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Law enforcement executive and principal perspectives on school safety measures

School resource officers and armed school employees

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to assess the perspectives of law enforcement executives and public school principals regarding school resource officers (SROs), armed teachers, and armed school administrators in order to inform the policy discussion surrounding school safety issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilizes data collected from two surveys that were sent to law enforcement executives and public school principals in South Carolina. Respondents were asked about their experience with SROs and their perspectives on these officers’ ability to maintain school safety. Both groups of respondents were also asked about their attitudes regarding arming school employees.

Findings – There is a large amount of support for SROs from both law enforcement executives and principals. However, in general, both groups of respondents do not believe armed administrators or armed teachers to be an effective school safety strategy.

Originality/value – SROs have been the primary strategy adopted by schools to maintain safety, but in the wake of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, public outcry and political debate has spawned a number of proposed alternatives. Among these alternative security measures has been the idea of arming school teachers and/or administrators. However, there appears to have been little effort to empirically consider the perspectives of those directly impacted by school safety policy decisions. In particular, a gap in the literature remains regarding the perceptions of police executives and school principals concerning school safety policies and how the attitudes of these key actors compare. Thus, the current study addresses this gap by exploring the perspectives of key school safety stakeholders.

Keywords Armed school administrators, Armed teachers, Sandy hook, School resource officers, School safety, School shootings

Paper type Research paper
shooting resulted in elevated public demand to protect students and spawned a political debate regarding possible strategies to decrease school violence. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, the primary focus has been on implementing and improving school security measures. At the forefront of the discussion has been increasing the use of school resource officers (SROs), or sworn law enforcement officers that are stationed within a school (Canady et al., 2012). Indeed, in January 2013, President Obama announced a series of executive orders, one of which proposed a plan to increase the number of SROs in schools and included a strategy for providing incentives to schools for hiring SROs (The White House, 2013).

At the same time, however, there are a number of legislators, policymakers, and activist groups involved in the nationwide debate about the best strategy for maintaining safe school environments. Among the alternative proposed security measures has been the idea of arming school teachers and/or administrators. For example, approximately a week after the Sandy Hook tragedy, the NRA proposed the National School Shield Program which includes training guidelines and considerations for placing armed personnel in every school (Hutchinson, 2013). Additionally, eight states across the country (AL, AR, GA, KS, OK, SD, TX) have passed laws to arm school administrators and/or teachers, and a number of others have proposed similar legislation (i.e. AZ, CO, ME, MO, SC, VA, TN, UT) (Flock, 2013; Koppel, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Given the nature of the issue, the conversation has turned into a heated debate with proponents arguing that armed school employees could protect students from active shooters and critics pointing to the dangers of bringing weapons into the school environment. However, there appears to have been little effort to empirically consider the perspectives of those directly impacted by school safety policy decisions. In particular, a gap remains regarding the perceptions of police executives and school principals concerning school safety policies and how the attitudes of these key actors compare. To address this gap, the current study analyzes data from samples of law enforcement executives and public school principals to assess their perspectives on the use of SROs and armed school administrators and/or teachers as strategies for addressing school safety issues.

School violence and safety
The current wave of media attention surrounding school violence was largely ignited in the wake of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School and has been further fueled by other highly publicized mass shootings, including the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary. The increase in media attention does not reflect a rising prevalence of general school violence which has actually declined in recent years (Brooks et al., 2000; Rocque, 2012). Rather, it is a manifestation of the growing concern from the public regarding isolated multiple victim shootings or active shooter situations (Blair and Schweit, 2014). After the Columbine tragedy, many schools introduced policies or increased existing security measures with the intention of reducing the occurrence of overall violence (Jackson, 2002). For example, many schools began locking doors and restricting access during school hours, conducting video surveillance, and/or installing metal detectors (Jennings et al., 2011; Myrstol, 2011). A survey of school administrators found that over 80 percent of Texas middle and high schools changed their school security policies in the years following the Columbine shooting (Snell et al., 2002). Nearly all of these administrators believed school policies were impacted by highly publicized school crimes and most indicated that this was a result of what they perceived as a decrease in a sense of safety among their students (Snell et al., 2002).
SROs

SROs are central to school safety policy discussions as evinced by President Obama’s executive orders to increase SRO presence in schools. Although it is unclear exactly how many SROs are currently stationed in schools, it is estimated that there are about 17,000-20,000 SROs across the nation, a majority of which are in middle and high schools (Brown, 2006; James and McCallion, 2013; Raymond, 2010). However, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), less than one-half of the nation’s public schools had one or more SROs stationed in their school during the 2009-2010 school year (NCES, 2012). Accordingly, any policy that aims to place an SRO in every school would require the number of SROs in the USA to be doubled. The push for SROs emphasizes the need to further explore the impact of SROs on school violence and the costs associated with such a policy. Despite this, the extant literature on SROs is limited and generally describes the nature of SRO programs rather than evaluating their impact (Brown, 2006).

The existing body of research regarding SROs primarily involves efforts at defining the SROs’ roles, duties, and daily activities (Coon and Travis, 2011; May et al., 2004; Shuler Ivey, 2012). The duties of the SRO are most commonly understood through the “triad model” (Canady et al., 2012). Specifically, SROs serve as counselor/mentor, teacher, and law enforcement within a school and are expected to complete duties associated with each of these roles. Thus, one way of measuring the effectiveness of SROs is to evaluate how well they fulfill these roles and duties. However, this does not tell us how such activities impact school violence. Rather, two primary strategies have been employed to examine the relationship between SROs and school safety – compare levels of violence within schools that have SROs and those that do not and assess perceptions of those individuals with whom SROs interact on a regular basis.

Recently, Na and Gottfredson (2013) compared schools that had increased their use of SROs to those that had not. Their results provide no evidence that increasing police presence reduced violence in schools. Other research has found similar results, suggesting SRO presence does not predict total arrest rates in a school (Theriot, 2009) nor reduce students’ victimization risk while at school (Tillyer et al., 2010). In contrast, one of the earliest examinations of SROs’ impact found the introduction of an SRO into a school decreased crimes in both middle and high schools (Johnson, 1999). Likewise, a study which utilized the 2006 School Survey on Crime and Safety found a negative relationship between SROs and serious school violence (Jennings et al., 2011). In short, the evidence concerning SRO effectiveness and increased school safety is mixed.

Another strategy for evaluating SRO effectiveness is to focus on the impact of SROs on student and school faculty/staff perceptions of school safety. Importantly, SRO presence appears to reduce students’ fear of crime and increase their feelings of safety while at school (Brown and Benedict, 2002; Tillyer et al., 2010). Furthermore, research reveals that principals and teachers tend to have positive attitudes toward SROs and believe that their presence deters student misconduct and reduces school crime, regardless of whether an SRO was stationed in the respondents’ schools during survey administration (Brown, 2006; Johnson, 1999; Myrstol, 2011; Travis and Coon, 2005). In one of the only surveys of principals regarding this topic, May et al. (2004) analyzed data from 128 Kentucky principals and found that they overwhelmingly supported SRO programs and believed that as a result of effectively fulfilling their expected roles, SROs are able to increase school safety.

Research also suggests that the general public tends to support SRO programs (Myrstol, 2011). According a 2012 Gallup poll conducted a week after the Sandy Hook
shooting, over one-half of Americans believe increasing police presence at schools would be very effective in preventing school shootings and another 34 percent believe it would be somewhat effective – only 12 percent of Americans reported that an increased police presence at schools would not be effective in preventing school shootings (Newport, 2012). Despite this line of research, the perspectives of principals and police officials concerning whether SRO presence in all schools is an effective strategy for increasing school safety remains largely unexplored. Currently, although there is some literature regarding the perceptions of principals, there is no existing research that explores law enforcement perceptions of SROs.

Because law enforcement agencies employ SROs and are expected to work in concert with these officers in school crisis situations, the perspectives of police executives are essential to any discussion of SRO programs. A policy that places an SRO in every school would require law enforcement agencies to either reallocate existing resources or hire new officers to accommodate the increased demand for police presence. If law enforcement does not support the use of SROs or does not believe in the effectiveness of SRO programs, then they may resent having to expend their resources on such a program. This could result in a tension between the SROs and their agency, the SROs and the school in which they work, as well as between the law enforcement agency and their corresponding school district(s). The coordination of law enforcement agencies and schools is essential in order to maintain school safety and effectively respond to active shooter situations. Thus, the goal of the current study is to explore the perspectives of law enforcement executives and principals and how they compare in order to inform the persisting policy discussion regarding the use of SROs.

Arming school administrators and/or teachers
Given that SROs are funded by the school district in which they are stationed and/or the agency at which they are employed, it follows that the financial burden of placing an SRO in every school would fall upon the shoulders of the school districts and law enforcement agencies. The cost of placing an armed officer in every school has been estimated to cost anywhere from $4 billion (O’Brien, 2012) to as much as $13 billion (Hill, 2013). Concerns regarding the cost of an all-encompassing SRO program have broadened policy discussions to include alternative strategies to increase school safety. Within days after the Sandy Hook shooting, the idea of arming school employees began to appear in media outlets and legislation across the country. Meanwhile, school districts, with the help of local police departments, had already found ways to arm teachers and administrators in their schools by employing them as security officers or “volunteer reserve officers” and still continue to do so (Melchior, 2012; Murphy, 2014). Generally, state governments do not actively mandate a law that arms teachers, but rather legislation is passed that leaves the decision to the districts of whether to allow school employees to carry firearms. In most cases, schools that allow employees to carry firearms do not require that parents, students, or other teachers be notified that a staff member is armed (Murphy, 2014).

While a growing number of state legislatures are attempting to pass laws to support the arming of school employees, there appears to be an absence of empirical evidence regarding the issue from the perspective of those who are directly involved in implementing such a policy. Anecdotal accounts of individual educators, administrators, and law enforcement personnel no doubt surface during media coverage and political discussions of the issue, but these fail to provide information about the broader
sentiments of key school and law enforcement stakeholders regarding arming school employees. The only research effort related to this issue was a national survey of school teachers conducted by the School Improvement Network (2013). The results of this survey indicated that teachers, in general, believe an armed security guard would effectively enhance school safety, suggesting that teachers would be in favor of increasing security or SRO presence in schools. At the same time, the survey also found that teachers do not want to be the ones charged with the responsibility of carrying a weapon at school (School Improvement Network, 2013). In fact, nearly 75 percent of responding teachers said they would not bring a firearm to school even if they were permitted to do so. However, the School Improvement Network survey did not ask respondents outright if they would support a policy that arms teachers in their district. The fact that teachers would not carry a weapon to school does not mean that they would oppose a policy that enabled others to do so. Relatedly, a survey of over 1,000 South Carolina residents found that although a majority support placing armed guards in schools, they were not in favor of arming teachers (Self, 2013). The present study begins to address these gaps in the literature by analyzing survey data from a sample of law enforcement executives and a sample of school principals in South Carolina. The overarching goal is to use the perspectives of these key actors to provide a starting point for an informed discussion surrounding the issues of school security and measures to improve the safety of students and staff.

Methods
This study utilizes data collected from two surveys that were sent to all law enforcement executives (n = 228) and public school (elementary through high schools) principals (n = 1,086) in South Carolina. Although the questionnaires were similar, each was tailored to the specific group of respondents such that the questions asked of law enforcement executives focussed on their jurisdiction and those for the principals focussed on their school and district. Respondents were asked about their experience with SROs and their perspectives on these officers’ ability to maintain school safety, regardless of whether they currently interact with an SRO on a regular basis. Additionally, South Carolina provides an appropriate and unique context for this research because the legislature has been considering laws regarding the arming of school teachers and administrators in the wake of the Sandy Hook incident. Thus, both groups of respondents were also asked about their attitudes regarding arming school employees. Survey administration took place between July and October 2013.

A modified Dillman method was used to encourage completion of the questionnaire (Dillman, 2007). First, both the law enforcement agencies and public schools received an initial survey packet which included a cover letter, survey, and a prepaid return envelope. Approximately two weeks later, a follow-up letter was sent, expressing appreciation to those who responded and requesting the participation of those who had not. Around three weeks after the follow-up letter was sent, another survey packet was sent including a cover letter, questionnaire, and return envelope. This methodology resulted in completed surveys from 141 law enforcement executives (61.8 percent response rate) and 486 school officials (44.8 percent response rate).

Sample characteristics
Table I presents the law enforcement sample characteristics. The law enforcement respondents are primarily executives from police departments (72.9 percent) and sheriff’s offices (25.7 percent). Consistent with this, most of the executives reported that
they are a chief (45.4 percent) with smaller portions reporting their position as sheriff (6.4 percent), deputy chief (3.6 percent), or director of public safety (2.8 percent). Approximately one-third of police respondents reported they held some other position (e.g. division commander). Many of the responding executives represent law enforcement agencies that employ fewer than ten officers (34.4 percent) while less than 20 percent represent agencies that employ more than 100 officers. This is consistent with the overall population of law enforcement agencies in South Carolina.

With respect to the school survey, most participants self-reported that they are the principal of their respective school (89.9 percent) (see Table II). The largest proportion of the respondents are from elementary schools (47.3 percent), followed by high schools (23.3 percent) and middle schools (22.7 percent). Importantly, this is consistent with the overall distribution of public schools in South Carolina. The respondents represent schools of various sizes, most of which have more than 300 students but <1,000 (77.5 percent). With respect to SRO prevalence, 56.7 percent of law enforcement participants reported currently employing SROs and 60.8 percent of school principals reported currently having an SRO stationed in their school. In other words, over one-half of both law enforcement agencies and public schools in our sample currently have experience with at least one SRO.

**Analysis**

The current analyses attempt to provide a descriptive portrait of South Carolina law enforcement executive and principal perceptions of SROs and their attitudes regarding the arming of teachers and administrators as methods for addressing potential school safety threats. Specifically, the surveys presented respondents with a series of statements regarding support for SROs and policies that would allow armed teachers...
or administrators. Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each of the statements on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree). For purposes of the following discussion, these categories were collapsed into “agree,” which includes those who strongly agree and agree, and “disagree,” which includes those who disagree and strongly disagree. The response categories were combined in this manner to allow for a clear presentation of the descriptive results and because the items were largely distributed in such a binary fashion. If applicable, a discussion of the differences within each truncated category is presented in the text that follows.

Results

Support for SROs

Table III presents the results pertaining to law enforcement executive and public school principal perceptions of SROs and armed teachers and administrators as methods for increasing school safety. A vast majority of both the law enforcement executives (97.8 percent) and school principals (96.5 percent) agree with the statement that “SROs should be placed in public schools in your jurisdiction/district.” In fact, nearly 75 percent of law enforcement executives strongly agree that SROs should be placed in public schools in their jurisdiction while none strongly disagree with the statement. Although less dramatic, a similar trend is noted in the principals’ responses, as almost 65 percent of principals strongly agree that SROs should be placed in public schools in his/her district while only eight principals strongly disagree with the statement (1.7 percent).

Support for a policy that requires at least one SRO in every public school seems to depend on the manner in which SROs would be funded. In general, support for such a
policy is greater if these SROs were to be externally funded and this support waned if these SROs were to be entirely agency or district funded. As presented in Table IV, nearly 75 percent of law enforcement executive respondents indicated they would support a policy that required at least one SRO in every school if it were entirely externally funded, but this number decreases dramatically to < 10 percent if this practice were to be entirely agency funded. Although less distinctive, this trend is also reflected in the principals’ responses with approximately 60 percent supporting such a policy if it were to be entirely externally funded and only 30 percent of principals supporting the policy if it were entirely district funded. However, this also suggests that school principals are in general more supportive of a policy that requires at least one SRO in every school.

Respondents were also asked their level of agreement to the following statements: “An SRO would improve overall safety within a school,” “An SRO would prevent a school shooting from occurring,” and “An SRO would reduce the number of victims if a school shooting were to occur” (see Table III). Consistent with the levels of support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SROs</th>
<th>Law enforcement executives (N = 154)</th>
<th>Public school principals (N = 487)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should be in schools</td>
<td>134 (97.8)</td>
<td>3 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve school safety</td>
<td>135 (99.3)</td>
<td>1 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent school shootings</td>
<td>76 (56.3)</td>
<td>59 (43.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce number of victims if school shooting were to occur</td>
<td>124 (91.8)</td>
<td>11 (8.2)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Armed teachers</th>
<th>Law enforcement executives (N = 154)</th>
<th>Public school principals (N = 487)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support such a policy</td>
<td>35 (25.5)</td>
<td>102 (74.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve school safety</td>
<td>38 (27.5)</td>
<td>100 (72.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent school shootings</td>
<td>16 (11.5)</td>
<td>123 (88.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce number of victims if school shooting were to occur</td>
<td>65 (47.5)</td>
<td>72 (52.6)</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<th>Armed administrators</th>
<th>Law enforcement executives (N = 154)</th>
<th>Public school principals (N = 487)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Support such a policy</td>
<td>52 (37.6)</td>
<td>86 (62.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve school safety</td>
<td>53 (38.4)</td>
<td>85 (61.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent school shootings</td>
<td>24 (17.3)</td>
<td>115 (82.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce number of victims if school shooting were to occur</td>
<td>64 (46.7)</td>
<td>83 (53.3)</td>
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<th>Policy funded</th>
<th>Law enforcement executives</th>
<th>Principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entirely internally funded</td>
<td>13 (9.8)</td>
<td>146 (30.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially internally funded</td>
<td>54 (40.6)</td>
<td>281 (59.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entirely externally funded</td>
<td>99 (74.4)</td>
<td>287 (60.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Percent values do not sum to 100 percent because respondents were instructed to “select all that apply”

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**Table III.** Law enforcement and principal perspectives on SROs and armed teachers and administrators

**Table IV.** Support for a policy that places an SRO in every school by funding
for the placement of SROs in schools, over 99 percent of law enforcement executives and more than 95 percent of school principals agree that SROs improve overall school safety. The same pattern continues with respect to respondents’ perspectives of SROs in active shooter situations. More than 90 percent of both law enforcement executives and principals agree that SROs would reduce the number of victims if a school shooting were to occur. On the other hand, about 55 percent of law enforcement executives and 51 percent of principals agree that an SRO would prevent a school shooting from occurring. Thus, both law enforcement executives and school principals support the use of SROs in public schools and their responses suggest that, in general, they believe SROs can be an effective measure in maintaining school safety. Importantly, however, a large portion of both samples seems to believe measures beyond SROs would be required to prevent school shootings.

Support for arming teachers
Unlike the overwhelming support for the placement of SROs in every school, only about 25 percent of law enforcement executives agree with a policy that would arm teachers in their jurisdiction and <10 percent of school principals agree with such a policy (“How strongly do you agree or disagree with a policy that arms teachers in your jurisdiction’s/district’s schools?”). Overall, this finding suggests that law enforcement and principal respondents are not supportive of arming teachers in an effort to improve school safety. This is evident when considering how strongly executives and principals agree or disagree with such a policy. Approximately 47 percent of law enforcement respondents strongly disagree, and more notably, about 65 percent of principals strongly disagree with such a policy. Conversely, only about 3 percent of respondent law enforcement executives and principals strongly agree with a policy that would arm teachers.

When asked how strongly they agree that “An armed teacher would improve overall school safety,” only 28 percent of law enforcement executives and <10 percent of school principals believe arming teachers would improve overall school safety. Less than one-half of law enforcement executives (47.5 percent) and only one-quarter of school principals (24.4 percent) agree that armed teachers may help reduce the overall number of victims during an active shooter situation (“An armed teacher would reduce the number of victims if a school shooting were to occur”). Furthermore, only 12 percent of law enforcement executives and 4 percent of school principals agree that armed teachers would prevent a school shooting from occurring (“An armed teacher would prevent a school shooting from occurring”). In summary, Table III suggests that law enforcement executives feel more favorably toward arming teachers than do the principals. However, a majority of both law enforcement executives and public school principals disagree that arming school teachers would have a beneficial impact on school safety.

Support for arming school administrators
Respondents were also asked “How strongly do you agree or disagree with a policy that arms school administrators in your jurisdiction’s/district’s schools?” Law enforcement executives and principals are slightly more inclined to agree with such a policy in comparison to the policy of arming teachers. However, as was the trend with the arming of teachers, a majority of respondents report that they disagree with such a policy. Indeed, only 38 percent of law enforcement executives and 28 percent of school
principals agree with a policy that would arm school administrators in their jurisdiction/district. Likewise, <40 percent of law enforcement executives and <30 percent of school principals agree that arming administrators at schools in their jurisdiction/district would improve overall school safety. (“An armed administrator would improve overall school safety”). Although there is more support for the idea that armed administrators would reduce the number of victims in the instance of a school shooting, less than one-half of law enforcement executives (46.7 percent) and about 40 percent of principals agree that “An armed administrator would reduce the number of victims if a school shooting were to occur.” Consistent with the trend regarding arming school teachers, a small portion of law enforcement executives (17.3 percent) and school principals (11.1 percent) agree that “An armed administrator would prevent a school shooting from occurring.”

**Most effective method to maintain school safety**

Table V presents the results regarding respondents’ opinions about the best methods for maintaining overall school safety. Respondents were asked “What is the most effective method for maintaining overall school safety?” (1 = SROs, 2 = armed teachers, 3 = armed administrators, 4 = other, (specify)) A majority of law enforcement executives (91.0 percent) identified SROs as the most effective method to maintain school safety. In fact, only one law enforcement executive selected armed teachers and none of the responding executives identified armed administrators as the most effective method for maintaining overall school safety. Likewise, a majority of principals (75.6 percent) identified SROs as the most effective school safety method, <3 percent believe armed administrators are most effective, and only one principal respondent believed an armed teacher is the most effective strategy.

A large portion of principal respondents also identified some “other” method as the most effective school security strategy (30.0 percent, n = 143). Respondents who selected the “other” category were provided a space for an open response to specify. The most common “other” method listed by the principals involved clear safety plans and procedures (n = 36). Additionally, many principals indicated that collaboration between SROs, school faculty/staff, and the community is the most effective school safety method (n = 25). A number of principals also listed physical security measures such as locked doors/restricted access, metal detectors, and cameras (n = 23). Other principals identified increased education and awareness (n = 17), preparation and prevention training (n = 10), and mental health services (n = 6). In all, <10 percent of law enforcement respondents identified “other” (n = 10), but similar to the principals, they also specified planning and training (n = 4), increased physical security (n = 4),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law enforcement executives</th>
<th>Principals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SROs</td>
<td>121 (91.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed teachers</td>
<td>1 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed administrators</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othera</td>
<td>11 (8.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: aE.g., physical security measures, collaborative effort/improved communication between law enforcement, school, and community, and prevention training

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Table V. Law enforcement executive and principal perspectives on the most effective method to maintain overall school safety
and coordination of police, school employees, and the community as the most effective school safety methods ($n = 2$).

**Best response to school shootings**

Table VI presents law enforcement and principal responses to “What is the best response to school shootings?” (1 = SROs, 2 = armed teachers, 3 = armed administrators, 4 = other, please specify) and a similar trend to the results discussed above emerged. Most law enforcement executives (95.6 percent) and principals (83.6 percent) believe SROs are the best response to school shootings. While a total of 15 school respondents identified armed teachers and/or administrators as the best response, not one law enforcement executive believed armed teachers or armed administrators are the best response to school shootings. Again, a nontrivial number of principals indicated that some “other” method is the best response to school shootings (21.7 percent). In the open response section, a majority of the principals’ answers included “police” ($n = 14$), “law enforcement” ($n = 10$), “SROs” ($n = 5$) or some other reference to law enforcement (i.e. SWAT team, emergency personnel, and local authority). Aside from law enforcement, the most common “other” methods for responding to school shootings in the eyes of the principals included safety plans and procedures ($n = 17$), increased awareness and education (for teachers, students, parents, and community) ($n = 9$), better physical security of the campus ($n = 8$), and crisis management and counseling ($n = 8$). Although <5 percent of law enforcement executives identified some “other” method as the best response to school shootings ($n = 7$), the responses of those police officials were consistent with the “other” methods identified by principal respondents (e.g. better campus security and planned coordination between faculty/staff and law enforcement).

**Discussion**

School shootings such as that which occurred at Columbine High School increased public concern regarding the safety of children while at school. In response to such incidents, many high schools and middle schools implemented or enhanced physical security measures in an effort to curb school violence. Additionally, the popularity of SROs began to rise and many law enforcement agencies assigned more SROs to schools, primarily at the high school level. The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, however, started a new push for SROs to be stationed in every school and also ignited a discussion about alternative strategies, including arming school employees. However, little is known about the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the use of SROs and the arming of school teachers and/or administrators as strategies to address school shootings and improve overall school safety. The present study used samples of law enforcement executives and public school principals in South Carolina.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Law Enforcement Executives</th>
<th>Principals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$ (%)</td>
<td>$n$ (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SROs</td>
<td>130 (95.6)</td>
<td>393 (83.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed teachers</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed administrators</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>14 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other$^a$</td>
<td>6 (4.4)</td>
<td>102 (21.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $^a$E.g., physical security measures, collaborative effort/improved communication between law enforcement, school, and community, and prevention training.
in an effort to begin filling this gap in the literature. In doing so, the results offer preliminary descriptive evidence concerning crucial issues for school safety. A number of findings warrant more detailed discussion.

First, there is a large amount of support for SROs in general. An overwhelming majority of both law enforcement executives and school principals agree that SROs should be placed in their jurisdictions/districts’ schools with a slightly larger percent of law enforcement executives supporting SRO use. However, when asked about support for a policy that would place an SRO in every school, the sentiments of principals and law enforcement executives varied based on how the SROs would be funded. A large proportion of both groups of respondents would support the policy if it were entirely externally funded with no costs to their respective school district or agency, but this support weakens if these SROs were to be entirely district or agency funded. Principals were more accepting of the policy if it were to be entirely district funded, while few law enforcement executives would support the policy if it were entirely agency funded. On one hand, this may be because law enforcement executives are more familiar with the costs of employing SROs and would prefer to share that burden. On the other hand, it may also suggest that those principals who support the placement of SROs in their schools feel more strongly about the policy than law enforcement executives, despite what costs it may entail.

In addition, both law enforcement executives and public school principals are generally more supportive of SROs than the arming of either school teachers or administrators. Law enforcement respondents indicated more support across the board for each of the school security strategies (SROs, armed teachers, and armed administrators) than do school officials. While law enforcement executives exhibited more than twice as much support for a policy that arms teachers, they were only slightly more supportive of arming administrators than were principal respondents. Considering that principals are school administrators, this raises the point that principals are less supportive than law enforcement executives of a policy that would give administrators like themselves a firearm.

The findings of the current study clearly indicate that, in general, law enforcement executives and public school principals do not believe armed administrators or armed teachers to be an effective strategy to increase school safety. This is confirmed in their responses regarding the most effective school safety method and the best response to school shootings. In contrast to the overwhelming majority of respondents who believe SROs are the best response in active shooters situations, very few respondents believe armed administrators and/or teachers are the best response to school shootings. In both cases, most of the respondents who did not believe SROs as the best school shooting response or the most effective method to school shooting identified some “other” approach. A very small minority of principals and an even fewer law enforcement executives believe armed school employees are effective school safety measures in general, or in response to school shootings specifically.

Another key trend that emerged from the analysis concerns the sentiments of law enforcement executives and school principals about preventing school shootings. In contrast to the law enforcement executives’ high level of agreement that SROs improve school safety and would reduce the number of victims if a school shooting were to occur, just over one-half agree that SROs would prevent a school shooting from
occurring. The principals demonstrate a similar trend. This suggests that although both law enforcement executives and school principals agree that SROs can be a useful tool in maintaining school safety, SROs are not perceived to be an effective measure to preventing school shootings. Furthermore, both police and school respondents are not, in general, supportive of armed teachers and/or administrators as school safety measures. Only a small percentage of law enforcement and principal respondents agree that armed teachers and/or administrators would prevent school shootings from occurring. Although both groups of respondents prefer SROs as opposed to arming teachers and/or administrators as measures to maintain safety within school, law enforcement executives and principals agree that none of these measures are effective in school shooting prevention. Thus, law enforcement, school officials, policymakers, and the public at large need to work together to develop a better strategy to prevent school shootings from occurring.

The general tone in the responses of those directly involved in responding to school shootings and impacted by policies targeting school safety is that SROs are a more effective and more favorable school security strategy than the proposed alternatives of arming administrators or teachers. However, there are a number of respondents that also believe some other response to school shootings or method to maintain school safety (as opposed to SROs, armed teachers, or armed administrators) is the best approach.

Conclusion
Considering the current debate regarding the best strategy to maintain school safety, the perspectives of law enforcement and public school principals captured by this study can be used as preliminary evidence to begin guiding policy discussions. According to their responses, both law enforcement executives and principals support the use of SROs as tools to ensure a safe school environment. Conversely, the findings of this study also indicate that although arming teachers and/or administrators has found its way into policy discussions, South Carolina law enforcement and principals, in general, would not be supportive of such a practice. This suggests that rather than allocating finances and resources to pass legislation that would arm teachers and/or administrators, a more effective response would be to focus on continued funding of existing SROs and developing strategies to add SROs to those schools where one is not currently stationed. However, law enforcement executives expressed concern regarding the manner in which new SRO positions would be funded. Thus, considering their perspective, alternative funding strategies should be explored rather than having the entire responsibility of SRO funding falling solely on the shoulders of law enforcement, who already feel overburdened by financial constraints. In fact, the large number of principals who would support a policy that places an SRO in every school in their district even if it was entirely district funded suggests that SRO funding that is shared by law enforcement and school districts would largely be supported by both parties. Furthermore, given that this issue is of great concern for policymakers, it behooves state and federal governments to consider providing funding or other financial incentives to those agencies who employ SROs and those schools where SROs are stationed. Alternative safety measures may also be explored.

Despite the support demonstrated by law enforcement executives and principals for the use of SROs, they did not agree that SROs would prevent a school shooting from occurring and they were even less supportive of the idea that armed teachers and/or administrators would prevent a school shooting. The perspectives of the respondents
indicate that SROs are an effective response to threats to school safety, but that SROs and armed teachers and/or administrators are not effective measures to prevent these problems in the first place. Thus, policymakers may wish to be first concerned with creating and maintaining SRO positions in agencies and schools and second on identifying effective measures to preventing school shootings.

Although this study only captures the perspectives of law enforcement and principals from South Carolina, it is the first to attempt to explore the views of those who are impacted by school safety polices. Thus, it can provide a starting point for the ongoing discussion regarding school safety issues. However, it is imperative that future research delves into the perspectives of these key stakeholders in other states in order to address variations that may exist across the USA. Specifically, future research should consider the sentiments of law enforcement and school officials in states where legislation permits armed school employees and in other states that are currently considering implementing such a policy.

References


**Further reading**


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