To Enforce, Educate, or Empathize?
The Conflicting Roles of Police in Schools

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Abstract

Police are commonly present in American schools, though their roles are often complex and ambiguously defined. This paper interrogates the role of police officers within the education system using in-depth interviews with current or former school police officers. Preliminary findings suggest that officers see their main duty as promoting school safety, though this often involves taking on roles outside of law enforcement, such as educator or therapist. Officers express regret at the limited time available to fulfill these roles as they ideally wish and sometimes describe frustration when administrators' seem to lack an understanding of their desired role. Yet despite their insistence of the necessity of having cops in schools, officers were largely unable to articulate clearly how the schools they work in would differ without their presence. In other words, the specific value-added of police seems unclear, even to those holding the job.

Background & Research Question

The majority of American students report the presence of police and/or security in their schools (NCES 2015). With this growth in school policing, two disparate narratives have emerged. First, proponents of having police in schools – often under the title of school resource officer (SRO) – argue that the presence of law enforcement officers cultivates a sense of safety, protects the school from mass shootings, provides youth with positive mentoring relationships, and educates students about the perils of drugs and alcohol. Conversely, some believe the presence of police in schools, most of whom lack significant training on how to work with youth, negatively affects the school environment, criminalizes normal student behavior, and reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline. Although school shootings like that in Parkland, Florida – and the Parkland SRO's notable lack of involvement in the event – have resulted in greater media attention on school-based policing, the popular narratives that have arisen to explain officers' roles within schools have not been sufficiently explored in academic research.

In a national survey, both school principals and school-based officers acknowledged that the majority of police involvement in schools revolves around enforcing the law (Coon and Travis 2012). But qualitative work paints a more complex picture. While school-based police believe their primary function should be enforcing the law, they also find themselves taking on the roles of mentor, role model, and even surrogate parent (McKenna, Martinez-Prather, and Bowman 2016). Given that the confluence of such disparate roles likely results in role conflict that impacts the ways police make decisions on the job, it is surprising that limited studies exist interrogating how police officers understand their roles. Moreover, past research on the role of police in schools has failed to give significant analytical consideration to the school context. It is surely possible that schools serving primarily advantaged student populations may engage with

the first narrative – in which the presence of law enforcement serves as a protective barrier from potential dangers of some undefined, outside "other" (Pain 2000). Schools serving economically disadvantaged or students of color may be likely to engage with the second narrative – in which law enforcement serves to police and control poor black and brown bodies and inadvertently intensify disadvantage (Goffman 2014; Nolan 2011; Rios 2011, 2017). As such, this paper addresses the following questions: First, how do police officers understand their role within schools? And second, how do officers' understandings of their roles vary by school context?

Data & Methods

This paper explores the role of school police through in-depth interviews with officers and examines whether narratives about officers' functions vary by contextual setting. Preliminary data presented rely on nine in-depth interviews with current and former school police officers collected from February 2017 through July 2018. Most officers were men, though more than half identified as a race or ethnicity other than white. I plan to conduct at least 30 in-depth interviews in total, and I seek both gender and ethno-racial diversity among the officers.

Most of the respondents discussed here were school-based officers in California. The schools in which participants work(ed) vary widely in terms of demographic composition. Three officers worked in affluent schools serving mostly white and Asian students, while three others worked in more socio-economically and ethnically heterogeneous settings. The remaining three officers worked in schools serving mostly low-income students of color.

I use a combination of snowball sampling through my own contacts and cold-calling to police departments to recruit participants for these semi-structured interviews. The interview protocols cover topics such as the purpose of having police in schools, hiring and training, collaboration between police and school staff, relationships with students, impact on broader

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community-police relations, and how officers think their experiences would vary in a different setting. The interviews lasted from 45 to 100 minutes and took place either at the participants' workplace – usually at the police department – or by phone.

Preliminary Findings

Given the small number of interviews discussed here, I focus primarily on preliminary findings that have emerged among officers working across all contexts. Future analyses will consider variations by context.

Officers all expressed concerns about safety and told the common narrative that their main priority was school safety. Ben, an SRO in an affluent district, said "Our main priority is, 'well, is the student safe? Are the other students safe?'." SRO Roger, who works in a neighboring affluent town concurred: "Safety is always number one." Participants discussed the complex and multi-faceted projects they or their schools undertake to create a sense of safety. These projects often result in officers being asked to fulfill many roles beyond that of enforcing the law. Roger describes being contacted frequently to this end:

> "The schools call me nonstop for things involving just intervention, to where it's not a criminal matter. But they see something that's glaring and they want someone in uniform to... relay information to a student."

Specifically, the officers typically described filling roles as educators and therapists. In describing his role, SRO Ben said:

> "We are there first as educators. We are there to educate kids what the law is, what it looks like when you break the law, what the consequences are when you break the law, what the police can and cannot do. We're there as a shoulder to cry on when there is a tragedy or they're just experiencing too much of life at one point in time and it becomes overwhelming."

Here, Ben explicitly describes his primary role as an educator, despite the fact that he previously had described his primary role as ensuring school safety. Moreover, his description of

being a "shoulder to cry on" edges into the realm of mental health professionals. In his mind, and possibly the minds of police and school officials who helped shape his role, the creation of a safe school is tied to concerns about education and support for mental health. Taken with his previous comments, Ben serves as an example that those same people trained to deploy weapons and prevent mass shootings are also taking on the roles of youth educators and counselors.

Jerry, the Chief of Police of an urban school-district police department, similarly describes a role as pseudo-therapist:

> "It's not the lack of intellect that keeps these kids [from] learning. It's the emotional baggage that they bring from home. And you really got to figure out what the emotional baggage is and see if you can get in there and figure out how you can help that piece."

As he conceptualizes it, his officers' roles go beyond enforcing the law to intervening in the mental health of students. Despite the fact that it is not at all criminal in nature, he places the job of easing a students' "emotional baggage" under the purview of police.

Yet despite the frequent discussion of roles such as educator and therapist, the officers also subtly acknowledge their lack of expertise. For instance, they periodically spoke with qualifiers such as "I'm not a psychologist, but…" or "I'm not an educator, but…" This hedging illustrates a hesitancy among officers to speak with too much confidence about these extra roles. It also shows that officers recognize others have greater training in these arenas. Very little police training revolves around skills that may be useful to officers in fulfilling these roles, such as adolescent development, learning modalities, or positive mental health interventions in non-crisis situations. While there is a short certification class available for the training of SROs, Roger found that it lacked much practicality, saying "To be honest, I didn't get a whole lot out of it…. I mean, I teach a lot. They didn't talk anything about teaching, really."

Moreover, officers expressed frustration at not having sufficient time or resources to manage their time as they think best. Roger says,

> "Having all these schools and teaching all these classes, I wish I could be at the high school 24 hours a day. But the fact that I have to teach these classes and go to all these schools and do all this in between stuff and fill in on patrol when they're short staffed... Or do a tour of the PD to the Boy Scouts or something like that. I just don't have time to establish those relationships [with students] that I think's most important to me... There's not enough time in the day."

Like Roger, both Jerry and Ben expressed a desire to build relationships with students and the difficulties in practically making this happen due to the high load of calls they receive. Their words suggest that these officers feel their time would be better spent having positive interactions with students but are limited in their ability to do so by requirements forced on them – responding to police calls, completing administrative tasks, and fulfilling teaching duties.

The officers describe supporting and educating students as part of their primary functions of ensuring school safety, yet hint that the number of tasks expected of them limits their ability to fulfill some of these goals to the degree they would like. Whether by district design, or simply their own perception of their role, these school-based police officers are shouldering the weight of the punitive criminal justice system, while simultaneously balancing roles in the welfare-supporting institutions of education and mental health.

There is preliminary evidence that juggling so many roles, many of which officers see as supportive and non-punitive, leads to frustration and role confusion. Officers describe instances in which they felt it was the school team that was too punitive. Jason, an SRO who worked in a district serving mostly low-income students, describes his introduction to students and parents:

> "They were doing the assembly at the beginning of the year and I'm just there in the background. The principal introduces me and some kid starts yelling or talking – this is middle school – [and the principal says] 'If you keep talking, Officer McDonald is going to arrest you!' And I'm just like, what a horrible message to send at this assembly. Here I

am, and the first thing you're saying is that I'm here to arrest someone. If I was a parent, that'd make me feel a little uneasy."

Glen, who works in an affluent district, details a difficult situation with an administrator who wanted a student arrested and was not swayed by Glen's attempts to make it a 'teachable moment.' He told her, "At the end of the day, you're the boss" and made the arrest. Officers often express sadness at having to arrest students, and sometimes related these uneasy feelings to their roles as parents. But they simultaneously see arresting children as a part of their duties and responsibilities and say they would not hesitate if it were necessary. Raven, who worked as an officer in a large urban district for over two decades describes arresting students: "It breaks my heart because I love. You know, I like these kids. The parent in me wants to protect 'em and not see this happen, but I got a job to do." It is not surprising, given these very contradictory roles and the vast array of tasks that are asked of them, that officers experience frustration.

Most importantly, when stretched thin across so many contradictory roles, their value-added in any of these arenas becomes unclear. Participants were unable to clearly articulate the value-added of police in their schools. When asked the question "How do you think your school would be different if there were no police?", respondents gave answers that ranged from vague generalities of the necessity of cops in schools, to discussions of the "strained" relations that would exist between young people and police sans SROs, to broad descriptions of improvements in the school environment. Chief of Police Jerry answered this counterfactual question in an abstract, general manner:

> "If you feel that the police department is not necessary in the school district, next Monday, all the officers and security officers will stay home for a week. If on the following Monday after that week is over, you think you don't need us, we won't be here. But I can guarantee you by the time that five days is over you're going to find out you do."

Here, Jerry combatively offered a strongly worded support for the role his officers play in the district, in a tone that suggested he has had to defend the existence of his department before. Yet he does not explicitly describe how the schools his force serves would be different without police. Some officers even sheepishly admitted that nothing would change. SRO Dennis paused for a long time when asked this question. Eventually, he responded, "I don't necessarily want to say that I think they would be ok, because there's certain things that we help them out with... but... yeah.... I don't know. I think they could *probably* get by." The officers extolled the necessity of having a police in schools, but struggled to describe concrete ways in which their presence contributes to the school environment.

In all, no participants pointed to specific ways in which the school environment would be harmed if there were no police. This suggests that while it is possible the presence of police may make some feel safer in an abstract sense, the concrete value-added of police in schools is unclear even to those who work in the job. Future analysis will continue to explore themes that emerge overall but also further explore variation among school contexts.

If nothing much would change if the police left, as preliminary findings suggest, and if officers – by their own admission – are not experts in fields outside of law enforcement, what would happen if we gave these roles that police have been filling to qualified educators and therapists? We must consider whether relying on the police, an arm of the criminal justice system, is really the best way to provide services to adolescents. This is especially important given the opposing occupational cultures of educators, who aim to understand students as complex, whole human beings, and of law enforcement, as highlighted by Jerry's reliance on blanket terms such as "good guys" and "bad guys" and Roger's referring to interactions with students as "war stories." A fundamental question we must ask then is: are law enforcement

really the appropriate people to be dealing with stress and mental health concerns, teaching

students healthy behaviors, encouraging academic motivation, and tasked with all-around

positive adolescent development? As Victor Rios would argue, reliance on the school police for

these welfare functions only serves to reinforce the youth-control complex, which has the

potential to alienate students and cause them to avoid social institutions, including schools,

altogether (Brayne 2014; Goffman 2014; Rios 2011).

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