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# Why and When Do School Resource Officers Engage in School Discipline? The Role of Context in Shaping Disciplinary Involvement

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The use of law enforcement in schools raises concerns about impacts on school discipline. Drawing on a large-scale qualitative study of approximately fifty schools across two school districts, this study explores school resource officers' (SROs') involvement in school discipline and how it is shaped by their context. We use interview, focus group, and observation data from nearly 200 participants to document variability in the way SROs conceptualize and are involved in discipline as well as how such involvement is shaped by context. Although 79% of SROs initially report not being involved in discipline, we find that the majority involve themselves in nuanced ways that are shaped by relationships with school staff, official policies, and the characteristics of students served. Our results point to the need for clarity around SROs' involvement in discipline and ways that schools can shape contexts to ensure that SROs are not increasing the use of exclusionary practices.

In recent years, exclusionary forms of school discipline have increasingly come under scrutiny among policymakers, educators, and the public (Steinberg and Lacoé 2017; US Department of Justice and US Department of Education 2014).

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Such practices, which include suspension and expulsion, are predictive of a host of negative outcomes including lower academic achievement, dropping out, and involvement with the juvenile justice system (Arcia 2006; Christle et al. 2005; Christle et al. 2007; Fabelo et al. 2011; Mowen and Brent 2016; Raffaele Mendez et al. 2002). Each of these outcomes, in turn, increases the likelihood that a student experiences incarceration (Aizer and Doyle 2015; Foley 2001; Lochner and Moretti 2004).

Some scholars have argued that the increasing presence of sworn law enforcement in schools, including the use of school resource officers (SROs), has increased the possibility that law enforcement is involved in relatively minor student misbehaviors that otherwise would have been handled by school personnel (Devine 1996; Hirschfield 2008). At a national level, public schools have seen a recent increase in the presence of security personnel, including SROs. Specifically, in 2001, 54% of students ages 12 to 18 nationwide reported the presence of security guards and/or assigned police officers at their school; by 2015 this increased to 70% (Musu-Gillette et al. 2017). Still, the ways in which SROs are engaged in discipline is unclear. Although the most recent nationally representative data indicate that approximately 50% of administrators in schools with SROs reported that their SROs were involved in maintaining school discipline (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018), there is little empirical evidence about the forms that this involvement in discipline might take and how or why it differs across schools.

The role of SROs in school discipline raises a number of considerations. Although their presence is often framed as a deterrent to misbehavior and

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ensuring the safety of schools, it is also possible for SROs to escalate situations that otherwise could have been handled by school personnel, possibly leading to arrest (e.g., Stelloh and Connor 2015). In addition, their involvement in discipline has the potential to shift schools' approaches to discipline in more subtle ways (Bracy 2010). Such shifts, however, may infringe on students' rights and create disciplinary contexts that are more punitive and rule driven rather than focused on addressing the underlying causes of misbehavior (Kupchik 2010). Increasingly, states and school districts are facing dual pressure to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and to ensure the safety of students in schools. As SROs continue to grow as a mechanism for promoting safety, it is critical to explore the varied ways in which they engage with school discipline and the contextual factors that shape such involvement.

The purpose of this study is to explore the contexts that may influence how SROs engage in school discipline. In doing so, we provide a framework for understanding why the relationship between SRO presence and discipline might vary across school contexts. To this end, we address the following research questions.

1. How do SROs in two school districts engage in school discipline?
2. How do contextual factors shape SROs' engagement in school discipline within these environments?

We address these questions through the analysis of a large-scale qualitative study of SROs in approximately fifty schools across two suburban school districts. Drawing on interview and focus group data with SROs, principals, teachers, students, and parents, as well as observations of SROs, we document the reported roles that SROs play in school discipline and how their involvement with discipline varies across school context.

## Background

### *The Variability of SROs' Roles and Involvement with Discipline*

SROs are a common form of school-based policing in which sworn officers with arrest power are assigned to a school or district on a full- or part-time basis and typically are not trained as educators (Keierleber 2015). Although some work for school district police departments (particularly in larger locales), many others report to local law enforcement agencies and are therefore not school district employees. A recent national survey suggests that more than half of SROs work for a local police or sheriff's department (Kurtz et al. 2018). Therefore, they are often police officers who receive standard police training

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and report to a supervising officer but who work full time in the school. Like other officers, they are sworn to uphold the law but not necessarily a school's code of conduct.

Many SROs undergo training for how to work in schools, though whether current levels of training are sufficient is debated. A recent national survey of SROs found that 81% reported sufficient training for working in schools with three in four reporting training in working with youth and more than half receiving training in mentoring (Kurtz et al. 2018). Others have pointed out that such training often amounts to only several days, relatively little compared with the length of training officers receive in formal law enforcement (Petteruti 2011). As of 2015, only 12 states mandated that SROs receive student-specific training, leading critics to suggest that current training is insufficient (Keierleber 2015).

The largest professional organization for SROs, the National Association for School Resource Officers (NASRO), performs much of the training for SROs nationwide. NASRO suggests that as professional law enforcement officers, SROs should refrain from responding to student misbehaviors that may violate school rules but fall short of criminal behavior. Instead, they should refer the misbehaving students to school administrators (Canady et al. 2012).

In light of NASRO's recommendation, it is striking that nationwide approximately 43% of elementary and 63% of secondary school administrators in schools with SROs reported that their SROs were involved in maintaining school discipline (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). However, it is unclear what form this involvement in discipline might take. Limited prior research on how SROs involve themselves with school discipline suggests that SROs' approaches vary widely. For instance, one national study documented that SROs engaged in writing disciplinary reports (28%), enforcing truancy laws or policies (61%), and advising staff on student rule/sanction enforcement (40%; Travis and Coon 2005). Although these figures shed some light on the general level of engagement in certain tasks, they do little to explain what the tasks actually are or when and why SROs engage in them. Beginning to address this limitation, Kupchik's (2010) study found that some SROs intervened in school discipline but others looked the other way, arguing that it was not their job if the behavior was not criminal. Other recent work examining school based law enforcement in Texas found that SROs may attempt to deescalate a situation, talk to a student, or otherwise attempt to deter misbehavior, but that they largely do not see discipline as an appropriate role for themselves (McKenna et al. 2016; McKenna and White 2017).

Evidence on the impacts of SROs on disciplinary outcomes is also somewhat mixed. Although qualitative evidence demonstrates that SROs can subtly shape school practices so that they rely more heavily on exclusionary discipline (Kupchik 2010), quantitative studies at scale have not consistently shown

increases in outcomes like misbehavior and suspensions as a result of SROs. Although a meta-analysis of the relationship between SROs and the use of suspension yielded some evidence of increased suspensions, the results were not always statistically significant, particularly in models that focused on higher quality studies with comparison groups (Fisher and Hennessy 2016). Other more rigorous studies that used longitudinal data or plausibly exogenous variation in SRO scale up from federal COPS grants have found no impact on suspension rates and even decreases in reports of student misconduct (e.g., Na and Gottfredson 2013; Owens 2017), whereas others have observed increases in discipline rates that disproportionately affect black students (Weisburst 2019). Finally, other studies suggest that the relationship can vary. Fisher (2016) found that SRO presence predicted higher rates of suspension but that this relationship was moderated by demographics of the schools and their disciplinary context.

One reason for this variability may be a lack of guidance for SROs regarding their role in school discipline. Nationwide, only 56% of principals of schools with formalized policies defining SROs' roles at school reported that there were specific policies around SROs' involvement in discipline, and even in contexts where policy formalizes this role, most SROs are not sworn to uphold school policy unless the policy is law (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). In this vein, qualitative work in Texas found that some SROs believed they lacked the necessary training for their responsibilities in schools—including training on district policies—and may therefore be left without clear guidelines about when or how to be involved in school discipline (Martinez-Prather et al. 2016). Because SROs follow two different authority structures, they may receive unclear or even contradictory messages about what their roles ought to be (McKenna and Pollock 2014; Schlosser 2014). Although best practices indicate the importance of a clear memorandum of understanding that outlines SROs' roles and responsibilities (Canady et al. 2012; Finn et al. 2005), it is unknown whether and to what extent these trainings and agreements shape the day-to-day work of SROs.

Another reason for variability in SROs' engagement with school discipline may be attributed to features of the school context. For example, the relationship between SRO presence and exclusionary discipline has been found to differ according to schools' disciplinary orientation as well as the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the student body (Fisher 2016). Specifically, schools that had a more zero tolerance orientation toward discipline, coupled with a student body comprising higher proportions of nonwhite students or students in poverty, showed a stronger relationship between SRO presence and exclusionary discipline than other schools. These findings mirror Wolf's (2014) findings that SROs' decisions of whether to arrest students are shaped by school context and indicate that SROs' involvement with school discipline may be shaped by both the broader system of discipline that exists in the school and the makeup of the student body.

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### *Contribution of the Current Study*

Given that prior research has found some inconsistency in the relationship between SROs and school discipline outcomes, calls have been made to better understand how SROs are involved in school discipline. Although some prior qualitative work has shed light on SROs' involvement in discipline (e.g., Kupchik 2010), we are unaware of prior research that examines why SROs are involved with discipline in the ways that they are. To this end, the current study draws on large-scale qualitative data collection across nearly 50 schools in two school districts to examine (a) how SROs are involved in discipline and (b) how contextual factors shape their involvement. We explored how individual personalities and experiences, interpersonal relationships, school characteristics, and broader dynamics shape the ways in which SROs are involved in school discipline.

### *The Ecological Systems Model as an Orienting Framework*

Our exploration of the role of SROs in discipline and the contexts that shape their involvement pointed to the applicability of the ecological systems theory as an orienting framework. We therefore present the results within the ecological systems theory framework. Commonly used in the study of human development, ecological systems theory provides a nested view of individuals and emphasizes the role of the contextual environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). We posit that the process of an SRO forming an approach to their involvement in school discipline is also a process of development that is shaped in no small part by a series of nested contextual systems. We show these graphically in figure 1, where we position SROs at the center of the framework. As such, the model recognizes that their involvement with discipline may vary as a function of their own characteristics (e.g., training, views toward discipline).

From there, we posit a microsystem consisting of the entities most directly connected to their daily work environment such as the school administrators, teachers, students, and structures like the school discipline system. The bidirectional arrows between the SRO and each of these microsystem components represent the way in which both the entities in this system may influence the SRO's involvement in discipline but also the ways in which the SRO may shape the actions of individuals and systems that surround them. In this way, SROs may act in ways consistent with theories of policy implementation that situate front line actors as engaging in processes of sense-making and co-construction by which enacted policy emerges (Datnow and Park 2009; Wolf 2014). The

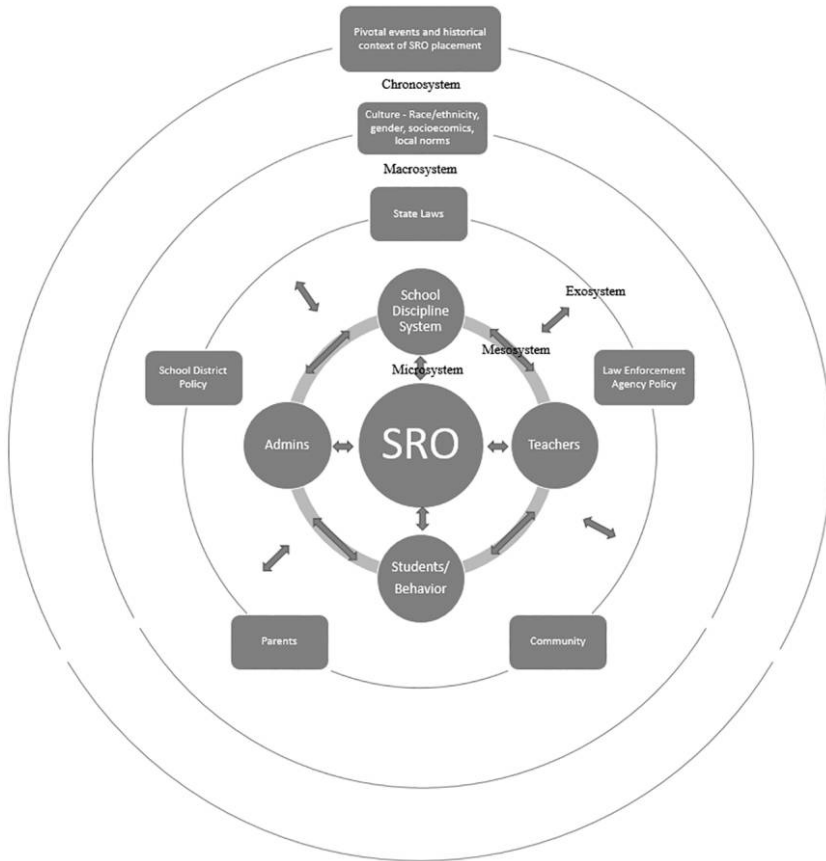


FIG. 1.—SRO’s role in discipline positioned within the ecological systems theory framework.

mesosystem is portrayed by arrows between the microsystems, representing the interactions between these structures and how they shape the disciplinary involvement of the SRO. For instance, if teachers do not feel supported by school administrators in disciplinary situations, there may be implications for when or how SROs are brought into the disciplinary process. The next layer, the exosystem, incorporates structural components of the SRO’s environment that are removed from their daily experience yet shape the context in which they work. We include things like school district policy, state laws, law enforcement agency policy, community norms, and parents. Next, the macrosystem captures

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larger cultural contexts such as societal norms. It is at this layer that the role of the SRO in discipline may be shaped by stereotypes or historical inequities. For example, racial threat theory suggests that schools may approach discipline differentially in response to the racial composition of the students served by the school (Welch and Payne 2010, 2012). Finally, ecological systems theory positions all of these components against the backdrop of the chronosystem, a temporal aspect of the model which captures the impact of pivotal events in time and the way in which interactions at other layers develop over time.

### Method

#### *Data*

The data for this study came from a broader research project examining the implementation of SROs across schools in an affluent, suburban area in the Southeast. This suburban area contains two school districts—one countywide, Fairfield County Schools (pseudonym), and one that covers the local county seat, Washington City Schools (pseudonym)—that both implemented SROs in all elementary schools in 2013. SROs had been in place in high schools in the district since the early 2000s and were placed in middle schools several years later. Although we describe the school districts as being suburban, the sample contains a range of urbanicity with one-quarter of the schools located within a small city, one-quarter of the schools located within large suburbs, one-quarter of schools in fringe rural areas, and the remainder of schools located in fringe town and distant rural areas. Both school districts contain some of the highest-performing neighborhood schools in the state according to the percentage of their students who meet or exceed state proficiency standards. As shown in table 1, about 40% of the students in Washington City Schools are African American or Hispanic, but only about 10% of the students in Fairfield County Schools are African American or Hispanic. Washington City Schools also has a more diverse population economically with about 40% of their students qualifying for free or reduced lunch and with 65% of schools qualifying for Title I funds compared with about 10% of students in Fairfield County Schools qualifying for free or reduced lunch and 15% of schools qualifying for Title I. Fairfield County Schools spends a little less than the state's average per pupil expenditures (state average is \$10,000), and Washington City Schools spends significantly more than the state average per pupil. In both districts, about 90% of the teaching staff is white. Both districts have lower racial achievement gaps in English, math, and science compared with the statewide achievement gaps (about 10 percentage points) but have slightly higher socioeconomic achievement gaps in English and math (about 1 percentage point).



TABLE 1

*Descriptive Statistics on School Districts*

	Fairfield County Schools	Washington City Schools
Number of schools	40 <sup>a</sup>	10 <sup>a</sup>
Enrollment	37,000 <sup>b</sup>	3,000 <sup>b</sup>
Percent African American	5% <sup>c</sup>	15% <sup>c</sup>
Percent Hispanic	5% <sup>c</sup>	25% <sup>c</sup>
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch	10% <sup>c</sup>	40% <sup>c</sup>
Percent of Title I eligible schools	15% <sup>c</sup>	65% <sup>c</sup>
Per-Pupil expenditures	\$9,000 <sup>b</sup>	\$14,000 <sup>b</sup>

SOURCE.—The state's Department of Education and Common Core of Data.

<sup>a</sup> Rounded to the nearest ten.

<sup>b</sup> Rounded to the nearest thousand.

<sup>c</sup> Rounded to the nearest five.

We conducted interviews with 47 SROs across both districts. The interviews took place at the school sites during the spring of 2017. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted by the authors and graduate research assistants using an open-ended interview protocol designed specifically for this project. The interview protocol was meant to guide the conversation, but the interviewers were encouraged to make the interview conversational rather than maintaining fidelity to the protocol. The semistructured interviews included questions regarding the school discipline structures used in schools, how SROs interface with these disciplinary structures, and how such approaches fit within broader efforts towards safety and security (see app. A for the full interview protocol). Along with SRO interviews, we also shadowed nine SROs for a half day each, taking field notes in the process.

In addition to the SRO interviews and observations, we also conducted focus groups and interviews with school administrators ( $n = 17$  interviews), teachers ( $n = 17$  focus groups), students ( $n = 9$  focus groups), and parents ( $n = 6$  focus groups) at Washington City Schools.<sup>1</sup> The interview and focus groups used similar protocols with the same semistructured setup as the SRO interviews (see app. A for full copies of protocols). Focus groups included between 2 and 10 participants with the average focus group including five participants. Participants were chosen in a nonrandom fashion, often by common planning periods for teachers, common noninstructional time for students, or involvement in the school PTA for parents. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents were asked about discipline at the school, their relationship with the SRO, how they view the role of the SRO in the school, and how they see the SRO interacting with the school's discipline system.

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TABLE 2

*Summary of Data Collection Activities and Participants*

Stakeholder	Data Collection		Participants
	Activities	Districts	
SROs	Interviews	Washington City and Fairfield County	47
SROs	Observations	Washington City and Fairfield County	9
School administrators	Interviews	Washington City	17
Teachers	Focus groups	Washington City	17 focus groups of 2–10 participants
Students	Focus groups	Washington City	9 focus groups of 2–10 participants
Parents	Focus groups	Washington City	6 focus groups of 2–10 participants
School district level leadership	Interviews	Washington City and Fairfield County	5
Law enforcement agency leadership	Interviews	Local law enforcement agency serving both districts	3

Study authors also conducted interviews with district-level officials at both school districts ( $n = 5$ ) and the leadership overseeing the SRO program in the Fairfield County law enforcement agency ( $n = 3$ ). The interview protocols were almost identical to the interview protocols for the school administrators (see app. A for copies of the protocols). Two of the district-level officials were in charge of the safety initiatives and safety procedures for their respective districts, interacted regularly with the SROs, and served as liaisons between the school districts and the Fairfield County law enforcement agency. The other district-level officials were at the assistant superintendent or superintendent level, so their interviews asked more specific questions about how discipline policy and discipline issues are handled across the districts. In total, we drew on 104 qualitative interviews and focus groups, all of which were transcribed by a professional transcription service for textual analysis.<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, we summarize all of our data collection activities and participants in table 2.

*Data Analysis*

Our analysis generally followed a grounded theory approach that, rather than testing a pre-defined theoretical framing, allowed for the emergence of a theoretical perspective—in this case, ecological systems theory—from the data

analyzed (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Although the semistructured interviews and focus groups were organized around expected themes and topics, the interview team met regularly during the data collection process to debrief on initial observations, in some cases leading to probing for emergent topics during future interviews and focus groups. At the data coding stage, interview and focus group data were coded in NVivo using the constant comparative method and iterative approaches to identify emergent themes. Although a number of anticipated themes were included, the iterative approach of data collection and coding allowed for unanticipated themes to emerge in the course of both data collection and data coding.

The overall coding scheme focused on themes that were guided by the interview protocol and continuing discussions among the research team on themes that arose consistently across interviews. All transcripts were independently coded by at least two members of the research team. As a means to enhance consistency in coding, the research team first coded several common transcripts and discussed coding decisions. That said, the goal of using multiple coders was to reach crystallization in coding, a concept that refers to the creation of a more credible and thorough view of a concept by engaging multiple perspectives in the coding of the data with a focus on capturing as many applicable segments of text, rather than perfectly aligning coding across readers (Ellingson 2008; Tracy 2010, 2013). As team members read and coded transcripts, they also kept coding memos in which theoretical notes, emergent themes, exemplar quotes, and negative cases were noted. The iterative process of code development was continued until the research team felt they had reached saturation, defined in this study as the point at which no new themes emerged (Fusch and Ness 2015; Saunders et al. 2018).

As transcripts were read and coded, connections or axial codes between the full set of codes were created through researcher team discussion (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These broad thematic categories included relationships between the SROs and other populations in and outside of the school, disciplinary systems, school security/safety, the purpose of the SROs in the schools, the different roles of the SROs in the schools, the impacts of the SROs in the schools, SRO training/background, and mentions of various subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities). Many different codes were included within each thematic category, and codes were continually updated based on research team conversations. We include a listing of our themes (both predetermined and emergent) organized by broader axial codes and a brief description of each in appendix B (apps. A and B are available online).

On completion of the initial coding phase, the authors reviewed the portion of transcripts with the codes that were related to the school's disciplinary system, misbehavior in the school, and the SROs' participation/role in the discipline system. Notes were created by school summarizing the roles of SROs in

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discipline and the influences on SRO participation in discipline in each school. Researchers collectively discussed the emergent themes that arose from these notes and how they fit within theory.

## Results

### *How Do SROs Engage in School Discipline?*

The SROs in our study overwhelmingly viewed discipline as not being a part of their role in the schools, with most SROs (approx. 79%) saying that they “do not discipline at all” (SRO 129).<sup>3</sup> In general, this position was corroborated by interviews with school administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

The seemingly automatic response that they do not engage in discipline appeared to be linked to the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the law enforcement agency and the school districts as defining their role as one of law enforcement and not of school discipline, stressing that discipline was “not my role” (SRO 114) or not part of their “job description” (SRO 107). As described by one SRO, this conception of the formal role shaped SRO involvement in even minor misbehavior: “I’m going through the uh the hall and if some student is running down the hall, I’ll end up telling him slow down uh but at the same time I feel like I’m treading the boundaries of my job description” (SRO 107).

Although SROs were fairly consistent in describing discipline as not being a function of their role, we found that there was significant nuance in what “not being involved in discipline” meant for each SRO. Many SROs described activities that fell on a spectrum of school discipline involvement. On the one hand, SROs almost universally reported no formal involvement in writing disciplinary referrals or determining disciplinary outcomes (e.g., assigning a suspension). The exception to this were cases in which laws were broken (e.g., weapons, drug offenses, or serious assaults) and law enforcement responses (e.g., arrest) were invoked. On the other hand, SROs were involved with discipline through a number of less formal mechanisms including verbal reprimands, one-on-one counseling or talks with students, lecturing classes on rules/consequences, being physically present for discipline responses (from school administrators), assisting school administrators with investigating misbehavior, and reporting misbehavior to school personnel.

Involvement across these disciplinary approaches varied (see table 3). Some SROs viewed verbally reprimanding a student as not a form of discipline but rather acting in the way any other adult in the building would. Likewise, when using their physical presence to deter misbehavior, SROs seemed to view the action as one of adult guidance rather than law enforcement or discipline. For instance, one SRO noted that if “students are running through the halls or

TABLE 3

*Summary of Involvement in Discipline and Contextual Factors*

Disciplinary Involvement	% of SROs Involved (as reported by themselves or other stakeholders)
Reports not be involved in discipline	79
Reports talking to or counseling students around behavior	40
Reports bringing misbehaving students to school staff	40
Reports using verbal reprimands	36
Reports using physical presence (proximity) in disciplinary situations	30
Reports talking to classes about behavior	11
Reports giving out a formal disciplinary consequence	4
Reports acting as the lead disciplinarian or enforcer in a situation	4

acting loud in the halls or when I step out of my door—you know, yeah. I-I'm—I'm obviously stepping out to change their behavior. Not so much because I'm a police officer, but because I'm an adult" (SRO 124). In a similar vein, SROs sometimes viewed one-on-one meetings with students for disciplinary reasons as a form of counseling or role modeling rather than a punitive, disciplinary response. For instance, one SRO noted, "You know, they might need a man to talk to them, and so I don't mind doing some of that stuff, and I do, but I'm not, I'm not gonna say, 'Hey, you're gonna get detention'" (SRO 128). In cases such as this, SROs appeared to describe an involvement in discipline that meshed into that of (in NASRO's terms) informal counseling.

For other SROs, involvement in discipline, although not rising to the level of administering formal school sanctions, was nevertheless more punitive and disciplinarian in nature. Some principals described using talks with SROs to communicate the potential for more serious consequences. For example, one principal described an SRO saying, "Or if this occurred two hours from now when you where [*sic*] had left the parking lot. Here's what exactly would be happening. We wouldn't be talkin'. You'd be in the back of a car" (Principal 114). Another principal, drawing on the SRO's law enforcement image in such conversations, stated,

I catch a kid, um, bullying or being extremely disrespectful to a teacher, I'll have the SRO come in and talk to them. Um, I'll say, you know, uh, "Officer, this is what this young man has done. Talk to him about what might happen to him if he continues to do this, if he continues down this

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road.” And there she is in her full uniform with, um, you know, a Glock on her hip and talking to him and he—he listens. (Principal 113)

In other cases, these talks took the form of discussions with entire classrooms with SROs being brought in to discuss the importance of not stealing and the consequences that could be attached if someone does so.

Though less common in our sample, in some instances, SROs took on roles as more active enforcers of school discipline. Sometimes such activities were SRO initiated. Although some SROs reported that turning students in for misbehavior was beyond their job description, many were active in bringing misbehaving students to school personnel or reporting observed misbehavior to such staff. Although such reporting fits with NASRO’s recommendations, other SROs reported deeper involvement such as being present at administrators’ discretion in the interviewing of students who were suspected of misconduct. In many cases, such presence amounted to no more than being a fly on the wall in an exchange between a student and an administrator. In other cases, SROs took on more active roles in questioning students or bringing evidence (such as from security cameras) to bear on the disciplinary situation.

Though SROs typically took a backseat to school personnel in disciplinary situations, we were told of a few cases in which the SRO took on the role of the lead enforcer of discipline. One SRO describes such a situation in detail.

Uh, last week, or the week before, we had a kid upstairs who wasn’t doing what he was told to do, wasn’t doing his work. Um, he was kinda getting smart with the teacher. Teacher said, “Fine, you know, if you’re not gonna listen to me, pick up your stuff and go to in-school suspension (ISS).” Um, kid in and goes, “No. I’m not doing it.” Well, now what? And he kinda had a stalemate, you know, right? Is the teacher going to physically pick him up and carry him down to ISS? So they uh, they notified the AP [assistant principal], and the AP said, “Okay, fine well I’ll write the referral up. Call the officer and have him go up there.” Well I know the kid real well. And when I walked in I said, “Hey man, grab your backpack, go to ISS.” And he says, “Why?” And I said, “Because I told you to go to ISS, that’s why. Don’t make me ask you again.” He got his backpack, up he went. Didn’t like it, but he went. So. You know, the next step after that is, if you’re refusing to do what I tell you to do . . . I’m probably going to take him into custody for unruly juvenile, and we’ll settle it that way. (SRO 104)

Although the situation was successfully resolved by the SRO’s involvement, the SRO being the primary respondent to the situation represented a markedly more central role in discipline for the SRO in this school as compared with the majority of the study’s schools. It also illustrates the potential for school disciplinary

involvement to escalate into an arrestable offense, as has been described previously by scholars studying SROs (Bracy 2010; Nolan 2011)

In short, SROs' involvement in school discipline was varied. Although generally not formal in nature, SROs nevertheless engaged in a number of less formal disciplinary approaches. We summarize reported involvement in discipline in table 3. In the next section, we turn to describing the ways in which such involvement varied across a number of contexts.

### *How Are SROs' Involvement in Discipline Shaped by Their Contexts?*

In this section, we return to the conceptual model of ecological systems as a way of structuring our discussion of contexts that shaped SRO involvement in discipline. We focus on the contexts that emerged as most salient in our sample for explaining variation in SRO involvement in discipline. Overall, we found that SROs' involvement in discipline varied most at the microsystem level with clear variation across the behavior of students, the grade level of schools, and the relationship between the SRO and school personnel. However, we also found evidence that some individual characteristics of SROs (e.g., their beliefs and desires about involvement in discipline) and some higher level contexts like school district and law enforcement agency policy shaped SRO involvement in discipline. We summarize our findings in table 4 and structure our discussion of these contexts moving outward on the ecological systems framework, from the SRO as an individual to progressively less proximal contexts.

#### *Individual Level: SROs' Personal Views about Discipline Involvement*

We observed variation in the extent to which SROs desired to be involved in disciplinary issues. By and large, most SROs appeared content with the disciplinary structure of their school and the official policy that they not be involved with discipline. Nevertheless, some SROs expressed a desire for greater involvement. One SRO stated,

Well, if it deals with anything that might involve the safety of other students, they get me involved right off the bat. And usually I try to be involved in it as much as I can be. Which, I mean, I don't get to see every single thing, but I at least get to hear about it. But they're real good about that. So, if something's going on, the principal will call me or one of the APs will call me and say, "Hey, just so you know, this is what's going on." "Okay, cool." And then I can kinda diagnose from there or, what I need to do or part of it I need to be. (SRO 104)

TABLE 4

*Contextual Factors Influencing Disciplinary Involvement Organized  
by Ecological Systems Theory Levels*

Individual: SROs' personal views about discipline involvement	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
Viewed discipline as a school issue and avoided being involved	Desired to be kept in the loop of behavior issues
Microsystem: Extent of student misbehavior, grade span of school, and special populations	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
Perceived little discipline/legal issues at school or an inappropriateness of involvement due to age of students (elementary schools)	Perceived more discipline/legal issues at school or saw age of students as more appropriate for involvement (high schools)
Microsystem and Mesosystem: Relationships with school personnel	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
Principals explicitly viewed SROs involvement in discipline as inappropriate and actively communicated this to school personnel	Principals and teachers requested SRO involvement in discipline, and SRO viewed doing so as being a helpful part of the school community
Macrosystem: Local consistencies in SRO approaches to discipline	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
Relatively homogenous, white, and affluent student bodies served across districts as a whole	No salient examples observed, but prior research suggests discipline involvement may increase when schools are serving greater proportions of racial minorities or lower socioeconomic student bodies
Exosystem: Official school district and law enforcement agency policy	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
MOU between the districts and law enforcement agency specified that SROs were not to be involved in discipline	Interpretation of MOU at the local level meant the meaning of not being involved in discipline was negotiable
Chronosystem: The influence of historical context	
<i>Reducing Disciplinary Involvement</i>	<i>Expanding Disciplinary Involvement</i>
Elementary SROs were placed in schools to prevent a mass school shooting and therefore conceptualized their jobs as fending off external rather than internal threats	No salient examples observed, but settings where SROs were introduced to respond to student misconduct or unlawfulness may differ



Although such involvement depended on some initiation by the school administrator, this SRO appeared to push to be in the loop on almost all behavioral issues and saw the decision of whether to engage in the situation as one that was for him to “diagnose” rather than a decision to be made by the administrators. In line with this approach, this SRO was the one who previously described engaging, prior to administrator presence, in a situation of a student who refused to do class work.

In a similar vein, another SRO described a desire to “keep an eye” on children, particularly “problem children”—those whom the SRO or school personnel perceived as being more frequent misbehavers. This SRO also discussed working to get regular updates on misbehavior from school administrators, noting,

Um . . . and no, technically we don't have to be involved in everything that goes on. But it is nice to know, “Hey,” um, “Susie took Tommy's lunchbox, and Tommy's kinda said some mean stuff to her, we're keeping an eye on it.” Just to give us an idea of what's going on. (SRO 109)

The result of this SRO's push for involvement in misbehavior then was attention to violations of school rules that did not rise to the level of criminality. This motivation to be involved with discipline contrasted sharply with the views of other SROs. A number of other SROs expressed a preference for not being involved in discipline. For some, like the SRO who said that asking students to walk in the hall was an uncomfortable stretch of his role, this avoidance of discipline appeared to be a product of their interpretation of the official roles of SROs. Others actively resisted involvement in discipline, even when school personnel like the principal or teachers sought their involvement. One SRO noted,

They try to get us involved in pretty much everything and which sometimes, I have to draw the line and tell them like, “I'm not getting involved in that, that's a school issue.” You know? Don't use me as the guy that, you know, as the intimidator or any of that kind of thing. That's not what we're here for. (SRO 116)

*Microsystem Level: Extent of Student Misbehavior, Grade Span of School, and Special Populations*

SROs' understanding of their school's overall level of misbehavior shaped the way that they engaged in school discipline. Within schools that they perceived to have more serious problem behaviors, SROs were more likely to be involved with school discipline. The perceived seriousness of misbehavior was strongly linked with school level. Specifically, SROs in elementary schools perceived that

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their students engaged in less serious misbehavior than SROs in middle or high schools. In many cases, the perceptions of differential misbehavior across grade level were corroborated by other stakeholders. One elementary principal noted that the school suspended about one student every other school year. This contrasted sharply with the reports of misbehavior in some of the high schools. One SRO gave an account of dealing with vaping, drug dealing, gang activities, and guns when working in a high school and went on to describe making as many as 48 arrests at the high school in one year (SRO 137). Overall, arrests were relatively rare, with SROs reporting only 85 total arrests on their activity logs across both districts during the 2016–2017 school year. By and large, these arrests occurred only at the high school level (89%) and were for serious offenses like drugs, assaults, and theft, as well as for subpoenas that were issued for students. Although there was some evidence from interviews and observations that officers might underreport arrests on time logs or that arrests may occur by calling in officers external to the school, arrests were virtually nonexistent in elementary settings and relatively infrequent in middle schools. These differences in the prevalence and seriousness of student misconduct served as an important limiter or promoter of SRO involvement in discipline.

In addition, many of the school personnel and SROs appeared to recognize differences in the developmental appropriateness of discipline responses between elementary students and older students. One SRO in an elementary school explained that when he addressed student misbehavior, he would refer to the more serious consequences that might come after elementary school.

I just lay it out to the path they're going on is . . . I, I tell them, you know, you're in elementary school now, so rules are a little different but once you get in middle school, high school, this behavior's gonna land you in jail, possibly. . . . But, since they're so young here, you have to find are they really understanding what they're doing and the consequences, so that's why, I mean, you never see us arresting, you know, second graders 'cause they're still working things out. (SRO 133)

This logic was common across elementary school SROs and indicates that their involvement in school discipline frequently was shaped by a shared understanding that elementary school students' problem behaviors did not deserve as severe of consequences as those that might come later in life.

In this same vein, SROs in middle and high schools were more willing to be engaged in school disciplinary infractions when those behaviors could also be read as illegal. One common way this happened was with unruly behaviors—explained by one SRO as behaviors that were noncompliant and did not involve violence, weapons, or drugs. For instance, a teacher or administrator might attempt to enforce school rules with a student, the student would not

comply, and then the SRO would become involved, sometimes taking the student into custody if the school administration decided to file a petition. As described previously by the SRO who was called in to take a defiant high school student to ISS, a student's defiance could quickly escalate into an arrest because both the school administration and the SROs were more willing to read these sorts of behaviors as illegal. This did not occur in the elementary schools where defiance was not even talked about on the spectrum of criminality.

Although SRO involvement with discipline was generally lower at the elementary level, we found that SROs were particularly likely to engage in assisting with misbehavior from students with disabilities (SWD) at the elementary level. In particular, when a SWD needed to be restrained, the SRO was commonly called in to maintain a presence, help diffuse the situation, or in some cases help the school staff to restrain the student. Some schools also had concerns about SWD running out of the building, so the administrators called on SROs to help block doors or chase down students trying to leave campus. Several SROs described building relationships with SWD specifically so that they could take an effective role if that student was having difficulties behaviorally. Both the school district leadership and the law enforcement agency's leadership supported this being part of the SROs' unofficial duties. "That's not a law enforcement issue. That—that's ours. But if they're helping to not let them run out an exit door or something like that, I think that's very appropriate just as an adult helping" (D1), said one school district official. Overall, schools that reported SRO involvement with SWD tended to be elementary schools, although this also occurred at the middle school level.

Whether acting as a physical presence for the discipline of a student or assisting with SWD, there appeared to be a tension that SROs experienced as they tried to avoid being involved in misbehaviors that were not illegal while simultaneously maintaining a safe school environment by being proactive. Some SROs and stakeholders saw these activities as discipline, whereas others saw them as engagement that would be expected of any adult in the building, thereby complicating notions about what actions were considered discipline and what actions were not. Interestingly, neither of these approaches explicitly addressed the extent to which students' behaviors were law violations, a key consideration in the MOU for when SROs were supposed to become involved in student misbehavior.

#### *Microsystem and Mesosystem Level: Relationships with School Personnel (Administrators and Teachers)*

Although SROs' involvement in discipline varied largely across school levels, there were also significant differences across schools serving the same grade level.

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SROs' relationships with school personnel (microsystem) as well as interactions between school administrators and teachers (mesosystem) shaped involvement with discipline. These differences were often related to the expectations and views of school personnel. In some schools, administrators and teachers actively sought to bring SROs into the disciplinary fold. SROs reported principals and teachers asking them for help with many disciplinary scenarios such as defusing potentially volatile situations or talking to students about the consequences of their actions. Many teachers reported that they enjoyed a supportive relationship with the SRO in which they knew they could count on the SRO to step in when needed. One SRO described responding to teachers' requests to speak to a classroom: "Yeah, I just, um, they feel like, like I said, you know, they'll come to me, if somethin's goin' on, if a kids actin' up, 'Hey, can you address this in our classroom?' Things like that. I'm here to help them. That's my role is to help them anyway I can" (SRO 140). In some schools, this type of engagement was actively encouraged and sometimes requested by school administrators; however in other schools, these types of practices were discouraged because principals saw this as an overextension of the SRO.

Although the use of SROs for discipline was not always punitive, such as employing an SRO as an informal counselor or even a reward for good behavior, it was not always clear that the school personnel had fully considered the potential unintended consequences of involving SROs in discipline. One teacher noted that they used time with the SRO as a type of reward for good behavior for a student, despite the incarceration of the student's father. "We weren't out to get your father, your father broke the law, kind of thing. And then used, so he was like a counselor, sort of, in a way, talked to him. And then he can earn points and just go be with him like a father figure sort of, just another male role model" (TFG 113). Even though not meant to be punitive, the teacher likely did not fully consider the consequences of this type of reward system.

In addition to explicit requests for SRO involvement in discipline, we also observed how nondisciplinary requests or partnerships with teachers could contribute to SRO disciplinary involvement. During one elementary school observation, the SRO regularly entered some of the classrooms to engage with students and assist the teacher during lessons. On the day of our observation, the SRO was assisting the art teacher. The SRO helped greet students entering the classroom, directed them to stations, brought them materials, and actively assisted as they developed their art projects. In many ways, the SRO's actions mirrored those that might be expected of a teaching assistant. In taking on this role, however, the SRO, by some necessity, took on responsibilities that are inherent in teaching, including maintaining order and discipline. As a result, we observed the SRO verbally correct students who were not following directions and pull some students aside for a quick discussion of their actions. It seemed, then, that as an SRO takes on a more active role in formal education, the need

for them to engage in discipline increases. Though we did not observe this in our data, an SRO who was responsible for teaching a class, such as an SRO in a DARE program, would presumably need to engage in discipline to the same extent as a regular teacher given the structure and nature of their role as the lead classroom teacher.

*Exosystem: Official School District and Law Enforcement Agency Policy*

SROs' involvement in discipline was also shaped by both formal and informal policies. As previously described, the MOU between the school districts and law enforcement agency specifically prohibited SRO involvement in school discipline issues.

In spite of the near universal recognition of the formal policy, there was also recognition that completely ignoring minor misbehaviors was not a good option, either. As such, informal policies were developed in schools that shaped SROs' involvement in discipline in a more nuanced way than the MOUs were intended to articulate. For instance, one SRO explained,

If we see like some minor things that can be fixed with like a, "Hey can you take your hat off while you're in certain areas of the building," or you know, "You might want to go see the principal because you just cursed out another kid," or something like that, um, yeah, but once it's reported to an administrator, that's now in their hands. (SRO 141)

Although this SRO may have been engaging in a form of school discipline, there was a system in place within the school that established how the SROs should interact with certain types of misbehaviors and who had ultimate authority to address them. This almost always took the form of SROs making a quick comment and then referring the student to administration if needed. This is consistent with the NASRO guidelines that encourage SROs to not administer sanctions for these sorts of misbehaviors but to refer them to school leadership.

As the previous quote indicates, the success of these informal policies rested largely on the relationship between SROs and school administration. Nearly all SROs reported having positive and productive relationships with their principals, and most principals seemed to agree. There was occasionally a settling-in period where having a new SRO or new school administration would require some conversations and common experiences to help shape these informal policies. One administrator shared that the SRO at her old school did things above and beyond what the SRO at her new school did, neither of which was right or wrong. She shared, "You learn how to build that relationship. Recognize each person's roles and responsibilities. But that took some, that took

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some effort” (VP 132). This relationship building was key for shaping the informal policies that guided SROs’ involvement in discipline.

In parent focus groups, parents agreed that SROs did not have a disciplinary role beyond correcting minor misbehaviors (e.g., running in the hallway) or positive reinforcement of good behaviors. The parents regularly commented that their reflections on the SROs, particularly with respect to discipline, were limited to observations at drop-off and pickup times. For instance, in one parent focus group, the parents commented on how they had no role in the implementation of SROs in the school, saying, “[SRO implementation in the school] probably wasn’t something the PTO [Parent-Teacher Organization] gave feedback to,” to which another parent responded, “I was not involved. That, I mean it came from the district” (PFG 132). This contrasts with examples elsewhere in the country where parent groups have taken active roles in negotiating SRO roles (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos 2016). In our study, parents did sometimes reflect on national news stories of SROs arresting elementary school-age children but did not think this could ever happen in their schools. Considering prior work on the deleterious effects of school discipline on low-income parents of color (see Mowen 2017), it is worth noting that the parents who took part in the focus groups were likely to be affluent and were predominately white. Their implicit trust in law enforcement and school officials to “do the right thing” may not extend to other contexts or even to other parents within this district.

### *Macrosystem: Local Consistencies in SRO Approaches to Discipline*

A striking finding of our analysis was a lack of systematic differences in SRO involvement and approach to discipline across demographics of schools in our sample. Although the sample drew from two suburban, relatively affluent school districts, there were nevertheless nontrivial differences in individual school contexts. Some schools were in more densely populated areas, whereas others were surrounded by farmland and woods. Some schools served highly affluent student bodies, and others were Title 1 schools. Some schools had very little racial/ethnic diversity, whereas others had student bodies that were predominantly racial/ethnic minorities. Strikingly, however, the reported approach to discipline of SROs across these contexts did not appear to differ in a systematic way. Prior work on SROs in more urban, less advantaged, and higher minority contexts has demonstrated a tendency for more punitive and active approaches than we observed in our data (e.g., Devine 1996; Kupchik 2010). It is possible that such differences are driven more by cross-district differences in approach to discipline by school districts and agencies and less susceptible to differences across schools within the same context. As we discuss

in the next section, the historical context of SROs in these districts may have contributed to different views of their job than those held by SROs in other school districts.

### *Chronosystem: The Influence of Historical Context*

Most of the SROs in our study conceptualized their job as providing safety from external threats to the students rather than policing activities among students. To understand why, it helps to situate the presence of SROs in these districts in historical context. Though the districts' high schools and middle schools had SROs for decades, the presence of SROs in elementary schools, which constituted the majority of the districts' schools, was a recent occurrence. In the wake of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook, the county allocated resources to expand the SRO program to all elementary schools. This expansion, and therefore the jobs of more than half of the SROs in the county, were directly tied to and justified in terms of preventing a mass shooting like Sandy Hook. Our discussions with SROs, school personnel, and the leadership of both the law enforcement agency and the school districts reflected this view of SROs' primary purpose being to prevent a tragedy like Sandy Hook. This view of their role likely contributed to a different approach to discipline than in contexts where SROs are placed in schools for more internal policing purposes.

### Discussion

As national tragedies such as the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, continue to mount political pressure for ensuring student safety in schools, it seems likely that the decades-long trend towards increased use of SROs will continue, as will their involvement with school discipline outcomes (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). Our findings fit within a body of literature that suggests possible heterogeneity in SROs' impacts on discipline (Fisher 2016; Fisher and Hennessy 2016; Kupchik 2010; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Owens 2017). Consistent with this, we found that SROs vary in their involvement, both in whether they engage in discipline at all and the extent to which they engage if they are involved. This variability can be explained in part through the lens of the ecological systems model. This study found, much like in studies of human development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979), that the development of SROs' involvement in discipline was a function of a series of complex, intersecting systems of influence. In this way, individual SROs' involvement in discipline was inextricably linked to and shaped by both the shared contexts at the chronosystem, macrosystem, and



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exosystem levels, as well as individual contexts at the mesosystem and micro-system levels.

We also saw how SRO involvement in discipline could potentially both exacerbate and escalate disciplinary situations and cases in which their involvement might have de-escalated and improved outcomes. On the one hand, there were SROs who kept a look out for “problem children,” sought to bring misbehavior to administrators, and were willing to view more minor misconduct through a lens of legal misconduct. On the other hand, we heard of cases in which SROs served as a deterrent by being present in hallways or in which SROs served as informal counselors prior to or during disciplinary situations.

Given such potential variance in the forms and impacts of SRO involvement in discipline, it is important for policymakers, schools, and law enforcement agencies to consider how the ecological systems in which SROs are embedded can shape engagement with discipline. Our findings point to ways that involvement with discipline varies across contexts. Importantly, we find that SROs in our study were generally responsive to agency and district policy: features of the exosystem. The MOU’s position that SROs were not to engage in discipline clearly shaped the response of SROs and influenced how they approached discipline, as well as how school personnel (particularly principals) attempted to involve them in discipline.

At the same time, however, the ambiguities of the concept of discipline were also apparent in our analysis. There was a spectrum of involvement in discipline, from verbally correcting students to being an enforcer of school rules. For some SROs, such involvement presented no conflict with official policy because they conceptualized the involvement (e.g., verbally correcting a student or counseling a student) as something other than discipline. For them, verbally correcting a student might be just “acting as an adult,” talking to a student one-on-one in an attempt to de-escalate a situation (which might fit within the triad model’s view of informal counseling), or discussing the implications of rule breaking with a class (which might fit within the realm of acting as an educator). In other cases, SROs recognized their actions as discipline but saw this as an acceptable form of bottom-up policy making. In many cases, this happened in contexts where school administrators supported or encouraged SRO involvement—a clear example of the impact of the microsystem. In these cases, SROs saw their role as one of supporting the school community and were willing to find ways to mesh informal policies of involvement with discipline with official top-down policy against such involvement. In the terms of policy implementation, there was a process of “sense-making” or “co-construction” in which the meaning of the district policy was negotiated and worked out by the actors at the school level (Datnow and Park 2009).

Although school-specific adaptations of broader policies that occur at the microsystem and mesosystem levels may be desirable to a degree because of their



responsiveness to particular contexts, they also present challenges with ensuring optimal engagement with discipline. Leaving administrators and SROs to informally negotiate the role they will play in discipline at the school potentially involves less forethought, consideration, or stakeholder input. Likewise, there may be less accountability given a lack of more uniform guidance on what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate involvement with discipline. In our sample school districts, such informal negotiation of the proper role of SROs in discipline appeared to generally result in arrangements that were mutually agreeable to the SROs and school administrators and that, by and large, maintained a tempered role of SROs in discipline. This may have been in part due to the relatively high-functioning and well-resourced nature of the school districts and law enforcement agency. As such, the findings of this article may well represent a best-possible case of informal decision making around SRO involvement in discipline. It is possible that in other settings, such as in schools that are less well-functioning or in areas where law enforcement agencies have much more strained relationships with the community, such informal negotiation of the role of SROs in discipline could result in more punitive or confrontational approaches.

This concern is particularly pronounced with regard to equity along lines of student demographics, such as race/ethnicity. We did not find a relationship between the racial or socioeconomic mixes of schools in our sample and SROs' approach to discipline, but such a lack of a relationship may be explainable by the relatively racially homogenous and affluent context of the setting. The broader literature on school discipline has documented persistent disparities by race/ethnicity as well as the ways in which official policies at the district and school level contribute to these disparities (Curran 2016, 2017; Welch and Payne 2010, 2012). Racial threat theory suggests that institutions, including schools, may respond to student bodies that contain greater proportions of racial/ethnic minorities with more punitive disciplinary approaches (Welch and Payne 2010, 2012). Similar disparities in the way our nation's law enforcement agencies police people of color are similarly established (Alexander 2012; Hirschfield 2008). It is particularly important, then, that school districts and agencies actively seek to ensure that the process of school-level adaptations of policies around SRO involvement in discipline do not explicitly or implicitly exacerbate disparities in disciplinary outcomes.

Our findings contrast sharply with some prior work that has examined the role of SROs in other settings. At a national level, about half of principals report that their SRO is involved with school discipline, yet in our study, 79% of SROs explicitly stated that they were not involved in discipline (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). In the same vein, the SROs in our study generally approached their jobs with a view of students as charges to be protected rather than potential criminals to be policed; this result differs from prior studies in which SROs are observed

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treating students as criminals to be feared (Nolan 2011) and studies in which SROs take on a dual notion of protecting vulnerable students while policing potential student criminals (Kupchik 2010). It is possible that the more benign view of students that SROs reported to us arose in some part from the broader demographics of the context, a generally affluent, suburban, and predominantly white environment. Similarly, the presence of SROs in these districts at the elementary level, where rates of serious misbehavior are lower, may have also contributed to system-wide views of students as in need of protection rather than policing.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

Our findings point to the importance of school districts and law enforcement agencies working to clearly define the roles that SROs play in discipline. Although broad policies prohibiting involvement in discipline can shape SRO involvement, we suggest that agencies would benefit from clearer guidance that considers the full spectrum of disciplinary involvement. Should SROs verbally correct students? Should they report misbehavior to administrators? Should they be used as a physical presence when administrators discipline? These are questions that agencies should work to clearly define for their officers and school personnel.

Such clarification is particularly salient for cases in which officers work with at-risk subgroups. We were struck in our findings by the proportion of officers who reported being involved in behavioral situations with students with disabilities. Although many viewed this involvement as a safety enhancing activity, the lack of specific training or guidance for handling these situations was notable. Given documented disparities in discipline and school arrests of special education students, particular attention should be paid to how SROs interface with discipline around this subgroup.

### *Limitations*

Although our work sheds considerable light on the roles played by SROs in discipline and the way contexts shape such involvement, our study is nevertheless limited in several ways. First, the context we studied, a relatively affluent suburban environment, differs from that experienced by many students nationwide. Although we see this as a unique contribution in its own right, given that much of the prior work on SROs has focused on less advantaged and more urban environments, we caution against extrapolating our findings to all environments in which SROs work. In many ways, our findings represent what might

occur under optimal conditions in well-resourced and high-functioning school systems. That said, the framework used in this study—namely, the ecological systems theory perspective—may transfer more broadly. It short, although the influence of context may vary across settings, the need to consider the environment in which SROs act and its influence on their disciplinary involvement extends beyond the setting of this study. Second, we note that our results are based in no small part on the responses of SROs themselves. Although their descriptions were generally corroborated by other stakeholders in our study and our observations, we recognize that the perspectives were nevertheless filtered through the lens of those doing the job. Consequently, we see value in future studies replicating this work in other contexts while also exploring relationships observed here in quantitative datasets.

## Conclusion

As schools work to maintain safe learning environments, SROs have become an increasingly common presence in the school setting. Although SROs have the potential to contribute to increases in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, the extent to which they do so is potentially dependent on how they engage in discipline. Such engagement, in turn, is likely shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. Our study has demonstrated both the heterogeneity in SRO involvement in discipline as well as how such involvement can be shaped by numerous contexts. In doing so, it provides a starting point for policymakers and practitioners to begin more nuanced conversations about SRO involvement in discipline and to carefully consider the implications of the environments of policy and practice that SROs are situated. For researchers, this work suggests a number of potential moderators to be explored in future studies of the relationship between SRO presence and disciplinary outcomes. Ultimately, students deserve a safe and supportive learning environment that minimizes the use of unnecessary exclusion. More careful consideration of SROs' contexts may help minimize their involvement and contribution to such unnecessary exclusion.

## Notes

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1. District officials at Fairfield County Schools did not agree to qualitative data collection at their schools.
2. We also conducted a survey of all SROs in both school districts. The survey is not a main data source for this study but will be referenced to contextualize the results. We administered the survey over the same timeframe as the interviews. The survey was administered electronically, and the response rate was 66%.
3. Likewise, in responding to a survey instrument included as part of the larger study, only about 10% of SROs reported that maintaining discipline was an activity in which they engaged.

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