

Arrest Decision Making by School Resource Officers

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, school resource officers (SROs) have become an increasingly common fixture on the American educational landscape. Despite their prominence in schools, significant investigation into their arrest-making behavior has not occurred. This article uses responses to a statewide survey of SROs in Delaware to explore SRO arrest decision making. Guided by Black's general theory of arrest, it analyzes the effect of the school context on SROs' arrest decisions. The SROs' survey responses indicate that the factors highlighted by Black as influential to arrest decisions remain prominent in SRO arrest decision making, but the school context influences their arrest decisions in a variety of critical ways.

Keywords

school resource officers, arrest decision making, school discipline, criminalization of schools

Introduction

During the 1990s, school resource officers (SROs) emerged as prominent actors in increasingly punitive school discipline policies adopted in public schools across the United States. With their ranks growing beyond 20,000 nationally and their presence in a majority of middle and high schools, SROs are now commonplace in America's schools (Theriot, 2009). Following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, many are calling for an expansion of SRO programs as a way to safeguard American school children from such tragic events (e.g., Hutchinson, 2013; St. George & Wiggins, 2013). Despite this, limited research exists that explores how SROs perform their various duties in school (Brown, 2006; May, Fessel, & Means, 2004). SROs' arrest powers hold particular significance because they threaten to fundamentally disrupt the lives of the youth that bear their effects, whether by obstructing employment prospects and college admission or by propelling at-risk students into the "school-to-prison pipeline." Moreover, the presence of SROs in schools renders interactions between students and the police more likely to occur and arrest decisions more frequent. Thus, a comprehensive understanding how SROs wield their arrest powers is essential.

Little has been written about how SROs make the decision of whether a student should be arrested for alleged misbehavior. Theriot (2009) analyzed school arrest data in schools with and without

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SROs and found that arrests for subjective charges such as disorderly conduct were more likely to occur in schools with SROs than in schools that did not have SROs. However, he did not look specifically at the arrest decision-making process. Kupchik (2010) and Nolan (2011) provide detailed and revealing accounts of SROs' interactions with students, including making arrests, but neither specifically evaluated the arrest process. Indeed, Theriot specifically identified SRO arrest decision making as an area in critical need of investigation.

This research endeavors to address this need by exploring SRO arrest decision making through the administration of a statewide survey to SROs in Delaware. It does so by drawing on existing arrest decision literature, and in particular on Black's (1971) "The Social Organization of Arrest," which has identified factors that are influential to arrest decisions on the streets, and testing whether those factors remain influential when arrest decisions occur in the school setting. It further investigates the extent to which the school context affects SROs' arrest decisions.

SROs and the Criminalization of School Discipline

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, school discipline in the United States had undergone a process of "criminalization," including the adoption of strict disciplinary codes such as zero tolerance policies, the installation of security technology such as surveillance cameras and metal detectors, and the placement of SROs in many middle and high schools (see generally Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik, 2009; Simon, 2007). These new policies came in response to growing concerns over violence and drug use in America's schools during the 1980s and were galvanized by highly publicized incidents such as the Columbine shooting during the 1990s (Altheide, 2009). The criminalization trend is ubiquitous, affecting schools of all types and in all locations (Devine, 1996; Dinkes, Kems, & Baum, 2009; Kupchik, 2009; Lyons & Drew, 2006).

SROs, prominent players in the modern school discipline regime, are trained police officers who are stationed in schools, commonly through agreements between school districts and police departments (Brown, 2006; May et al., 2004). While SROs existed in one form or another throughout much of the 20th century, they became commonplace alongside these other punitive discipline policies and strict security measures during the 1990s (Theriot, 2009). The growth of SROs was accelerated by federal legislation, including the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which created the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services that provided support and funding for SRO programs.

SROs are typically intended to carry out their duties in accordance with the "triad model," which expects them to be law enforcers, counselors, and educators (Finn, Shively, McDevitt, Lassiter, & Rich, 2005; National School Safety and Security Services, 2007). In their law enforcement role, they monitor school grounds, consult with school administration regarding school security, respond to incidents, and take part in schools' disciplinary responses to student misbehavior, among other tasks (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). Making arrests when students misbehave falls under this role. Their counselor and educator roles require them to undertake conflict resolution efforts, befriend at-risk students and help them avoid misbehavior, and teach classes on topics such as drug abuse and gang avoidance (Jackson, 2002; Kupchik & Bracy, 2009).

Our understanding of how SROs fulfill these duties continues to evolve. For example, Nolan (2011) recently offered an insightful ethnographic account of how SROs operate in a large urban high school and Kupchik (2010) demonstrated SROs' prominent but conflicted roles in modern school discipline regimes. Despite this informative work, many questions remain about how SROs carry out their duties and what effects they have on schools. The current study sought to enhance our understanding of SROs by focusing on one of their primary duties—responding to incidents of misbehavior—by examining the factors that influence their decisions of whether to make an arrest when a student misbehaves.

Arrest Decision Making

Black (1971) provided a general theory of arrest in his early and influential article, “The Social Organization of Arrest.” Noting that the police exercise considerable discretion when deciding whether to make an arrest, Black identified several factors that affect that decision. First and foremost, Black noted that whether an arrest occurs first hinges on whether the police are aware that a crime has been committed, which is dependent on either a citizen reporting the crime or on the police observing the crime directly. Of course, this is not the end of the inquiry, as Black demonstrated that the police exercise a wide array of discretion even when they are aware that a crime has occurred. The factors he identified as influencing the probability of arrest were *complainants* (victim preferences), *evidence* (amount available), *seriousness* (of the crime), *intimacy* (relational distance between victim and suspect), and *disrespect* (demeanor of suspect when interacting with police). Black also identified *discrimination* as a potential factor, but did not find support for it as an influential factor in his study.

Scholars built upon the work of Black and others during the 1980s and 1990s by applying increasingly rigorous and diverse methodologies to arrest decision data (e.g., Smith & Visher, 1981; Worden & Shephard, 1996). All of these efforts produced a muddled picture of the arrest decision, with different studies often contradicting prior work (Linn, 2009). The most recent arrest decision literature has sought to reconcile these differences by again retesting the importance of various factors (e.g., Kochel, Wilson, & Mastrofski, 2011) and by pointing out factors that have been ignored (e.g., Linn, 2009). Currently, there is a short list of factors that most scholars recognize as important to the arrest decision, with other factors’ importance remaining unclear, perhaps because of widespread variety in study circumstances. The factors that are widely found to be important to the arrest decision are the amount of evidence (e.g., Black, 1971; Brown, Novak, & Frank, 2009; Linn, 2009); the seriousness of the offense (e.g., Black, 1971; Brown et al., 2009; Schulenberg, 2010; Smith & Visher, 1981); the wishes of victims (e.g., Black, 1971; Novak, Frank, Smith, & Engel, 2002; Sherman, 1980; Smith & Visher, 1981); suspect demeanor (e.g., Black, 1971; Smith & Visher, 1981; Worden & Shepard, 1996); and victim–offender relationship status (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988). Studies continue to produce mixed results when testing whether discrimination plays a factor in arrest decision making, but one recent meta-analysis of such studies strongly suggests that race is an important factor (Kochel et al., 2011). Thus, while more than 40 years of analysis have demonstrated the complexity of arrest decisions, Black’s general theory seems to have endured, as researchers continued to recognize those factors he initially identified as significant to the arrest decision process.

In his later work, Black also emphasized the importance of social space in understanding police interactions with the public, including when the police might make an arrest (Black, 1980, 1976). In his words, “[H]ow the police handle a particular case will depend upon the social characteristics of the alleged offender and of the complainant or victim, and with the nature of the relationship between the parties. It will also depend upon the characteristics of the police officers themselves and upon their relationship with the citizens involved” (Black, 1980, p. 5). Thus, when considering how SROs make arrest decisions when confronted with misbehaving students in schools, it is also imperative to consider the specific school context in which SROs make arrest decisions, including the relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and the SROs. For example, because SROs are assigned to a single school or a few schools, they form relationships with the students, teachers, and administrators in those schools that may impact their arrest decisions. The nature of the school community, in which almost all potential victims and perpetrators are known to each other, renders one potentially influential factor obsolete—there is little variance in *intimacy* in schools. Thus, the school context must be considered when examining SRO arrest decision making.

Similarly, it is important to consider the SROs’ thoughts and beliefs about those relationships and, more broadly, about the role of arrests in the school context. Accordingly, the research that

is described below considered both those factors identified by Black as important to the arrest decision, but also explored the influence of the school context specifically on SROs' arrest decisions.

The Current Study

The intent of this research was to obtain a better understanding of the arrest decision-making process of SROs by asking SROs themselves about the factors that influence their arrest decisions. Using Black's (1971) general theory as a framework, this study was designed to answer two research questions:

Research Question 1: Do the factors identified by Black affect SROs' decisions of whether to arrest students for alleged misbehavior?

Research Question 2: Does the school context impact SROs' decisions of whether to arrest students for alleged misbehavior and, if so, how does it influence their decisions?

Method

In order to answer these questions, an online survey was designed using Qualtrics software and distributed to all SROs in the state of Delaware. A survey was an appropriate tool for conducting this research, as it sought to provide descriptive assertions about SRO arrest decision making. Further, surveys are particularly valuable when data regarding attitudes and orientations are desired (Babbie, 2007; Colton & Covert, 2007). Moreover, due to time and resource constraints, direct observation of SRO arrest decision making was not feasible. Linn (2009) effectively utilized a survey to investigate arrest decision making in an important research study that shed light on how police officers' personal lives affect arrest decision making, demonstrating that surveys are an effective tool in this line of research.

Study Sample

The study consisted of a statewide survey of SROs in Delaware. Delaware's public school system features 19 school districts, along with various specialty schools, that served just under 130,000 students during the 2010–2011 school year. In total, 49 SROs serve Delaware's public schools, with 30 stationed in individual middle schools and high schools and the remainder assigned to more than one school. The SROs were employed by either state or local police departments.

The entire population of SROs who served in Delaware schools during the 2010–2011 school year received the survey, with the exception of the SROs who took part in a pretest.¹ A response rate of 67% was achieved, although the respondent pool was relatively small ($N = 46$).² As is demonstrated in Table 1, the respondents closely resembled the entire population of SROs across race, gender, and officer rank demographic characteristics, with the exception of a significant underrepresentation of the rank of corporal.

Survey Design

The survey was designed to gather data regarding SROs' arrest decision making.³ Along with questions about the respondents' demographic information, the survey included three sections of questions that offered scaled response options and were focused on factors that might influence the arrest decision. It also contained general questions focused on the SROs' perceptions of the amount of discretion they exercise their perceptions of how arrest decisions differ when they occur in school as opposed to on the streets, and the extent to which SROs consult with others when making arrest decisions.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents and Entire Population.

Demographic Variable	Demographic Group	Survey Respondents ^a (%)	Entire Population ^b (%)	Fisher Exact Test (One-Tailed)
Gender	Female	13	12	$p = .62$
	Male	87	88	$p = .62$
Race/Ethnicity ^c	Latino/Hispanic	10	8	$p = .42$
	Black	17	27	$p = .10$
	White	73	65	$p = .23$
Rank	Lieutenant	3	2	$p = .63$
	Sergeant	3	2	$p = .63$
	Master corporal	48	45	$p = .37$
	Senior corporal	16	16	$p = .63$
	Corporal	13	24	$p = .02$
	Patrolman first class	16	10	$p = .09$

^a $N = 31/46$ possible respondents with 3 SROs excluded from survey pool due to participation in pretest.

^b $N = 49$.

^c $N = 28/46$ because three respondents did not provide a response.

The first section of scaled questions was designed to identify the importance of various factors that affected the SROs' arrest decisions. It contained two sets of questions. The first set asked the SROs to rate how important certain factors were to their arrest decision making, using a 5-point scale, with 1 being *not important at all* and 5 being *extremely important*. The questions included a total of 13 factors, derived from Black's general theory and subsequent arrest literature and SRO literature. For example, the survey asked the importance of the quality of evidence available, the nature of the misbehavior, the victim's wishes, and the demeanor of the suspect student. The survey also asked the importance of teacher and administrator input, and of the suspect student's history of misbehavior, which relate to SROs' unique roles in schools, where they form relationships with other members of the school community.

These questions were followed by a set of eight arrest scenario questions that pertained to the SROs' past behavior. Four of the questions asked how often the SROs decided to arrest students for minor misbehavior under specified circumstances that might influence them to make an arrest. The remaining four asked how often they decided *not* to arrest students under specified circumstances in which there was evidence of an arrestable offense. The response options were *never*, *rarely*, and *frequently*.⁴ The arrest scenario questions were included to test whether the SROs' responses about the importance of factors to their arrest decision aligned with their past arrest decision-making behavior, as they included five questions that were matched with five of the questions in the previous section. The remaining questions were designed to further explore how the school context affects their arrest decisions under specific circumstances.

The next section of the survey contained questions that related to the SROs' beliefs about common rationales for arresting students for misbehavior, as these attitudes might affect arrest decision making. The questions were designed to determine the extent to which SROs believe involvement in the juvenile justice system has rehabilitative, deterrent, and incapacitating effects, which are commonly cited purposes of juvenile justice (see, e.g., Feld, 1999; Zimring, 2005).⁵ The SROs responded using a 5-point scale, with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*.

The survey also contained three additional questions. One question asked the SROs whether they had sought advice regarding the arrest decision from various school and juvenile justice system officials, including school administrators, teachers, the attorney general's office, other SROs, police supervisors, and probation officers. Another question asked how often the SROs made arrests when confronted with clear evidence that a student had committed an arrestable offense. This question was

included to determine if the SROs recognized that they exercise discretion when making arrest decisions. Finally, the SROs were asked whether they believed the arrest decision was different in schools than on the streets, and, if so, why it was different. This gave the SROs an opportunity to explain in their own words how the school context affected their arrest decisions.

Analysis

Given the small sample size of data, the SROs responses to the 5-point scaled questions were means tested and frequencies for each response option were calculated. In order to measure dispersion, standard deviation was also calculated for the responses to each scaled question. Only frequencies were calculated for questions that offered either two or three answer options. For the few open-ended questions, simple content analysis of the SROs' responses was performed to identify common responses. Finally, Spearman's correlation tests were run to test the extent to which the respondents answered five sets of matched questions consistently.

Findings

SRO Discretion

The SROs' survey responses suggest that the SROs exercised a great deal of discretion when making the decision of whether to arrest students for misbehavior. All but five of the respondents indicated that they did not make arrests every time that they were presented with strong evidence of an arrestable offense, with 15 responding that they made arrests 80% of the time, 7 responded that they made arrests only 60% of the time, 2 respondents indicated they made arrests 40% of the time, and 1 respondent answered that he made arrests only 20% of the time.

Collectively, the SROs also indicated that a variety of circumstances beyond the mere occurrence of an arrestable offense might lead them to make an arrest or not to make an arrest. When presented with various scenarios in which extenuating circumstances existed that might lead them to either make an arrest for minor misbehavior or to *not* make an arrest even when clear evidence of an arrestable offense existed, every SRO admitted to exercising discretion in at least one of the proposed scenarios. Table 2 shows the SROs' response rates to these questions.

All but one of the SRO respondents indicated that they had previously decided against making arrest in at least one of the four arrest scenarios in which the decision to not make an arrest was made. Moreover, for three of the four of those scenarios, more than half of the respondents indicated that they had experienced the scenario. For example, 77% of respondents indicated that they had previously refrained from arresting students because the students had never been in trouble before and 55% of respondents indicated that they had not arrested students after a fight because the students demonstrated that the fight was over. Thus, the SRO respondents reported that they previously decided against making arrests despite evidence of criminal conduct. Moreover, they indicated that this decision occurred on numerous occasions and in differing circumstances.

Similarly, all but two of the SROs indicated that they arrested students for relatively minor offenses when certain extenuating circumstances existed. Seventy-seven percent of SROs indicated that they had arrested a student in the past to calm that student down; 68% indicated that they made arrests to show students that actions had consequences; and 55% indicated that they had arrested students for minor offenses because teachers wanted the arrests to occur. Only 37% indicated that they had arrested students to calm down a group of students who were disrupting classes. While these responses do not indicate how often SROs faced these particular scenarios, they do indicate that SROs exercise discretion when facing a variety of circumstances that may lead to an arrest.

Table 2. Percentage of Responses by School Resource Officers (SROs) to Arrest Scenarios.

Scenario	Rarely/ Frequently(%)	Never (%)
In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a student who had committed an arrestable offense because that student had never been in trouble before	77	23
In the past, I have arrested a student who was acting in a disorderly manner because it was the only way to calm the student down	77	23
In the past, I have arrested a student for a relatively minor offense to show the student that actions have consequences	68	32
In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a student who had committed an arrestable offense because the student cooperated with my investigation	68	32
In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a group of students who had been involved in a fight because they demonstrated to me that their fight was over	57	43
In the past, I have arrested a student for a relatively minor offense because a teacher wanted the student to be arrested	55	45
In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a student who had committed an arrestable offense because the student promised to stop misbehaving	40	60
In the past, I have arrested a student because it was the only way to calm a group of students down who were disrupting classes	37	63

Table 3. The Importance of Factors to the Arrest Decision According to School Resource Officers (SROs).

Factor	M^a	σ
Quality of evidence	4.67	0.547
Guidelines provided by applicable laws, rules, and regulations	4.55	0.723
Nature of the alleged misbehavior	4.35	0.661
The impact the behavior had on the victim	4.35	0.798
The wishes of the victim's parent/guardian	4.23	0.990
The student's attitude when approached about the alleged misbehavior	3.61	1.174
The student's history of misbehavior	3.45	1.312
The need to ensure the student is punished for misbehavior	3.16	1.186
The wishes of school administrators	3.13	1.310
The potential consequences of the student's involvement in the juvenile justice system	3.10	1.136
Expectations of whether student will continue to misbehave	2.81	1.400
The wishes of teachers	2.52	1.151
The student's academic achievements	1.71	1.039

^a Based on a 5-point scale with 1 being *not important at all* and 5 being *extremely important*.

Factors That Affect SROs' Arrest Decisions

Table 3 summarizes the SROs' responses to the 13 questions that asked them to rate the importance of various factors to their arrest decisions and reports the mean response value and standard deviation for each factor. The responses are based on a 5-point scale, with a rating of 1 indicating *not important at all* and a rating of 5 indicating *extremely important*.

The quality of available evidence and guidelines provided by applicable laws, rules, and regulations clearly ranked as the two most important factors to their arrest decisions, with more than two thirds of respondents rating these factors as *extremely important*. The SROs rated the nature of the alleged student misbehavior, the impact the behavior had on the victim, and the wishes of victim's parent/guardian as the third, fourth, and fifth most important factors, with at least 80% of the respondents rating these factors as either 4 or 5.

Table 4. Correlation Between Arrest Factors and Arrest Scenarios.

Factor	Scenario	Significant at .05 Level	Spearman Correlation
The wishes of teachers	In the past, I have arrested a student for a relatively minor offense because a teacher wanted the student to be arrested	Y	.574
Expectations of whether student will continue to misbehave	In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a student who had committed an arrestable offense because the student promised to stop misbehaving	Y	.505
The student's history of misbehavior	In the past, I have decided NOT to arrest a student who had committed an arrestable offense because that student had never been in trouble before	Y	.371
The student's attitude when approached about the alleged misbehavior	In the past, I have arrested a student who was acting in a disorderly manner because it was the only way to calm the student down	Y	.369
The need to ensure the student is punished	In the past, I have arrested a student for a relatively minor offense to show the student that actions have consequences	N	.268

The importance of the factors that related to the suspect student varied considerably. For example, the student's attitude when approached about misbehavior and the student's history of misbehavior ranked as the next two most important factors according to the SROs. However, the SROs rated three other factors that related to the SROs' existing knowledge of students as relatively unimportant to their arrest decisions. The SROs rated the student's academic achievements as the least important factor, expectations of continued misbehavior as the third least important factor, and the potential consequences of the student's involvement in the juvenile justice system as the fourth least. There was also considerable variance among the SROs' responses regarding these factors—while some SROs reported that they take what they know about suspect students into account when making arrest decisions, others did not.

The input of other school personnel seemed not to be of great import to SROs' arrest decisions. The SROs rated the wishes of administrators and teachers as the fifth least important factor and the second least important factor, respectively. However, there was great variance among SROs' ratings of the influence of administrators, with four SROs rating their import as not important at all, five SROs rating their input as extremely important, and the remaining SROs' ratings distributed almost evenly in between.

These ratings were consistent with the SROs' responses to arrest scenario questions (reported above in Table 3). Five of the arrest scenario questions were matched with five of the questions that asked the SROs to rate the importance of factors to their arrest decision. Spearman's correlation was used to test the extent to which the SROs answered these five matched questions consistently. As reported in Table 4, significant correlations were found for four of the five matched questions, suggesting that the SROs were consistent in their answers regarding the factors that they thought were important to the arrest decision and how those factors have actually influenced their decisions in the past.

The Effects of the School Context on the Arrest Decision

When asked whether arrest decisions in schools differed from decisions on the streets, 71% of respondents answered in the affirmative. The SRO respondents who saw the decisions as different were also asked to explain how arrest decisions in schools differ. The SROs provided several common responses.

Five SROs pointed to Delaware's School Crimes Law as affecting their arrest decisions in schools. The law prescribes how public schools in the state must respond to certain student misbehavior (14 Del. Code §4112). The law serves primarily to require that schools report incidents of student misconduct to the Department of Education. Until the legislature recently made changes to the law, it also required police investigations, criminal complaints, and other disciplinary responses when the school staff becomes aware of certain types student misbehavior. The law required police investigations of a wide array of offenses, including misdemeanor offenses such as terroristic threatening and assault in the third degree. Thus, the School Crimes Law mandated that SROs become involved in schools' disciplinary responses a wide array of student misconduct, thereby exposing many students to potential arrests. However, the law required criminal complaints in only a limited array of circumstances—when school employees were the victims of crimes—and even then the law provided SROs with some discretion to decide against making an arrest. The SROs who mentioned the School Crimes Law did not specify exactly how it affected their decision, but it is reasonable to assume that this particular provision in the law influenced them by mandating that they become involved in the investigations of a wide range of behavior and by strongly suggesting that they make arrests when school employees were victims of crimes.

Five of the SROs also pointed to the availability of alternative disciplinary actions, such as suspensions, as influential to their arrest decisions. For example, one SRO responded: "I tend to arrest less inside the school because of the involvement of school punishment." Another SRO indicated the he "allow[ed] the school to punish [students] for minor arrestable offenses." Thus, some SROs recognize that there are formal, but less severe, disciplinary responses available in schools that are not available on the streets.

A few SROs also pointed to their desire to maintain order within the school as differentiating their arrest decision making. For example, one SRO noted a concern for disruption of the school environment as a factor that influences his decisions. Another commented that fighting was more disruptive in school, suggesting that he may be more prone to make an arrest when a fight occurs in school.

Some of the SROs indicated that the relationships they formed with students affected their arrest decisions, but they differed in how they described the effect of these relationships. One SRO responded: "Being in school allows the opportunity to see the students who tend to display chronic negative behavior," which indicated that he is more likely to arrest such a student. Conversely, another SRO responded: "[A] rapport [*sic*] is established in school more often than [*sic*] on the street. Often times because there is a rapport you can almost always work things out." A second SRO offered a similar perspective: "I seem to give kids more of a chance to stop their behavior," which suggests that SROs' relationships with students lead SROs to decide against arrests in certain circumstances.

Finally, when asked whether they had sought guidance from various school and juvenile justice system officials when making an arrest decision, some of the SROs indicated that they had consulted school administrators and teachers. While most SROs (73%) indicated that they had sought guidance from school administrators, a much smaller number indicated that they had consulted teachers (26%). This is consistent with the responses reported in Table 3 regarding the importance of the wishes of administrators and wishes of teachers, which were rated as *moderately important* and *relatively unimportant*, respectively.

SROs Perceptions of Common Juvenile Justice Rationales

The SROs were also asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements about common rationales for arresting students that relate to the underlying purposes of the juvenile justice system. A summary of their responses are reported in Table 5. The SROs agreed most with the statement that reflected a general deterrence rationale for student arrests. Beyond general deterrence, they also tended to agree with the two statements that reflected an incapacitation rationale for arrests. The

Table 5. Extent of School Resource Officers (SRO) Agreement With Juvenile Justice System Rationales.

Statement	Juvenile Justice System Rationale	M^a	σ
Seeing a student arrested for misbehavior deters other students from misbehaving	General deterrence	3.32	1.194
Arresting students when they misbehave is an effective way of preserving order in the school	Incapacitation	3.10	1.136
Arresting students when they misbehave allows other students to focus on learning	Incapacitation	3.07	1.163
Services provided by the juvenile justice system can help prevent students from misbehaving in the future	Rehabilitation	2.66	1.111
Involvement in the juvenile justice system deters misbehaving students from future misbehavior	Specific deterrence	2.32	0.979

^a Based on a 5-point scale with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*.

SROs tended to disagree with the statements relating to specific deterrence and rehabilitation rationales. Thus, the SROs seem to think that arrests are more likely to have an effect on the school community than they are on the student who is arrested.

Discussion

Much like police officers patrolling the streets, SROs in Delaware reported that they exercised a great deal of discretion when they made arrest decisions in schools. Most of them openly recognized that they do not make arrests every time they are confronted with strong evidence that a student has committed a crime and all of them admitted that certain extralegal factors affect their arrest decision in certain circumstances.

In their exercise of discretion, the SROs deem many of the factors identified by Black's general theory of arrest as important to their arrest decision. As Table 3 demonstrates, *evidence* (quality of the evidence available), *seriousness* (nature of the alleged misbehavior and impact on the victim), *complainants* (wished of the victim's parent/guardian), and *disrespect* (the student's attitude when approached about the alleged misbehavior), all were ranked by the SROs as important to their arrest decisions.

These results also align with the body of arrest decision literature that has developed since Black offered his general theory, which has consistently identified the nature of the misconduct, applicable laws, and the amount of evidence available as critical to the arrest decision (e.g., Klinger, 1996; Lundman, 1996; Mastrofski, Worden, & Snipes, 1995). In rating victim desires as comparatively important, the SROs again responded consistently with existing literature (e.g., Kochel et al., 2011). For example, victim preferences were found to be important in an early, influential study by Smith and Visser (1981), and the more recent work by Novak, Frank, Smith, and Engel (2002), who found that victim preference was particularly important to officers operating under the community policing model, which also forms the basis of school-based policing. Similarly, the SROs' high rating of the suspect student's demeanor was consistent with previous research that repeatedly found suspect demeanor as important to the arrest decision (e.g., Worden & Smith, 1996). That SRO arrest decision making aligns with previous arrest decision-making research findings is a logical result, since SROs are trained police officers.

Yet, the specific social space that is created in schools influenced their arrest decisions in important ways. As discussed above, the SROs spend large portions of their days in their schools, allowing them to form relationships with students, teachers, and administrators. They indicated that the relationships

they formed with students affected their arrest decisions in certain ways. For example, the SROs ranked the student's history of misbehavior as relatively important to their arrest decisions (Table 3) and an overwhelming majority of them indicated that they decided against arresting a student because that student had no history of misbehavior. The SROs' knowledge of the students' past behavior only existed because of the SROs' unique relationships with their schools. Likewise, even though the SROs ranked the input of administrators and teachers as relatively unimportant, many of them indicated that they sometimes consulted with administrators and a small number of them indicated that they sought guidance from teachers when deciding whether to make an arrest. It is important to keep in mind that arrest decisions are situational. Though SROs may not view the input of administrators and teachers as particularly important overall, administrators' and teachers' input may play a prominent role in certain situations, leading SROs to consult with them. Thus, the relationships they formed because they were assigned to certain schools play an important role in their arrest decisions.

Beyond the relationships they formed in the school community, the SROs' responses to the open-ended question regarding the differences between making arrests in schools and making arrests on the streets point to several important factors that influenced their arrest decisions. One of the most common responses offered by the SROs was the influence of Delaware's School Crimes Law, which directs school and police responses to certain types of student misbehavior. Likewise, the SROs ranked applicable laws, rules, and regulations as particularly important factors in their arrest decisions (see Table 3). It is no surprise that a school-specific law would heavily influence their arrest decisions.

The other most common response pertained to the availability of school disciplinary responses as alternatives to arrests. As Black (1980) explained, making an arrest is not the only means of exercising social control available to the police when confronted with illegal or disruptive behavior. In lieu of making an arrest, they might search or question a suspect, issue a verbal warning, or serve in a mediation role when they come across conflicting parties. The SRO respondents indicated in various ways in the survey that they similarly pursue arrest alternatives. The school setting and the availability of school disciplinary sanctions provided the SROs with a broader range of formal arrest alternatives than is available on the streets. The school itself serves as an institution with its own powers of social control upon which the SROs can rely when responding to misbehaving students. Their reliance on school discipline also reinforces the role of administrators in arrest decisions, as administrators decide whether students receive school disciplinary sanctions for their misbehavior.

The SROs' survey responses also suggest that their desire to maintain a safe and orderly school environment was a paramount concern that guided their arrest decisions. When asked about rationales for arresting students, the SROs showed a preference for using arrests to preserve order in the school over using arrests to alter the path of misbehaving students (see Table 5). A few SROs also mentioned the need to maintain order in the school environment in their open-ended responses regarding the differences between making arrests on the streets and in schools. These responses are reinforced by other common responses to other questions in the survey. For example, as mentioned above, students' attitudes when approached about misbehavior was a relatively important arrest decision-making factor according to the SROs (see Table 3). Additionally, 77% of SROs indicated that they had made arrests to calm individual students down and 37% of SROs indicated that they had made arrests to calm a group of students down when they were disrupting classes (see Table 2).

This apparent focus on order is consistent with Theriot's (2009) study, which found that students in schools with SROs were more likely to face arrests for disorderly conduct. It is also consistent with the offenses that commonly led school arrests during the 2010–2011 school year in Delaware—more than three quarters of those arrests were for fighting and disorderly behavior offenses (Wolf & Kuhn, 2012). This suggests that SROs may be more likely to make arrests in schools than on the streets, at least when the misbehavior at issue threatens to disrupt the learning environment.

The SROs' focus on maintaining the school environment may have come at the expense of the misbehaving students. In addition to indicating that they did not agree with the notions that involvement in the juvenile justice system has rehabilitative or specific deterrent effects on misbehaving students (see Table 5), the SROs rated the potential consequences that the arrest would have on the misbehaving student as the fourth least important factor (of the 13) to the arrest decision (see Table 3). This is troubling because SROs' arrest decisions have far-reaching consequences for the students that face possible arrests. Students that experience harsh and exclusionary school discipline responses tend to struggle with school and are more likely to reoffend and face incarceration as adults—a phenomenon that has been described as “the school-to-prison pipeline” (e.g., Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2011). Certainly, the direct connection between schools and justice systems that is created when SROs make arrests threatens to hasten students' entrance into the pipeline. Even for students who are not at high risk of future criminal involvement, an arrest can have serious consequences such as impeding employment opportunities and college admission.

Thus, while SROs follow the tendencies of other police officers when making arrest decisions, the social space that exists in schools has an unquestionable effect on those decisions. Perhaps this is not surprising. When you place a trained police officers in schools and ask them to make arrest decisions in response to student misbehavior, it is reasonable that they would be influenced by the same factors that influence arrest decision making on the street, while also accounting for the specific school context in which they are operating.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the survey results discussed above. First and foremost, the survey size is relatively small, and the results are not generalizable. The small sample size also prohibited more rigorous statistical analysis. Second, the survey did not ask the SROs the extent to which considerations such as race and gender affect their arrest decisions, simply because such questions were unlikely to yield reliable results. Yet, race is a central feature in the criminalization of school discipline, as multiple studies have demonstrated disparate treatment of minority students in the modern school discipline era (e.g., Advancement Project & Civil Rights Project, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Wolf & Kuhn, 2012). Similarly, existing research suggests that males and females are treated differently by the police and other officials when they misbehave (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005). Thus, failing to measure the influence of students' race and gender on SRO arrest decisions limits the above findings to some extent.

The survey also did not ask the SROs extensive questions about organizational influences and personal motivations that might affect the arrest decision. Groeneveld (2005) demonstrated the possible importance of organizational influences on arrest decisions. Linn's (2009) study provided compelling evidence that police officers' arrest decisions are also influenced by personal factors, such as the desire for overtime hours and the desire to avoid paperwork. As an exploratory study seeking principally to measure the effect of the school context on SRO arrest decisions, such organizational and personal factors were not included. However, it is certainly foreseeable that they might play a part in arrest decisions in the school just as they do on the street.

Conclusion

Although they are asked to fill roles in schools that stretch beyond traditional law enforcement duties, SROs act as police officers first and foremost. They tend to replicate arrest decision-making behavior that occurs on the streets, while making certain adjustments to account for the school context in which they operate. This research is a step toward a comprehensive understanding of SRO arrest decision making, but there is much more work to be done. The results discussed here shed light on the specific

effects that the school setting has on the arrest decision, but more research that includes differing methodological approaches and includes a larger population of SROs is needed. Certainly, direct observations of SROs making arrest decisions would provide valuable context to the responses reported above, as would systematic analysis of data relating to incidents of student misbehavior in which arrests were made and not made. Additionally, specific efforts should be made to understand the role of race and gender in SRO arrest decision making.

Like metal detectors, security cameras and zero tolerance policies, SROs are justice system features that have been transplanted into the school setting. While they may have been placed there out of desire to keep children safe and secure, the consequences that come from inserting law enforcement directly into our children's lives cannot be ignored. SROs appear to be a mainstay in the American education system, so we must develop a greater awareness of how they carry out their duties so that any security they might provide for schools is not eclipsed by harmful, unintended consequences.

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Notes

1. Because of the relatively small respondent pool, the number of SROs who participated in the pretest ($N = 3$) was also small. A pretest was necessary in this instance because the survey instrument had not been used before and pertained to a topic that had not been previously researched. The pretest results and feedback from the participants led to the rephrasing of a few questions in the survey.
2. The surveys were distributed via e-mail to the SROs in June 2011. The initial e-mail was distributed through an SRO who took part in the pretest. After this initial introduction, follow-up e-mails were sent by the researcher in June and July 2011.
3. The survey contained 55 questions in total, including subparts. A copy of the survey is available upon request from the author.
4. Respondents' perceptions of how often something has occurred are difficult to measure, as much depends on the respondent's interpretation of terms such as *rarely*, *sometimes*, and *frequently*. Therefore, this scale of responses was chosen to illicit answers that would allow simple analysis of whether or not the SROs had ever experienced these scenarios. The SROs' responses to these questions are discussed and displayed according to this rationale in the discussion section.
5. The punitive/retributive rationale for juvenile justice was not included in these questions because of doubts that such a statement would yield accurate responses. However, to measure the SROs' view of the punitive/retributive rationale, a question in the first section of the survey specifically asked the SRO respondents to indicate how important "the need to punish students when they misbehave" was to their arrest decision making.

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