Public Perceptions of School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs

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School Safety

- Several high profile incidents in 1990s
  - Put pressure on school and police administrators to “do something”
- Responses
  - Technological solutions
  - Zero-tolerance policies
  - Addition of security staff
    - Assignment of sworn police officers to schools
Police in Schools

• Presence of police in schools not new, extent of their presence is
  – Prior to 1990s police footprint was small
  – Now police in schools is largely taken for granted
    • 43% local police departments/47% sheriff’s departments
    • SRO program participation increases with jurisdiction size
    • Estimated 20,000 SROs (2003)
School Resource Officers

• Reconceptualization of the police role
• SRO programs embody many of the principles and aims of community policing
  – Forging new relationships with citizens, new partnerships with other institutions
  – Explicit recognition of many non-enforcement duties police are called upon to provide
• Tripartite Mission: law enforcement, law-related education, counseling/mentorship
Effectiveness of SRO Programs

• Do they work?
  – We don’t really know…
  – Most research focuses on perceptions/attitudes, not student behavior
    • SRO evaluations are largely descriptive, not predictive
    • Lack of multivariate models
Perceptions of SRO Programs

• School administrators, teachers, parents, students generally supportive
  – Largely anecdotal, descriptive analyses
  – We know little about the factors that shape these attitudes/perceptions

• General public perceptions
  – Deep body of research on perceptions/attitudes of police in general…
  – No research on perceptions of SRO programs
Research Questions

• Is the general public familiar with SRO concept?
• Is the general public aware of Anchorage SRO program?
• Does the general public believe there is a need for SRO program in Anchorage?
• Does the general public have confidence that SRO programs can achieve their objectives?
Data and Methods

• Anchorage Community Survey (2009)
  – Mixed-mode survey (mail, internet)
    • 5-stage protocol
  – Adult heads of household
  – Sample size: $n=1,983$

• Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression
  – 5 models
Dependent Variables

• SRO Program Objectives:
  – Crime/Delinquency Prevention
  – School Climate and Safety
  – Police-Community Relations
  – Community Quality-of-Life
  – Unintended Consequences

• Confirmatory factor analyses
• Summated scales
Predictor Variables

• **Demographics**
  – Age; Race; Gender; Education; Marital status; Employment status; Parent of ASD student; Residential tenure

• **Household**
  – Income; Language spoken at home

• **Crime/Victimization**
  – Prior felony assault (household); Prior misdemeanor assault (household); Fear of youth victimization

• **Attitudes/Perceptions of Police – General**
  – Crime control; Order maintenance; Fairness; Confidence; Official contact; Social contact

• **School/SRO**
  – Satisfaction K-12; Prior knowledge SRO programs

• **Neighborhood**
  – Street crime; Loitering
# OLS Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Beta</th>
<th>Model 2 Beta</th>
<th>Model 3 Beta</th>
<th>Model 4 Beta</th>
<th>Model 5 Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.009</td>
<td>.098***</td>
<td>.107***</td>
<td>-.064**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race (White)</td>
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<td>-.069**</td>
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<td>Language Spoken at Home (English)</td>
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<td>-.022</td>
<td>-.059**</td>
<td>-.032</td>
</tr>
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**Model 1**: Delinquency Prevention; **Model 2**: School Climate and Safety; **Model 3**: Police-Community Relations; **Model 4**: Community Quality-of-Life; **Model 5**: Unintended Consequences.
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<tr>
<td>Rating: APD Crime Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rating: Confidence in APD</td>
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<td>-.133***</td>
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<td>Satisfaction: K-12 Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Problem: Loitering</td>
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<td>-.004</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>-.053*</td>
<td>-.014</td>
</tr>
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| Constant:                      |              |              |              |              |              |
| R²:                            | .077         | .053         | .092         | .075         | .118         |
| N:                             | 1,745        | 1,745        | 1,745        | 1,745        | 1,745        |

**Model 1:** Delinquency Prevention; **Model 2:** School Climate and Safety; **Model 3:** Police-Community Relations; **Model 4:** Community Quality-of-Life; **Model 5:** Unintended Consequences.
Summary

• What factors influence public confidence in SRO programs?
  – It depends on which domain of SRO activity people are asked about
    • Some factors are significant in some models, but not others
    • Some factors are consistent predictors, but others are not
    • Direction of effects can vary, depending on domain
  – Public support for SRO programs is multidimensional and “fuzzy”
Significant Predictors

- **Demographics**
  - Age (4); Gender (4); Race (2); Education (1); Marital status (1); Parent of student (1); Residential tenure (1);

- **Household characteristics**
  - Language spoken at home (2); income (1)

- **Attitudes toward police (general)**
  - Rating: Crime control (4); Confidence in police (4)

- **Experience with police**
  - Social contact (5)

- **School/SRO program familiarity**
  - Prior knowledge SRO programs (4); Satisfaction K-12 education (2)

- **Neighborhood context**
  - Neighborhood problem: Loitering (1)
Non-Significant Predictors

- **Demographics**
  - Employment status

- **Attitudes toward police (general)**
  - Rating: Order maintenance; Police fairness

- **Experience with police**
  - Official contact APD officer

- **Crime Victimization/Fear**
  - Prior felony assault (household); Prior misdemeanor assault (household); Fear of youth victimization

- **Neighborhood context**
  - Neighborhood problem: Street crime
Conclusions

• Demographics
  – Consistency and magnitude of effect varied, but…
  – Provide important clues to the complexity of public’s perceptions
  – Beliefs in police efficacy deeply intertwined with socio-cultural identities

• Institutional Legitimacy/Public Conception of Police Role
  – Faith in ability of police to control crime (but not Order Maintenance, Police Fairness)
  – Overall confidence in the police

• Contextual Knowledge
  – Prior knowledge of SRO programs, satisfaction with K-12 education, perceptions of community disorder

• Nature of Interactions with Police
  – Interactions outside the realm of “official” duties are important
Conclusions

• **Crime/Delinquency**
  – Public appears to view SRO programs as a delinquency prevention strategy
  – But confidence in them seems to be unrelated to underlying crime concerns

• **Public Support for Police is Multidimensional and “Fuzzy”**
  – Level of support depends on domain of activity
  – Influence of predictive factors varies across domains of activity
  – Must be careful when making blanket statements about public support
    • Public perceptions of police are remarkably nuanced
    • Research efforts must reflect this reality
Questions?

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