Challenging Our Perceptions of Rural Policing: An Examination of School Resource Officers in Rural and Urban Kentucky Schools

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Abstract: Many of our notions about rural justice systems are shaped by stereotypes that suggest that the people employed within these agencies are less sophisticated or skilled than those working in urban areas. In this study, results from a 2009 survey of Kentucky school resource officers (SROs) are used to compare the characteristics and tasks of officers in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the differences between SROs from rural and urban areas. Inconsistent with expectations, officers in rural school districts had almost identical education, training, and experience on the job as their urban counterparts. While officers were generally responsible for supervising more schools in rural areas and had fewer resources compared to their urban counterparts, they generally reported spending almost identical time in enforcement, counseling, and educational activities. Officers working in rural school districts also reported feeling more supported by school administrators. Implications for the study of rural crime and justice as well as for research and policy about SROs are highlighted.

Keywords: School resource officers, school safety, rural policing.

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The study of school resource officers (SROs) in rural communities is challenged by a number of factors. First, because of their role in schools, the activities of these officers may be perceived as less important or worthy of scholarly attention than research on special weapons and tactics units, multi-jurisdictional task forces, homeland security or criminal investigations. Second, most research has focused upon police operations in urban areas – what Liederbach and Frank (2003) called a "big city bias" (p. 54). This may be a consequence of convenience (e.g., these agencies are closer to research universities), availability and access to data, as well as funding (larger departments are often able to fund researchers studying their operations). Third, researchers might be drawn to the study of larger organizations because they believe that they are more creative or innovative, and therefore overlook what occurs in smaller agencies. Altogether, a combination of all these factors shape the police research agenda in favor of large agencies and specialized crime-fighting units. Yet, disregarding what occurs in rural areas ignores the fact that over 59 million Americans live in these places (Matthews & Woodwell, 2005). Furthermore, most sheriffs' offices and police departments in the United States are small: Reaves (2010) reported that there were 6,229 agencies with nine or fewer officers in 2007, representing almost one-half (49.5%) of all departments (p. 9). Thus, overlooking what happens in these organizations ignores the fact that one-sixth of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, and these small agencies deployed over 25,000 employees in 2007.

Officers in rural jurisdictions confront the same sorts of challenges as their counterparts working in larger urban areas, and while rates of crime and violence are generally lower in rural counties, there are exceptions. In contrast to the vision of the quiet and serene life in rural places, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2009), reported that murders and robberies in non-suburban cities of less than 10,000 residents increased by 1.7% and 8.8% respectively in 2008. There are also rural counties with high levels of crime and violence. In Northern California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Midwest, for example, methamphetamine use is common (see Grant, Kelley, Agrawal, Meza, Meyer, & Romberger, 2007) and has devastated individuals, families, and communities. Moreover, in some rural places, rates of gang involvement are high (Weisheit & Wells, 2001) and counties adjacent to urban areas may experience a "spillover" effect where offenders from the city victimize residents as they pass through these communities.

While generally having fewer incidents than urban schools, rural schools are not immune to the problems of crime and violence. Dinkes, Kemp, Baum, and Snyder (2009) reported that:

During the 2007-2008 school year, a greater percentage of teachers in city schools (10 percent) reported being threatened with injury than teachers in town schools (7 percent) and suburban or rural schools (6 percent each). A greater percentage of teachers in city schools (5 percent) and suburban schools (4 percent) reported being physically attacked compared to

teachers in rural schools (3 percent). (Dinkes et al. p.v)

These investigators also reported student victimization from 2007-08, and while those attending city schools experienced the highest rate of serious violent incidents (1.9 per 1,000 students), students in suburban (0.9), town (1.2), and rural schools (0.8) also had high rates of violent victimization (p. 96). Last, Dinkes, Kemp, Baum, and Snyder (2009) stated that students in rural schools experienced similar rates of theft as those attending suburban schools, and rates of other incidents (e.g., bringing weapons, drugs, or alcohol to school) were nearly identical in rural as suburban or town schools (p. 99). Thus, while having fewer incidents than city schools, teachers, staff, and students in rural schools are still at risk of victimization.

Because rural county governments have a smaller tax base from which to draw, responding to the challenges of crime and violence is often challenging as small law enforcement agencies are often hamstrung by a lack of funding. Agency size matters when it comes to specialization and smaller police organizations have fewer specialized units. As Maguire and King (2007) observed, "larger police agencies can create special units, policies, and arrangements to address institutional demands" (p. 356). Officers and deputies in smaller agencies must gain experience in a broad range of duties, including ones that are rare for most urban officers, such as animal control, search and rescue, and marine operations. A "jack of all trades" or generalist approach is necessary in small agencies. In 2007, for example, 652 law enforcement agencies had only one part- or full-time sworn officer (Reaves, 2010,

p. 9). One of the few exceptions to the generalist role in rural law enforcement, however, has been the deployment of SROs.

POLICE IN SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER

Maguire and King (2004) observed that the police have a long history in securing and socializing children, dating back to the police athletic leagues of the early 1900s (p. 22). While police have been deployed in schools for decades, their prevalence increased in response to a number of school shootings in the 1990s. Furthermore, over the past two decades, federal government grants have provided a financial incentive for putting law enforcement officers in schools (Addington, 2009).

One specialized police role, in both urban and rural jurisdictions, is the school resource officer (SRO). An SRO is officially defined by Part Q of Title I of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and amended in 1998 as "a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations" (United States Department of Justice, 1999, p. 1) although the term is often applied to any sworn law enforcement officer working in an educational environment (National Association of School Resource Officers [NASRO], 2003). SROs are thus sworn officers whose primary function is law enforcement in schools. NASRO recommends that, in addition to the role of law enforcement, SROs should also:

(a) act as a liaison between the school, the police, and the community, (b) teach law-related education classes, and (c) counsel students (United States Department of Justice, 2001).

Despite the existence of NASRO, and federal grants to employ law enforcement officers in the school setting, it is difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of officers assigned full- and part-time to work in schools. The 2007 census of law enforcement agencies reported that 13,056 officers were deployed in public school districts (Reaves, 2010, p. 28) although the National Association of School Resource Officers website reported that there were 6,000 officers who were members of that organization (NASRO, 2010). In a recent report, Wald and Thurau (2010) observed that there were an estimated 17,000 SROs within the United States (p. 1). Furthermore, Snyder and Dillow (2010) reported that there were some 132,656 elementary and secondary schools in 2007-2008, and less than one-third of them had a daily police presence (p. 19).[1]

A review of the extant SRO literature shows that studies have been conducted on the factors that contributed to the prevalence of officers in schools (Addington, 2009), their effectiveness in preventing or reducing disorder and violence (May, Fessel, & Means, 2004; Time & Payne, 2008), the legal rights of juveniles in their interactions with SRO (Bracy, 2010, Torres & Stefkovich, 2009) and whether SROs criminalize student behavior that in past years would

have been dealt with informally (Theriot, 2009). Other scholars have described the duties and roles of the SRO (May & Chen, 2009; May, Cordner, & Fessel, 2004), while Brown (2005) and McDevitt and Panniello (2005) examined the relationships between these officers and students. Despite the scholarly attention placed on the roles of these officers, however, little notice has been paid to the characteristics, values, and activities of SRO in general, and specifically, to those working in rural areas.

Although we all harbor perceptions of what constitutes a rural place, the term is harder to define. Scholars tend to use the terms small and rural interchangeably, and that practice leads to a lack of precision (see Crank & Wells, 1991; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000). While many rural communities are policed by small agencies, there are exceptions, and a full appreciation of the concept of rural life requires that one understands geography, economic activity and the local culture (see Wolf, Korosec, & Goltz, 2008). Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, and Xie (2007) reported that "In the 2003-04, over half of all operating school districts and one-third of all public schools were in rural areas; yet only one-fifth of all public school students were enrolled in rural schools" (p. iii).

Thus, rural school districts cover a significant proportion of the United States and comparatively little is known about the activities of SROs in these places, despite the fact that levels of crime in some rural schools can be as high as those in larger jurisdictions. In this study, then, we use data from Kentucky officers to respond to this gap in understanding the characteristics and

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[1] Snyder and Dillow (2010) reported that 27.2% of public and 6.4% of private schools had a daily police presence and that rural public schools were under-represented compared to city, suburban, or town schools (p. 234).

roles of SROs as well as their perceptions of school administrators in urban and rural school districts. Our goal in undertaking this research was to determine whether there were significant differences in the demographic and job-related attributes of rural and urban SROs. In addition, we also examined the contextual characteristics of the respondent's schools, including a number of economic and demographic indicators of the schools and counties where these officers worked. In order to accomplish those tasks, a number of statistical techniques were used and the following paragraphs describe the data and methods used in this research.

DATA AND METHODS

Survey Results

In January 2009, a research team from the Kentucky Center for School Safety engaged in an endeavor to identify and survey all the SROs in the state of Kentucky. As part of that effort, the investigators identified 211 SROs and each was sent a survey. The survey instrument included a series of questions about the: (a) demographic and workplace characteristics of the respondents, (b) SRO roles, responsibilities, and resources, and (c) perceptions of the school administrators with whom they interacted as part of their SRO role.[2] Following the mail survey protocol identified by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2008), data were obtained from 149 respondents, a response rate of 70.6%. [3]

Respondents were classified into two groups, SROs from rural jurisdictions (rural SROs) and SROs from non-rural jurisdictions (that we labeled urban SROs in the analyses and discussion that follow). Comparisons of the characteristics of these respondents were conducted using t-tests and chi-square analyses.

Jurisdictions where the rural officers served were defined using the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) classification system that takes into account the size of the school district and the district's distance from urban centers (Provasnik et al., 2007). The NCES classifies school districts into twelve different descriptors, including three definitions of rural districts. According to Provasnik and colleagues (2007), the rural classifications include census defined rural areas that are five miles or less from an urbanized area, (rural-fringe), more than five miles, but less than 25 miles from an urbanized area (rural-distant), or more than 25 miles from an urbanized area (rural-distant) (p. 2). Using this classification system, we identified 38 rural SROs (25.5% of the sample) and 111 urban SROs (74.5%).[4]

In order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of the jurisdictions where these officers worked, county-level data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau including average income and racial composition. In addition, the average expenditure per

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[2] Due to the length of the questionnaire (8 pages), it is not included in the Appendix, but can be obtained from the first author.
[3] Further data regarding the characteristics of the non-respondents (e.g., whether they were from urban or rural areas) were not available.

[4] A parallel series of analyses were conducted using an alternative classification of rural (SRO from places of less than 10,000 residents not adjacent to urban areas). This increased the size of the rural respondents to 57 officers, but the results were almost identical to the ones presented in these analyses. Consequently, the more conservative NCES definition of rural was used.

student was obtained from the NCES for each of the school districts. It was hypothesized that there might be a significant difference between rural and urban districts on these factors; specifically, we anticipated that rural jurisdictions would be more racially homogenous, poorer, and therefore have less funding for education.

Jurisdiction and School Characteristics

In Table 1, the results from the comparison of jurisdiction and school characteristics for rural and urban SROs are displayed. Consistent with expectations, the jurisdiction's population is much less in the rural areas, although this may be skewed by the number of respondents from two large urban centers (Lexington and Louisville). In addition, the county income and racial heterogeneity is also lower in the rural areas where the rural SROs worked: t-tests revealed that these differences were statistically significant.

The results presented in Table 1 also show the characteristics of the schools where the SROs were posted.[5] Again, consistent with expectations, rural SROs worked in smaller schools in districts that spent less per pupil, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Although the first SRO programs in Kentucky were initiated in Jefferson County (Louisville) in 1977, the results in Table 1 revealed that there was little difference in how long these programs had existed in rural or urban schools. Moreover, most officers, whether from urban or rural districts, were assigned to

middle or high schools (77.4% and 70.4%, respectively).

The SRO's primary school assignment revealed more differences. Urban SROs were more likely than rural SROs to be assigned to one school: 61.1% were assigned to one school and had some on-call responsibilities for other schools. By contrast, 60.5% of rural SROs reported being assigned to two or more schools. Chi-square tests were not conducted on these indicators, however, as many of the cells had an observed frequency of less than five cases. Thus, while the assigned school for the urban SROs was only slightly larger, in terms of pupil size, than the primary assigned school for rural SROs, almost two-thirds of the rural SROs were responsible for two or more schools.

Officer Characteristics

It was also hypothesized that there would be significant differences between rural and urban SROs in terms of their demographic characteristics, but the results in Table 2 show more similarities than differences between the two groups. Almost all SROs were White males.

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[5] In cases where the SRO was deployed to more than one school, the school where they spent a majority of their time was used.

Table 1. Jurisdiction and School Characteristics

Jurisdiction Characteristics			
	Rural SRO (n = 38)	Urban SRO (n = 111)	
City/town population (Mean)	4,012	103,063	*
County income 2008 (Mean)	26,030	32,899	*
County percentage White (Mean)	95.6	89.2	*ns*
School Characteristics			
	Rural SRO	Urban SRO	
School population	929	1,076	*
Expenditure pupil (District)	$9,581	$9,631	*ns*
SRO Program Existed (Years)	8.2	8.5	*ns*
School assignment (%)			
One school	10.5	26.4	
One school + on call (others)	28.9	34.9	*na*
Two schools	15.8	9.4	
More than two schools	44.7	29.2	
School Type (%)			
Mixed	5.7	5.6	
Elementary	23.8	16.7	*na*
Middle	59.0	66.7	
High School	11.4	11.1	
Employer (%)			
Sheriff	36.8	31.8	*na*
City police Dept.	36.8	45.5	
School district	10.5	15.5	
Blend	15.8	7.3	

Note: *ns* = non-significant, *na* = not applicable, * $p \leq .05$

Respondents were also very experienced: the average age of officers in either group was in the mid- to late-forties and they had almost two decades of law enforcement experience.[6]

Furthermore, both rural and urban SROs had similar SRO time on the job, with about five years in this role. Given that our experience suggests that officers

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[6] Anecdotal information suggests that a growing proportion of SROs are retired police officers

who are attracted to both working with youth as well as working the shorter school year. Follow-up studies could further investigate whether this observation is correct.

who perform SRO duties generally prefer those duties over typical law enforcement assignments, and often seek to remain in the SRO role after their initial assignment, this finding is not surprising.

Officers in both groups had similar amounts of formal education, with an average of two years post-secondary education. Two statistically significant differences between the two groups, however, were the proportion of urban officers who were members of professional associations, and the training that they received. Officers posted in urban schools were more likely to hold memberships in professional associations and to have received basic SRO or NASRO training or advanced NASRO training. A higher proportion of rural SROs, by contrast, had attended the advanced SRO training.

Regardless of whether they worked in an urban or rural school, respondents reported that they devoted slightly less than two-thirds of their time to law-enforcement related duties, a finding that mirrors that of previous research (May, Cordner, & Fessel, 2004). Rural SROs spent a higher proportion of their duties in counseling-related activities, while officers in both school classifications spent about 15% of their time teaching. In addition to these formal duties, these officers were also involved in a number of student organizations and after-school activities. While over one-half of SROs in both urban and rural schools reported being involved in extra-curricular activities, rural SROs were almost twice as likely to sponsor student organizations.

The finding that rural SROs reported spending more time counseling and sponsoring student organizations is suggestive that rates of engagement with students in rural areas may be higher than urban SROs, although this result should be interpreted with some caution as it is plausible that urban officers spend similar amounts of time with youth dedicated to support and counseling while engaging in other activities. Investigators in follow-up studies might find it fruitful to further examine this issue to help us discern the differences between these two groups.

There is some debate in the policing literature about the degree to which officers in rural areas have a stronger community service orientation than officers in cities. Pelfrey (2007) observed that:

Due to the close relationship between the police and their constituents in rural areas, police are more likely to represent the values and customs of the community than officers in urban areas and are also more likely to handle low-level incidents through informal means. (p. 621)

Consistent with that observation, Torres and Stefkovich (2009) found that officials in urban schools were more likely to handle matters formally (e.g., making a formal referral to the authorities) than those in rural or small communities.

Table 2. SRO Characteristics

	Rural SRO (n = 38)	Urban SRO (n = 111)	
Race (Percentage White)	100	95.5	*ns*
Gender (Percentage Male)	97.3	94.5	*ns*
Age (Years)	47.0	45.7	*ns*
Education (Years)	14.1	14.2	*ns*
LEO Experience (Years)	19.0	19.8	*ns*
SRO Experience (Years)	4.8	5.0	*ns*
Membership Professional Association (%)	55.3	62.4	*
Training			
Basic SRO	61.8	68.4	
Advanced SRO	44.8	40.0	*
Basic NASRO	42.3	53.6	
Advanced NASRO	14.3	21.5	
Duties (Percentage)			
Law Enforcement	58.8	61.4	
Counselor	27.4	21.8	*ns*
Teaching	14.0	15.5	
SRO sponsor student organizations	27.0	15.5	*
SRO participate in extra-curricular activities	54.1	55.1	*ns*

Note: *ns* = non-significant, *na* = not applicable, * $p \leq .0$

It is possible that the foundation for this informal approach toward law enforcement is built, at least in some communities, between SROs and students, and that the police also benefit from this arrangement in terms of public support. Hurst (2007), for example, reported that rural high school students were generally supportive and trusting of the police. Maguire and King (2004) noted that policing in schools does have a socialization component, and while we can't make any general inferences about officer-student engagement based on these findings, they suggest that an informal approach toward law enforcement may be more evident in rural schools.

Perceptions of School Administrators

Wald and Thurau (2010) observed that working relationships between officers and school staff members are strained in some settings. Having positive working relationships between school administrators and the officers deployed in schools is important (May, Fessel, & Means, 2004).

To better understand these connections, a number of survey items solicited perceptions of the SROs about the extent to which they felt welcomed and supported by school administrators. Officers were also asked a series of questions regarding the degree to which school administrators were concerned about students and teachers, and their perceptions about different types of school-related crime. These responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. SRO Perceptions of School Administrators
(Percentage of SRO who reported strong agreement)

	Rural SRO (n = 38)	Urban SRO (n = 111)	
Welcome SRO presence	86.1	83.8	*ns*
Supportive of SRO	83.3	82.0	*ns*
Concerned about students	91.7	87.3	*ns*
Concerned about teachers	88.9	79.3	*ns*
Low tolerance violence	94.4	74.5	*
Low tolerance gang members	88.9	76.4	*
Low tolerance drugs	97.2	81.8	*
Strict enforcement rules	77.8	56.4	*
Cooperate with investigations	88.9	79.1	*ns*

Note: *ns* = non-significant, *na* = not applicable, * $p \leq .05$

Regardless of whether they were assigned to a rural or urban school, officers strongly agreed with the statement that their presence was welcomed by school administrators and that administrators were supportive. Rural SROs were more likely than urban SROs, however, to perceive that school administrators were concerned about students and teachers. One interpretation for this finding is that rural administrators might have less social distance between themselves and the teachers that they supervise. Alternatively, it is plausible that the demands of managing larger schools reduces the time school administrators can spend with students or teachers, which may give the appearance of reduced concern.

In terms of student crime and disorder, rural SROs reported that administrators were much less tolerant of violence, gang-involved students, and drug use than urban SROs. Furthermore, the rural SROs in this sample perceived school administrators to be more supportive of the strict enforcement of school rules and cooperate with investigations. This is an important

finding, as there is increasing concern over the criminalization of school-related misconduct. Theriot (2009), for instance, compared schools that had SROs compared to ones that didn't, and found that the presence of an officer led to more arrests for disorderly conduct (but fewer arrests for some other crimes). This finding must be tempered by the fact that Theriot's study examined urban and suburban schools, and it is plausible that these results may differ in rural school districts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many of our ideas about rural crime and justice are shaped by stereotypical perspectives—the friendly and well-meaning but unsophisticated approach of Sheriff Andy in Mayberry comes to mind for most baby-boomers—but this perspective has also been reinforced through the popular culture (for example, television series such as Criminal Minds, CSI, and other program and films of this genre that often portray urban officers as more sophisticated and professional than their rural counterparts). Many rural nsheriffs' offices and police departments are further constrained by their small size and must work within the limitations of geography and a lack of resources due to small or impoverished tax bases. Often the size of these agencies limits their ability to specialize, resulting in officers anddeputies that must respond to almost every conceivable law enforcement challenge without the advantages of additional resources or access to specialized training.

The results of this research challenge the assumption that a lack of resources will necessarily result in poorly educated and trained officers in rural law enforcement. Inconsistent

with expectations, this research showed that when it comes to SROs, those working in rural Kentucky schools had almost identical levels of post-secondary education and years of experience as their counterparts in larger jurisdictions.

The results also suggest that the daily work activities of rural and urban SROs do not differ significantly. Both urban and rural SROs spend most of their time performing law enforcement functions (although those tasks might differ depending on the dynamics of the school, given the differences between school administrators highlighted by the SROs) and both groups are heavily involved in extracurricular activities. One particularly interesting finding was that rural SROs were almost twice as likely as urban SROs to sponsor student organizations. Thus, at least among this sample of officers, rural SROs appear to be somewhat more engaged with students after school than urban SROs. Further research in this area is needed to understand the source and nature of these differences.

One limitation of this study is that rural policing is not a homogenous endeavor, and it is difficult to make broad assumptions based on the results from a single state. Liederbach and Frank (2003) used observational data from different rural police agencies and found that there was variation in their work routines, even in a relatively small sample of rural Ohio counties. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that the results reported in this study of Kentucky SROs might not be generalizable to the rest of the nation, especially when one considers the thousands of schools and small law enforcement agencies.

Rural police agencies are sometimes constrained by their size and

the realities of rural geography and economics (Wolf et al., 2008). As many are too small to take advantage of economies of scale or deploy officers in specialized programs, they are forced to "make do." Still, this study showed that the teachers and students in rural Kentucky schools are not under-served—at least in terms of officer experience, involvement in extra-curricular activities, years of formal education or training—than their counterparts in urban schools. As such, these findings challenge the conventional wisdom that citizens in rural areas receive less professional services. Having made that statement, however, this research suggests that similar national-level studies be conducted of SROs as well as other types of specialized law enforcement units as there may be more similarities than differences between the law enforcement services delivered in urban and rural jurisdictions.

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