

Understanding How Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Add,  
Eliminate, or Maintain School Resource Officers:  
A Qualitative Narrative Study

by

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or Maintain School Resource Officers:

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## ABSTRACT

National School Resource Officer Appreciation Day, established in 2022 and celebrated on February 15th, provides a focal point for exploring the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in Midwestern school districts. Through qualitative research involving interviews with 10 administrators, this study examined how districts decide to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. Triangulated data, including interviews and policy reviews, offered comprehensive insights into the decision-making processes and key factors involved. Findings revealed the significant influence of student safety, emotional triggers, and budget considerations on administrators' choices regarding SRO presence. Utilizing the constant comparative method, data analysis identified distinct categories, enhancing our understanding of influencing factors. This study contributes valuable insights into the changing aspects surrounding SROs in Midwestern school districts, emphasizing the importance of future research-informed decision-making.

### *Keywords*

Arrest rates, district administrators, high school students, mental health, qualitative narrative, school resource officers, suspension, and expulsion

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

God is good. I love and thank Him for everything I have. Through His Light all is possible!

To my mother, father, and brother Johnny in heaven...thanks for listening!

### **To My Husband, John**

You are my soulmate and best friend. Your love and support have motivated me; I know this would not have been possible without you. Thank you for always being there throughout my life.

### **My Beautiful and Amazing Children: Alena, Alec, and Athena**

You are the air that I breathe, the blood that flows through my veins, and the love that fulfills my heart. You have made me the proudest mother on earth, and I thank God every day for you. I love you to the depths of the ocean and my soul.

### **My Brother, Jimmy**

Thank you for being you . . . my big brother who is a loving, giving, and caring human being.

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Evangelia (Ghia) Anastasia Burzynski



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This qualitative narrative study described how Midwestern school district administrators decided how to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers (SROs). The researcher of the study explained the history of SROs, participants' position descriptions, and theories for utilizing SRO services in schools. The research included enrollment, arrest and crime, and mental health data from the schools and districts, and the perspectives of school district administrators. This study is critical because it affects school principals, communities, school safety procedures, students, staff, and students' families.

The SRO profession started in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s to help formulate meaningful connections between the police and local youth and to minimize criminal activities (Scherer, 2022). Similarly, throughout the years, police and school administration worked together to establish programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) for officers to aid in the fight against drugs and gang affiliations (Palumbo & Ferguson, 1995). In the past 20 years, an increase in school shootings, police brutality against Black victims, and injured students on school grounds changed the roles of SROs, influencing district administrators' decisions to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). There have been events on the side of school administrators that justified maintaining or eliminating SROs in creating safe educational environments. School administrators have maintained SROs in their school location and will continue based on the safety of their entire communities. The researcher has incorporated current news segments to help understand SROs' abilities to create safe adolescent environments.

One specific SRO took a different approach in their schools by not wearing a uniform and exchanging it for a bowtie, dress shirt, and pants for his job. This person was one of 12 SROs in a Midwestern urban school district. The SRO was enthusiastic about their job and prided themselves on decreased student discipline referrals to the police (Kaplan, 2022). In 2016, 700 student discipline referrals were confirmed in the district, and in the 2021 to 2022 school year, only 50 were referred (Kaplan, 2022). Since working in the high school, this SRO has acted in other roles, sometimes functioning as a social worker, mentor, principal, and teacher because the students come to him in their time of need (Kaplan, 2022).

During a fall 2022 football game in the same district, the SRO's development of trust with students paid off. The students attending the game confided in the SRO that a rival school was there to settle a dispute (Kaplan, 2022). The SRO went to a student's car and the situation quickly escalated when the SRO noticed the unlocked car contained two loaded pistols (Kaplan). This story is an example of how SROs may be maintained in schools because of the trust they build with students, which can de-escalate situations that otherwise could become horrific.

On the other hand, highly publicized deaths that involved Black men and police, such as George Floyd, have caused people in other school districts to start petitions and successfully eliminate SROs (Steward, 2021). Floyd was an unarmed Black male arrested and killed by White police officers who were charged and later found guilty by a court of law, sentenced for charges of unreasonable force, aiding and abetting, and second-degree manslaughter (Office of Public Affairs, 2022). The death caused outrage among protestors, who took to the streets to voice their anger about police targeting the disproportionate treatment of Black people (Taylor, 2021).



## **Background**

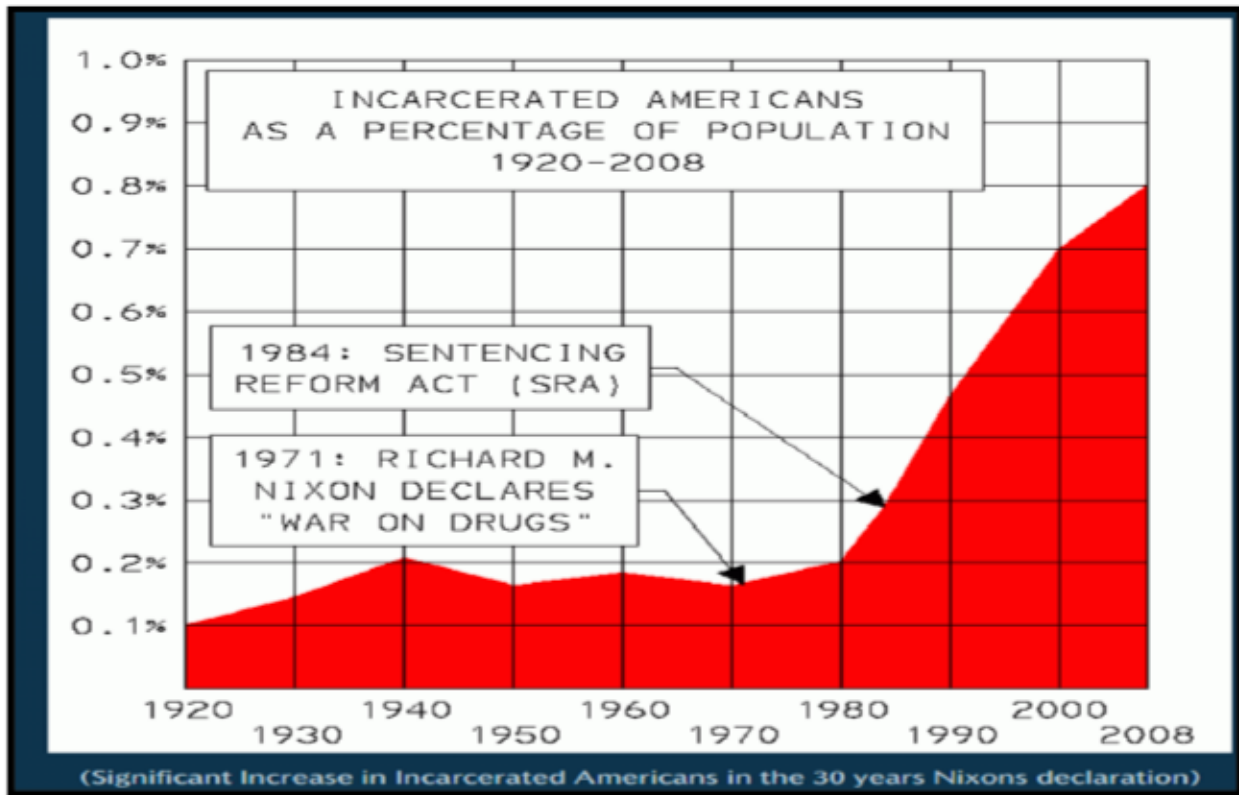
In this section, the researcher provided a comprehensive overview of three critical aspects: the school-to-prison pipeline, zero-tolerance policies, and disproportionate discipline. To support the analysis and enhance the readers' understanding, this section incorporated figures and tables from various reputable sources, offering data that reinforce the categories. By delving into these topics and examining the evidence, the researcher aimed to explain the factors contributing to the phenomenon and understand why Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

President Richard Nixon inspired the school-to-prison pipeline in a historical attempt to combat the war on drugs in the 1970s (Person, 2020). A&E Television Networks (2017) presented an episode that suggested President Nixon had ulterior motives during the 70s by associating drug use with Black people. The History Channel (2017) specifically aimed to provide the way Nixon demonized these communities and exploited public opinion against them. Figure 1 is a summation of data on President Nixon's commencement of the war on drugs. Nixon's policies distributed millions of dollars into the drug war, which supported increased policing across America (Person, 2020). Rapidly increasing arrest rates disproportionately affected African-American males (Person, 2020). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of President Nixon's War on Drugs' impact on America's offenders.

**Figure 1**

*Incarcerated Americans Affected by President Nixon's War on Drugs*



*Note: President Nixon's War on Drugs implemented in 1970 shows a rapid increase in arrests.*

Figure 1 adapted from Wikipedia. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License.

(2023).

Similarly, a study showed Black males with previous trauma and exposure to the criminal justice system were more likely to be incarcerated than those who did not have those experiences (Jaggi et al., 2016). The results of this study showed the detriments of the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan took Nixon's War on Drugs a step further. They created the Just Say No anti-drug campaign, which included zero-

tolerance policies in school discipline, exacerbating the school expulsion problem (Person, 2020). Researchers (Skiba, 2004) found that the policy had not improved student conduct decades after implementing zero-tolerance policies. Relatedly, school-aged children experienced astonishing arrest rates (Skiba, 2004). By 1997, 90% of U.S. schools had administered zero-tolerance policies in their learning environments (Heitzeg, 2014).

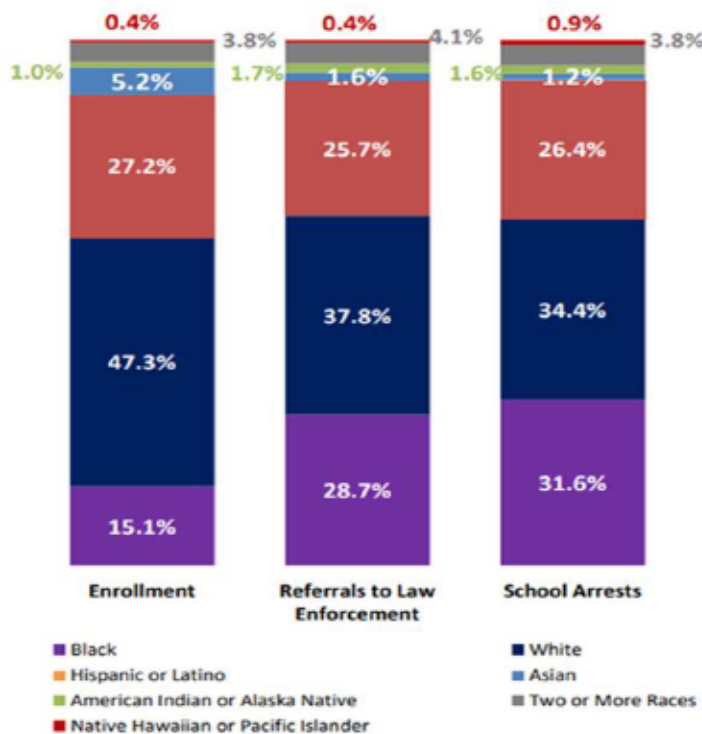
Decades later in 2015, 36,000 students in a Midwestern state under the age of 8 were suspended in one academic year (Marrero, 2021). State Senator Peggy Lehner saw the statistics and worked to establish Senate Bill 246, which was enacted into law. Senate Bill 246 protects pre-kindergarten through third-grade students from out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Marrero, 2021). Although Senator Lehner's effort should be commended as it curtailed arrests for many elementary students, it did not abolish zero-tolerance policies across the state. Data show that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affected Black students (Skiba, 2004).

### **Disproportionate Discipline**

Disproportionate disciplinary practices were evident in the 2009 to 2010 school year in a large city in the Midwest wherein 648 students were arrested, of whom 552 were Black (Celeste, 2013). In 2021, the United States Education Department (2021) shared that in the 2017 to 2018 school year, 15% of Black students enrolled in schools represented 38% of out-of-school suspensions. Those figures were compared to White students who constituted 45% of enrollment and experienced arrest rates of 34% (USED, 2021) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*2017-2018 U.S. Student Enrollment, Referrals to Law Enforcement, and School Arrests*



In 2017-18, Black students accounted for 28.7% of all students referred to law enforcement and 31.6% of all students arrested at school or during a school-related activity—twice their share of total student enrollment of 15.1%.

Similar patterns of disparities were observed for Black students served under IDEA who accounted for 2.3% of total student enrollment, but 8.4% of students referred to law enforcement and 9.1% of students who were arrested.

*Note.* Black student enrollment is 15.1% and Black student school arrests are 31.6%.

<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018>.

Black students face tougher penalties for similar behavioral infractions and are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, which increases the likelihood of incarceration in the following year (Hawkes, 2015). Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the 2017 to 2018 demographic enrollment data breakdown, including 50 states compared to Ohio. These 2017 to 2018 U.S. Department of Education tables show the enrollment and gender rates for the United States and Ohio. Although Black student enrollment rates were lower than for white students, the arrest rates were higher, as shown in Figure 2.

**Table 1***2017 to 2018 High School Student Enrollment Rates*

50 States Compared to Ohio							
2017-2018 School Data	Total		Black or African American Students		White Students		Number of Schools
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	50,992,024	100.00	7,696,501	15.10	24,096,313	47.30	97,632
Ohio	1,732,939	100.00	281,954	16.30	1,218,947	70.30	3,593

*Note.* Adapted from Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education, June 2021.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

**Table 2**

*2017 to 2018 Percentage Rates of High School Black or African American Males*  
2017 to 2018 Ohio Percentage

2017-2018 School Data	Total of Males		Black or African American	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	26,171,327	51.40	3,933,157	7.70
Ohio	893,371	51.60	144,487	8.30

*Note.* Adapted from Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education. (June, 2021). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

**Table 3***2017 to 2018 Percentage Rates of High School White Males*

2017 - 2018 School Data	Total of Males		White Males	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	26,171,327	51.40	12,449,901	24.40
Ohio	893,371	51.60	630,976	36.40

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of Education (ED). (2021, June).

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

**Table 4***2017 to 2018 Percentage Rates of High School Black or African American Females*

2017 – 2018 School Data	Total of Females		Black or African American Females	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	50,922,024	48.60	3,7663,344	7.40
Ohio	1,732,939	48.40	839,568	48.40
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	50,922,024	48.60	3,7663,344	7.40
Ohio	1,732,939	48.40	839,568	48.40

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of

Education (ED). (2021, June). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>



**Table 5***2017 to 2018 Percentage Rates of High School White Females**2017 to 2018 Ohio Percentage*

	Total of Females		White Females	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	50,922,024	48.60	11,646,412	22.90
Ohio	1,732,939	48.40	587,971	33.90

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of Education (ED). (2021, June). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

**Table 6***2017 to 2018 High School Number of Arrests per Categorical Violation*

The States	Rape or Attempted Rape	Sexual Assault	Robbery with a Weapon	Robbery with a Firearm or Explosive	Robbery without a Weapon	Physical Attack or Fight with a Weapon	Physical Attack or Fight with a Firearm or Explosive Device	Physical Attack without a Weapon	Threats of Physical Attack with a Weapon	Threats of Physical Attack with a Firearm or Explosive Device	Threats of Physical Attack without a Weapon	Possession of a Firearm or Explosive Device	Number of Schools
50 States, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico	685	13,114	650	283	16,480	9,178	7,217	844,435	15,577	5,676	205,028	6,786	97,632
Ohio	9	623	0	1	780	323	4	37,046	594	220	5,717	177	3,393

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. June, 2021.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

Table 6 shows student arrest violations, demonstrating that most violations consisted of physical attacks or fights without a weapon (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Although the numbers were high, the historical category of physical attack without a weapon or fighting consisted of various motives, including students defending themselves from incidents such as bullying, physical aggression in their homes, or attacks from jealous classmates. Table 7 shows the highest student discipline rates for each category of the United States for the 2017 to 2018 school year, from kindergarten through high school.

**Table 7**

*2017 to 2018 High School Students Disciplinary Action Rates*

Characteristics	Corporal Punishment	One or More In-School Suspensions	Out Of School			Expulsions				Referral To Law Enforcement	School Related Arrests
			Total	Only One	More than One	→ Total All Expulsions	→ Total Under Zero-Tolerance Policies	← With Educational Services	← Without Educational Services		
<b>All Students</b>											
<i>Sex</i>											
Male*	0.22	7.05	6.81	4.18	2.63	0.29	0.04	0.23	0.06	0.61	0.15
Female	0.05	3.27	3.01	2.00	1.01	0.11	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.28	0.07
<i>Race/ethnicity by sex</i>											
<i>Male*</i>											
White	0.25	6.07	5.06	3.31	1.75	0.22	0.04	0.16	0.05	0.51	0.11
Black*	0.50	13.31	15.76	8.61	7.15	0.66	0.05	0.54	0.12	1.08	0.28
<i>Female*</i>											
White	0.05	2.27	1.69	1.22	0.48	0.07	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.20	0.04
Black*	0.17	7.69	8.71	5.27	3.44	0.31	0.02	0.26	0.06	0.59	0.16
<i>Students with Disabilities</i>											
<i>Sex</i>											
Male*	0.22	9.59	10.66	5.93	4.73	0.39	0.05	0.33	0.06	1.02	0.24
Female	0.07	5.20	5.32	3.25	2.07	0.18	0.02	0.16	0.02	0.54	0.13
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>											
White	0.20	7.24	7.30	4.30	3.00	0.24	0.04	0.20	0.04	0.73	0.15
Black*	0.32	13.80	18.44	9.41	9.03	0.72	0.05	0.65	0.07	1.61	0.41
<i>Race/ethnicity by sex</i>											
<i>Male*</i>											
White	0.26	8.80	9.11	5.26	3.85	0.31	0.05	0.25	0.05	0.89	0.19
Black*	0.41	15.43	20.86	10.37	10.49	0.83	0.06	0.75	0.08	1.83	0.46
<i>Female*</i>											
White	0.07	4.21	3.78	2.43	1.35	0.12	0.02	0.10	0.02	0.42	0.09
Black*	0.15	10.51	13.57	7.50	6.08	0.49	0.03	0.45	0.04	1.18	0.31



Characteristics	Corporal Punishment	One or More In-School Suspensions	Out Of School			Expulsions				Referral To Law Enforcement	School Related Arrests
			Total	Only One	More than One	→	→	←	←		
			Total	Only One	More than One	Total All Expulsions	Under Zero-Tolerance Policies	With Educational Services	Without Educational Services		
<b>All Students</b>											
<i>Sex</i>											
Male*	0.22	7.05	6.81	4.18	2.63	0.29	0.04	0.23	0.06	0.61	0.15
Female	0.05	3.27	3.01	2.00	1.01	0.11	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.28	0.07
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>											
<i>by sex</i>											
<i>Male*</i>											
White	0.25	6.07	5.06	3.31	1.75	0.22	0.04	0.16	0.05	0.51	0.11
Black*	0.50	13.31	15.76	8.61	7.15	0.66	0.05	0.54	0.12	1.08	0.28
<i>Female*</i>											
White	0.05	2.27	1.69	1.22	0.48	0.07	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.20	0.04
Black*	0.17	7.69	8.71	5.27	3.44	0.31	0.02	0.26	0.06	0.59	0.16
<b>Students with Disabilities</b>											
<i>Sex</i>											
Male*	0.22	9.59	10.66	5.93	4.73	0.39	0.05	0.33	0.06	1.02	0.24
Female	0.07	5.20	5.32	3.25	2.07	0.18	0.02	0.16	0.02	0.54	0.13
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>											
White	0.20	7.24	7.30	4.30	3.00	0.24	0.04	0.20	0.04	0.73	0.15
Black*	0.32	13.80	18.44	9.41	9.03	0.72	0.05	0.65	0.07	1.61	0.41
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>											
<i>by sex</i>											
<i>Male*</i>											
White	0.26	8.80	9.11	5.26	3.85	0.31	0.05	0.25	0.05	0.89	0.19
Black*	0.41	15.43	20.86	10.37	10.49	0.83	0.06	0.75	0.08	1.83	0.46
<i>Female*</i>											
White	0.07	4.21	3.78	2.43	1.35	0.12	0.02	0.10	0.02	0.42	0.09
Black*	0.15	10.51	13.57	7.50	6.08	0.49	0.03	0.45	0.04	1.18	0.31

*Note.* \*Indicates majority discipline actions in each category. Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of Education (ED). (Prepared 2022, March). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

As the data confirmed, each category of student disciplinary action resulted in Black males being the most disciplined. Specifically, Black male students with disabilities were handed the most out-of-school suspensions (USDE, 2022).

Tables 8 and 9 provide data regarding the referral of students to SROs and the comparison of disciplinary actions between Black male and White male students in public

elementary and secondary schools. The tables highlight percentages that are of significant interest in understanding the disparities in these areas. The first table presents the percentages of students referred to SROs, offering insights into the overall trends in student interactions with SROs within educational settings in seven randomly selected states. The second table represents the same seven states between Black male and White male students in terms of disciplinary actions within the same 2017-2018 educational schools.

**Table 8**

*Example of Seven States, 2017 to 2018 Percentage of High School Students Referred to SROs.*

U.S. State	Percentage of Students Referred to SRO	Percentage of Black Students Referred to SROs
Illinois	7.40	18.40
Kentucky	4.80	9.30
Ohio	2.00	3.60
Pennsylvania	10.50	23.60
Michigan	2.10	2.10
New Hampshire	10.10	22.30
South Dakota	7.30	20.20

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of Education (ED). (Prepared 2022, March). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

**Table 9**

*Example of Seven States, 2017 to 2018 Black Male Students Versus White Male Students*

*Suspended and Expelled from Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*

U.S. State	Percentage of Black Male Students	Percentage of White Male Students
Illinois	10.20	2.13
Kentucky	14.78	4.37
Ohio	18.13	4.19
Pennsylvania	14.79	3.16
Michigan	17.42	4.86
New Hampshire	12.20	4.84
South Dakota	7.50	1.91

*Note.* Adapted from *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. US Department of Education (ED). (Prepared 2022, March). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

### **A Single White Mother Raising a Black Child: An Incident with SROs**

At a Midwestern high school during the second week of the school year 2022, a first-year Black student experienced a dramatic incident with an SRO. The student's white grandmother was called to pick up her Black grandson because he engaged in, what the principal called, a scuffle that resulted in the boy slipping (Savini, 2022). Upon the grandmother's arrival, the student was emotionally upset, visibly shaking, and in a wheelchair (Savini, 2022). A video played during a news segment on CBS from the school showed the first-year student standing up from the wheelchair in handcuffs (Savini). Finally, as he was released from school with his grandmother, the SRO uncuffed the child. Numerous school employees, including the SRO and a paramedic, were around the child and no one informed the grandmother that any injuries were

sustained. The grandmother noticed a scratch and that the student had difficulty walking, so she immediately drove him to the hospital for doctors to conduct a thorough examination.

Eventually, the family obtained legal counsel and requested the video from the high school, which showed the hallway incident. The video confirmed the family's worst nightmare. The student was in the hallway, making no confrontation toward the SRO who, without provocation, body slammed the 4'11" student headfirst onto the hard linoleum tile floor, knocked him unconscious, and handcuffed his limp body to a chair (Savini, 2022). After receiving the physician's report, the legal team confirmed that the SRO caused permanent neurological damage due to the use of extreme force (Savini).

From 2017 to 2018, the same Midwestern high school data showed 72 referrals and 43 arrests by SROs (Savini, 2022). According to CBS2 Investigators, the Midwestern high school referred students to the police 94% more than other high schools in the nation (Savini). The 2022 incident remains unresolved as the legal team has verbally committed to filing a federal lawsuit (Savini).

### **Mental Health**

Students are experiencing more stressors than in the past. Adolescents are contending with increased stressors, including the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressing need for gun safety laws addressing school shootings, and heightened awareness of issues related to racial inequality. These challenges collectively shape the complex experiences faced by today's youth (Tran, 2024). During the school year 2016 to 2017, the number of children ages 12 to 17 who experienced mental health issues increased by 100% (RTI International, 2018). A 2021 Mental Health America report confirmed an increase of over 9% since 2020 in adolescents who reported at least one major incident of depression (State of Mental Health, 2021). The

increase in students' stressors continues, with at least 60% of those with major depression going untreated (Reinert et al., 2022).

The use of social media, mass school shootings, and COVID-19 have increased mental health issues in students. A report from The State of Mental Health in America (SMHA) ranked a Midwestern state as 27<sup>th</sup> in the United States for youth mental health (SMHA, 2022).

According to an SMHA survey, students reported in 2019 that they had experienced one of the following: major depressive episodes (with or without receiving mental health services), substance abuse, or emotional disturbances (SMHA, 2022). The American Psychological Association (APA) stated that after COVID-19, 81% of students ages 13-17 experienced intense stress, 67% of U.S. high school students reported that schoolwork was more difficult, 55% experienced some emotional abuse in the home, 11% experienced physical abuse, and 24% reported that they did not have enough food to eat during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have detrimental effects on students' mental health (APA, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Schools have decided to eliminate SROs based on disproportionate disciplinary rates and increases in student mental health issues. In a large city in the Midwest parents of the school district were disappointed when news circulated that SROs had their contracts canceled (Seman, 2020). They voiced their concerns because they felt their children were safe when SROs were present on school grounds (Seman, 2020).

On the other hand, the district's social worker was relieved about the elimination of SROs because she was concerned about the disproportionate criminalization of students of color with the school-to-prison pipeline (Seman, 2020). The same social worker shared an additional concern about the potential psychological harm experienced by Black children due to the



presence of SROs and that it is imperative for schools to provide secure environments where children feel safe and secure physically and mentally (Seman). An example of when the students did not feel safe was shared when an SRO joked about police brutality during a conversation with students (Seman). Another time, a female student felt physically unsafe knowing her very own SRO was constantly following her in an attempt to groom her (Seman, 2020). Given these data incidents, it is important for police agencies, school districts, parents, and communities to better understand how district administrators make decisions about employing SROs. Hence, the problem that this proposed qualitative narrative study seeks to address is that it is not known how Midwestern school district administrators decide to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The researcher utilized the study's theoretical framework and supporting literature to develop the following research questions, which are critical in understanding the problem.

- RQ1: How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add SROs?
- RQ2: How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to eliminate SROs?
- RQ3: How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to maintain SROs?

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The researcher of the study utilized a qualitative, narrative design. Data collection instruments included interviews with Midwestern school district administrators. Additionally, the

researcher examined arrest rates, data from the Department of Education, and data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

### **Significance of the Study**

The research was imperative as it may benefit school and district administrators and, more importantly, the safety and mental health of high school students. The study brought awareness to students' needs and showed how school and district administrators make decisions about SROs. School districts that presently employ school resource officers have more specific information on SROs which may help them decide to revise their high school's policies and procedures.

The study may benefit future researchers in exploring and examining schools that have incorporated more school counselors instead of school resource officers. At the same time, future researchers can delve into similar data to study possible decreases in student arrest and expulsion rates where school resource officers are no longer employed. In addition, future research can review the school-to-prison pipeline to see if there is an increase or decrease when SROs are present on school grounds.

### **Definition of the Terms**

#### *Arrest Rates*

The percentage of students who are arrested by SROs or involved in SRO-related investigations.

#### *District Administrators*

District-level administrators involved in decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers.

### *High School Students*

United States female or male students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades between the ages of 14 and 18.

### *Mental Health*

The cognitive, social, and emotional security of oneself (USDE, 2022).

### *Qualitative Narrative*

Extensive descriptive research consisting of interview analysis of documents wherein participants' stories become the data (Leclair, 2015)

### *School Resource Officers (SROs)*

Sworn law enforcement officers employed by school districts or police agencies to work in schools (Ohio Revised Code, 2021).

### *Suspension and Expulsion*

Disciplinary sanctions imposed on students for prohibited conduct committed (Children's Law Center of Massachusetts, n.d.).

## **Limitations**

This study was limited to only the perspectives of Midwestern school district administrators and not extended to SROs, parents, teachers, or school staff. The study was qualitative, and the results are not generalizable due to the small sample and regional exploration.

## **Organization of the Study**

The qualitative narrative study consists of Chapter 1, which includes the introduction, background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, data collection instruments, the significance of the study, the nature of the study, the definition of terms, and the



organization of the study. In Chapter 2, the researcher provides the literature review of the qualitative narrative study. Chapter 3 examines the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 reviews and analyzes the data collected. Chapter 5 summarizes the study, reminds the reader of the research questions, and provides a conclusion and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand how Midwestern school district administrators described their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers. The study will help principals, parents, policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and the community understand the reasoning behind the district administrators' decisions on the employment of school resource officers.

A School Resource Officer (SRO) is a full-time police officer appointed by the school district or local law enforcement agency. According to the Ohio Revised Code (ORC), Section 3313.951, D, b, (2021) the SRO is expected to provide a safe learning environment, offer resources to staff members, build relationships with students and staff, establish practices to resolve problems with youth and protect all students.

For an SRO to be present in a school, the local law enforcement and the school district often implement an MOU, or memorandum of understanding, which establishes and incorporates an SRO into a school's safety plan and overall educational environment (2022). The National Association of School Resource Officers (2015) stated that MOUs are essential to providing details of an SRO's job duties and ensuring that selected officers are professionally trained by local law enforcement through continuing education classes. Once selected, both parties approve by signing the document (2015). The Ohio Legislature 135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2018) enacted House Bill 318 to define the MOU process for SROs.

## **The History of SROs in Schools**

### ***1950 to 1960***

The SRO program started in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s to formulate meaningful connections between police and local youth and to help decrease criminal activities (Scherer, 2022). As time went on, other communities, cities, and states gained awareness and incorporated the use of SROs in their school districts.

### ***1970 to 1990***

From the mid-1980s to 1990, DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) was the next program implemented that affected SROs by increasing their presence and involvement in schools. The 101<sup>st</sup> Congress meeting (1989) supported the federally funded distributions for the programs. Given the extensive need for drug prevention measures within schools, DARE served as a valuable and respected local resource, offering readily available DARE officers to fulfill this demand. DARE history (n.d.) confirmed the demand for DARE training and program implementation in schools grew and prompted the development of DARE national and international infrastructure for disseminating substance abuse prevention initiatives.

The Los Angeles Police Department began the program and added a visual with a mascot, Daren the Lion, which appeared kind-hearted but courageous (2022). The DARE program was intended to combat the war on drugs. During that time, the popular illicit drug of choice was crack cocaine, and it was crippling and defeating the nation. Eventually, DARE grew immensely and by 2002 had an overwhelming annual budget of more than \$10 million (Ingraham, 2017).

Assessing the tremendous amount of funding and commitment to DARE the results were not as predicted. A 2016-2017 report from New Jersey schools collected data from 304 schools

to analyze and examine if there was an increase or decrease in New Jersey's students who were involved with drugs. The statistical analysis confirmed that there were no substantial changes regarding "violence, vandalism, or substance abuse" despite a long-term commitment to DARE (Ingraham, 2017).

Moreover, even after examining the data that showed the ineffectiveness of the DARE program within the schools, a Fact Sheet from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms approved and prioritized a budget of \$1.179 billion to continue the program (2015).

Astonishingly, one billion dollars was invested in an ineffective program. This program persisted as the government's sole 'solution' for addressing school safety, mental health access, and the presence of police officers in schools.

#### *1990 to 2000*

According to a DARE Review and Evaluation (2013) from Governor Mike DeWine, between 1995 and 1999, over \$11 million in grants were distributed to 650 law enforcement officers who delivered DARE education across 78 Ohio counties. The same report (2013) indicated that over time what started strong started to change with turnover rates being high among DARE officers due to the absence of a defined career progression for them, coupled with instances where they were perceived to be treated as inferior to other law enforcement personnel.

Starting during the same time frame, in 1991, the Phoenix, Arizona Police Department along with the Bureau of Tobacco and Firearms implemented GREAT (Gang Resistance Education and Training) in their local school systems (Esbensen et al., 2012). The program GREAT was established for police officers to persuade students to stay in school and seize the false perception that being in a gang is cool, a means of making money, or family oriented. At

the time, GREAT did not show an increase in gang affiliations, but data that was later gathered revealed a decrease in linking students with local gangs (Esbensen et al.).

### ***2000 to Present***

Since the 1950s, the number of SRO programs along with billions of dollars had been devoted to the schools, but problems continue to increase. School programs have ceased in many school districts, but SROs have increased across the nation. The turn of the century brought innovative ideas to address a broader concern and implemented grant funding programs geared to the needs of the students. Student-centered programs, such as DARE and GREAT still incorporated SROs in some school districts, but the funding and other distinct reasons eliminated them in others.

However, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice applied the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Framework Implementation Toolkit (SAMHSA, 2022). The program offers toolkits geared toward assisting schools with mental illness, preventing violence, and safety programs (SAMHSA, 2022). This type of program aids the schools and supports families and the community. The programs are still being offered but slowly disconnecting the SROs with the mentorship of students.

## **School, Student, and SRO Categorical Information/Statistics**

### **Student Enrollment and SRO Data**

The National Center for Education Statistics reported the 2019 to 2020 year had over 128,000 elementary and secondary institutions in the United States with approximately 48,000,000 students enrolled (NCES, 2022). In the 2019 to 2020 academic year, the percentage of sworn law enforcement officers who carry a firearm at least once a week in schools was 51% (NCES, 2022). In *Guard 911*, SROs create a safe culture and are effective in ensuring student and staff



safety through prompt response to alerted threats, expertise in managing K9s for drug searches, and crucially preventing active school shooters from entering school grounds (Kristin, 2020).

Although SROs are to ensure the safety culture of students, the remaining 49% of schools that do not employ SROs have reasons to justify the decision (Washington, 2021). For example, the National Association of School Principals reported that too many reports were submitted of unnecessary and extreme force along with discipline for minor incidents by SROs. Since SROs were involved with high arrest rates of involvements which could have been resolved with a phone call to the parent instead, it makes the student feel anxious and finds it difficult to have a safe culture (Washington, 2021).

Some research has found that additionally, schools do not support employing SROs because there is no evidence that they avert or halt mass shootings (Washington, 2021). Schools may feel the funds could be used more appropriately and directed to benefit the needs of the students. The areas of essential need could be to obtain more staff in school counselors, social workers, and additional teaching staff (Washington, 2021).

#### *Student Arrest and Crime Rates in Schools*

The United States Department of Education (2019) reported that in the school year 2015 to 2016 71% of urban high schools, 59% of suburban high schools, and 64% of rural high schools had written policies that outlined the circumstances under which SROs could make arrests on school grounds. One may suggest the presence of SROs decreases crime and arrest rates leading to safer school cultures; however, 29% of high schools in the United States lack formal policies stating when SROs can arrest students on school grounds. This lack of standardization and oversight from school boards could lead to inconsistent and disproportionate

arrest rates in schools, thus making schools feel less safe to some students, which is disconcerting.

A study by Devlin and Gottfredson (2016) examined whether the presence of SROs increased or decreased the reporting of crimes in schools. The study found that in schools with SROs, compared to those without, more crimes were reported. On the other hand, who knows better about the school's safe culture than a principal? Kentucky school principals were surveyed to analyze their observation of SRO's effectiveness. The principals viewed that SROs contributed to a decrease in crime and were an asset to the school setting (Zhang, 2019).

### *Childhood Mental Health and SROs*

An increase in mental health issues has been prominent in young children and adolescents. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) confirmed in 2019 one in nine students put together a suicide strategy which was an increase of 44% over a decade.

Is an SRO present in the school effective with school administration seeking to enhance a safe culture for students' mental health? An SRO would contribute to a safe culture; however, the arresting authority has been known to contribute to a negative impact on a student's mental health (Nayeb & Meek, 2020).

In 2018, an eight-year-old Key West student was arrested on school grounds and transported to an adult facility (Culver, 2020). Surely, this would not contribute to a safe culture for the student's mental health when the student returns to school.

Recently, a California SRO disarmed a student involved in a fight that brought a loaded gun to school (Best, 2022). The SRO created a safe culture for the student's mental health. Although the students in the school may have additional stressors, the SRO enhanced a positive culture with students' mental health.

Moreover, a study revealed Black children with past traumatic encounters in their lives were more prone to arrests leading to adult incarcerations (Jaggi et al., 2016). With a lack of mental health resources within the community and more SROs than mental health professionals in schools, Black children are often viewed as unruly. According to *Black and African American Communities and Mental Health (2022)*, major depression increased by 10% among Black students between 12 to 17 years old. In addition, *Black and African American Communities and Mental Health (2022)* confirmed, “Black and African American people are often diagnosed with schizophrenia and less often diagnosed with mood disorders compared to white people with the same symptoms” (n.p.).

In comparison, a small study using data from the National Center of Education Statistics explored relationships between SROs in Utah and safe school cultures. The study researched the number of students who were arrested in schools in the State of Utah that had SROs versus those in the rest of the United States of America. The data were collected from 2015 to 2016 in secondary public schools that had at least one SRO present on school grounds. In Utah’s 2015 to 2016 academic year, approximately 6% of schools had SROs present and reported at least one arrest in secondary schools, with around 63% making up the remaining U.S. (NCES, 2019). The percentage of arrests involving White youths decreased from 70% in 2014 to 56% in 2018, as reported. Concurrently, the proportion of overall arrests for young individuals of color rose from 30% in 2014 to 44% in 2018 (Miller, 2020).

In 2018, 91% of Utah’s population was White and 2% Black (U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration). In comparison, the U.S. population was 73%



White and 14% Black or African American with the remaining being Asian American and others (2021).

*Cops and No Counselors* data confirmed Utah’s school district enrollment data included 2% Black and Latino children, of whom 6% were arrested (Whitaker et al., 2019). Regarding arrests on rural school grounds, Utah had 6% of arrests as compared with 57% in the remaining United States. The data included one SRO on school grounds.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), to be considered a rural area most of the land must consist of continuous hills that include farmland and minimal concrete for sidewalks. The U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration rated Utah as the 13<sup>th</sup> largest state by landmass, the majority of which was rural. In Utah, over 10 years, the number of SROs in schools in rural areas increased significantly by 64% (2019). Interestingly, the increase in students referred to an SRO was greater in rural areas than in urban areas (Mitchell et al., 2022). Utah’s rural Davis School District is the second largest in the state with over 72,000 students. Despite the school district’s enormous size, the availability of resources is limited for students. The scarcity of mental health resources could pose a significant challenge in meeting the needs of students within the second-largest school district. Table 10 shows the 2015 tabular data of the mental health professionals available in the Davis School District area.

**Table 10**

*2015 Mental Health Providers Per 10,000 Children Ages 0 to 17 for Utah’s Davis Schools*

Health Care Provider Designation	Number of Mental Health Providers per 10,000 children
Pediatrician	4
Psychiatrists	1.6
Family Medicine	8.9
Licensed Social Workers	23.5

*Note.* Adapted from the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (April, 2022).

Students are apprehensive to seek help for mental stressors if they have not formed connections with mentors or do not know that resources are available (Vidourek et al., 2014). According to the National Alliance on Mental Health (2021), Black people seeking help for issues, such as depression, may seem like a sign of weakness and could be frowned upon by family, friends, or the community in which they were raised. Even if Black males in the United States do become knowledgeable about mental health resources and seek out help, finding a male Black psychologist is challenging. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, only 2% out of 41,000 psychiatrists in the country were Black (Milloy, 2020). It is a challenge for male Black students to trust a professional that does not mirror their race (Milloy, 2020).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

In this review of the literature, the researcher presented statistics on SROs and student arrest rates. The researcher also portrayed the existing literature on SROs. One significant weakness of the existing literature is that it is not known how school administrators make decisions regarding the staffing of SROs in schools. It is, therefore, critical to conduct a study describing how school district administrators decide to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The results of the study can address a deficit of knowledge in the secondary literature.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this research, two theoretical lenses have guided the implementation and interpretation of this research. The theoretical framework in this research is informed by Robert Sternberg's intelligence approach (Cherry, 2022) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

### **Triarchic Theory**

Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence (1985) offers a thorough model defining human intelligence as the mental capacity directed toward effectively adapting to, selecting, and shaping real-world environments pertinent to one's life. Understanding intelligence as practical, creative, and analytical guided my exploration into how school district administrators add, eliminate, or maintain SROs within educational settings. At the same time, consider the complicated decisions of students' safety and well-being.

Theorist Robert Sternberg's intelligence approach consisted of three factors (Cherry, 2022). The Triarchic Theory includes analytic, creative, and practical factors that connect not only to the students but to the position of SROs in the schools. The Triarchic Theory is defined as a model of intelligence that emphasizes three aspects of intelligence: analytical, creative, and practical (Sternberg, 1985). This theory is useful as an analytic lens because it provides a framework for understanding different forms of intelligence and how they relate to real-world problem-solving. By applying this theory to the context of school districts and SROs, school district administrators can gain a better understanding of how different forms of intelligence are utilized in decision-making and problem-solving processes.

### ***Analytic Factors***

According to Krumhansl (2016), the data showed that incorporating an analytic learning approach in the essential learning of both knowledge and skills led to the highest level of

success. This finding may be particularly relevant for school district administrators who are responsible for making decisions related to SROs. Adopting an analytic learning approach, school district administrators can analyze data, make informed decisions, and develop effective strategies for improving student well-being.

The SRO can be a vital part of students' success. The school's administration can implement a series of analytics that deal with the well-being and safety of students entering the doors. The measurements collected will assess the student's physical and mental welfare to decipher behavior in students. By doing this, the school can monitor the status of the students to ensure the safety of the students and the school. This not only reduces the amount of violence and negligence but can also aid in addressing the increase in student arrests.

#### *Creative Factors*

Another factor to introduce is audio and visual tools or even having students act out a play from a book. For example, reading Macbeth by William Shakespeare may seem agonizing for students but asking them to participate by painting props and creating costumes might enhance the creative side and encourage participation. The student is likely to remember and retain the storyline content rather than reading while attempting to concentrate throughout the book. A way the SRO can connect with students is by volunteering in some capacity, by taking the prop home to paint it if the students do not have the resources.

This act of kindness will create a connection between the SRO and the student. This proved to be true when an Inside Edition Facebook video went viral, an SRO worked during the day watching students practice cheers for upcoming football games (Staff, 2017). The same SRO that was also scheduled to work the football games started practicing the cheer without the student's knowledge. The SRO surprised the student body by leading the student section with



movements and words of the practiced cheer. After the skit finished, the thrill and excitement proved to be beneficial to the student body (Staff, 2017).

Learning outside the classroom can be instrumental for high school students in deciding their occupation. Class field trips to courthouses and the local police departments can help students determine the field of the profession that they want to pursue. Doing so could break the barriers that students may have between themselves and SROs. If this is arranged, an SRO can be a highly influential role model for a student to pursue a profession in law enforcement. SROs have many opportunities to connect to students by volunteering and being mentors but can still effectively protect the students and school grounds. Students can shadow SROs to understand the importance of building safe cultures in schools. In 2021, a student took advantage of the opportunity to gain experience from the SRO at Stillwater High School in Minnesota. The SRO shared his love for the community and this student learned various aspects of the profession.

### *Practical Factors*

Students who have a grim time learning through textbooks discover it beneficial to learn through practical applications. A firsthand experience is another creative tool that can be applied in a learning environment. Firsthand learning helps the student enhance the absorption of the content instead of continuously reading the textbook subject matter over and over in hopes of understanding the concept.

Teens may not be enthusiastic about reading a book of poems but introducing the infamous Maya Angelou and reading aloud to the class a few of her beautiful poems might influence, inspire, create, and bring out the inner poet within them. An SRO could arrange for a special visit and recite one of the poems. Then, schools can have a writing contest with the SRO

being the judge. Students can be asked to create a poem on the importance of having an SRO in the schools. This project could bring about a form of respect for one another.

A Tennessee SRO, Chad Dodson, took it a step further and authored his book to help alleviate fears and provide a safe culture, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As he promotes the book around the world with all proceeds helping families in need, his intentions were for students to know that not all police officers are scary (Shelton, 2021). In the news segment, the elementary school student reads to the SRO his book which formed a safe bond between the two and a safe culture within the school (Shelton).

Similarly, the SRO can conduct direct training with demonstrations in classrooms. The United Department of Justice, COPS Office, created training for SROs to teach students about healthy social media habits by explaining to the students how to block and what to do if certain disturbing texts are received from a sender (2015). Then, a forum for questions and answers can be left for open communication between the parties to get rid of any misleading conceptions. The SRO could build trust, which would lead to a safe and positive culture for future conversations and the students would feel the SRO is more approachable in times of need.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Abraham Maslow constructed the Hierarchy of Needs, a positive theory of motivation into five stages starting from the highest, self-actualization, esteem, belonging, safety, and physiological, which is the first step (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) theory is based on behavior being motivated by the desire to fulfill their needs and achieve goals. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a useful analytic lens because it provides a framework for understanding the different levels of human needs with motivation and behavior. Applying this theory can help school district administrators understand how SROs impact student motivation and behavior.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can also help school district administrators develop effective strategies for promoting student success. School district administrators can create a supportive learning environment that encourages student engagement and motivation, leading to improved academic performance and overall well-being for students. Maslow reflects on his theory:

Danger to these is reacted to almost as if it were a direct danger to the basic needs themselves. Such conditions as freedom to speak, freedom to do what one wishes so long as no harm is done to others, freedom to express one's self, freedom to investigate and seek information, freedom to defend one's self, justice, fairness, honesty, orderliness in the group are examples of such preconditions for basic need satisfactions (p. 383).

Maslow's statement is important because without the basic needs being met there can be no safety culture for students.

### *Physiological*

The SRO can help meet the basic needs of students. Examining the data from the 2015-2016 *National Center for Education Statistics*, with one SRO present once a week in the building, between 70 to 100% of those eligible students, 64 were eligible for free or reduced-rated lunches in the U.S. (2019). SROs can be instrumental in the safety culture by hosting Lunch with a Deputy like Oregon's Pleasant School District described in *Share Your Great Heart-Warming Story* (2021). SROs help students feel safe while their basic needs are being met.

The basic step can be achieved by extending free lunches to low-income minority students who could be provided with basic needs. Also, the school is an institution that provides a means of shelter, especially for homeless students. It is difficult to have better numeric facts since homeless rates change throughout the school year. Over a few years, a federal data

summary for the school years 2015-2016 through 2017-2018 calculated over 340,000 homeless secondary students in the U.S.

Furthermore, if the SRO is aware that the student is homeless, he can continue to protect the student's safety by ensuring he arrives at school and, if not, follow up to alert authorities. If the needs of the students are met by creating a safer culture with the aid of the SRO, the daily routine will be more productive, and the school setting will become a safe shelter.

### *Safety*

For over a vicennial, students have been exposed to a startling number of guns, knives, arrests, and shootings in the place they should feel the most secure. School resource officers have decreased the safety of some students by committing sexual infringement, discrimination, and unnecessary arrests (CLCCRUL, 2020). Students who do not have a secure culture are unable to make it to the next level. Nevertheless, teachers and staff can do their best to provide a haven inside the classrooms. Students who are arrested and removed from their haven and placed in a jail cell are introduced to other unsafe factors and mental stressors in the environment (Nurse et al., 2003). An SRO can ensure students that safety is their utmost priority. In theory, the SRO would adhere to this practice to the same safety standards to ensure a safe school culture.

### *Belonging-Love*

Students want to feel a sense of belonging and love in a classroom. This can be achieved by partnering with peers of different races or cultures to educate each other and develop mutual respect. Providing students that have disadvantages such as educational materials or wheelchair access will give them a sense of belonging. Teachers who show interest in the students will increase students' engagement in learning, student attendance, and test scores (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Student Resource Officers welcoming students upon entering the school will show that sense of belonging. School resource officers can make students feel this by performing small gestures, such as high fives, smiling, and telling the student it is great to see them. An article in the *City of North Charleston* (2022) featured multiple SROs posing with staff and even arms around smiling students as they greet students upon entering the schools. These small gestures will create a safe culture and connect the students. If they meet outside of the school setting, it will become more of an acquaintance instead of a threat.

### *Self-Esteem*

Though self-esteem is difficult to accomplish at any age, it can be the most rewarding to achieve. By praising students for accomplishments and acts of kindness, SROs can influence a student's self-esteem which contributes to the safety culture. An SRO could have an enormous impact in this step by showing empathy and building confidence (Posick, 2013). Both can be at no cost, but the outcome can be academically and emotionally rewarding for the student. SROs do not always have to be recognized as bad models in society but are illustrated as the change a student needs for their self-esteem.

### *Self-Actualization*

At the highest level, the peak of the pyramid, the ultimate achievement receives self-actualization. Unfortunately, many students will never reach their full potential because of their day-to-day stressors; but if the SROs follow the positive motivating theory, it can be achieved and the student will have a better chance for a successful future, even as future SROs.

The history of an SRO started to help students resist drugs and the desire to join local gang affiliations. With budget cuts along with a shift in other needs for students, police officer programs in schools began to fade (May et al., 2020). School resource officers have a position

description and a signed MOU and are equipped with technical training to provide a safety culture.

If students do not meet Maslow's Hierarchy of School Needs, then they are missing the key necessities to thrive in an educational environment that their community feels is a safe culture. Before SROs are appointed to protect a local school district, they should have mandatory childhood cognitive development, diversity, and sensitivity training to identify a student's needs. Federal, state, and local funding should be shifted, increased, and utilized more toward creating counselors, and additional teaching staff in schools. When SROs are professionally trained and the schools are adequately funded, they would know to identify the adverse behavior a student may be displaying and adjust their reactions accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

Using Sternberg's Triarchic Theory (Cherry, 2022) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) as theoretical lenses, the researcher proposed a qualitative narrative study that interviewed Midwestern school district administrators to understand how they describe their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. This study addressed a significant gap in the literature at a time when the presence of SROs in schools has become problematic for some students (Washington, 2021). The study would benefit boards of education, school district administrators, parents, students, and policing agencies as they strive to keep students safe in their schools. The study brought awareness to students' needs and showed how school and district administrators made decisions about SROs.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers (SROs). Although the purpose of SROs is to ensure the safety of students, 49% of schools that do not employ SROs have reasons to justify their decisions (Washington, 2021). For example, the National Association of School Principals (2021) reported that many reports of unnecessary and extreme force in discipline were submitted for minor incidents by SROs. The presence of school resource officers is connected with high arrest rates, which could be resolved with less punitive measures (Washington, 2021). Instead, unnecessary discipline creates the opposite behavior and may make students feel anxious, making it more difficult for them to feel safe at school (Washington, 2021). These data make it important for school district leaders to carefully consider the addition, elimination, or sustainment of SROs.

The problem that this qualitative narrative study sought to address was that it is not known how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The research was significant because, given the instances of violence and disproportionate disciplinary consequences in schools, it better explained how school district administrators in the Midwest describe their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs (Muniz, 2021). This qualitative narrative study is expected to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative research study answered the following research questions: How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add SROs? How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to eliminate SROs? How do Midwestern school district administrators decide how to maintain SROs?

### **Research Method**

The researcher used a general qualitative approach to understand how Midwestern school district administrators describe their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The researcher collected data through individual interviews with 10 Midwestern school district administrators and analyzed the data to address the study's research questions. The common thread among the interviewees was that they were 10 Midwestern school district administrators who had added, eliminated, or maintained SROs. Some principals or school district administrators may feel SROs provide a safe culture in schools, and others may justify why they have eliminated SROs from their schools.

### **Participants / Sample**

The participants interviewed were Midwestern school district administrators from urban and suburban public schools who have added, eliminated, or maintained SROs. The Midwestern district school administrators were members of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO), or National School Boards Association (NSBA), or both. The professional organizations helped distribute interview requests to their members. Although seeking interview requests, this researcher contacted Midwestern district school administrators directly who have recently been featured in the media for adding, eliminating, or maintaining SROs. After selecting and contacting participants, an email was sent with an attached informed



consent form, along with instructions on how to complete and return it. The interviews were conducted virtually. Before advancing to participate in the voluntary interviews, all participants signed consent to participate forms. The interviews were conducted virtually. The categories consisted of demographics, leadership styles, enrollment, disciplinary practices, and decision-making processes.

The characteristic of participants included adult males or females in Midwestern school districts who have served as administrators for at least five years in public schools and have made decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. Ten school district administrators constituted the study's sample, which was sufficient for reaching data saturation (Merriam et al., 2002).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was an outsider role because the researcher did not work in a school or district environment, nor did the researcher have any first-hand understanding of how school administrators decide to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The researcher's bias was that SROs are taking more disciplinary roles instead of acting as safety officers. The interviews were beneficial as they allowed for in-depth conversations with those in the profession who have the experience to elaborate on understanding how Midwestern district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

The use of SROs traces its roots to Flint, Michigan in the 1950s as an attempt to form a connection between police officers and students within the community (Scherer, 2022). Slowly, programs such as SMART and DARE evolved, encouraging students to stay away from drugs and any affiliations with gangs (Palumbo & Ferguson, 1995). As a result of these types of activities, local schools, and police agencies increasingly worked together to utilize SROs in

school districts. These programs, which intentionally began as a mentoring connection to keep drugs out of the schools, eventually transitioned to efforts emphasizing SROs as safety and disciplinary figures. This enforcement focus has been criticized as giving rise to disproportionate discipline (ACLU, 2012).

The purpose of this research was to understand how Midwestern district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The researcher in this qualitative study conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Midwestern school district administrators from public schools to understand how they decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

### **Data Collection / Instruments**

The researcher utilized a triangulated data collection strategy. Triangulation involved interviewing Midwestern school district administrators from a variety of settings (urban and suburban public school districts) to describe their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The interview questions emerged from the initial research categories identified by the researcher based on recurring themes from the literature and theoretical framework. The initial research categories included demographics, leadership styles, enrollment, discipline strategies, and decision-making processes. The interviews were conducted in the form of Webex interviews or phone interviews. Follow-up or clarifying questions were posed at a later time via email.

The triangulated data collection strategy also included validating school district data by reviewing the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) which is part of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) database. The NCES is a resource tool that includes statistics submitted by the Department of Education. The NCES requires all educational institutions that receive, seek, or anticipate applying for Federal financial assistance as outlined in the Department of Education regulations implementing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (34

CFR 100) to gather and document data on the race/ethnicity and gender of their students. According to NCES, they are granted legal authority under Section 153 of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-279) to collect, obtain, compile, and distribute educational statistics ranging from preschool to high school. If schools do not adhere to the federal guidelines annually, the Office of Federal Student Aid distributes warning letters or fine notices for submitting the surveys. Failing to submit the surveys is a severe violation, and appropriate measures will be given to the schools that neglect to provide the requirements.

The NCES is used for enrollment rates, demographics, the number of SROs, and disciplinary statistics. At times, schools misinterpret the categories that were reported but work with the Department of Education to resolve them. The majority of schools collaborate with the Department of Education to submit the most accurate information.

The final element of the triangulated data collection strategy is a review of school district policies, processes, and public records related to suspensions, expulsions, disciplinary practices, and SROs. The researcher employed this method after conducting participant interviews and examining NCES data. The researcher used this strategy to verify responses from participants.

#### **School Administrator Interview Questions**

The researcher utilized the subsequent interview questions to investigate the decision-making processes of Midwestern school district administrators to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. These questions encompass demographic inquiries, decision-making inquiries, as well as inquiries regarding enrollment and decision-making processes (see Appendix D).

## Data Analysis

For this qualitative research study, the researcher planned to analyze data utilizing the constant comparative method. The method was used by Hebert and Beardsley (2002) as they collected data and “looked for issue-related meanings to emerge” (p. 209). Hebert and Beardsley utilized four procedures established by Robert Stake (1995), which included “categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establish patterns, and forming naturalistic generalizations” (pp. 74, 78, 85). The sample and data are appropriate because district administrators have experience in the profession and most likely participate in decision-making processes to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

To better understand this phenomenon, this qualitative descriptive design approach strives to describe a current event. The design mirrored John Creswell’s (1994) method which emphasized that the descriptive research method focused on collecting pertinent data to provide an understanding of the current events. This researcher believes the use of Creswell’s method is the most suitable approach for this qualitative descriptive design.

The researcher collected the data, analyzed it, properly coded it, and placed it in the appropriate categories. The data collection and analysis occur concurrently in somewhat of an open-ended process. As the data are analyzed, further questions relating to the research may arise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As the data were collected, the researcher applied open coding with short words or phrases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher named the interview categories as demographics, leadership styles, enrollment, disciplinary strategies, and decision-making processes. During the interviews, the researcher made notes to document the responses of the district administrators to help categorize participants’ responses (Merriam & Tisdell,



2016). The method of analysis was flexible as other findings surfaced and further data collection and analysis were necessary.

The data analyzed in this study were obtained directly from the interview process and supplemented by information from the Ohio Department of Education. The Ohio Department of Education provided additional context into broader data, offering valuable information for Urban versus Suburban regions. This combined approach ensured a better understanding when comparing the districts.

### **Ethics**

This qualitative research study developed a description to answer the following research questions: How do Midwestern school district administrators decide to add SROs? How do Midwestern school district administrators decide to eliminate SROs? How do Midwestern school district administrators decide to maintain SROs? The research involved human subjects, which required institutional review board (IRB) approval. The IRB for Youngstown State University (YSU) is responsible for reviewing and approving human research studies. There were no known negative consequences associated with this research for school district administrators in the Midwestern areas.

The researcher informed participants of the study's professional and ethical safeguards. The interviews were conducted through virtual interviews or phone calls. Before the virtual or phone interviews, a consent form was emailed as an attachment to participants. During the interviews, the researcher thoroughly discussed with each participant the consent process. Study participants were free to withdraw without penalty or prejudice at any time during the study. A follow-up email may be necessary to obtain data from prior academic years or if the school district administrators have additional information to share. Another safeguard that was used is

maintaining all data electronically on the researcher's personal single computer, to which no other individual has access. The interview notes were maintained electronically in the same electronic storage file. Another safeguard was a coding scheme to protect the identities of each participant. Examples are Suburban School Administrator A, Urban School Administrator B, and Rural School Administrator C. Federal regulations require all data collected as part of a research project to be maintained for a period of three (3) years after the end of the project before it can be destroyed.

### **Validity / Limitations**

The researcher used methodological triangulation to validate the study's findings. It is not feasible for researchers to capture an objective truth or reality; however, there are many strategies to help increase validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The theories of leadership style, decision-making process, and disciplinary decisions were triangulated around their combined effect on understanding how Midwestern school administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The use of a qualitative research method also contributed to methodological triangulation. This study conducted interviews, social media, and a document review for internal and external validity and reliability. The research also has limitations. The research sample was focused solely on the Midwestern United States, which may applicability of the findings to broader contexts. The study predominately involved only Midwestern school district administrators and did not include parents, teachers, students, and SROs. Another limitation was the small sample size, which may impact the representativeness and reliability of the results.



## Summary

The research study sought to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, maintain, or eliminate SROs. This study was limited to considering only the perspectives of Midwestern school district administrators, excluding teachers, parents, and SROs. The study was qualitative, meaning that the results were not generalizable to the larger population due to the small sample from one geographical area. Utilizing interviews, data collection was conducted, drawing from media segments and the National Center for Education Statistics. The analysis involved coding using the constant comparative method.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

Understanding how Midwestern school district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers was crucial because of the significant impact these decisions can have on the overall safety and well-being of students, school staff, and the community. Researching the factors that influence these decisions provides an in-depth understanding of key determinants, such as safety concerns, community needs, and budgetary constraints. The researcher's interest is in understanding school district administrators' decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs, which stemmed from the alarming number of school shootings in the United States (Da Silva, 2022). The sudden rise in school violence sparked a nationwide discourse on enhancing school safety measures, making it crucial to examine Midwestern school district administrator's decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs (Choi, et al., 2023).

The researcher was influenced by media coverage of police violence and the potential impact on students' perceptions of SROs (Heckman, 2023). Media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and may strongly influence how students perceive and interact with SROs (Heckman). Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into the broader contexts surrounding school safety measures and the decision-making processes of school district administrators who are the ultimate decision-makers in deciding to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

#### Study Sample

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to gain an understanding of how Midwestern school district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource

officers. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the researcher utilized triangulation in this study by collecting data from multiple sources, including virtual interviews, data collection, and media segments. The research questions investigated by the researcher are: How do school district administrators decide how to add school resources officers? How do school district administrators decide how to eliminate school resource officers? How do school district administrators decide how to maintain school resource officers? After establishing the research questions, the subsequent interview discussions brought forth the awareness and depths of the topic shared by Midwestern school administrators. For this study, the researcher interviewed 10 school administrators (see Table 11).

**Table 11**

*Study Sample School District Administrators' Demographics*

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

**Data Collection and Analysis Processes**

In the data collection process, the researcher began by emailing a sample group of school district administrators (Bingham, 2023). After receiving confirmation through emails and consent forms, virtual interviews were conducted as a means of collecting valuable information from participating administrators. These interviews were conducted remotely, capturing

participants' insights and responses to get an in-depth understanding of how school district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The researcher recorded these virtual interviews, ensuring that every detail was preserved for thorough analysis. Following the recordings, the researcher reviewed the conversations and coded each participant to respect and protect the administrators by not disclosing any details that could lead to their identification. This organized textual data formed the basis for the subsequent analysis.

The interviews were based on initial research categories of decision-making, enrollment, discipline strategies, and decision-making processes with SROs (see Appendix D). The categories represented topical areas that had the most promise of yielding informative data pertaining to the research questions.

The core of the analysis of data revolved around coding and categorizing content, within the transcribed interviews, which led to the identification of themes (Bingham, 2023). The researcher studied the transcripts and assigned codes to specific portions of texts that represented applicable themes. This analysis process structured and categorized the qualitative data, making it more manageable.

One of the key tasks of the researcher's analytic work was to uncover word patterns within the coded data. The coded segments were examined to identify recurring words or phrases, identifying patterns that provided insights into the research questions. These word patterns were crucial in drawing meaningful conclusions from the qualitative data, helping to extract valuable insights and observations from the interviewees. Not only were the words within the themes used during the virtual interviews, but the administrators stressed these words, ensuring that the key points and details were thoroughly captured, which was beneficial to this qualitative study.

The data collection and analysis processes, comprised of interviews, recording, coding, and the extraction of word patterns, was a comprehensive approach to derive valuable findings and meaningful interpretations from the research (Bingham, 2023). In the next section, the researcher presents the themes identified through this process.

## Results

Through the analysis of data, the researcher identified three key themes in the study (see Table 12). The first theme in Midwestern school district administrators' decisions to add or eliminate SROs (RQs 1 and 2) was the overwhelming need and desire of school district administrators to protect students' safety and well-being. In deciding to eliminate SROs (RQ 2), Midwestern school district administrators described the need and desire to avoid prompting emotional triggers in students based on their traumatic childhood experiences or media reports of violence toward African Americans or other underrepresented populations (RQ 2). Midwestern school district administrators described cost factors as another primary element of their decisions to eliminate or maintain SROs (RQ 2 and 3).

**Table 12**

*Data Analysis: Word Count of Administrators Referencing Themes*

	Safety and Well-Being	Emotional Triggers for Students	Cost Factors
Suburban School Administrator A	4	0	1
Suburban School Administrator B	11	0	0
Suburban School Administrator C	7	0	0
Suburban School Administrator D	13	1	9
Suburban School Administrator E	6	0	2
Suburban School Administrator F	6	0	11
Urban School Administrator A	6	0	0
Urban School Administrator B	20	2	1
Urban School Administrator C	14	3	1
Urban School Administrator D	7	1	2



## **Key Theme 1: Student Safety and Well-Being (RQs 1 and 2)**

Emphasizing the safety and well-being of students within the busy hallways of the schools scrutinized in this study, school district administrators faced the decision to either add (RQ 1) or eliminate (RQ 2) School Resource Officers (SROs). Their primary focus was on the crucial aspects essential to students' learning and growth (Murray & McCarty, 2021).

Conversations with school district administrators revealed the challenges students faced, such as their sense of security in educational environments, which play a key factor in their academic achievements (Murray & McCarty). Whether it was physical or emotional safety, the concept encompassed a sense of security required to thrive on school grounds (Murray & McCarty).

Through extensive interviews and data analyses, it became evident that the theme of protecting students' safety and well-being was key in administrators' decision-making processes to add (RQ 1) or eliminate (RQ 2) SROs.

### *Safeguarding Students*

The interview with the Suburban School Administrator D left the deepest impression on the researcher. During the sample selection process, the administrator was chosen without prior knowledge of the school's background; however, the researcher was taken aback when the interviewee began to explain the reason for her return from retirement. It was revealed that the district had experienced a devastating mass shooting a year and a half before the time of the interview. Tragically, the incident resulted in the loss of four students and left seven others wounded, and one teacher sustained injuries during the devastating event. In response, the school administration collectively decided to intensify school security measures. The district added SROs (RQ 1) across the 10 buildings throughout the district. Softly stating the impact, Suburban School Administrator D shared the tragic incident, "We doubled our school resource officers,



doubled our security, doubled our efforts around everything.” Obviously, the tragedy resulted in a decline in enrollment. Furthermore, the superintendent who was present during the shooting had to end his career due to the overwhelming traumatic stress associated with the event.

Suburban School Administrator D emphasized the well-being of students as a top priority in decision making stating, “We’ve also increased both quality and the quantity of other security services in addition to SROs and we have installed or are about to install seven days a week 24 hours a day Artificial Intelligence (AI) to check for weapons and other critical events.” The conversation continued that the school district will be the first in the state to utilize a new form of AI. Suburban School Administrator D added, “AI can detect weapons through clothing, and pick up audio surveillance of a gunshot. We will know the decibels of a gunshot versus a firecracker. It surveys the perimeter and interior of the building, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.”

Suburban School Administrator D stated that students feel SROs are, “Friendly, trustworthy, and safe.” However, they acknowledged that SROs are not enough to cover an entire district.

Suburban School Administrator E monitored a thriving educational institution with a student population of 3,600 students, with the expectation of continued enrollment increases. Supporting their commitment to academic excellence, this institution has garnered unparalleled recognition, receiving a flawless five out of five-star rating from the Department of Education, the highest attainable accolade in the state. The researcher had the privilege of interviewing several administrators across various schools, but the Suburban School Administrator E stood out in achieving this remarkable accomplishment. However, our initial meeting was postponed due to unforeseen circumstances. A couple of students from the district, while participating in an out-of-state school event, violated a school policy by possessing and engaging in vaping. As a consequence of the incident, the parents had to drive seven hours to the place where the violation

occurred to pick up their children. This event delayed our scheduled interview, which was rescheduled for later in the evening, making for an exceptionally long day for the school district administrator, who was still willing to participate.

Initially, Administrator E's district maintained an SRO who was responsible for safety across the district. The superintendent and board of education recently implemented a new policy by adding an SRO to each middle school, potentially increasing the security presence. Hence, the district has maintained (RQ 3) one SRO for more than five years and added (RQ 1) additional SROs. The district took a step further in prioritizing safety by appointing a retired FBI agent as their Safety and Preparedness Director. This individual brings valuable expertise and experience in overseeing the overall security measures throughout the district, so the SROs can focus on the individual buildings. Suburban School Administrator E described the students' perception of SROs, "Our students love our SRO. He was nominated to be Pie in the Face this year, which is a big thing in our schools. We have a really good relationship with our school research officer."

The researcher and school District administrator further engaged in a discussion regarding the effectiveness of SROs. The school administrator admitted, "If the person that is the SRO wants to be there and is there for kids, their position can be effective; but if it's just a patrol cop coming in to be an SRO by force because their captain told them, I feel that it is not effective." After interviewing many school district administrators, the researcher agrees. The interviewee was not the only one who has made this comment which hampers the progress towards ensuring the safety of students and staff in the district. However, this district does not have to be concerned with having a negative perspective on SROs since its academics and relationship with SROs continue to excel.

After the tragic Parkland school shooting in 2018, Suburban School Administrator F and the community chief of police found themselves brought together by the shared urgency to ensure the safety and security of the community. The administrator reflected on their collaborative efforts stating, “We began a path and the more you learn the more you start to develop things, they just grow. I think originally the conversation was to have a presence, but I was very fortunate to where we have a tremendous police chief who’s very forward-thinking.” This partnership, created out of a need for immediate action, evolved into a proactive strategy to safeguard students and teachers.

The administrator’s words highlighted the transformative journey they embarked upon, starting with a simple idea, and maturing into a comprehensive approach that not only enhanced security but also fostered an environment of trust with students and SROs. The dynamic collaboration between Suburban School Administrator F and the visionary police chief stands as a testament to the power of partnership in the face of adversity, exemplifying how dedication and out-of-the-box thinking can create a positive change for the safety of the district. The administrator can be at ease regarding financial concerns, as the district has established a funding arrangement with the police department. This allows them to direct their attention toward prioritizing the safety and well-being of the students.

Urban School Administrator D emphasized that the presence of SROs on school grounds is primarily aimed at ensuring the safety and well-being of students. By being visible on school grounds, SROs not only function as a deterrent to potential threats but also foster a sense of security among students. Their presence serves as a reminder that the educational environment is a place of learning, free from harm. School resource officers often engage with students in positive ways, building relationships that contribute to a more inclusive and caring school

community. This collaborative effort underscores the commitment to student safety, fostering an atmosphere conducive to learning.

Even though Urban School Administrator D admitted that most students in the schools look at police as “The ones who took daddy to jail,” they are still valued figures within the schools. It is difficult to experience for suburban and urban students, and disparities emerge that go beyond the realm of school safety. Urban School Administrator D described suburban students enjoying the advantages stemming from the way they are raised and the environment in which they grow up. In suburban areas, parents frequently have more resources at their disposal, allowing a greater focus on providing their children with a solid foundation. This contrasts with urban settings, where many parents are engaged in a constant struggle for survival. Administrator D continues, “With fewer two-parent households, children in urban areas often lack the stable support systems that can positively influence their development.” Factors such as poverty and limited resources can create significant hurdles, and it is not unusual for multiple siblings to share limited living space in a small unit. The perspectives of urban students with SROs could be influenced by their interactions with law enforcement outside of school. Given the complex dynamics that can exist between law enforcement and communities in urban areas, some students might approach SROs with mixed feelings. However, Administrator D adamantly believes that having a single visible SRO on school grounds is optimal for ensuring the safety and well-being of the students.

### *Fostering Community Unity*

When asked to describe how they decided to add SROs (RQ1), Suburban School Administrator A stated that they added SROs recently to buildings in their school district. To enhance safety, three SROs were added to the existing five school buildings. The presence of



these additional SROs provided an increased level of security and protection within the school community. Their roles encompassed fostering a safe learning environment, responding to potential threats, and building positive relationships with students and staff. The SROs also played a vital role in controlling traffic during the morning and after-school hours. Their presence helped facilitate smooth traffic flows, preventing congestion and potential hazards around the school premises. Each of these perspectives represents school district administrators' concerns for students' safety and well-being.

By strategically assigning SROs across the school buildings, the educational institution prioritized the safety and peace of mind of students, their families, and staff members, representing a key theme of this study (see Table 12). Suburban School Administrator A obtained funding from the Department of Education's student Wellness program allowing them to determine the appropriate number of SROs. As part of their community engagement efforts, the district had police officers regularly walk through the buildings, interacting with students in the hallway and occasionally joining them for lunch. This familiarity between the students, parents, and the officers fostered a smooth transition when the officers began working inside the building. The recognized faces of the police officers created a sense of comfort and trust within the community.

During this interview, the researcher asked what influenced the school district administrator's decision to add SROs (RQ 1). This prompted Suburban School Administrator A to reflect on the community: "Friday night football is a big deal for us, and the police are out directing traffic. People just know the faces of the police officers." The district brought those officers to work inside the building, so it created a smooth transition because the students and their parents knew the officers' faces. The familiarity of the police officers contributes to a sense



of comfort and trust. As the discussion unfolded, the researcher inquired deeper into the decision-making process behind adding SROs, promoting Suburban School Administrator A to reflect:

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

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

According to Suburban School Administrator B, the SRO has proved to be highly effective, even in handling seemingly minor tasks such as managing traffic during morning hours (RQ 3). Their presence outside the middle school ensured smooth traffic flow, allowing buses to depart promptly, and ensuring students arrived on time. Inside the elementary school, the SROs engaged in conversations with students, fostering positive relationships. Suburban Administrator B’s voice overflowed with delight as they exclaimed:

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

The advantages of having an SRO persist through their involvement in discipline-related interactions. However, it is worth noting that their presence has shown to be beneficial specifically in situations related to custody issues (SRO Review Task Force, 2020). Additionally, Suburban School Administrator B highlighted another advantage of having SROs in the building, which was the opportunity for parents to file police reports on school premises. It eliminated the need for parents to reach out to external authorities and offers them a sense of safety and familiarity. Overall, the presence of SROs has had a profoundly positive impact on the community, as noted by Suburban School Administrator B during the interview.

### *Understanding Controversy*

Urban School Administrator A advocated for maintaining (RQ 3) SROs in their district to ensure the safety and well-being of students. By maintaining SROs, the district prioritizes a strong emphasis on ensuring the safety of students. In 2022, the district started using handheld metal detectors or security wands. Urban School Administrator A expressed, “Since last year, we started using wanding by the SROs and it probably saved 10 lives.” The SRO holds a handheld wand and moves it along an individual’s body to detect hidden guns or metals. This process is called wanding.

Urban School Administrator A recounted a story from a football game last fall when one of their students was shot outside the high school stadium. Urban School Administrator A reflected on the event:

A known felon was at the football game and saw rival gang members, so he exited and ran to his car but was shot first. I think it is why they targeted him there because they knew he’d be unarmed inside the stadium, so they wanted to get him before he got back to his car where he probably had weapons.

Unfortunately, one of the high school students was caught in the crossfire while attempting to go into the football game from the parking lot. This incident highlighted the significance of maintaining SROs (RQ 3). If the gang members or their associates had gained access to the stands without the presence of SROs who conducted security checks through wandering, it could have resulted in a disastrous scenario with potential shootouts between rival gangs, creating a nightmare for the entire community.

Another urban school district used **wandering procedures** but was not consistent with the procedures as they were randomly enforced during sporting events. Urban School Administrator C despised the wandering process stating, “It is done inconsistently. I have never been supportive, and it is done in a way that is inequitable.” The administrator stressed that it was not needed and has been an advocate for eliminating the wands because “They give a false sense of safety and security and so for me building a true and authentic safe space for students should be created.”

#### *Data Driven*

Suburban School Administrator C voiced that there was no need for SROs, so the decision was not to add SROs (RQ 1). Suburban School Administrator C confirmed, “We don’t make decisions without data to support it and are committed to looking at our data to justify why we might do it.” The need to not add SROs was supported by the data even though there are always “pressures” to have an SRO. Additional specific comments were made that adding SROs would cause more of a negative impact and harm to students’ safety and well-being. The interviewee stressed that every decision the district made was data-driven and represented the district’s commitment to basing its choices and strategies on information and evidence to achieve school safety.

In addition to the perspective and experiences of the school district administrators, it was the next interviewee, Suburban School Administrator C who said that the school district was impacted by eliminating SROs. The depth of this interview was interesting as their input shed light on the collaborative efforts between board members and the community. By incorporating their concerns as one factor for eliminating (RQ 2) SROs in a school setting, their alternative approach would impact the school district's sense of security and overall well-being.

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

### **Key Theme 2: Avoiding Emotional Triggers in Students (RQs 1 and 2)**

The responsibility of school district administrators to create environments that promote learning extends beyond textbooks and curriculums. The researcher explored the internal dynamics of educational organizations, and a recurring theme of anxious and unsafe environments began to emerge: the unwavering commitment to avoid triggering emotional responses in students, which could interfere with their abilities to learn (Murray & McCarty,



2021). The researcher could perceive the emotions and concerns in the administrators' voices as they described students' perceptions when they encountered an SRO, which often carried tones of sadness and distress (RQ 2). These student perceptions reflected their feelings of unease and fear when interacting with SROs.

### *Mixed Emotions and Challenges*

A perspective from Urban School Administrator B confirmed, that when deciding to add or eliminate SROs (RQs 1 and 2), the board of education had to step back and reevaluate what was best for the district along with the police department, which was also undergoing budgetary issues. More importantly, Urban School Administrator B confirmed, "SROs were causing trauma and triggers [in students], regardless of who the police officer was, it was just that [their] presence." Consequently, the perceptions of SROs shifted negatively, despite any prior mentorship students had experienced. For these reasons, the urban school district eliminated SROs (RQ 2) as documented in this case study.

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

Moreover, Urban School Administrator C shared, "Other students, they're seen as a trigger, they're seen as unsupported." These students and their families have expressed their concerns due to events that unfolded in the media. Subsequently, the Board of Education



eliminated SROs because they recognized students felt SROs were triggers and training for cultural competency needed to be established. Urban School Administrator C believed that if a student safety council were established, the students would have input in creating a safe environment, ensuring their voices were heard on school safety.

Even though Suburban School Administrator C is data-driven when deciding to not add SROs, it was important to consider whether the data being analyzed encompassed all relevant aspects of school safety and student well-being. Evaluating the right data requires a comprehensive approach that includes input from students, parents, and the community to fully understand the safety needs and concerns of the district. Researching other alternative approaches such as a student safety council would enrich the decision-making process and ensure the best viable solutions are explored.

In the context of Urban School Administrator D's school, the prevailing sentiment among students revolved around negative perceptions of SROs. Often, these students harbor thoughts that these officers are merely interested in sending their family members, specifically "Throwing daddy back in jail" as Urban School Administrator D heard often. A majority of the school's urban students deal with a high volume of crime in their neighborhood witnessing law enforcement constantly in their neighborhood, so their opinions of SROs are unfavorable. Urban School Administrator D shared that the current SRO has attempted to shift the perception through their actions and interactions with students to present themselves in a new light. An example was told with a smile when an SRO played kickball with the students as laughter was heard from afar. The effort to establish a positive connection attempted to break the traditional law enforcement stereotype.

In the urban setting, transforming the perception has been an ongoing journey that may never end. Students in Urban School Administrator D's district faced a multitude of stressors in their lives, making the sight of an SRO potentially daunting due to the challenges within their upbringing. However, despite these concerns, the administrator stated they are fortunate to have an exceptional SRO who attempts to break the barriers that may trigger students and positively engage with them. If cost were not a factor, additional SROs could potentially contribute to reducing triggers and negative perceptions and foster a safer and more supportive environment.

Another viewpoint from the largest district in the sample study was expressed by Urban School Administrator B, who felt SROs had unintended consequences triggering students' feelings of anxiety and fear. The presence of SROs on school grounds led to a sense of intimidation by most students and parents in the district, which was expressed by protestors to eliminate them (RQ 2). The sense of intimidation may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately affecting Black students and having a negative perception of SROs among students (Gomez, 2021). When students feel intimidated and uncomfortable, it may create increased tension and hostility between them and SROs (Paterson, 2022). Suburban School Administrator B, in their first year as a district school administrator, highlighted the presence of an SRO primarily stationed at the high school over the past year. They emphasized the significance of this decision, particularly in the aftermath of COVID and increased incidents of school shootings at younger grade levels, which sparked numerous discussions. Suburban School Administrator B emphasized that the "Board of Education in our community felt strongly that we needed a second SRO because the recently added (RQ 1) one was stationed mostly at the high school." Suburban School Administrator B continued, "They were adamant to add a second SRO so all four buildings [to ensure] a quick response if something happened as far as safety."

Suburban School Administrator D had been contending with heightened anxiety in the aftermath of a tragic mass school shooting that unfolded just last year. The effects of this heartbreaking event have cast a long shadow over the community, leaving a deep sense of unease among students and staff. In fact, most school shootings in suburban areas happen inside the school premises and involve students, which often results in fatal outcomes (Office, 2020). This grim reality had intensified the administrator's concerns, especially given the backdrop of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflecting on the challenges faced, the administrator emphasized the urgent need for more mental health counselors and therapists in schools, particularly at the elementary level. Suburban School Administrator D acknowledged, "A lot more mental health counselors and therapists at the elementary level, well, at all levels, but for sure in elementary." This call for increased mental health support underscored the administrator's commitment to addressing the emotional well-being of students and staff members.

In light of fostering a sense of safety, trust, and support within the school environment, Suburban School Administrator D recognized the positive impact of SROs. Suburban School Administrator D specified students viewed SROs as "Safe, trustworthy, and friendly" figures, valuing their presence on school grounds. This sentiment underscored the significance of collaborative efforts between law enforcement and educational institutions in maintaining (RQ 3) a secure and welcoming atmosphere for students to learn and thrive.

In the context of the suburban school district, the presence of SROs took on an exceptional dynamic. According to Suburban School Administrator E, students do not feel triggered by SROs; rather, they consider themselves fortunate to have SROs with whom they

share a close bond. Suburban School Administrator E smiled proudly and said with enthusiasm confirmed, “Our students love our SRO!”

This positive sentiment highlighted the district’s successful approach to cultivating relationships of trust and familiarity between students and SROs. The harmonious rapport between them suggested that SROs are viewed as more than just security personnel. Instead, they are embraced as approachable figures who contribute positively to the school community. Suburban School Administrator E’s observation emphasized the importance of building bridges of trust and understanding between law enforcement and the student body. Such connections create an atmosphere where safety is enhanced through friendly and supportive interactions.

In the heart of the Suburban School District, a description unfolded where the fusion of security and compassion needs to be embodied. Suburban School Administrator F, a witness to the intricate dynamics of school life, shared a vivid insight:

Sometimes you can have an SRO who’s been a police officer, a patrol police officer for a long, long time, and has a tough time adjusting to a school setting. You know, they walk into an elementary school and there’s a 5-year-old crying because the SRO yelled at them.

The right personality for the role is imperative when dealing with students at every level. The example above serves as a vivid reminder that the canvas of an SRO’s role extends beyond security protocols; it is an artistry that demands the adept blending of protection and empathy.

The influence of SROs stretches beyond the confines of the school, touching the lives of parents as well. The encounters between SROs and parents can be intricate, as Suburban School Administrator F noted, “And they’re like you over there, over there, do this and then parents are



crying, what do I do? So, the SRO didn't believe he was shouting, but a parent going into a school parking lot expected a little bit more.”

While SROs do not inherently serve as triggers, their presence holds significant influence over both students and parents within the suburban school district. Suburban School Administrator F ensured that this influence was managed constructively by conducting quarterly safety meetings. The gatherings served as a proactive platform to address and reinforce safety guidelines and measures. In navigating the delicate balance between authority and approachability, these measures highlighted the district's pledge to cultivate an environment of security, trust, and effective communication for all students and parents involved.

#### *Sense of Security*

“Success” is how Urban School Administrator A described the utilization of the SRO that has worked there even before Administrator A was employed. The terms sad and crying were used to describe the SRO's departure as the news spread of their recent promotion. This would mean their presence would no longer be in the schools. The collaborative efforts described by Administrator A and the SRO were remarkably successful and grew into a great friendship due to the respect each of them had for their profession and most of all for putting the students in the district first. The students felt a sense of comfort as the SRO sat with them at lunch and built a rapport with their families. When asked to describe the students' perspective of SROs, Urban School Administrator A did not hesitate and replied “trustworthy, protector, safe.” Having cultivated a strong relationship with the previous police chief and SRO, the administrator found himself at odds with the perspective of the new chief. While hoping for the best with the new SRO, they acknowledged that they can never fully fill the shoes of the original SRO who



established such a positive connection. Contemplating whether this shift will also influence the perceptions of the students and the dynamics within the school will undergo changes as well.

Suburban School Administrator A benefitted from a supportive community that has embraced the presence of SROs. Both students and the community have welcomed the inclusion of SROs, as the administrator highlighted, and stated “There’s a perception that having additional law enforcement in the building can help make people feel safer.” Several years ago, the district undertook the initiative of prioritizing students belonging aiming to create an environment where students felt valued and heard. Guided by the general philosophy that “School is a place where everybody belongs” the administrator stressed that SROs play a major part in upholding the philosophy as well. The administrator confirmed, “Their kids have attended our school district, so they’re part of our community.”

Suburban School Administrator A enjoyed the advantage of an encouraging community where students experience a sense of safety and are not triggered by the presence of SROs. The positive relationship led SROs to routinely stroll through the school premises, taking the time to greet students during lunch breaks. The familiarity of these officers extends beyond school hours, as they are often recognized for their participation in weekend events, contributing to a strong sense of connection and familiarity among students. Moreover, students witnessed their parents engaging in conversations with the SROs, which encouraged them to build relationships and have a positive perception.

### **Key Theme 3: Cost Factors (RQs 2 and 3)**

The final prominent theme in school district administrators’ decisions to eliminate or maintain SROs (RQs 2 and 3), was cost factors. Through the analysis of data, it was evident that some school district administrators were compelled to eliminate resources due to the school

district's financial constraints, even as others added them in the absence of financial restrictions. The researcher observed the influence of these financial considerations in the administrators' decisions, ranging from eliminating SROs because of the costs to adding them due to the availability of financial resources.

In contrast to the previously mentioned suburban schools such as Administrator E's stellar performance, Urban School Administrator D's district received a less favorable rating of two out of five stars, indicating a need for support to meet state standards in academic achievement. Their district accommodates approximately 1,200 students spread across five buildings. Despite the evident need for heightened security, the district only has two SROs available for the entire district. Due to a shortage of local police officers, these SROs are rarely present in the buildings. Leaving the students and staff with inadequate security coverage. It is worth noting that this district previously had one SRO stationed in each building for a period of five years but staffing constraints and financial considerations led to their elimination (RQ 2).

When Urban School Administrator D was asked why they eliminated (RQ 2) SROs, the immediate reply was "Cost." The board of education bears the responsibility of allocating funds amounting to \$65,000 for each SRO. Continuing the conversation regarding the effectiveness of SROs, Urban School Administrator D emphasized:

If we had one full-time SRO, it is the biggest thing there can be. Even the presence of a police car in front of a building would scare off a school shooter. It has actually been discussed. At least parking a car in front would be effective.

The researcher observed that it was profoundly disheartening to witness devoted school district administrators, who genuinely cared about their students' safety, well-being, and emotional states, yet found themselves unable to add or maintain SROs due to the cost constraints. Urban

School Administrator D concluded, “Most kids in urban cities have negative thoughts that are bad about SROs. They think, they just want to throw Daddy back in jail. We have had really good SROs, and students have to see them in another light.” With a smile, the administrator shared an uplifting story of an SRO engaged in a friendly game of kickball with students, illustrating the positive impact that such interaction can have in challenging misconceptions and fostering a desire to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Suburban School Administrator F maintains (RQ 3) SROs across the school’s district. The implementation of four SROs in each building, alongside the addition of a DARE officer, brought a fresh perspective to the administrators’ eyes and invigorated their efforts to enhance emergency safety procedures. The Suburban School Administrator F expressed:

It was very evident to us that we had work to do to align an educator’s point of view and a law enforcement point of view, and that really started us in proactive conversations about, you know, what else do we do?

This realization sparked an initiative-taking approach, fostering collaborative discussions aimed at finding additional measures to ensure the safety and well-being of the students and staff of the district.

Through a partnership with the local police department, the district successfully maintained (RQ 3) multiple full-time SROs. Remarkably, the school district pays a mere \$80,000 annually for the services of these five officers, a fact that the Suburban School Administrator F enthusiastically described as, “An incredible deal.” This cost-effective collaboration allows the district to ensure enhanced safety and security measures for the community. The administrator concluded by adding that the SROs are a resource to the administration because they bring

experience and several factors to ensure safety. As cost is not a limiting factor, the school district can prioritize safety to a greater extent, resulting in a safer environment for all.

According to Urban School Administrator D, “Cost” was the biggest factor in employing SROs. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2020) examined school shootings and uncovered that urban schools had more outside shootings by non-students or unknown shooters overall. Despite urban schools experiencing the highest number of school shootings, it is a matter of concern. It raises questions about the sufficiency of their funding and resources. Ensuring proper funding for urban schools is critical in addressing safety measures. Again, Urban School Administrator D stressed the presence of a police car outside a school building is essential to serve as a deterrent to potential threats and acts as an initiative-taking approach to school safety.

“We’re a district that had a mass shooting a year and a half ago.” Suburban School Administrator D redirected the focus toward strengthening safety measures and support systems. Formerly constrained by cost considerations, the district’s priorities have evolved, with cost no longer holding the same weight. This shift was evident in the initiative-taking approach to security enhancements. The district is the first in its state to introduce AI security measures into public school installations, a significant investment totaling \$15,000. This reflects a resolute commitment to nurturing a more secure learning environment.

Suburban School Administrator D’s dedication to fortifying safety is manifested in its escalated efforts. “We’re a district that has many school resources or has doubled our school resource officers, doubled our security, doubled our efforts around everything.” This commitment stressed the determination to safeguard both students and staff following the tragic event. Furthermore, Suburban School Administrator D emphasized that threat assessments, suicide assessments, and bullying assessments spoke to their comprehensive strategy for



identifying and mitigating potential risks. This approach has been reaffirmed by external evaluations. Suburban School Administrator D explained, “We had a firm come to evaluate what we’re doing, and they said we’re doing 300% more threat assessments than any other school around,” which highlighted their thoroughness and dedication to maintaining a secure and supportive school environment. Unfortunately, adequate state funding is not provided to prevent tragedies like these from occurring.

Suburban School Administrator E was committed to addressing certain financial concerns for their district. Suburban School Administrator E accentuated:

Our school has spent like \$10,000 on vape detectors. We pay teachers to teach classes for restorative education. We have an SRO; we spend all this money. We have repeated offenders that go through these courses that are not beneficial for kids. So, we’re not allocating the right resources for supporting kids.

This candid observation pointed to a disappointing gap between financial investments and effective support within the school district.

Earning five stars from the Department of Education, Administrator E’s dedication to addressing various issues was evident. The recognition validated the district’s commitment to seeking impactful solutions for its students. Administrator E’s statement called attention to the need for a more strategic approach to resource allocation. In an era where investing in education and student well-being is paramount, this reflection served as a reminder that true support encompasses not only a financial investment but also a thoughtful understanding of how to channel resources in a way that genuinely benefits the students and nurtures their growth.

Suburban School Administrator B along with members of the Board of Education established that since the district had a successful experience with the only SRO, they pursued



seeking financial assistance to add (RQ 1) another professional. The Board's financial representative supported the additional SRO because the district had adequate funds to act upon it. However, Suburban School Administrator B felt the ultimate goal for school safety would be to install an electronic pass system. Suburban School Administrator B confirmed an implementation would track every student, "Especially those who like to frequently use the bathroom at the beginning of each class or more importantly if they do not show up for school." Unfortunately, Administrator B concluded that the vision would have to be postponed until additional funding is accounted for and the only means for security is funding the additional SRO.

In the last cost factor interview piece, Suburban School Administrator C illuminated the integral role of collaboration within their educational system. The governance team, consisting of the Superintendent, Treasurer, and school board members operates as a collective unit that critically evaluates data-driven insights. This collaborative process is particularly crucial when considering funding allocations and policy adjustments. Administrator C's account highlighted the team's function in guiding decision-making and ensuring the alignment of policies with the district's educational objectives.

Throughout the conversation, the interviewees consistently highlighted the significant interplay of "political" and "data" elements within their decision-making framework. The fusion of these two factors highlights policy adoptions and resource management. While direct cost-related matters were not discussed, the interview resonated with the vital role that data-driven, politically informed decisions play in shaping the district's educational landscape. The narrative reaffirmed the district's commitment to a comprehensive, collaborative approach that optimizes decision-making by leveraging data-driven decision-making.

### *Financial Flexibility*

The decision to add additional (RQ 1) SROs was a deliberate process led by Suburban School Administrator A in conjunction with the school board. Despite serving a student population of approximately 3,500, the district managed to address the financial aspect through a collaborative partnership with the local Police Department, effectively sharing the associated costs and successfully employing two more SROs. The expansion was made possible by Student Wellness funds provided by the state's Department of Education. As Suburban School Administration A explained, "The first SRO was a huge success, and it led to the exploration of adding additional ones."

The motion behind the decision to increase the number of SROs was multifaceted, encompassing security concerns, fiscal responsibility, and public perception. The district recognized the paramount importance of maintaining a safe and secure learning environment for its students. The collaborative financial arrangement overcame budgetary constraints to ensure the commitment to student safety. Freed from the burden of financial concerns, the district could redirect its attention toward other critical areas. With the cost factor alleviated, Suburban School Administrator A and the school board could concentrate on addressing other pressing matters that impacted student experiences. The administrator's composed demeanor conveyed a sense of calmness as we discussed the matter which showed that cost was not associated as a stress factor. This financial relief allowed Suburban School Administrator A and the school board to direct their focus toward improving curriculum and support services, ultimately enhancing the overall educational environment for students. Administrator A's demeanor during our conversation not only reflected a lack of stress associated with cost concerns but also inspired confidence in their ability to lead effectively.

The Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding filed suit, *DeRolph v. State of Ohio*, for neglecting its obligation due to relying too heavily on local property taxes for school funding (1991). According to *DeRolph v. State of Ohio* (1991), in wealthy neighborhoods, high property values generate large revenues that can be invested in providing students with abundant resources, including innovative technology, advanced coursework, and a wide array of extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, the opposite holds in poor communities. The lack of sufficient financial resources leaves schools in urban areas and many low-income communities severely under-resourced, leading to significant disadvantages for their students (Schneider, 2018). Consequently, the disparity in funding greatly hinders educational outcomes and safety resources for students in these areas.

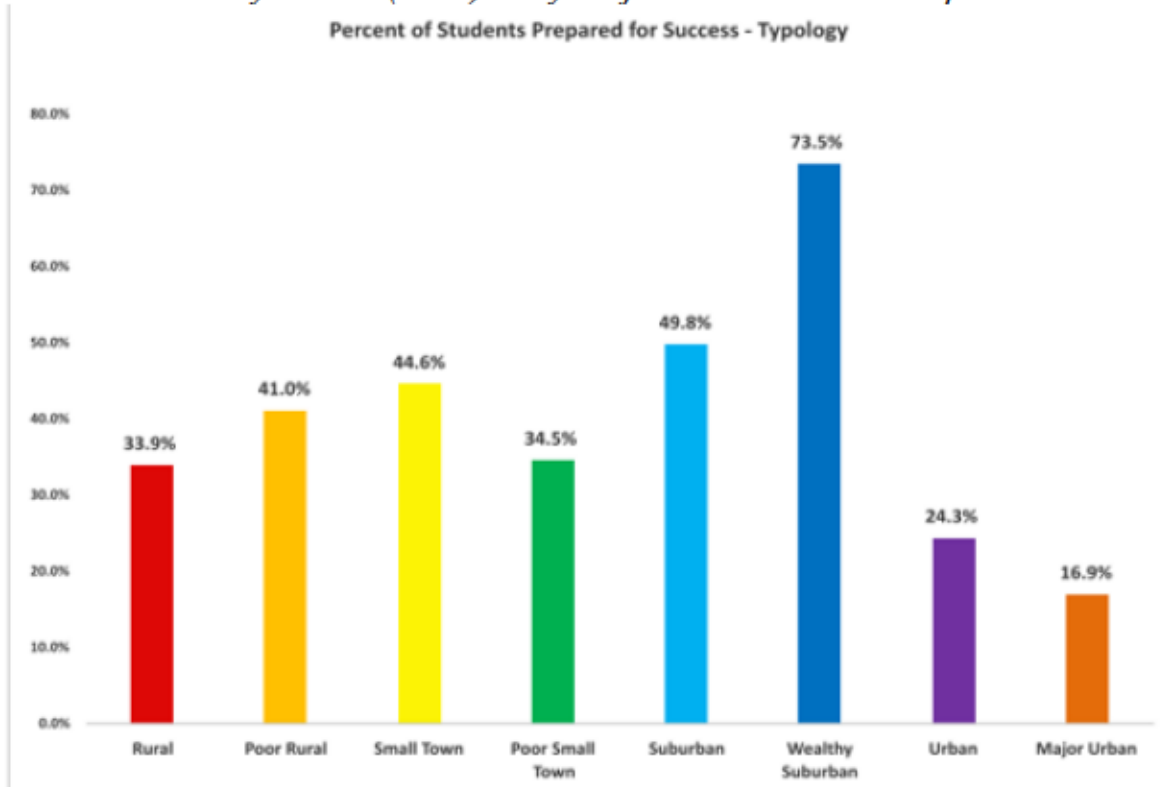
Inequality in funding distribution between urban and suburban schools is a prevalent issue within many education systems. Suburban schools often have the advantage of higher property values and larger tax bases due to the relative wealth of the communities they serve. As a result, those schools receive more substantial financial support, allowing them to broaden their financial distribution within their district. Suburban schools may attract highly qualified teachers and staff with competitive salaries and benefits. On the other hand, urban schools, often serving poorer communities, tend to face budget constraints and limited access to local resources (Schneider, 2017).

Consequently, urban schools may struggle with outdated infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of essential educational materials and technology. This funding disparity also impacts the ability of some urban schools to provide safety features, such as school resource officers as they may not have the financial means to implement such security measures. This further deteriorates the safety concerns in some urban schools, making it even more crucial to

address the funding inequality to ensure that all students are safe. Funding inequality in Ohio between urban, suburban, and rural school districts is not only an issue for student safety but also relates to students' preparedness for academic success in school (see Table 13).

**Table 13**

*Ohio Education Policy Institute (OEPI) Analysis of 2018 School District Report Card Data*



*Note:* 2018 Ohio Education Policy Institute relations between educational outcomes and district socioeconomics. From OEPI analysis of 2018 School District Report Card Data. (n.d.).

Cost was not a term mentioned by Urban School Administrator A. Administrator A's school district maintained SROs (RQ 3) primarily at the high school level, covering a student population of over 2,000. Additionally, wandings was implemented at all events as a security measure. In fact, the district's plans for the upcoming academic year included the approval to implement a specially trained K9 unit that can identify guns only, further highlighting the commitment to initiative-taking safety measures beyond budgetary considerations. This



dedication to safety demonstrated that in this urban district, the consideration of cost takes a back seat to the necessity of providing a secure learning environment. Vaping emerged as the most discussed and challenging issue within the school, including parents engaging in the phenomenon with their young children on school grounds.

Urban School Administrator B and Urban School Administrator C made a collective decision to eliminate (RQ 2) SROs from their district. Despite their district being among the highest funded in Midwestern schools, the choice to remove SROs was guided by careful consideration of factors that included the best interests of their communities. Financial concerns stemming from police departments also played a role in this determination since they helped fund SROs. Urban School Administrator B reflected on the decision, “[t]hat summer, we did some community conversations. I actually had protests at my house and the police department was undergoing some budgetary issues and they couldn’t support it (SROs).”

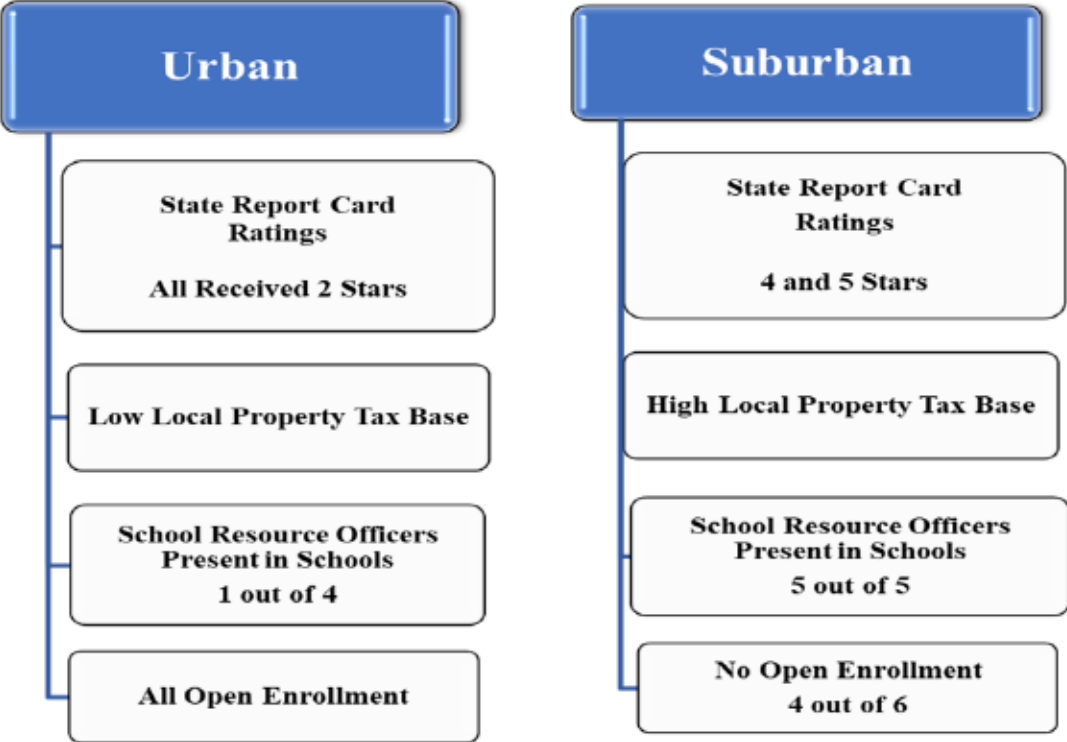
Although cost did factor into school district administrators’ decision-making processes, Urban School Administrator B and Urban School Administrator C recognized the importance of taking a step back and focusing on “authentic ways to engage our police in our buildings outside of a formalized SRO process” as Administrator B elaborated. This approach demonstrated not rushing into a commitment but finding an alternative strategy beyond the traditional SRO involvement in the district. The cost for the district was not a factor because Urban School Administrator B mentioned that they were revisiting the idea of forming their own police force, due to the substantial size of their school district. This potential transition would be specific to the safety needs of the district without the need to rely on MOUs with the local police department. This approach would provide the district with more control of funding and security measures, tailored to its unique needs and resources. One emergent finding in this study is that



there was a difference among school districts based on factors such as state report card ratings, the strength of the local property tax base (whether it was low or high), the presence or absence of SROs in schools, and whether the district had open enrollment. Figure 3 delineates the differences in financial resources, academic achievement levels, and the presence of SROs between schools in urban and suburban districts in this sample. The funding for education differs substantially across various districts. Some districts had the financial means to invest in additional resources like updated facilities, technology, and teachers' salaries, while others, facing financial constraints, find it challenging to meet the basic necessities (Kim, 2024).

**Figure 3**

*Urban versus Suburban Schools Per-Pupil Contribution*



## Summary of Findings

The researcher of this qualitative narrative study aimed to describe how Midwestern school district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. Through in-depth interviews and analyses of data, the researcher explored the factors that informed school district administrators' decision-making processes, including students' sense of safety and student well-being, potential emotional triggers, and cost factors. By exploring all of the school district administrators' lived experiences, including in the aftermath of one school's mass shooting, this study provided valuable insights into the complex dynamics of Midwestern school district administrators' decision-making processes in adding, eliminating, or maintaining SROs in their schools. Table 14 represents a breakdown of the study's findings by each of the three research questions.

**Table 14**

*Summarization of Findings and Research Questions*

	RQ 1 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Add SROs?	RQ 2 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Eliminate SROs?	RQ 3 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Maintain SROs?
Safety and Well-being for Students	X	X	
Triggers for Students		X	
Cost Factors		X	X

The school district administrators in this study who added SROs (RQ 1) did so because they prioritized the safety and well-being of their students over cost factors. These decisions were also a crucial component of their community engagement efforts. As Suburban School Administrator A expressed, “It is what our community wanted.” This sentiment pointed out the collaborative approach taken by administrators to align their actions with the desires and expectations of the community they serve. Additionally, the district believed that the presence of additional law enforcement within the school building contributed significantly to the perception of enhanced safety. Adding SROs was justified as being in support of the safety of students and staff.

The decisions by the school district administrators in this study to eliminate SROs (RQ 2) were driven by concerns that their presence triggered emotional distress among students. As Urban School Administrator A confirmed, “SROs were causing trauma and triggers, and regardless of who the police officer was, it was just that presence was there.” This reflected a growing awareness of the potential adverse effects of SROs within the school environment. Administrators are committed to creating a safe and inclusive space where students can learn and thrive without experiencing unnecessary stress or anxiety. By eliminating (RQ 3) SROs, the district aimed to prioritize the emotional well-being of their students and foster an atmosphere conducive to education and personal growth.

A third group was driven by cost factors. The decision to maintain or eliminate SROs (RQ 2 & 3) in some school districts in this study was based on cost factors. Suburban School Administrator F, for instance, mentioned the cost factors of SROs and described it as “An incredible deal” citing the absence of funding restraints in this particular suburban district and emphasized the benefits of SRO programs in enhancing safety and security. On the contrary,

Urban School Administrator D eliminated (RQ 2) SROs, citing budgetary concerns. For some urban schools, the financial burden associated with maintaining SROs may be unmaintainable, leading to the difficult decision to eliminate them. Cost factors are considered by school administrators when determining the presence or absence of SROs in their district.

**Table 15**

*A Selection of Qualitative Data by Research Question*

	RQ 1 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Add SROs?	RQ 2 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Eliminate SROs?	RQ 3 How do Midwestern School District Administrators Decide How to Maintain SROs?
<b>Safety and Well-being for Students</b>	<p>“We’re a district that had a mass shooting a year and a half ago. We’re a district that has many school resources and has <b>doubled</b> our school resource officers.” ~ Suburban School Administrator D</p> <p>“It is what our community <b>wanted</b>.” ~ Suburban School Administrator A</p>	<p>“Most kids in urban cities have <b>negative thoughts</b> that are bad about SROs. They think, they just want to throw Daddy back in jail.” ~Urban School Administrator D</p>	
<b>Triggers for Students</b>		<p>“SROs were causing trauma and <b>triggers</b> [in students], regardless of who the police officer was, it was just that [their] presence.” ~Urban School Administrator B</p>	
<b>Cost Factors</b>		<p>Urban School Administrator D was asked why they eliminated SROs; the immediate reply was “Cost.”</p>	<p>“As <b>cost</b> is not a limiting factor, the school district can prioritize safety to a greater extent, resulting in a safer environment for all. Through a partnership with the local police department, the district successfully maintained multiple full-time SROs.” ~Suburban School Administrator F</p>

In conclusion, the study's findings were embedded in the three core themes, including the safety and well-being of students, emotional triggers for students, and cost factors. These themes intertwined, collectively contributing to the decision-making process that guided Midwestern school district administrations in their determination to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs within their districts. Although each of these factors holds significance individually, their importance is magnified when they interact with each other. When considering these urban schools, which often receive two stars on state report cards, contend with low property tax generation, have maybe one SRO, and follow open enrollment policies, the significance of these factors becomes challenging. On the other hand, the majority of suburban schools boasting five-star ratings on the same state report cards, maintaining higher property tax support, enjoying the security of SROs, and not implementing open enrollment, highlight the disparity.

The division between urban and suburban schools stems from distinct circumstances. Urban schools suffer from lower funding, limited availability of SROs, and intricate community dynamics. This division holds significant implications. Urban schools are challenged with upholding student safety within restricted resources, which might impact both the quality of education and student well-being. Conversely, suburban schools possess greater resources and security measures, affording them the advantage of prioritizing student well-being and education.

In Chapter 4, the research presented the study's findings in the form of key themes. In Chapter 5, the researcher shares the study's conclusions, discussion, and suggestions for further research on school district administrators' decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers. The researcher examined the lived experiences of 10 Midwestern school district administrators, via interviews. Included herein is a discussion that connects the study's findings to a theoretical framework. This chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations, areas for future research, and a summary to understand how Midwestern school district administrators described their decisions to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study worked to understand the gap in the research by 10 school district administrators from diverse urban and suburban public school districts from the Midwestern region. The study encompassed both male and female school district administrators, offering a comprehensive overview of how Midwestern school district administrators add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. The administrators participating in the sample study served as the main and crucial component for educational leadership in Midwestern public school districts; each addressed the school's varying funding availability. The data collected from the interviews supported the findings.

Three key findings emerged in understanding how urban and suburban Midwestern school district administrators decided to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs: students' safety and well-being, avoiding emotional triggers in students, and cost factors associated with employing

SROs. Each of these factors helped influence safe learning environments in educational settings for Midwestern school district administrators.

This chapter contains a discussion and future research recommendations. To arrive at these key findings, the researcher utilized the following research questions:

- RQ 1 How did Midwestern school district administrators describe their decisions to add school resource officers?
- RQ 2 How did Midwestern school district administrators describe their decisions to eliminate school resource officers?
- RQ 3 How did Midwestern school district administrators describe their decisions to maintain school resource officers?

By integrating perspectives and data from various sources, such as one-to-one interviews, reviews of existing data sets, and reviews of relevant literature, a more comprehensive understanding of school district administrators' decision-making processes developed. This triangulated approach enhanced the credibility and dependability of the study's theoretical foundation, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), thus providing a well-rounded framework for examining the challenges and facilitators to support Midwestern school district administrators.

The researcher in this study utilized a qualitative, narrative design. Data collection instruments included interviews with Midwestern school district administrators, an examination of arrest rates, and a review of data from the Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics. The triangulated data collection strategy also included validating school district data by reviewing the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) database.

## Summary of Findings

In presenting the findings of the study conducted on urban and suburban Midwestern school district administrators' decisions regarding SROs, three key findings emerged. First, the physical safety and mental well-being of students were of paramount concern for administrators as they made these decisions. They prioritized creating secure learning environments where students could thrive without fear.

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

Lastly, cost factors were essential in administrators' decision-making processes to add or eliminate SROs. School district administrators, as they attempted to meet the safety needs of their students, felt an obligation to weigh the financial implications of eliminating or maintaining SROs, often having urban schools navigate budget constraints beyond their control while suburban schools had plenty of resources to distribute.

This study emphasized the intricate complexity of the decisions made by Midwestern school district administrators regarding SROs, with student safety and well-being, avoiding emotional triggers, and related cost factors constituting the forefront of their deliberations. Table 16 illustrates the summary of findings:

**Table 16***Summary of Findings*

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting Interview Details</b>
<b>Safety and Well-being of Students</b>	Physical Safety	School district administrators reported the importance of students' sense of safety
	Mental well-being	School district administrators reported the importance of students' sense of mental well-being
<b>Avoiding Emotional Triggers for Students</b>	Emotional well-being	Stressors for students
	Impact on school performance	Interferes with the student's ability to learn (Work, 2021).
<b>Cost Factors</b>	Budget constraints	SROs removed because of the cost restraints
	Resource allocations	Resources with local police and grants

In deciding to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs, the ideas of school district administrators dually focusing on the presence of SROs as enhancing students' physical safety and mental well-being, as well as triggering emotional responses that potentially interfere with students' emotional well-being and school performance, may initially appear to contradict each other. On one hand, the study showed that the presence of some SROs, particularly in urban schools, contributed to students feeling uncomfortable and fearful. On the other hand, school district administrators saw SROs as key contributors to shaping safe and secure learning environments. Despite this, both findings connect in the sense that this apparent contradiction arises from the core principle of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), which stressed the importance of students needing to feel safe to learn at high levels.



A more subtle understanding emerged as the researcher examined urban schools with lower star ratings and different demographics compared to their suburban counterparts while reviewing data from the Department of Education (2023). Urban schools were often faced with heightened safety concerns, so addressing students' basic physiological and safety needs was crucial. In urban schools, resource officers were hired to create secure learning environments, laying the foundations for students to focus on their education and overall well-being (Curran et al., 2019).

The contradictory findings regarding SROs and student well-being became interconnected when viewed through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). This revealed that students may experience emotional triggers in response to the presence of SROs within their educational environment, as stated throughout the interviews with urban school district administrators.

The third key finding recognized the practical aspects of implementing safety and well-being initiatives in schools. Some administrators, in partnership with SROs, strategically navigated cost factors to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of SROs. This involved exploring cost-effective alternatives, such as seeking external funding sources and engaging in community partnerships to mitigate financial burdens on the school districts while still prioritizing the safety and well-being of students.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative was to understand how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers. The researcher contemplated the significant efforts undertaken by Suburban School Administrator D following a mass shooting in their school district, realizing that such events served as a method for implementing crucial safety measures. Considering this, the researcher believed that it would be



an opportune moment for other schools to reevaluate their existing protocols and prioritize the safety and well-being of their students by adopting similar comprehensive safety measures. By drawing lessons from Suburban School Administrator D's approach, school leaders can work toward establishing safer environments that prioritize the overall well-being of their students. The researcher deeply admired Suburban School Administrator D's challenging decision to return to work despite extremely difficult circumstances, thus demonstrating unwavering courage throughout the aftermath of the mass school shooting. Suburban School Administrator D's commitment to the school community and demonstrated resilience were inspiring examples of dedication and fortitude that everyone should recognize.

*Education Week's (2023)* analysis confirmed that between January 2023 and June 2023, American schools experienced 23 school shootings that involved injuries or fatalities. Comparatively, the previous year saw 51 school shootings resulting in injuries or deaths across the United States (Education Week). These distressing statistics support the urgent need for the implementation of proactive measures to enhance safety, which Suburban School Administrator D attempted to address for the well-being and safety of students (RQ 1). The need to add SROs, according to several of the study's participants, is crucial for students and staff as they play a vital role in enhancing school safety, providing a presence to respond quickly to potential threats, and a sense of security within the school.

Exploring the reasons for eliminating SROs (RQ 2) unveiled a range of factors, such as budget constraints or community pressures to fortify school environments. Focusing on the first finding, on how Midwestern school district administrators decided to eliminate school resource officers, allows one to gain a deeper comprehension of specific challenges and understandings of the reasonings for schools eliminating SROs. The research question of how Midwestern school

district administrators eliminated school resource officers was posed. The findings from Urban School Administrator B in this sample study indicated a “high-fidelity” level in eliminating SROs, thereby establishing clear protocols for decision-making and restorative training by the board of education. The intention was not to have the community’s voice control the decision to eliminate SROs, but it was evident that their voices were heard.

It is important to note that these decisions were being made in the immediate aftermath of the killing of the Black male, George Floyd, by White police officers, an event that received national attention. Protesters assembled outside schools, meetings, and even at the residence of the school board president in the Midwestern region, voicing their disagreement with the decision to eliminate the use of SROs.

The researcher acknowledged that everyone in the sample empathized with the community’s response to George Floyd’s death, a sentiment that resonated nationwide. The context and timing of the study complicated the public’s understanding of the role that SROs play. The study’s timing and context powerfully disrupted the public’s understanding of the crucial role SROs play. It placed administrators in a maze of complexities as they navigated the profound implications, compelling them to carefully weigh the consequential pros and cons of introducing law enforcement personnel into the foundation of their school buildings.

Suburban School Administrator B believed interacting with SROs at an early age builds meaningful relationships. The Midwestern school district removed SROs in disciplinary actions or negative relationships with students to help build the continued bond. At times, SROs engaged in handling custody matters, which served as an asset for administrators. This involvement helped prevent escalations of altercations and ensured quicker resolutions, ultimately prioritizing students’ safety and well-being. As a result, students continued to develop trustworthy

relationships with SROs, potentially contributing to a reduction in factors that emotionally triggered students' concerns.

One interesting aspect of the decision to add an SRO was that, in this sample, school administrators considered Student Well-being as a primary factor to add an SRO; however, the issue of Emotional Triggers was not considered or did not become evident until SROs were already in-place at the school site. This suggests a developmental curve on the part of the school administrators in this study.

Considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs within the context of students and SROs revealed a concern. The first level emphasized the importance of fulfilling students' basic physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter. The second level addressed the safety and well-being (RQ1 and 2) that students must have their basic needs met, including physical safety and emotional well-being, to effectively engage in the learning process (Curran et al., 2019). Maslow's second and third levels addressed emotional triggers (RQ2) because threaten students' feelings of safety and belonging and may impact their ability to form connections within the school community. Cost factors (RQ 2 and 3) at Maslow's second level were crucial to ensure that resources were allocated effectively to support students' safety, well-being, and educational outcomes.

These three findings aligned with Maslow's second level of needs, encompassing safety and security. They indicated variations in decision making between urban and suburban contexts and demonstrated potential disparities between urban and suburban schools. In short, K-12 schools, when viewed as a coherent system, seem to be deficient in providing the foundational support of SROs in all contexts. Neglecting these second-level needs, particularly in urban

school districts, obstructs students' progression toward higher-level fulfillment, limiting their academic, safety and well-being for success.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

Chapter II contained a description of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which outlines a hierarchical model of needs for students in urban and suburban school districts, ranging from basic physiological needs to higher-order psychological needs. In contrast, Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence focuses on the different components of intelligence, including analytical, creative, and practical intelligence, among students in these districts. While Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasizes the progression of needs from lower to higher levels, Sternberg's theory provides a framework for understanding and assessing cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills. Together, these theories offer complementary perspectives on student behavior and cognition, with Maslow's theory addressing motivational factors and Sternberg's theory focusing on cognitive processes. Integrating both theories can provide a more comprehensive understanding of student development and behavior, highlighting the interplay between psychological needs and cognitive abilities in urban and suburban school settings.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is represented in a five-level pyramid that was considered a psychological model (1943). Maslow's theory outlined an understanding of motivation and behavior and the ranked nature of human needs (Mcleod, 2023). Maslow proposed that individuals are motivated by different levels of needs, ranging from basic physiological needs to higher-level psychological and self-fulfillment needs. Maslow's (1943) theory, initially proposed by psychologist Abraham Maslow, is a foundational framework in psychology that outlines a hierarchy of human needs. The theory suggests that individuals are motivated by a series of



needs arranged in a pyramid, from basic physiological requirements to higher-level psychological and self-fulfillment needs.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a five-stage model. The foundation of human needs includes meeting basic physiological requirements for survival, such as air, water, food, and shelter. This foundational level is crucial as it establishes the fundamental prerequisites for human survival and forms the base upon which higher-level needs are built. Fulfilling these basic physiological needs is essential for maintaining overall well-being and creating a stable foundation for psychological and emotional development. When applied to the context of high school students and school resource officers, Maslow's theory provides valuable insights into understanding the comprehensive needs within an educational setting.

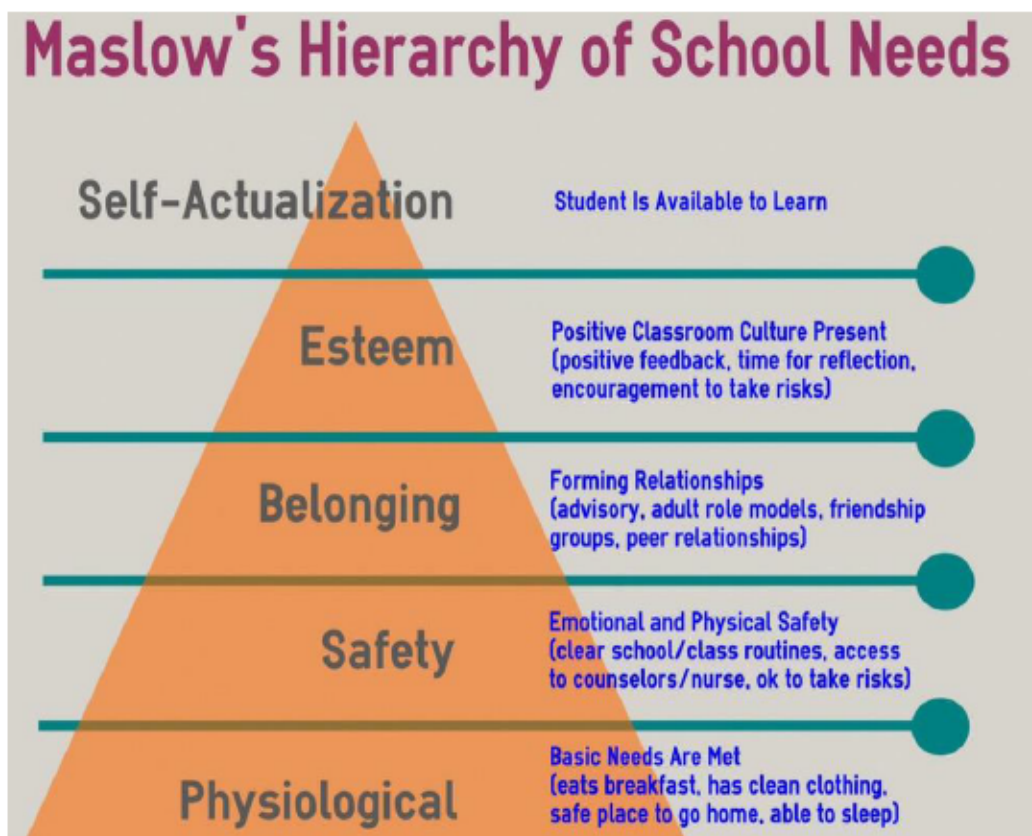
When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the context of students and SROs, the first level emphasizes the importance of fulfilling students' basic physiological needs. Students' access to safe and secure environments contributes to meeting these foundational needs. School resource officers play a function in ensuring a secure atmosphere, which is critical for students to feel physically safe and supported. Creating an environment conducive to effective student learning and overall well-being is crucial. Addressing basic physiological needs lays the groundwork for students to engage more meaningfully in their educational experiences. High school students must have their basic needs met, including physical safety and emotional well-being, to effectively engage in the learning process (Curran et al., 2019). School resource officers play a crucial role in contributing to the safety of school environments that may align with the foundational levels of Maslow's hierarchy (1943). By addressing these fundamental needs, the educational community can create supportive atmospheres that foster positive social



interactions and contribute to the overall well-being of students, thereby enhancing the potential for personal development and academic success. The integration of Maslow's theory into the context of high school students and SROs stresses the importance of recognizing and addressing the diverse needs that influence students' educational experiences. Figure 4 demonstrates Maslow's hierarchy as it relates to school needs:

**Figure 4**

*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



(Guditus, 2013)

In urban and suburban schools, every decision made is deeply rooted in the well-being of students. Unfortunately, we have come to a poignant realization that the presence of SROs does not always serve the best interests of our children. School district administrators need to create environments where every child feels safe, supported, and empowered to succeed.

However, as we strive to create these havens for our urban youth, we face a harsh contrast. In suburban schools, where resources are abundant, there is a different narrative. Despite having ample funds, SROs are often added under the mask of security. But what about the security of a child's sense of belonging? What about the security of their emotional well-being?

The core of this issue lies in the very essence of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Our urban students are too often the victims of societal injustices and are denied the basic physiological and safety needs required to even contemplate reaching the highest level of self-actualization. It is a fundamental injustice that strikes at the very core of our humanity.

So, as we navigate these disparities, let us remember that education is not just about academic success but about nurturing the whole child. Let us advocate passionately for equitable approaches to safety and support, ones that recognize the unique challenges every student faces regardless of their zip code. It is time to ensure that every child, no matter where they come from, has the opportunity to flourish and thrive and be able to fulfill those that promise equal education to all no matter the region.

The decision to eliminate SROs in urban schools often boils down to financial constraints rather than the abundance of resources suburban schools encounter. Urban districts frequently face budgetary pressures that compel them to make difficult choices about allocating limited funds. Unfortunately, SROs are expensive to maintain, involving not just salaries for officers but also health and equipment costs. In contrast, suburban schools with greater resources may find it easier to justify the expense of SROs. However, this does not necessarily mean that suburban schools are immune to scrutiny regarding their use of SROs. Despite their financial capabilities, some suburban districts may also reevaluate the role of law enforcement on school grounds considering alternative approaches to school safety that prioritize community engagement and

mental health support over an SRO presence. Ultimately, both urban and suburban schools must critically assess the need for SROs weighing the costs against the potential benefits for student well-being.

SROs in suburban schools do not guarantee immunity from school shootings within the buildings. Despite the perception of suburban areas as safer, incidents of school shootings still occur when there is an SRO present, challenging the perception that SROs alone can prevent such tragedies. Urban schools are often unfairly stigmatized as a breeding ground for unruly and violent students, but they do not experience the same frequency of school shootings in the buildings. These facts indicate the need to reassess assumptions about safety. Urban School District Administrator F was passionately committed to the belief that the mere presence of an SRO police car outside of a school would deter an armed shooter from entering school doors. If this were indeed the case, why does the reality revealed by the data contradict the assumption? We must confront this uncomfortable topic and push toward evidence-based solutions that prioritize the safety and well-being of students more than anything else.

### **Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence**

Through the lens of Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence (Sternberg, 1985), school district administrators can obtain valuable ideas about the roles of SROs when understanding how to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs. Analytic intelligence becomes vital in assessing the effectiveness and necessity of SROs, relying on data-driven analysis and critical evaluation of their impact on school safety and student well-being. Creative intelligence allows school district administrators to explore innovative approaches to other school security measures and student support, potentially reshaping the role of SROs to better align with evolving needs and community expectations. Practical intelligence equips school district administrators with the

ability to navigate difficult decisions with SROs, ensuring they have a positive effect on the educational system. Considering these factors of intelligence, school district administrators can make informed decisions that prioritize student safety and well-being while building positive relationships between SROs and the school community. Incorporating the Triarchic Theory into decision-making processes offers school district administrators a strong structure for evaluating SROs, leading to evidence-based practices and informed policy recommendations tailored to the unique needs of their school districts.

Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, school district administrators in both urban and suburban settings can understand important factors regarding the roles of SROs in schools for student well-being, emotional triggers, and cost factors.

Analytic intelligence could be used to identify and break down data to determine if SROs are needed in urban school districts. School district administrators would be able to address specific students' well-being and safety concerns, ensuring that the presence of SROs aligns with the unique needs of students. Analytic intelligence could be employed to identify and dissect relevant data to determine the necessity of SRO in suburban school districts. School district administrators would then be equipped to address the specific well-being and safety concerns of students in suburban settings, ensuring that funding resources and the presence of SROs are also allocated to the distinct needs of the community.

In urban schools, where emotional triggers for student concerns are often felt, school district administrators should focus on realistic approaches to ensure student well-being. An analysis would support school district administrators in identifying specific areas of concern and devising creative strategies for effectively utilizing SROs, thereby protecting students from



negative perceptions. In suburban schools, where the available funding is abundant and students' feelings towards SROs are viewed in a positive light.

Practical considerations play a crucial role in both urban and suburban districts. In urban schools, school district administrators navigate complex challenges to integrate SRO effectively within budget-constrained districts. In suburban schools, adding and maintaining of SROs are common practices, it's essential for school district administrators to carefully balance the cost considerations with the benefits of having SROs on site. Unlike urban, suburban districts often have more abundant resources, allowing school district administrators to allocate funds towards SROs without facing significant constraints. However, even in these circumstances, school district administrators need to ensure that the investment in SROs aligns with community priorities and values. School district administrators can utilize practical intelligence to make informed decisions regarding SROs. This involves not only assessing the financial implications but also considering how SROs presence contributes to the overall safety and well-being of students.

Integrating the Triarchic Theory into decision-making processes, school district administrators ensure that the presence of SROs in schools aligns with the unique needs and circumstances of their respective districts. This approach prioritizes student well-being, addresses emotional triggers, and optimizes resource allocation to enhance overall school safety and security.

Through Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, school district administrators can obtain valuable insights into the roles of SROs and how to effectively manage their presence in both urban and suburban settings. Analytic intelligence becomes vital in assessing the effectiveness and necessity of SROs, relying on data-driven analysis and critical evaluation of



their impact on school safety and student well-being. Creative intelligence allows school district administrators to explore innovative approaches to enhancing school security measures and student support, potentially reshaping the role of SROs to better align with evolving needs and community expectations. Practical intelligence equips school district administrators with the ability to navigate difficult decisions regarding SROs, ensuring they positively contribute to the educational system while considering budget constraints and community priorities.

In urban schools, where emotional triggers for student concerns are often pronounced, school district administrators should focus on realistic approaches to ensure student well-being. Analytic intelligence enables administrators to identify specific areas of concern and devise creative strategies for effectively utilizing SROs to address safety challenges and protect students from negative perceptions.

In suburban schools, where funding resources are more abundant and students generally view SROs positively, practical intelligence guides administrators in balancing cost considerations with the benefits of having SROs on site. Integrating Sternberg's Triarchic Theory into decision-making processes, school district administrators ensure that the presence of SROs aligns with the unique needs and circumstances of their respective districts, prioritizing student well-being and enhancing overall school safety and security.

Through Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, school district administrators gain valuable perspectives on managing SROs in diverse educational settings. This approach emphasizes three key aspects: analytic intelligence, creative intelligence, and practical intelligence. Incorporating these bits of bits of intelligence into decision-making processes, school district administrators ensure that SRO presence aligns with the unique needs of their district. This approach can enhance overall safety and well-being, reduce emotional triggers, and

effectively disburse funds efficiently. This will benefit urban and suburban school districts by providing a framework to support the learning environment for all students.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the themes that arrived from interviews which consisted of six suburban school district administrators and four urban school district administrators. It revealed that the safety and well-being (RQ 1) of students were referenced 47 times for each, even though there were more suburban school district administrators. It revealed urban school district administrators were just as passionate about their student's safety and well-being by having the same number of references but with only four interviewees. Emotional triggers (RQ 2) for students were referenced by only one in six suburban school district administrators but four urban school district administrators referenced it six times. Cost factors (RQ 3) were mentioned 23 times by suburban interviewees but only four by urban school district administrators. Is it because suburban districts have the financial resources when employing SROs, but urban districts simply do not have the funding and could not elaborate on that area?

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

It is challenging to view the disparity between urban and suburban schools when it comes to ensuring the safety and well-being of students. In urban schools, the decision to eliminate SROs often stems from an attempt to create environments where students feel genuinely secure and eliminate emotional triggers. But why is it that urban schools, where students are often exposed to higher levels of risk, are forced to make sacrifices in the name of safety? Why are students in urban areas triggered by SROs but suburban students feel safe when an SRO is present within the schools?

The research findings emphasized the importance that school district administrators placed on ensuring students' safety and well-being, particularly when deciding to add or eliminate SROs. Administrators can use these insights to refine and reinforce the need for safety protocols, stressing a comprehensive approach that considers both physical and emotional aspects of students' well-being. Training programs for SROs, placed in collaboration between administrators and SROs, can enhance the effectiveness of security measures and foster supportive and secure learning environments for students (Curran et al., 2019).

### **Emotional Triggers**

School district administrators in this study worked hand-in-hand with SROs and saw themselves as playing critical roles in understanding and addressing potential emotional triggers in students. As discussed with the urban school district administrators, they recognized the importance of creating a school culture that prioritized the safety and emotional well-being of students and sought to alleviate any emotional triggers associated with the visible presence of SROs in the district.

With that said, after reviewing the data from 2017 to 2018 high school students' disciplinary actions, why do Black males have the highest rate for every category from student arrests to the highest most severe corporate punishment? Why are more Black students being arrested and expelled than their white peers? This is why school district administrators must view the relevant data to seize the percentages from targeting Black male students.

### **Cost Factors**

Why do suburban schools have a plethora of funding resources available and partner with local police for cost savings but urban simply do not receive the same amount of grants? Also, why are urban schools unable to compete with the cost-sharing like suburban when utilizing the

local police departments? It is a painful contradiction that speaks volumes about the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities in our education system. As someone deeply committed to the principle of equality in education, I find it unacceptable that our student's safety is treated as a privilege rather than a fundamental right. We must strive for a system where every child, regardless of how much their local property tax is worth, can learn and grow in an environment where their safety and well-being are non-negotiable priorities.

Balancing the efforts for enhanced safety and well-being with fiscal responsibility, administrators must strategize cost-effective measures, in collaboration with districts' local police departments to add or maintain SROs. Allocating resources efficiently, exploring grant opportunities, and establishing partnerships with local communities can assist administrators in implementing evidence-based practices without placing undue financial burdens on school districts. This collaborative financial planning ensures sustainable and effective initiatives for the benefit of both student safety and emotional support.

#### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was limited only to the perspectives of Midwestern school district administrators in urban and suburban public school districts and was not extended to SROs, parents, teachers, or school staff. The study was qualitative, and the results are not generalizable due to the small sample and regional exploration. While the researcher believed that qualitative research was appropriate for this study, qualitative resources, such as interviews, played a meaningful and key role in capturing the depth of the 10 school district administrators' experiences, they also served as valuable means for revealing detailed perspectives. Adjusting the timeframe of the research would be another suggestion along with other avenues of security for school districts.



The researcher's suggestion would be to utilize artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance the effectiveness of SROs revolving around leveraging technology to address safety concerns, lessen triggers, and optimize costs. To enhance safety, AI-powered surveillance systems can be implemented to monitor school premises in real time, swiftly detecting any unusual activities or potential threats. These systems can analyze data from various sources, such as security cameras and sensors, to provide early warnings and improve response times. In addition, AI can detect vaping in bathrooms and decipher noises such as firecrackers or bullets. Artificial intelligence can assist those districts that have budgetary restraints and costs associated with SROs. Integrating AI into SRO operations holds the potential to significantly enhance safety, lessen emotional triggers for students, and manage costs in Midwestern school districts.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation brings to light the vital importance of examining school safety, especially within suburban settings where unique challenges and opportunities exist. Despite suburban schools often earning better ratings, increased funding, and a larger presence of SROs, they still face the unsettling occurrence of shooting incidents within their school walls.

This research highlights the disproportionate impact of SRO interactions on students of color, uncovering systemic disparities within the established security protocols. The fact that suburban schools have more shootings inside buildings but urban have less funding, open enrollment, lower local taxes, and lower school star ratings, and yet they are safer because if shootings occur, they are outside the school building.

In response to these findings, the suggestion of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance as a 24/7 monitoring solution emerges as a promising avenue. With its unmatched



attentiveness and potential to mitigate biases, AI offers a new approach to enhancing school safety while addressing triggering inequities.

### **Final Thoughts**

As I reflect on this journey, there is no justification that urban school districts have fewer resources than suburban school districts. Al Sharpton once said:

There's no reason why children in urban schools do not receive the same quality education or opportunities as those in suburban areas. If we truly believe in giving all citizens a chance to pursue happiness and pursue their goals, then we cannot continue to marginalize entire groups of people.

In the quest to achieve Maslow's hierarchy of needs within our educational institutions, it is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of various factors, including safety, emotional well-being, avoiding emotional triggers, cost factors, and cultural responsiveness. By addressing these elements administrators can create environments that facilitate the fulfillment of students' fundamental needs, thereby laying the foundation for their development and self-actualization.

Through a strategic focus on safety and well-being, administrators can ensure that students feel secure and supported, allowing them to rise above basic safety concerns and progress toward higher levels of fulfillment. By carefully considering the emotional triggers that may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline and exploring alternatives such as AI-driven solutions, school district administrators can ease the risk of harm and create spaces where students can flourish emotionally and academically.

Investing in culturally responsive training for both SROs and teachers, administrators can cultivate environments that honor students' diverse identities and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and self-worth. In doing so, they not only address students' psychological and

belonging needs but also lay the groundwork for higher-level needs such as esteem and self-actualization.

Ultimately, by prioritizing safety and well-being, avoiding emotional triggers, and balancing cost factors with innovation, administrators can create educational environments that not only meet students' basic needs but also empower them to reach their full potential and achieve self-actualization, as envisioned by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In this way, we can collectively work towards creating schools where every student has the opportunity to thrive and flourish towards educational excellence in a safe learning environment.

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## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

IRB LETTER OF PERMISSION



Jun 20, 2023 11:32:32 AM EDT  
Rodney Rock  
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt – Initial – 2023-263 Understanding how Midwestern School District Administrators Decide how to Add, Eliminate, or Maintain School Resource Officers: A Qualitative Narrative Study

Dear Dr. Rodney Rock:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Understanding how Midwestern School District Administrators Decide how to Add, Eliminate, or Maintain School Resource Officers: A Qualitative Narrative Study

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the Identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,  
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

## APPENDIX B

### NCES INFORMATION REQUESTS

Hi Evangelia,

Thanks for calling the NCES Help Desk. This email is in reference to your request for information on the number of public schools, number of SROs, and number of arrests in US public schools.

Like I mentioned on the phone, I will attach what I think may be some helpful resources for you to this email.

Generally speaking, the *Digest of Education Statistics* is the largest repository of summary statistics collected across most of the Department of Education surveys. These tables contain counts and percentages of things ranging from to number of students enrolled in each grade in all US public schools, to percentages of schools with various types of technology. All of the digest tables can be found here [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/current\\_tables.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/current_tables.asp). Specifically, I think the following tables will be useful to you:

- [Table 105.50 – Number of educational institutions, by level and control of institution](#)
- [Table 233.70a - Percentage of public schools with security staff present at least once a week, by full-time or part-time status and selected school characteristics: 2005-06 through 2015-16](#)
- [Table 233.70b – Percentage of public schools with security staff present at school at least once a week, by type of security staff, school level, and selected school characteristics: 2005-06, 2015-16, and 2017-18](#)
- [Table 329.10 – On-campus crimes, arrests, and referrals for disciplinary action at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by location of incident, control and level of institution, and type of incident: Selected years, 2001 through 2019](#)

For additional information on Crime and Safety in Public Schools, you can look at the *School Survey on Crime and Safety* (SSOCS). This is a bi-annual nationally representative survey of principals asking about their school's safety measures, instances of crime, and discipline. The most recent edition of the survey occurred during the 2017-2018 school year but the 2019-2020 edition has begun releasing some data. You can find this survey and all of its data and documentation here: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/>

For the count of all public schools in the US, the *Common Core of Data* (CCD) will provide you with all public information on every school reported by states in that year including school name, address, grades offered, and enrollment numbers. Attached to this email I included a zip file with the 2021 CCD data csv file, and you can find more information on the CCD home page here: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>

If you have any other questions or need any more information, feel free to call back any time.

The NCES Information Requests Team

[NCESInfo@air.org](mailto:NCESInfo@air.org)

(202) 403-5551

## APPENDIX C

### EMAIL CONTENTS TO PARTICIPANTS

#### **PLEASE PARTICIPATE - DISSERTATION INTERVIEW**

I hope this email finds you well! I am conducting interviews as part of a qualitative narrative study to increase my understanding of how Midwestern school district administrators decide how to add, eliminate, or maintain school resource officers. You are in an ideal position to give valuable and imperative information to my study from your professional perspective. I am attempting to gather information from suburban, urban, and rural areas.

The informal interview takes approximately 30 minutes, and you may end the volunteer interview at any time during the session. I have attached a consent form in advance with the hopes that you will participate in this topic which I feel is very important. Your responses to these questions will be kept confidential and each interview will be coded (i.e., Rural District A, B, etc.) so personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and findings.

The IRB process was approved recently and the class assignment for the first finding is due almost immediately, so your response is critical, and interviews are imperative. I am available at any time on weekdays, weekends, day or night via Zoom, Webex, and Teams. Please respond as soon as possible with a date and times that work best for you.

Again, if you can schedule a time this week, I would greatly appreciate it!

Thank you so much!!!  
Evangelia Ghia Burzynski

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How many years have you worked in a school administrator role?
- What are the total years working as a professional in an educational setting?
- May I ask you to identify your ethnicity and race?

#### *Decision-Making Questions*

- There are various leadership styles that school administrators employ to meet the challenges associated with their specific school environments. What leadership style do you find effective on a day-to-day basis?
- Much attention has been given to Restorative Justice in some corners recently – Restorative Justice is an alternative approach that entails a meeting with the offender and victim to resolve the problem instead of punishment. In your experience how practical is restorative justice theory for use in your school?
- If we think of racism on a scale that ranges from inadvertent behaviors that people may be unaware of (on one end) all the way up to blatant racist attitudes and language (on the other end) – Do you deal with racism among staff at any level?
- At your school, who is the primary person in charge of disciplining students? Do you (or that person) seek input from other school employees when disciplining students?
- What level of input would be solicited from the School Resource Officer on student discipline?
- Discipline-wise, what is your school's biggest challenge?
- How do the SROs within the schools address that issue?



- If you were allowed to change one thing in your school to improve safety and there were no barriers, what would it be? Why do you feel it would be effective and what steps would it take to be accomplished?

#### *Enrollment Questions*

- Has enrollment increased or decreased this academic year?
- Is your school open enrollment?
  - If the school is Open Enrollment: Is safety a factor when parents enroll their children in your schools?
- Do you feel the grade you received from the Department of Education last academic year positively reflects your school's academic achievements? Why?

#### *Discipline Strategy Questions*

- Does your school have a Zero Tolerance Policy? If so, since the implementation of the policy, has your schools' data confirmed a decrease or increase in discipline referrals?
- If your school does not have a Zero Tolerance Policy, why not?
- What is the approximate number of out-of-school suspensions your school had pre-pandemic versus post-pandemic? Have you noticed any changes in the number of suspensions?
- After our interview, would you be willing to email me the data for the 2017- 2018 academic year, showing what the percentages were for out-of-school suspensions of African American versus White males?

- There is a body of literature that suggests that students of color face disproportionate discipline on the part of SROs or school staff. As a school leader, what are your thoughts about how serious this problem is?

***Decision-Making Processes Questions***

- Please describe, generally speaking, your decision-making processes regarding your school or school system.
- Please describe the decision-making process that you use to add, eliminate, or maintain SROs.
- Who else is involved with these decisions?
- What other factors contribute to the decisions?
- What kinds of data do you use when you make decisions about SROs?
- Where do you find these data?
- Given these data, are SROs effective in your school?
- What steps are taken to ensure that SROs do not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline or proportionate discipline?
- If an SRO is deemed ineffective in a school, is there a process in place for school officials to evaluate and assess their performance, gather supporting documentation, and make an executive decision to replace them with a more suitable peer?
- Are there any alternative programs instead of SROs being considered? If yes, what are they?
- Are there specific procedures in place for communication between the principal or administration and SROs? If so, please explain.

- Do you or a district administrator gather input from students, parents, and teachers when making decisions related to SROs or SRO programs?
- Are there policies that guide your decision-making regarding the involvement of SROs when it comes to disciplinary and non-disciplinary matters?