Students Perceptions of Safety in Response to a School Resource Officer Program

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Abstract

To increase school safety, many schools are implementing school resource officer programs (SROs). SROs are officers trained to work in schools with the goal of preventing crime (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). Whereas some studies have found that SROs improve students’ perceptions of safety (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005), others have found that SROs do not have an impact on students’ perceptions of safety (Bracy, 2011). Better understanding students’ perceptions of safety is critical, as it can impact student learning and the realized safety of the school (Welsh, 2000). The current study examined high school students’ perceptions of safety in a high school with an SRO. Twenty-seven ninth and tenth grade students from Metea Valley High School completed a self-devised survey about the impact of the SRO on perceptions of school and personal safety. It was hypothesized that the students would perceive the SRO as promoting school and personal safety. Results indicated that while the students believed the SRO kept the school safe, it did not impact their perceptions of personal safety. The SRO program appears to have a positive impact on school safety overall but could benefit from clarifying its role and goals with students.
When watching the news, it would seem that the number of instances of school violence is on the rise. Stories of mass violence in school, including the 1999 Columbine school shooting incident have drawn the eye of the media and make these incidents appear to occur more frequently than they truly do. After the incident at Columbine, a poll from *USA Today* found that 68% of Americans thought a school shooting was likely in their hometown (Bracy, 2011). However, the media’s portrayal of the issue is unrealistic. In fact, schools are still one of the safest places to be for children and teenagers; the percentage of children reporting being victimized in school has declined (Beger, 2003). This may be due to increased awareness of the issue of violence in schools and the counteractive measures taken by schools. Overall, the occurrence of school violence has been declining since 1994 (University of Virginia, 2014). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2012), only 2% of youth homicides occur in schools, and this statistic has been stable for the past ten years.

Despite the decline in the incidence of school violence over the past two decades, school violence does still occur. In 2011, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention completed a study of a representative group of 9th-12th graders. From the self-report data that was gathered in the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey, it was found that 5.4% of students reported carrying a weapon in their school in the 30 days previous to the survey. The same survey reported that 7.4% of students said they had either been threatened or harmed with a weapon that another student had brought to school. An additional 20% of students reported that they had been bullied on school grounds within the 12 months before the survey, and 5.9% of students said that they would skip school because they felt unsafe (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), between July 2010 and June 2011, there were 31 school-associated violent deaths in elementary
and secondary schools. Though statistics show that these numbers are decreasing, the seriousness of the consequences of school violence warrants further research. Specifically, it appears that there is a need for a focus on other areas of school safety, such as student perceptions of the safety programs being implemented by the schools to decrease the occurrence of school violence.

A majority of the current literature has a primary focus on the effectiveness of security measures rather than on student perceptions of safety. For instance, Jennings, Khey, Maskaly, and Donner (2011) collected data as a part of the 2006 School Survey on Crime and Safety; the focus of this data collection was specifically on whether or not law enforcement security measures reduced the incidence of violence in schools. These authors concluded that the SRO program appeared to have a positive impact on levels of school violence. Another study completed by Brady, Balmer, and Phenix (2007) explored whether the increased presence of police and other officers was successful in reducing violence in schools that were found to previously have higher than average levels of violence. The study found that there was only a slight decrease in major crimes upon increasing police presence.

However, this focus on effectiveness instead of student perceptions has resulted in the implementation of policies and measures that could possibly have a negative effect on students. Schools have begun implementing security measures such as zero tolerance policies, drug sniffing dogs, lockless lockers, ID badges, SWAT team rehearsals, lock-down drills, student drug testing, school resource officers or school police, and some schools have banned backpacks and large purses (Beger, 2003). One study found that 69% of students between 12 and 18 reported having police or security in school; the same study also found that 55% of all schools used security cameras, and 11% of schools used metal detectors (Bracy, 2011). These policies can have positive and negative consequences. For example, zero tolerance policies are positive in
that they show students the seriousness of certain violations. On the other hand, the number of expulsions, suspensions, and school-based arrests has “exploded” in recent years, after zero tolerance policies and security programs surged in popularity (Dohrn, 2001, p. 98). Initially, a one-year expulsion was required when students brought a firearm onto school property; eventually, schools and legislation began to apply this expulsion to incidences involving “dangerous weapons” (Dohrn, 2001, p. 99). As time has gone on, schools looking to create safer environments have increasingly added actions to this list of violations that could result in expulsions and suspensions, including incidents that have taken place off of school property.

Impact of Students’ Perceptions of Safety on Learning

Better understanding student perceptions of safety is critical, given that these have been linked to a variety of negative academic outcomes. There are several factors that impact the school’s ability to educate students, one of which is the existence of security measures that are seen as too aggressive by students. Aggressive measures have been proposed to result in mistrust among students and other school members, as students have been shown to learn best in environments where they can trust and where they feel trusted, respected, and encouraged (Beger, 2003). As was mentioned earlier, some students felt that these security measures added unnecessary stress, which could distract these individuals from their work. One student was quoted as saying, “…all these other rules and all this other stuff, it makes all the kids all frustrated, and they get off track with school, and it just throws everything off” (Bracy, 2011, p. 377).

Aggressive measures may also be problematic if they foster feelings of external locus of control among students. Schools are encouraged to let students have a say in the curriculum, the rules, and the punishments (Edwards, 2001; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Welsh, 2000; Bracy,
In addition to possibly feeling apathetic, students may take aggressive actions to be heard (Nielsen, 1996). In addition to the relationships between security officers and students, the relationships between students and teachers may become strained by strict measures such as zero tolerance policies. In the past, moments where students misbehaved may have resulted in a small punishment for the student, but the moment also provided an opportunity for teaching about appropriate behavior or prompted a discussion about serious topics. Opponents of zero tolerance measures describe the policies as taking away these moments (Ayers, Ayers, & Dohrn, 2001). Instead of discussing complex and serious ideas with students during these teaching moments, bringing up these topics result in students being labeled as having done something “inappropriate.” This makes some topics off-limits, preventing creativity having to do with complex issues in classes such as writing and limit the topics available for exploration by students (Fine & Smith, 2001).

Lack of perceived safety has also been linked to timidity and avoidance (Knutson, 1954). Timidity can cause individuals behaving apprehensively, which can be negative. When a student is feeling timid, they may be less likely to speak up during class and either offer suggestions or to ask questions when they do not understand the material. Students who are fearful may also engage in avoidant behavior (Knutson, 1954). In 2001, it was found that 160,000 students are absent from school each day due to fear and the need to avoid the environment (Garbarino & deLara, 2004). Students may skip class periods, avoid certain areas of the school, or they may skip school altogether (Nielsen, 1996). Student learning will suffer due to their lack of class attendance and students skipping school may also find themselves in negative environments.

Nielsen (1996) believed that conformity could also be a possible negative reaction to fear or perceptions of being unsafe that may affect student learning. A few students were described as
saying that they joined gangs because if they did not, they were targets (Devine, 1996). Darley (1966) found this desire to be part of a group common in his study of fearful subjects. School is the time for students to make choices and learn from their mistakes. However, if people are fearful of being rejected or want to join a group to enhance feelings of safety, they are likely to conform and follow the group, which may hinder their personal growth (Nielsen, 1996).

The Influence of the Environment on Perceptions of Safety

The environment, specifically the nature and consistency with which rules are applied, appears to have a large influence over perceptions of safety. Welsh (2000) stated that schools that had unclear or inconsistently enforced rules were found to be the ones with the most severe discipline problems. Edwards (2001) wrote that arbitrarily enforced rules could result in confrontational student behavior, as students perceive the rules as unimportant if they do not have to be followed all of the time. In this situation, the rules and their creators are not perceived as legitimate (Bracy, 2011). Rules should be clearly stated and communicated to students, because clear rules promote a safe learning environment and perceptions of safety (Grady, 1996; Nielsen, 1996).

In addition to promoting a safe learning environment, clear and consistently enforced rules may assist students in the process of peer predictability. Garbarino and deLara (2004) discuss the idea of “peer predictability,” which refers to the idea that in unpredictable situations, students take on the extra work of “observing, categorizing, and eventually predicting the attitudes and behaviors” of other students (deLara, 2000, p. 21). Adolescents were found to rely on peer predictability the most in situations in which they felt they could not rely on adults to provide the safety they needed and expected (deLara, 2000). This evaluation allows students to interpret current behavior and makes for better predictions about possible future behavior of
peers. According to the authors, the more anonymous the place (anonymity being associated with a larger school), the less able students are to predict the actions of other students, which results in perceptions of danger or general insecurity. The ability to predict peer behavior has been found to be one of the most important predictors of feelings of security (Garbarino & deLara, 2004). When asked what personally makes them feel safe in school, many students responded with the general idea that they knew everyone and knew how everyone would act (deLara, 2000). Peer predictability can be assisted through clear and consistently enforced rules, as these rules will control or direct behavior, typically making others’ actions easier to predict.

**The Impact of School Resource Officers**

One safety program that has gained popularity in schools in recent years is the school resource officer (SRO) program. The first school resource officer program was based in Flint, Michigan in 1953. The National Association of School Resource Officers attributes a decline in school violence in the 1990s to the creation and expansion of this program, which swelled in popularity at this time (Canady, James, & Nease, 2012). In this type of program, a police officer is deployed by a law enforcement agency or employed by a school and is meant to perform his or her tasks at the community level. This can include crime prevention and response, changing the overall culture of safety of the school, building relationships with students and staff, and educating students about laws and their rights. The law enforcement agency and the school will establish the exact duties of a SRO, but in general, SROs are meant to function as a law enforcement officer, teacher, and informal counselor, generally focusing on legal issues. It is expected that officers are trained in how to deal with many situations, such as law-related education, school safety procedures and emergency management, crime prevention, substance
abuse, school law, counseling for child abuse and special education, crisis intervention
techniques, active shooter response, and many others (Stephens, 2013).

Specific duties the officer may take part in include making arrests and issuing citations on
the school campus; removing individuals from school property; responding to off-campus
incidents that involve students; being a first-responder to campus; responding to situations that
may not necessarily be criminal but could escalate, such as bullying; and creating or expanding
crime prevention efforts at the school and the surrounding community (James & McCallion,
2013). Officers can become liaisons between students and school officials, become mentors to
students, and educate students and teachers on legal matters. For a program to be successful, the
SROs responsibilities must be clearly established, there must be ongoing and effective
communication between the school and the officer, continued training of the SRO, and ongoing
assessment of the program (Stephens, 2013).

As of 2003, Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) had awarded $700 million
schools, funding 6,150 school resource officer positions (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). The
number of school resource officers peaked in 2003, and has dropped slightly (by about 800
officers) in the most recent survey that was conducted in 2007. According to the School Survey
on Crime and Safety in the 2007-2008 school year, there were just short of 20,000 school
resource officers employed in the US (James & McCallion, 2013). In the same survey, only 26%
of high schools with a population of 1000 students or more did not have a SRO present at least
one day per week. Smaller schools were less likely to have a SRO present; 57% of schools with
an enrollment of 500-999 students, 73% of schools with 300-499 students, and 84% of schools
with fewer than 300 students had a SRO present at least one day per week (James & McCallion,
2013).
Evidence with respect to effects of SROs on student perceptions of safety is mixed. Some students seem to prefer having an SRO in school (Barnes, 2005; Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1994; McDevitt & Panniello, 2005; Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2012), some do not care about the presence of the officer (Bracy, 2011), and some dislike the program (Devine, 1996; Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2012).

**Evidence Supporting the Use of SROs to Increase Perceptions of Safety**

McDevitt and Panniello (2005) performed research in four schools. Participants were 907 students either in grades six, eight, ten, or twelve who completed a 38-item survey. The survey was meant to gather information on student perceptions of their school’s SRO; more specifically, it focused on how often they interacted with the officer, what the student’s opinion of the officer was, and about the activities that the students saw the officer participate in. Of the students that reported having had several conversations with the officer, most (92%) reported feeling safe compared to those who had not had conversations with the officer (84%). Additionally, of those who reported having a positive opinion of the officer, 92% reported feeling safe and of those who did not have a positive opinion, only 76% felt safe. Lastly, more of those who felt comfortable reporting an incident to the officer also testified to feeling safe (94%) than did those who would not report incidents (75%). Overall, this data suggests that school resource officers increased students’ perceptions of safety when they had conversations with students, when the students had a positive opinion of the SRO, and when the students felt comfortable reporting crime to the officers.

Johnson, Burke, and Gielen (2012) worked with two groups of high school students in an after school program to create concept maps depicting aspects of the school that made them feel safe or unsafe. These students came from two different after school programs and any student in
the program could participate; Group A contained twelve students and Group B had fifteen students. Each group met with the researchers three times. In the first session, the participants were asked to create a list of items that described their school that in any way affected their experience of violence. Students generated most of the terms used, but the researchers added a few based on a previous literature review they had completed. In the second session, participants were given cards that each had one of the terms that they had generated as a group and were asked to sort the terms into groups that they felt had similar qualities. In the third session, the participants were shown the first draft of the concept map that contained all of the terms they had generated. Participants were shown how the points could be separated into clusters and, as a team, terms were separated into groups that they felt best described how they perceived the school environment to influence violence. Results indicated that two variables were associated with decreased perceptions of student safety: unpatrolled school areas and inability of faculty to enforce rules. A school resource officer would be able to patrol these particularly dangerous areas and reduce the incidences of crime both by being in that location and by being better trained to handle more diverse types of situations, such as those including weapons or violence, which teachers may feel uncomfortable handling. Students also listed the presence of school police, school police policies, school police who make sure students go to class, and school police who are aware all as factors that would help them feel safer in school. According to this study, if done well, the program can have many benefits, including increasing perceptions of safety, as well as increased actual safety.

In his newspaper article, Barnes (2005) details his discussions with students at the YMCA Legislative Weekend in Washington D.C. Though this is not an empirical study, the passion demonstrated by students shows how strongly the program can affect students. Barnes
wrote that students gathered to discuss the issue of having members of the police working in their school, and many lined up to publicly ask questions about the current security detail and give their opinions about the benefits of having a trained officer in their school. One student claimed that they see others with drugs and weapons in school and many believed that a police officer would be better trained to handle such incidents. One student currently attending a school with a school resource officer stated that the officer made a difference and cited a lack of physical violence between two groups that frequently fought with one another in previous years. In these particular schools, students actively called for trained security officers, and others attested to their effectiveness in providing actual safety and perceived safety.

**Evidence Showing SROs Have No Effect on Perceptions of Safety**

One study to date suggests that SROs do not affect student safety. Bracy (2011) conducted a study at Cole High School and Vista High School in which the majority of students’ perceptions of safety were largely unaffected the officer’s presence. Participants in this study included students and staff at two high schools over a whole school year. Two individuals (a graduate student and a professor) were present in the schools several days every week; time was spent observing community member interactions, typically between students and administration or faculty to see how the groups interacted and how rules were enforced. Twenty-six individuals at each school were also interviewed in person. Interviews were conducted with administrators, the SRO, disciplinary staff, teachers, students, and parents. The researchers varied the times and days of their visits and particularly focused on instances where students were being disciplined or arrested. Results indicated that most students did not care about the presence of the school resource officers for three primary reasons: 1) they thought their school was already safe, making the SRO unnecessary, 2) they believed that because the SRO was just one person, he or she
would not be able to prevent a significant amount of crime, and 3) they thought that students wanting to break rules would do it anyway, whether the officer was there or not. The author concluded that security strategies used by schools may have little impact on the level of safety that students perceive. Furthermore, several students reported that the security measures resulted in extra stress for the students, which in turn became a distraction from schoolwork (Bracy, 2011).

**Evidence Against the Use of SROs**

In the Bracy (2011) study described in the previous section, it was found that students felt aggressive security measures, such as SROs, could create a “prison-like environment” (p. 369), whereby students and staff are treated as criminals instead of community members. Some students saw these security measures, such as police, metal detectors, and cameras, as a challenge—they thought others would try to bring weapons into school to challenge the system (deLara, 2000). One student interviewed by Bracy believed that the aggressive security measures were stressful for students and created worry about all of their actions, because “they have so many rules…every little thing you can get into trouble for” (Bracy, 2011, p. 377). In addition to adding stress and frustration, these security measures can reduce trust between students and the staff possibly even resulting in oppositional relationships between the groups (Beger, 2003). Edwards (2001) believes that some level of trust is needed among community members to really prevent violence, as having trusting relationships with others in the environment promotes a nature of nonviolence and care for others.

Ryan, Mathews, and Banner (1994) completed a study in one school that housed seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. The purpose of the study was to observe the process of implementing a partnership between a school and a SRO to address the issue of violence in schools in Ontario, to
assess the effectiveness of the program, and to determine school member responses to the program. The purpose of the program being implemented was to create a safer learning environment, to help the school develop a better relationship with the police, and to help protect students outside of the immediate school environment. Participants consisted of 397 students in addition to administrators, the officer, and staff that responded to victimization surveys, self-report surveys, and additional surveys examining students’ levels of fear and perceptions of the violence problem. The officer and administrators thought that the program was successful in establishing control over student behavior, developing trust between community members, encouraging victims to report incidents, and deterring crime. The staff claimed that they did not see a great deal of change in student perceptions of safety as a result of the project but did notice a decrease in violence. Students reported that they believed the program reduced levels of violence in the school, but the majority reported only feeling safe “sometimes” or “most of the time” in school, which was not a change from the pre-test. A minority of students in this project perceived the new program as a sign that the school was unsafe. However, students said they might feel more comfortable with the program as time went on and stated that the program should continue into the next year (Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1994).

In his book, Devine (1996) focuses on his work in three schools in inner city New York. The purpose of the book as a whole was to observe the process by which violence becomes a normal occurrence in school and to study the accompanying culture of fear in schools. The data was collected through “hanging out” ethnography (Devine, 1996, p. 61) in which students would often stop by the office on their own time or when they were referred to the office by teachers, where Devine and his graduate students worked as tutors in the high school. The researchers also observed interactions between students in the halls and between students and teachers in
classrooms. The information in this study was gathered through qualitative research and the author made use of anecdotal evidence. After all of his observations, Devine claims that the New York City schools responded to a perceived increase in school violence by instituting militant security measures that take disciplinary action totally away from teachers and gives it to security. He reported that police presence in schools is making the problem worse, by criminalizing behavior rather than finding a solution to the problem while not changing student perceptions of violence in school.

In addition to possibly making students more fearful and possibly worsening the problem by focusing on increasing security and not addressing other aspects of the issue, data suggest that additional variables, such as students being discriminated against by school resource officers, school police not being actively involved, students not trusting the officers, and rules being enforced too harshly may also reduce student perceptions of safety (Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2012).

**Summary and Study Aims**

To summarize, SRO programs have been implemented as one way of enhancing student perceptions of safety. However, data on the effectiveness of these programs is lacking; additionally, the data that is available is mixed with respect to the impact of the SRO on student perceptions of safety, with some studies reporting benefits (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005; Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2012; Barnes, 2005), some reporting negative outcomes (Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1994; Devine, 1996), and others suggesting no impact (Bracy, 2011). At this point in time, there is a lack of consistent evidence about the effects of school resource officers on students’ perceptions of safety.
In an effort to further elucidate student perceptions in response to SRO programs, the purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of student safety among high school students. The current study hopes to add to the literature by surveying students in a mid-sized school about their perceptions of the School Resource Officer program and its effect on perceived student safety.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants consisted of 27 students enrolled in Metea Valley High School (MVHS) in Aurora, Illinois, a public high school totaling 2,624 students. Nine of these students were in ninth grade, and 18 were in tenth grade. These students ranged in age from 14 to 16 with an average age of 15.1 (SD = .66). There were 15 female participants (55.6%) and 12 male participants (44.4%) in this study. The students were all part of Health and Physical Education courses at MVHS. Of these students, 21 had previously attended a grade school or middle school that also employed a school resource officer.

**Materials**

Students were administered the following questionnaires:

**School safety questionnaire.** The School Safety questionnaire is a self-devised questionnaire that consists of 13 questions (5 Likert scale, 8 free response) aimed to assess how the school resource officer program influences student perceptions of personal safety and the overall safety of the school. To examine student perceptions of safety in school as they are affected by the school resource officer program, the survey questions focused on student perceptions across three topics: the purpose of the SRO (e.g., “What do you believe is the purpose of a school resource officer?”), the students’ expectations of violence and how those
were affected by the SRO (e.g., “With the school resource officer present, I expect less violence at school.”), and how safe the students feel in school and how the officer affected those feelings of safety (e.g., “Do you like having the school resource officer in the high school? Why or why not?”).

**Demographics questionnaire.** This questionnaire was used to gather basic information about the participant, such as students’ age, gender, and year in school, and previous exposure to a school resource officer in middle school.

**Procedure**

Research ethics approval was first obtained by both the host institution and the high school. Given that students participating in the study were under age 18, they were required to obtain a parental consent form and also sign a student assent form before participating. Parental consent forms were distributed by the school social worker and various health teachers to 167 students enrolled in Health and Physical Education classes at Metea Valley High School. Students who returned signed parental consent forms were given their own assent form to sign and return if they would like to participate in the study. Twenty-seven students returned signed parental and self consent forms. Six students returned parental consent forms but did not sign self-consent forms and therefore were not included in the study.

Data collection occurred over four sessions that occurred on consecutive days. Students were removed from their health or physical education class and taken to a classroom in the same area of the school that was not currently in use. Participants completed the study questionnaires and were each given a debriefing form upon completion that included information about the purpose of the study, the relevance of their perceptions of safety, how perceptions of safety can affect a student’s education, and contact information for the researcher should they like to find
out the results of the study or gather other information on the topic. Students were also directed to speak with the school guidance counselors if they were feeling uncomfortable following their completion of the survey.

Results

Quantitative responses were analyzed using SPSS; qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic coding. Themes within student free responses were coded and then transferred into SPSS, where frequencies of themes were analyzed.

Purpose of the SRO

When given a free response question about the purpose of the school resource officer, 59.3% of students answered the free response question stating that the purpose was to prevent or protect them from violence, and 29.6% of students responded that the officer was also meant to provide guidance or assistance to students with anything they need. One student who believed the officers had this broader role wrote, “They were there to help kids who felt they were having trouble fitting into school and also there just to talk to.” Outside of this general assistance role, 11.1% of participants believed the officer was meant to help students with their academics. Only a small minority (n = 2) expressed that the officer was there to assist the school with legal matters, such as arresting students engaging in misconduct, and one student wrote that he or she was unsure of the officer’s role.

Participants were also asked to explain why they believed their school in particular had a school resource officer. The answers to this question were very similar to the above question; 59.3% of respondents mentioned that the officer was there to protect the school and to prevent violence, and 37% of students replied that the officer was there to help them be successful in
school and help them in an academic context. Additionally, one student expressed the belief that the school did not have a SRO.

**Expectations of Violence**

Overall, students reported that they did not expect to see school violence frequently (see Figure 1). Students attributed these beliefs to school rules, student attitudes, and a lack of previous experiences with violence in school. The students who responded that they did not expect to see violence frequently most often cited student attitudes, believing that the students all get along or know better than to fight (29.6%); one student wrote, “…most students are mature and handle the situation appropriately.” Another common answer, given by 18.5% of the respondents, was that teachers or other school employees supervised the students, which led to less violence (“…there are always teachers supervising throughout the whole school.”). Another 18.5% of participants indicated that they believed violence was not common in school because they had not personally seen that much of it. A student even wrote, “I have not seen any violence yet so I don’t think I will be seeing any.” Witnessing previous school violence was the primary reason cited by students who expected to see frequent school violence; one participant stated, “We see kids fighting all of the time (at least once a week).” Smaller percentages of students (18.5% and 3.7% respectively) stated that arguments and “drama” among students could lead to violence (“…kids can easily get picked [on] so people will get mad and they will fight it out instead of going to a counselor.”) and that school employees cannot possibly stop all of the violence, because, “…you can’t watch everyone at once and you won’t always catch everything.”

To gain an understanding of whether or not students believe the school resource officer has an impact on violence, participants were asked if they expected to see less violence because the school had an SRO. Overall, the majority of students responded that the officer made them
expect less violence in school (see Figure 2). When asked to explain their answer, the most frequently given response, provided by 55.6% of students, was that they expected less violence with the SRO in school “because it is their job to create [a] safer environment for students.” Others (22.2%) wrote that the officer reduced their expectations of violence because other students did not want to be punished by the officer (“Students wouldn’t want to get in trouble for violence if there was an officer around to arrest them.”). Some students (14.8%) stated that the officer could not possibly prevent all violence (“I feel like they can’t eliminate everything violent” and “The officer isn’t always there 24/7…”). Additionally, participants responded that students would do what they wanted even with the officer around (11.1%), and that the officer was not visible or around enough to prevent violence (11.1%).

**Perceptions of Safety**

Results indicated that most students (92.6%) either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they felt safe in school. However, when students were prompted with another statement about if it was the school resource officer helping them to feel safe in school, the majority replied that the officer did not affect whether or not they felt safe (see Figure 3). When explaining whether or not the officer helped them feel safe in school, many students (33.3%) indicated that they felt the officer helped them feel safe in school because of the perception that his job is to look after and protect them. Other students (29.6%) also said the SRO increased their feelings of safety because they knew he was always available if needed and thought he was helpful. One of the students that indicated this response wrote, “It makes me feel safer I guess just because I feel like I know there is someone there in case of an emergency.” A small number of students (7.4%) mentioned that the officer might be able to handle a serious situation better than another school employee would due to their training and authority. For instance, one student wrote, “Resource officers
have more authority than a teacher (being that they are affiliated with the police) and can most likely resolve problems more effectively.” Students (22.2%) either did not know that the school had the officer or did not see the officer, which led them to reply that the officer did not affect their perceptions of safety. Additionally, other students (11.1%) responded that they either did not think the SRO was necessary or that they did not think he did anything; one student said, “I really don’t know what one does so I don’t know how they would affect my school life.”

Most students (63%) students reported feeling safe when they saw officer. Only 14.8% of students selected a neutral response to this question, and 11.1% of participants responded that they did not feel safe when they saw the officer (“No because he doesn’t do [anything],” see Figure 4). As for whether or not the officer kept the school safe in general, 63% of students said the officer did help with school safety.

Lastly, a majority of participants (51.9%) replied that they liked having the school resource officer in school. Thematic coding revealed two primary reasons as to why they liked having SROs in school: the SRO promotes feelings of safety and prevents violence (51.9%), and the SRO is available and necessary (18.5%). However, 14.8% of the participants indicated that they did not think the officer did anything (“I’ve never seen them do anything so I don’t know.”), while another 11.1% stated that they thought the officer might make the situation worse (“They can be immediate help in the face of danger but also make other students feel unsafe and [like there is] something wrong in their school.”).

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study suggest that students responded positively to the SRO program. The majority realized that the officer’s purpose was to protect them, but several students reported that they thought the SRO served a counseling/guidance or academic support
purpose as well. Students did not expect violence frequently because the school employed the officer because they know that it is the officer’s job to prevent violence in school. Most reported feeling personally safe in school, that they felt safe when the officer, and that they liked having the officer at their high school. However, the results showed that the students’ personal perceptions of safety were not affected (positively or negatively) by the school resource officer, but that the students did believe that the SRO kept the school safe as a whole. Though the students knew that the SRO’s job is to prevent violence and they therefore did not expect it often, this knowledge somehow did not affect their personal perceptions of safety; they felt personally safe in school, but they did not seem to attribute those feelings of safety to the presence of the officer and his ability to prevent violence. This may possibly be because they did not expect violence in the first place, meaning the officer was not necessary to make them feel safe, or possibly because they did not think they would personally be affected by violence.

Many students had been previously exposed to an SRO in their middle school. Therefore, it is possibly due to this previous experience with the program that the students mostly responded that the officer primarily served as a security measure for the school and was meant to protect them. However, some students expressed the belief that that officer was meant to also be a source of guidance, counseling, or academic support; one student in particular stated that the officer could help with any problem, such as difficulty transitioning from middle school to high school. It is possible that their school resource officers in middle school performed these tasks in addition to serving as security for the school. Furthermore, the school resource officer’s office is located in the “Freshman House” at Metea Valley High School, which is a section of the building where freshman students (other years have their own “houses” in the building) would find the dean for their grade level, as well as counselors and a school social worker. The location of the
SRO in this area of the school may have signaled to some of the students that the officer was meant to help them with problems that freshman typically face, such as difficulties fitting in or transitioning from middle school- to high school-level academic work. Or, the officer may have previously worked with some of these students in a guidance or academic setting, which may have resulted in students reporting that role.

In regard to the result that the students did not expect violence frequently, felt safe in school, and felt safe when they saw the officer, the reasoning is all very similar. Most of the students explained that they felt safe and did not expect violence because they had not personally seen much violence. They might see some shoving (according to one student), but they believed that was to be expected in a crowded hallway. A minority of students wrote they felt safe in school and did not expect violence because the school promotes an environment in which fighting does not have a place. Some cited strict policies against violence, and some said students knew better or just would not engage in violent behaviors. The latter is an encouraging prospect.

Upon entering the Freshman House, there was a sign with the acronym, LIFE (Live with integrity, Inspire passion for learning, Foster positive relationships, Expect equity and excellence for all) across it, and several of these posters were placed throughout the school. It seems that Metea Valley High School really focuses on developing good relationships between students, faculty, and administrators, which may have lead to students frequently reporting ideas similar to, “Our community is very accepting of one another” and, “MVHS is a lot better than most schools in terms of social connection, [so] not much happens.” The focus on the development of good relationships and behaviors used to resolve issues that do not involve fighting may be the reason behind the lack of expectations of violence among students.
One student specifically included LIFE in their response as to why they did not expect violence in school, and wrote that the officer promoted those values along with “optimistic behavior.” In addition to the promotion of acceptable and nonviolent behavior, many students reported that the SRO made them expect less violence simply because that is his job—to prevent violence and to protect school members, which was why they felt safe when they saw him around the school. This belief may have come from past experiences with middle school SROs, or it may have come from seeing the officer break up fights or perform any other necessary tasks previously at MVHS.

Although the students reported generally feeling safe and expecting less violence because the SRO was present, the majority (by a small percentage) still responded that the SRO did not impact their perceptions of personal safety either positively or negatively. This largely seems to be because students either did not know there was an officer, they did not know what the officer does, or they had not seen the officer become involved in violent situations. This belief that the officer did not affect their personal safety may be a result of the population of students surveyed. This particular group of students seems to have only had minimal contact with the officer. They have not personally seen the officer intervene in any situations and some had not even ever met them. Because they have not personally seen the officer become involved, their personal perceptions of safety may remain unchanged because they did not have any personal experiences to go on. The group of students’ reliance on personal experiences can be seen in other questions about expectations of violence, where students frequently based their answer off of whether or not they had previously seen violence in school.

On the other hand, most of the students replied that the officer kept the school safe and wrote, again, that it is the officer’s job to keep them safe and that they were trained and capable
to do so. Instead of being able to rely on personal experiences to respond about whether or not the resource officer kept the school safe as a whole, students may have had to rely on other students’ anecdotes about dealings with the officer. Relying on information that they had gathered previously from other students would have been the best way for them to understand how the whole school, as opposed to just them personally, felt affected by the officer.

Finally, the majority of students that reported that they liked having the officer in school replied, similarly to other questions, that he helped them feel safe and prevented violence. They also reported that they did not mind having him in the school, seemingly because he would not bother them if they did not do anything wrong. A small group responded that they thought the officer was good to have because he was available and because he was necessary. The idea of students finding the officer necessary is an interesting one, as it may convey the mindset that students have about violence in school. With school violence being often discussed in the media, student perceptions about the safety of their own school may be affected. These students in particular may have been paying attention to the media and have been impacted by the stories of violence; considering that most of the students reported that Metea Valley is a relatively violence-free school, the responses saying that having the officer was necessary were unexpected based on information gathered about Metea Valley High School alone and might be due to media attention on the issue.

The findings of this study provide a new perspective on how to consider the effectiveness of the school resource officer program and also possible ways that the visibility of the SRO could be increased. The results have shown that some students were unaware that the school had a school resource officer, and many others did not know exactly what the officer did or claimed that they had never seen the officer do anything. This could be a potential issue at any school
with a SRO program; it could be addressed by having the SRO introduce him or herself to incoming freshmen, by encouraging interactions between the students and the SRO, and even by having the SRO mingle with students in the halls or before or after school. The SRO and his or her purpose needs to be better known among students to have an effect. The students who did not ever interact with the officer were most often the ones that said the SRO did not make them feel more or less safe.

The results of this study also suggest that schools should ensure that they have enough officers in the school so students think the program can be effective at reducing violence or inappropriate behavior. A few students in this study responded that they did not think the one officer would be able to stop all of the violence or all of the bad behavior, because they cannot be everywhere at once and that students will find a way to get away with misconduct. Increasing the number of officers may improve their perceptions of the program, which may in turn have a positive impact on their perceptions of personal safety or overall school safety.

A final implication of this study is that, in addition to increasing interactions with students, there should be a formal way for students to address the officer or others working on the program about the SRO program. It would beneficial to allow to students to ask questions, as clarification about the program may ease any concerns they happen to have. These questions and concerns may also provide some interesting information for the individuals in charge of the program. Several students stated that officer could possibly “go overboard” or may make problems worse. Being able to get input from students with these opinions may provide new information to consider when trying to make the SRO program as effective and reassuring to students as it can be. If the program makes students uncomfortable, then something about the
program needs to be addressed. Students should feel safe in school, and allowing them the chance to provide input or gather information about the program may help them feel safer.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that the sample population was rather small. Difficulties in obtaining participants in school settings are common, in this case partially due to the necessary two-part consent process, as only a small number of students returned signed parental consent forms. Another limitation in this study is that the school currently has one school resource officer; many students did not know the officer was in the school or they had not met him before. Though many students had contact with SROs in middle school, not all of them had yet come into contact with the officer at Metea Valley High School. This may have resulted in some students being unsure of how to answer several questions and may have resulted in the increased selection of neutral answers on the Likert-scale questions. Another limitation is that a normed, standardized measure of student perceptions of safety does not appear to currently exist in the literature; such a measure is warranted for future research.

**Future Research**

To expand upon this study, future research should consider surveying several schools at once, with more than one school resource officer, and look to increase the sample size (possibly by conducting the study over a longer period of time or by expanding the sample to include older students). Additionally, it may be of use to study why it is that students felt that the school resource officer was there for general counseling or for academic support. It is unclear whether this is a role that Metea Valley High School’s SRO commonly takes on or if other students in other schools would believe their school resource officer serves the same purpose. The number of students that responded that the SRO supplied academic support was larger than expected, and
determining if the SRO or his or her activities have an impact on the academic success of students could be beneficial as well. In addition to the protective role and the possible academic support or counseling role, another common activity for SROs in general is to provide legal advice or education to students. Only a small number of students indicated that this was a purpose of their school resource officer. Officers who take positions in schools are likely to be trained in how to approach these subjects according to Stephens (2013); future studies should clarify whether or not students take advantage of the SRO as a possible resource for any legal issues they may have.

Another direction for future research is to explore how the media portrayal of school violence has affected students’ perceptions of their own schools. As was discussed previously, some students at the school responded that the officer was necessary, even though most students responded that they felt safe in school already. Studying how much students weigh their own experiences of safety against media stories of violent situations in other schools could provide information on other issues that affect student perceptions of safety in school.

Lastly, SRO programs are not the only safety programs that are being implemented by schools. Some schools commonly use identification cards and scans throughout the school, some have security that could be considered similar to their own police force, and some use metal detectors and security cameras. These types of security measures could also be considered “aggressive” or “intrusive” and may also have an impact on student learning or perceptions of safety. Research into these programs is necessary to determine the nature and impact that they have on perceptions of student safety.
References


Appendix

Figure 1. I expect to see violence in school frequently.
Figure 2. With the school resource officer present, I expect less violence at school.
Figure 3. Having a school resource officer makes me feel safer in school.
Figure 4. Do you feel the school resource officers keep the school safe?
School Safety Questionnaire

In this short survey, you will be asked several questions about your personal opinions. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer each question as honestly as possible. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, you may skip it and move to the next one. If you decide you do not wish to complete the survey, you may stop at any point and hand in the incomplete survey without penalty.

Please read the following questions and circle the number that best describes how you feel. Please use the following scale when responding:

1= strongly disagree  2= disagree  3= neutral  4= agree  5= strongly agree.

1. Did you have a school resource officer in your middle school?
   Yes          No

2. What do you believe is the purpose of a school resource officer?

3. Why do you believe that your school has a school resource officer?

4. I currently feel safe in school.

   1         2         3         4         5
   strongly disagree  disagree  neutral  agree  strongly agree
5. I expect to see violence in school frequently.

1  2  3  4  5
strongly disagree   disagree   neutral   agree   strongly agree

6. If you answered that you expected to see violence in school frequently, why is that? If you do not expect to see violence frequently, why not?

7. Having a school resource officer makes me feel safer in school.

1  2  3  4  5
strongly disagree   disagree   neutral   agree   strongly agree

8. If you answered that the school resource officer makes you feel safer, why is that? If the school resource officer doesn’t change how safe you feel, why not?

9. Do you feel safe when you see the school resource officer?

10. Do you feel the school resource officer keeps the school safe?
11. With the school resource officer present, I expect less violence at school.

   1  2  3  4  5  
strongly disagree   disagree   neutral   agree   strongly agree

12. If you answered that the school resource officer makes you expect less violence, why is that? Or, if you answered that you would expect more violence with the school resource officer, why is that?

13. Do you like having the school resource officer in the high school?

   Yes   No   Neutral

Why or why not?
Demographics Questionnaire

Please answer these questions before continuing on to complete the survey.

Age: ________

Gender: ___________

Year in school: 9th 10th

Did you have a School Resource Officer in middle school? Yes No