parent's comment was left at the completion of the survey:

"Law enforcement is so important in schools! It would be detrimental to remove them. They are protectors. What would happen if they weren't there, and a school shooting occurred?" Parents are an important and valuable stakeholder in the community, and our legislative leaders must hear their opinions and concerns, especially when it involves making decisions about a parent's child's safety at school.

### **Parent's Perceptions on School Resource Officers**

The study showed that parents often visited their child's school within a 30-day period despite the impact COVID-19 played on forcing parents away with social distancing. Even with the impact of COVID-19, the study showed that parents still saw SROs at their child's school regularly. One parent commented on their child's SRO: "The SRO for my children's school directs traffic in the AM. Due to COVID, the school no longer hosts events that would give me the ability to interact with him." Parents who stated they had interacted with the School Resource Officer (SRO) at their child's school did not report any negative experiences. These positive interactions boost the community-orientated policing mission SROs are entrusted in expanding. It speaks volumes about the professional approach these men and women have when dealing with parents of school-aged children on a daily basis. Another parent stated this about their child's SRO: "The SRO at my child's school is attentive and ensures our children are safe. He makes a positive impact on the students daily."

## Limitations of the Study

### Coronavirus Disease 2019

This study was limited in scope due to the current and long-lasting effects of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that has wreaked havoc on society's lives, making the once routine not so routine. Until the beginning of this school year (2020-2021), it was common for parents to attend their child's teaching day at school or the school's annual open house event in early fall. However, COVID-19 has changed the routine into the not so routine for not just parents but for all members of society. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, society will continue to learn to live and adapt to this new lifestyle of wearing a mask, socially distancing, and limiting personal contact in public. According to *The Lancet*, the COVID-19 pandemic is undermining researchers and their research at the university level. Furthermore, it was stated that the impact COVID-19 has had on the sciences, including sociology, could be felt for years to come (Lancet, 2020).

When this study was first conceptualized, it was done so with public interaction in mind. While the study was always designed to be completed via SurveyMonkey to help limit bias from the researcher, I knew that I would not only be able to rely on posts on social media platforms to reach the intended sample group. It was intended for me to go out in public and stand in car lanes at schools to hand out fliers with the survey's web address and QR barcode attached for parents to quickly and easily be able to access the survey. It was also planned to attend local events like school sporting events, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and farmer's markets to increase response rates.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no longer any public meetings, a lot of local schools only allowed parents into sporting events, and schools would not allow me to come with fliers or even hold a sign with the survey posted due to the tight restrictions brought on by COVID-19.

### **Sole Reliance on Social Media Platforms**

As stated previously, this survey was never designed to be solely administered through social media platforms. However, I was forced to rely only on this method for gathering respondents due to COVID-19. I created multiple posts that were opened to the public and shared the link for the survey, but the majority of my friends and family reside in the neighboring county to Seminole County. I relied on friends of friends to repost in an effort to gather more responses. I posted to the following social media platforms: Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The main issue with posting a professional survey to personal social media accounts is having to purge all personal opinions (post) that you have in the effort of remaining completely unbiased. After the first 20 days that the survey was available, only 27 people had responded. To gather more respondents, I started joining local groups in areas of Seminole County, Florida via Facebook (e.g., Oviedo Local, Chuluota Residents, Altamonte Springs Local) and began to request permission from the group administrators to post the survey on their local chat groups. Permission was usually granted, and the number of respondents started to grow rapidly. This technique would have been hopeful if it were started when the survey was first posted in December of 2020.



Saberi (2020) explained solely relying on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic is problematic. The potential for sampling bias is evident as the use of social media only eliminates the possibility of surveying those who do not use the designated social platforms or who do not have continuous internet access.

### **Techniques That Did Not Gather More Respondents**

Foremost, Saleh and Bista (2017) advised that a researcher should try to elicit the help of "authority figures, known personnel or organizations" to assist in distributing the survey to the target population. I had previously reached out to the Seminole County School Board in an effort to get their assistance with distributing the survey. The initial contact at the Seminole County School Board, which was also employed with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office, was eager to help. However, the School Board's standing policy did not allow them to assist in distributing the survey via parent's email. The justification seemed reasonable, they have never granted this request before, and if they did it for this study, they would have to do it for all future studies.

I made attempts to distance the study from the Seminole County Sheriff's Office to avoid any possible external conflict interfering in the scope of the study. However, in an effort to increase response rates, I had asked if the Sheriff's Office could assist in posting the survey to their social media platforms and received a similar response as the School Board. In retrospect, it was for the best. Even though it may have reached the number of respondents to make the study results significant, it would not have been worth losing the impartiality the survey maintained.

I reached out to the Seminole County PTA on four occasions during the 45-day survey period, twice by email and twice by Facebook Messenger. I never received a reply to any of his correspondence and felt the Seminole County PTA was the best resource to increase response rates without jeopardizing external validity. Then, I reached out to approximately 30 local churches (via social media and email) in the Sanford area of Seminole County, which has a wide array of diversity but received only two replies back, and both replies were in reference to getting back in touch at a later date.

### **Implications**

This study provides insight into the parent perceptions of how SROs positively impact school safety. Additionally, it demonstrates that the Seminole County School Board and their law enforcement partners have established a good community-orientated policing model in Seminole County Public Schools where parents feel safe, support their child's SRO, and have nothing but positive interactions with them on a continued basis.

### **Social Change**

Despite this study's nonsignificant findings, this study has still contributed to the expansion of knowledge and data in the field of parent perceptions of SROs in public schools. The study showed that parents in Seminole County, Florida, do support their local law enforcement officers being present in their child's school on a daily basis. The purpose of this study was to give parents a voice and continue the discussion among parents, lawmakers, and educators on how their communities and schools should be policed. When parents feel their child is safe and the child feels that they are safe, a safer and secure learning environment is promoted for children to thrive, which was explained

by both Ripski and Gregory (2009) and Perumean-Chaney and Sutton (2013), who concluded that children who felt safe at school, performed better.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation was the first quantitative study to examine parent perceptions of the impact that SROs have on school safety. The findings contribute to the scholarly exploration of examining the relationship between PET and how in this case, it has seemed to impact parents and students positively. After the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting, the Florida Legislature quickly implemented new gun restrictions and mandated armed personnel on school campuses in an effort to deter future school shootings (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, 2018). While the study results are nonsignificant, the support of police in school by Seminole County Parents supports law enforcement officers in public schools.

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