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Public Perceptions of School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs

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Abstract: *Prior research examining people's perceptions of SRO programs has focused on the views of four stakeholder groups: school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Notably, however, no prior studies have assessed the views of the general public, and few have utilized multivariate analyses in order to identify the factors that shape perceptions of SRO initiatives. Using community survey data collected in Anchorage, Alaska this study explores the general public's awareness of, perceived need for, and belief in the effectiveness of SRO programs, and systematically examines factors that predict public support for them within a multivariate framework. Results show that public support for SRO programs is multidimensional and "fuzzy." Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.*

Keywords: School Resource Officers, schools, police, delinquency, public perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Prompted by several high-profile incidents of school violence in the late 1990s in places like West Paducah, Kentucky (1997); Springfield, Oregon (1998); Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998); and perhaps most memorably in Littleton, Colorado (1999), school administrators have taken a number of steps to improve school safety. Most prominent among these efforts has been the widespread adoption of technological security solutions, particularly the use of metal detectors and surveillance cameras. While these sorts of technologies were used prior to the high profile incidents of school violence that occurred in the 1990s, their use was largely limited to crime-ridden, urban schools. Now these forms of enhanced surveillance have spread to suburban and even rural schools (Addington 2009). In addition to these technological strategies, school administrators have taken other steps to control crime and

delinquency. Examples of such steps include the creation of zero-tolerance policies for behaviors deemed to be detrimental to the learning environment of schools (Bracy 2011; Kupchik 2010; Price 2009), procedures for more tightly controlling access to school campuses and buildings, limiting weapons on campus, and developing crisis drills for faculty, staff, and students (Garcia 2003; Lawrence 2007; Snell et al. 2002). Officials have also worked to enhance the presence of security staff and police working in schools (Addington 2009; Birkland and Lawrence 2009; Price 2009). The introduction of School Resource Officers (SROs) – certified, sworn police officers who are employed by a local police agency but are permanently assigned to work in local schools – has been an especially popular response to concerns about school violence (Beger 2002; Theriot 2009).

While there is a long history of police occasionally working in schools, the permanent assignment of sworn

police officers to schools is a relatively recent development. Prior to the 1990s, the number of sworn police officers working in schools was small (Brown 2006), but fears about school violence, coupled with the surge of interest in community policing throughout the 1990s, produced rapid increases in the number of sworn officers working in public schools in the United States (Birkland et al. 2009; Center for the Prevention of School Violence n.d.; Brown 2006). Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show a significant increase in the number of local police agencies employing full-time SROs. In the late 1990s approximately a third of local police and sheriffs' departments employed SROs (Goldberg and Reaves 2000; Hickman and Reaves 2001; Reaves and Goldberg 2000). By 2003 SRO programs were operational in an estimated 43 percent of local police departments and 47 percent of sheriffs' departments. School resource officers are especially common in larger jurisdictions. Roughly 80 percent of police departments and 73 percent of sheriffs' offices serving jurisdictions of 100,000 or more residents maintain an SRO program; in cities with populations between 250,000 and 499,999 residents, more than 90 percent of departments employ full-time SROs. Local police and sheriffs' departments employ an estimated 20,000 SROs (Hickman and Reaves 2006a; 2006b).

Much of the growth of SROs can be directly traced to the efforts of the federal government. As part of their overall effort to advance community policing, in 1999 the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) initiated the COPS in Schools grant program to facilitate the hiring of SROs "to engage in community policing in and around primary and secondary schools" (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2010). The COPS in Schools effort has two primary objectives: 1) to improve student and school safety, and 2) to help police agencies build collaborative partnerships with local schools. The COPS office provided the first round of funding for the COPS in Schools program in April of 1999. Between 1999 and 2005, more than \$750 million was awarded to over 3,000 agencies for hiring SROs, and approximately \$23 million more was granted for the training of SROs and the administrators of participating schools. The COPS office has also awarded an additional \$11.5 million through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative and the Office of Justice Programs' Gang Reduction Project (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2005; 2008).

Despite the massive financial investments by federal, state, and local governments to initiate SRO programs and train officers, and the widespread adoption of SRO programs in schools across the country, relatively little is known about how these programs operate and there is almost a complete absence of research evaluating the ability of SRO programs to alter student behavior and thus improve school safety (Brown 2006; Johnson 1999; May, Corder and Fessel 2004; May, Fessel, and Means, 2004;

Raymond 2010; Theriot 2009). The dearth of empirical research focused on the implementation and effectiveness of these initiatives may be due, at least in part, to the tendency of police agencies and school districts to establish SRO programs without a plan for assessment and evaluation. Relatively few SRO programs conduct "useful or valid assessments of their programs" (Finn et al. 2005: 5), or even collect important process or outcome data that would make program evaluation possible (Finn and McDevitt 2005).

The bulk of research examining the impact of SRO programs focuses on their subjective impacts – that is, how the introduction of SROs into local schools has shaped the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Studies have consistently demonstrated support for SRO programs among the groups that are most directly impacted by them, particularly school officials and students. In general, principals and teachers are supportive of the SRO concept, believing that the presence of police in schools improves school safety and climate by deterring student misconduct and delinquency (Brown 2006; Brown and Benedict 2005; Johnson 1999; May, Fessel et al. 2004; Travis and Coon 2005). Students, on the other hand, seem to be much more ambivalent about the introduction of police into the school milieu (Bracy 2011). While students often express positive opinions of their SROs, routinely report acts of crime/delinquency to SROs, and frequently seek counsel from SROs about legal and personal problems (Hopkins 1994; Johnson, 1999; McDevitt and Panniello 2005), they also take issue with overly aggressive or authoritative officers and worry about being harassed and "treated like criminals" by SROs (Travis and Coon 2005; see also Bracy 2011). Compared to what is known about the perceptions and attitudes of school administrators, teachers, and students, much less is known about the perspectives of parents. The limited research that has been done suggests that although parents are generally supportive of assigning police officers to schools, they worry that the presence of police might give the impression to students (as well as the larger community) that their school is a dangerous place, when in fact it is not, and that children might feel as though they are under constant police surveillance (Travis and Coon 2005).

In sum, while the research literature is relatively small, the studies that have been conducted reveal broad-based support for SRO programs among the members of school communities. On the whole, students, parents, teachers, and school administrators approve of assigning sworn police officers to schools, yet we know very little about the factors that shape these attitudes. Given the near absence of SRO program impact evaluations, there is little reason to think that people's confidence in these initiatives is based on evidence of their effectiveness. What then accounts for the widespread endorsement of these programs?

Using data collected as part of a city-wide survey of adult residents in Anchorage, Alaska, this paper addresses this gap in the literature by examining the extent to which demographic, experiential, and attitudinal factors influence people's awareness of, perceived need for, and belief in the effectiveness of SRO programs. In addition, through its use of population survey data, rather than a more limited sample of individuals situated within the school milieu, the study also sheds light on the previously unexamined topic of the general public's views of SRO programs. Given the specific aims of SRO programs, it is easy to understand why researchers have focused so intently on the attitudes and perceptions of those who have the closest experience with them. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the police serve entire communities, not narrow constituencies, and thus they are rightly subject to the opinions and judgments of all the residents within their jurisdiction.

Importance of Public Perceptions of Police Performance

Although most research examining the impact of SRO programs does not speak directly to these programs' central objectives of reducing school violence and crime, research examining how community members perceive, interpret, and evaluate the police services provided within an SRO framework can yield important insights into how well the police are performing. In an era of community policing wherein the police are expected to fully engage the public as partners in the development of organizational priorities and practices, it is no longer sufficient for police departments to look inward when evaluating their performance; appraisals of organizational performance must include the judgments of external constituencies (Duffee, Fluellen and Roscoe 1999; Kelling 1999; Langworthy 1999; Scheingold 1999). Prior to the advent of community policing the police were permitted to "project and impose their expectations on the public" (Scheingold 1999:183); today, the expectations are dramatically different. Police are increasingly being held accountable for not only the products of their activities, but also for the means by which they are attempting to attain them (Langworthy 1999; Scheingold 1999). Within the community policing paradigm, the police (and by extension, the SRO programs they administer) are "only as good as the public say they are" (Bayley 1996:42).

Thus, population surveys that ask members of the public to share their views about police serve dual purposes. First, these surveys have become an important mechanism by which citizens can give voice to their concerns and actively participate in the development of police priorities and practices in what has been termed a "new world of police accountability" (Walker 2005). In democratic societies where governmental authority and legitimacy are ultimately derived from the consent of the

governed, it is difficult to overstate the importance of such a procedure for assessing police performance.

Second, surveys measuring public perceptions of police are of benefit to police organizations as well as the citizenry. From the standpoint of police organizations, which are faced with increasingly tighter budgets at the same time as demands for greater accountability are being placed upon them, surveys provide a method for measuring organizational performance that is at once innovative and cost-effective (Klockers 1999; Langworthy 1999). Surveys of the public represent an innovative method of measuring the quality of police services in four major areas. First, they place emphasis on the ways departments enact their strategic and operational priorities, rather than focusing solely on organizational outcomes; and second, they are outward-looking rather than inward-looking, acquiring information from sources external to the organization. Third, surveys serve as a platform from which multiple domains of police service can be studied simultaneously. And lastly, population surveys are typically designed, administered, and analyzed by one or more independent entities (such as a university or public polling firm), which helps to ensure their methodological rigor and the integrity of results. With respect to cost, while surveys are usually more expensive than internal data collection systems (e.g., calls-for-service and record management systems), the breadth and depth of information they provide more often than not justify the costs associated with their use.

THE PRESENT STUDY: ANCHORAGE ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SRO PROGRAM EFFICACY

Methods and Data

The data used for this study were collected as part of the *Anchorage Community Survey, 2009*. The sampling frame for the Anchorage Community Survey (ACS) was adult heads of household residing within the Municipality of Anchorage, Alaska (hereafter Anchorage). A mail marketing firm drew a sample of 4,702 non-institutional and non-business mailing addresses from this sampling frame using a non-replacement random selection protocol. Only households with valid residential mailing addresses were included in the final sample; post-office box addresses were excluded.

A mixed-mode survey methodology was used in the administration of the survey (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2009). Participants could respond via a paper-based or a web-based questionnaire. Survey administration proceeded through five stages. At the first stage, pre-notification letters were mailed to respondents notifying them of their eligibility and inviting their participation. Approximately seven to ten days following, each sample member was sent a cover letter detailing the purpose of the

study, a questionnaire, and a pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope for returning the questionnaire. Two weeks later, sample members who had not yet returned their questionnaire, were mailed a reminder postcard. After an additional two weeks, sample members who still had not returned their questionnaire were mailed another reminder postcard. Finally, two weeks following the mailing of the second postcard, sample members who had yet to return a questionnaire or complete the web-based instrument were mailed a replacement questionnaire and cover letter. At each contact, sample members were told about the web-based version of the questionnaire and encouraged to complete the survey on-line if that was a preferable option for them. In addition, sample members could declare their desire not to participate at each contact, either by returning a blank questionnaire or by contacting the study director by phone. Once a sample member communicated the desire not to participate, all identifying information was permanently removed from the sample database and no further efforts to make contact were made. Mailings that were returned by the United States Postal Service as “undeliverable” also resulted in the permanent removal of all personally identifying information from the database. When questionnaires were returned with a forwarding address within Anchorage, the mailing list was updated with the new address and the respondent was mailed a new survey packet.

Data collection began in June 2009. The last completed questionnaire was received in October 2009. Of the 4,702 subjects included in the sample, 560 were removed because their surveys were undeliverable for a variety of reasons (e.g., moved out of the area or no forwarding address), reducing the total number of eligible households to 4,142. In all, 2,106 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 50.8 percent. Respondents who did not provide a valid age, or who reported their age as less than 18 years, are not included in the analyses presented here ($n=1,983$).

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic and household characteristics of ACS respondents. Participants were predominantly White/Caucasian (79.9%), middle-aged (mean age = 49 years) females (54.7%). A large majority of respondents (81.2%) reported attending college, although just over half of this group reported obtaining a bachelor's or graduate degree. Nearly three-quarters of the sample (72.8%) were married or separated, and an additional 15 percent reported being married previously. Just over a third of the sample were parents of a student currently enrolled in the Anchorage School District (ASD). More than three-fourths of respondents (78.8%) reported living in Anchorage at least a decade; fully 58 percent have lived in the municipality for 20 years or more. With

respect to the household characteristics of respondents, most reported living in 1-person (13.5%) or 2-person (39.6%) households; less than 10 percent resided in households with five or more members. A majority reported household incomes in excess of \$75,000 gross annual income. Nearly all (96.7%) lived in households in which English was the primary language.

Measures of SRO Program Knowledge and Effectiveness

The ACS contained 29 items exploring public perceptions of SRO programs. Respondents were first asked three yes/no questions¹ assessing their knowledge and awareness of SRO programs, in general; the need for an SRO program in Anchorage; and their awareness of an SRO program in the municipality. Respondents were then asked to register their level of agreement or disagreement² with 26 statements about the efficacy of school resource officer initiatives, in general (see Appendix A and Appendix B for exact wording of items). These 26 items reflect the tripartite mission of SROs (law enforcement, law-related education, and mentoring/counseling), the aims of SRO programs, in general, as well as the specific goals of the Anchorage SRO program.³

Findings

An estimated 73 percent of Anchorage adults reported at least some familiarity with the foundational concept of school resource officer programs – that is, the permanent assignment of police officers to schools as a means of providing for the safety and welfare of students, faculty, and staff. Fully 88 percent of these respondents indicated that, in their opinion, the ASD should participate in an SRO program, and 70 percent said they had knowledge of the current SRO program administered by the school district and the police department.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the 26 items measuring survey participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of SRO programs (irrespective of prior knowledge of SRO programs, perceived need for an SRO program in Anchorage, or awareness of the current SRO program). The items are grouped into six conceptual categories that reflect each of the outcome domains of SRO programs more generally: Delinquency Prevention (in general, not specific to the context of schools), School Climate and Safety, Police-Community Relations, Community Quality-of-Life, Student Education: Law/Legal System, and Police Outcomes. In addition, three items measured the extent to which SRO programs may produce Unintended Consequences.

In general, respondents expressed confidence in the ability of SRO programs to reduce the occurrence of

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Anchorage Community Survey Sample			
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Valid N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Gender	Male	893	45.3%
	Female	1,080	54.7
Age	18-24 years old	58	2.9%
	25-34 years old	281	14.2
	35-44 years old	390	19.7
	45-54 years old	528	26.6
	55-64 years old	464	23.4
	65 years and older	262	13.2
Race	AK Native/AM Indian (only)	92	4.7%
	Asian (only)	81	4.2
	Black/AF American (only)	54	2.8
	Pacific Islander (only)	19	1.0
	White/Caucasian (only)	1,559	79.9
	Hispanic/Latino (all races)	112	5.7
	Two or more races	18	0.9
	All Other	16	0.8
Educational attainment	L/T High school degree	28	1.4%
	HS degree or equivalent	340	17.4
	Some college, no degree	501	25.7
	Associate's degree	201	10.3
	Bachelor's degree	485	24.8
	Graduate degree	398	20.4
Employment status	Employed	1,208	62.6%
	Not employed	722	37.4
Marital status	Single, never married	196	10.0%
	Married	1,406	71.4
	Separated	27	1.4
	Divorced	231	11.7
	Widowed	79	4.0
	Other	29	1.5
Parental status	Parent of an ASD student	718	36.2%
	Not a parent of an ASD student	1,265	63.8
Anchorage resident	L/T 5 years	204	10.4%
	At least 5 years, L/T 10 years	212	10.8
	At least 10 years, L/T 15 years	202	10.3
	At least 15 years, L/T 20 years	193	9.8
	20 years or more	1,152	58.7

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Anchorage Community Survey Sample

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Valid N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Household size	1-person household	256	13.5%
	2-person household	753	39.6
	3-person household	362	19.0
	4-person household	345	18.1
	5-or-more person household	186	9.8
Household income (2008)	L/T \$20,000	70	3.8%
	\$20,000 - \$34,999	116	6.3
	\$35,000 - \$49,999	245	13.4
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	323	17.6
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	371	20.3
	\$100,000 or more	706	38.6
Language spoken at home	English	1,885	96.7%
	Language other than English	64	3.3

delinquency among students, particularly that which occurs in and around schools. The items constituting general delinquency, which did not specifically reference the school as the site of delinquent behavior, received lower scores on average than those that did. These higher overall scores for school-specific acts of delinquency may indicate that the public perceives some limits in the reach of SRO program delinquency prevention efforts. Moreover, within the School Climate and Safety category, respondents appear to make a distinction between the ability of SROs to *enhance safety* (mean = 4.065) and *establish order* (mean = 3.728) within schools, which may provide some clues as to the public's conception of the police role in schools.

Respondents were also optimistic about the potential for positive spill-over effects from SRO programs. Anchorage residents indicated that SRO programs are a good way to reconfigure – and improve – the relationship between the police and the public. Among the five items included in the Police-Community Relations group, the lowest mean score was 3.5 (“Instill in children the ideal of ‘respect for law’”), followed by a mean of 3.7 (“Improve students’ attitudes toward police”), a mean of 3.8 (“Build trust between students and police”), and two items with mean scores of greater than 3.9 (“Improve police-community relations” and “Build a partnership between the police and schools”). Mean scores for the four Community Quality-of-Life items ranged from a low of 3.5 (“Limit vandalism of property of neighborhoods near schools”) to a high of 3.7 (“Enhance the safety in neighbor-

-hoods surrounding schools” and “Prevent drug dealing near schools”). Improving the quality-of-life of the community fell in between with a mean score of 3.6.

Survey participants recognized the educational benefits SRO programs can provide to students as well. Most felt that an SRO program would not only contribute to students’ understanding of the law and legal system (mean=3.6), but also teach them about potential career opportunities in policing/law enforcement (mean=3.7). Many respondents also reported that they thought an SRO program would provide educational benefits to police officers as well – or at least help police to broaden their own perspectives (mean=3.8). More pragmatically, study participants acknowledged that placing officers in schools would help police departments conduct investigations (mean=3.5).

In addition to asking respondents to assess the ability of SRO programs to achieve their programmatic goals, the survey included three items focused on some potential unintended consequences of these initiatives. Notably, although Anchorage adults did express some reservations about assigning police to schools, most were dubious about possible negative effects. By and large, sample members disagreed with statements suggesting that SRO programs create additional barriers between students and police (mean=2.3), that SRO programs make students, faculty, and staff more fearful (mean=2.3), and that SRO programs undermine the authority of school officials (mean=2.2).

In sum, these data demonstrate that the public has a great deal of confidence in the ability of SRO programs to achieve their objectives. With few exceptions, people

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics for SRO Performance Measures

<i>SRO Performance Measures</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>s.d.</i>
Delinquency Prevention					
Reduce rates of juvenile crime	1–5	4	4	3.623	0.879
Reduce drug use by kids	1–5	4	4	3.620	0.989
Deter children from committing acts of crime/delinquency	1–5	4	4	3.595	0.905
Control bullying	1–5	4	4	3.567	0.929
School Climate and Safety					
Enhance safety in schools	1–5	4	4	4.065	0.738
Reduce violent crimes committed in schools	1–5	4	4	3.936	0.795
Reduce property crimes committed in schools	1–5	4	4	3.873	0.776
Reduce vandalism of school property	1–5	4	4	3.847	0.799
Establish order in schools	1–5	4	4	3.728	0.878
Increase school attendance by children	1–5	3	3	2.826	0.899
Police-Community Relations					
Build a partnership between the police and schools	1–5	4	4	3.942	0.732
Improve police-community relations	1–5	4	4	3.921	0.801
Build trust between students and police	1–5	4	4	3.794	0.824
Improve students' attitudes toward police	1–5	4	4	3.686	0.867
Instill in children the ideal of "respect for law"	1–5	4	4	3.542	0.910
Community Quality-of-Life					
Enhance safety in neighborhoods surrounding schools	1–5	4	4	3.728	0.859
Prevent drug dealing near schools	1–5	4	4	3.683	0.925
Improve the quality-of-life in the community	1–5	4	4	3.625	0.875
Limit vandalism of property of neighborhoods near schools	1–5	4	4	3.453	0.956
Student Education: Law/Legal System					
Help students learn more about law enforcement careers	1–5	4	4	3.693	0.806
Educate students about law and the legal system	1–5	4	4	3.609	0.884
Police Outcomes					
Broaden perspectives of police officers	1–5	4	4	3.788	0.802
Help police conduct investigations	1–5	4	4	3.504	0.873
Unintended Consequences					
Create additional barriers between students and police	1–5	2	2	2.335	0.902
Make students, faculty and staff more fearful	1–5	2	2	2.248	0.928
Undermine the authority of school officials	1–5	2	2	2.210	0.910

believe that the permanent assignment of police in schools is a good way to reduce delinquency; enhance the overall climate of schools; improve community quality of life; strengthen the bonds between police and the community; educate students about law, the legal system, and law enforcement careers; and have a positive impact on the police department as well. Moreover, there is relatively little concern among members of the public that SRO programs would produce negative unintended consequences such as creating additional barriers between police and students, increasing the level of fear in schools, or undermining the authority of school officials.

The question that remains is this: What accounts for this high level of public confidence in SRO programs?

Public Confidence in SRO Programs: An Empirical Model

While there is an expansive research literature examining the demographic, experiential, and contextual factors that influence public attitudes and perceptions of police *in general*, to date there have been no published studies that systematically explore the factors that shape public perceptions of *school resource officers*, let alone public perceptions of *the efficacy of SRO programs*. This paper seeks to fill this gap in the research literature by developing an empirical model of correlates that influence public perceptions of the efficacy of SRO programs.

In recent years, research on public attitudes and perceptions of police has been criticized for being overly simplistic and monolithic with respect to how such public “support” is conceived and operationalized (Brandl, Frank, Wooldredge, and Watkins 1997; Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum 2003; Worrall 1999). While researchers frequently ask the public about their satisfaction or confidence, they typically fail to ask more detailed questions about the particular aspects of policing they are satisfied with or confident in. This is problematic because, as with most things, it is unlikely that an individual’s support for police is complete or uniform. Levels of satisfaction and confidence likely vary according to which aspects of policing an individual is asked to evaluate.

These expectations have been confirmed by Worrall (1999), who conducted an analysis of survey data about support for police that was obtained from a nationwide sample of respondents. His study demonstrated that support for police is, in fact, multidimensional. In that study, respondents were asked to provide their assessments of police efficacy (confidence in the ability of the police to *protect* respondents from crime, to *solve* crime and to *prevent* crime) and to rate police treatment of citizens (ratings of police *fairness* and *friendliness*). Logistic regression models revealed that two well-known predictors of public support for police, racial group membership and age, did not have uniform effects on perceptions of police efficacy or the way police treat members of the public.

Respondent race was found to influence respondents’ confidence in the ability of police to solve crime, but it did not influence respondents’ assessments of the ability of police to protect people from, or prevent, crime. Meanwhile, respondent age did not have a significant impact on any of these measures of police efficacy. In contrast, race and age significantly influenced both measures of police treatment of citizens (fairness and friendliness). These findings prompted Worrall to conclude that public support of the police is “fuzzy” (Worrall 1999:62). Similarly, Schafer and his colleagues (Schafer et al. 2003) found in their examination of public support for police in a Midwestern community that the influence of demographic, contextual, and experiential factors varied according to which police satisfaction measure respondents were asked to evaluate: their overall satisfaction with police, their satisfaction with the delivery of “traditional” police services, or their satisfaction with the provision of “community policing” services. As did Worrall, these authors conclude, “[A] complex mix of factors influences how citizens perceive the police and...the significance of specific variables is, at least in part, a function of the way [support for police] is operationalized” (Schafer et al. 2003:462-63).

The Dimensions of Public Confidence in SRO Programs

The analyses that follow are informed by these prior research findings showing that public support for the police is not monolithic or uniform, but rather multifaceted and somewhat “fuzzy” in nature. It is expected that public confidence in SRO programs, like that for the police more generally, will vary according to the specific SRO program outcome domains respondents are asked to evaluate.

Dependent variables. Each of the SRO outcome domains described previously serves as a dependent variable in the analyses that follow (Delinquency Prevention, School Climate and Safety, Police-Community Relations, Community Quality-of-Life, Student Education: Law/Legal System, Police Outcomes, and Unintended Consequences). Confirmatory factor-analytic techniques were used to examine the internal consistency and scalability of each of these outcome domains. Factors were extracted using the principal-factor method, which utilizes the squared multiple correlations to estimate communality. Oblique (promax) rotation of the factor loadings was then performed in order to simplify the factor structure. Average item-test and item-rest correlations were computed to identify weak items for each subscale. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) tests were then performed for the items retained in each sub-scale to test their suitability for factor analysis, and alpha coefficients were computed to measure the internal reliability of each subscale. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Diagnostic Statistics and Factor Loadings for Retained Sub-scales

<i>SRO Performance Measures</i>	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>KMO^a</i>	<i>Item-Total Correlation</i>	<i>Factor Loading^b</i>
Crime/Delinquency Prevention	.847	.812	.686 ^c	---
Reduce drug use by kids	---	---	.637	.692
Control bullying	---	---	.637	.693
Deter children from delinquency	---	---	.725	.795
Reduce rates of juvenile crime	---	---	.745	.812
School Climate and Safety	.872	.823	.729 ^c	---
Enhance safety in schools	---	---	.759	.811
Establish order in schools	---	---	.687	.736
Reduce violent crimes in schools	---	---	.766	.825
Reduce property crimes in schools	---	---	.706	.760
Police-Community Relations	.892	.830	.764 ^c	---
Improve police-community relations	---	---	.732	.775
Build trust between students and police	---	---	.808	.856
Build partnership b/w the police and schools	---	---	.753	.797
Improve students' attitudes toward police	---	---	.764	.812
Community Quality-of-Life	.866	.814	.717 ^c	---
Enhance safety in neighborhoods	---	---	.711	.765
Prevent drug dealing near schools	---	---	.719	.775
Limit vandalism of neighborhood property	---	---	.743	.800
Improve the quality-of-life of community	---	---	.693	.746
Unintended Consequences	.795	.705	.639 ^c	---
Make students, faculty and staff more fearful	---	---	.697	.620
Undermine the authority of school officials	---	---	.750	.671
Create additional barriers b/w students-police	---	---	.703	.625

Note:

^aKaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.

^bOblique (promax) factor rotation.

^cMean item-total correlation for factor composite.

All four items included in the Delinquency Prevention subscale were retained. Diagnostics for these items showed them to be well-suited for factor analysis. The Bartlett test of sphericity was highly significant ($\chi^2=3,350$; $p=.000$), indicating sufficient inter-item correlation, and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .812, indicating the common variance among these items was very good. The alpha coefficient for these items was .847. Two items – *Reduce vandalism of school property* and *Increase school attendance by children* – failed to load onto the School Climate and Safety subscale. The remaining four items loaded strongly on this factor, however, and demonstrated high internal reliability ($\alpha=.872$). With the exception of one item – *Instill in children the ideal of “respect for law”* – the Police-Community Relations subscale also performed well. The Bartlett test of sphericity was highly significant ($\chi^2=4,637$; $p=.000$) as was the KMO statistic (.830) and the alpha coefficient (.892). All four of the items comprising the Community Quality-of-Life subscale loaded into a single factor and were retained. As with the other subscales, the Community Quality-of-Life measures scaled well and displayed high internal consistency ($\alpha=.866$). The three items constituting the Unintended Consequences subscale were also found to be well suited to factor analysis, as the Bartlett test of sphericity was found to be highly significant ($\chi^2=1,817$; $p=.000$) and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy (.705) was adequate. The alpha coefficient for these items was .795. The two remaining subscales – Student Education: Law/Legal System and Police Outcomes – failed to materialize. The items comprising each of these subscales were not well suited to factor analysis (KMO <.6). As a result, these four measures were dropped from the analysis.

In all, five SRO performance subscales are included in the analyses presented below: Delinquency Prevention, School Climate and Safety, Police-Community Relations, Community Quality-of-Life, and Unintended Consequences. Each variable was operationalized as a summated scale.

Predictor variables. Given that no prior research has examined public perceptions of SRO programs, little is known about what factors shape them. Furthermore, what information is available is contradictory. For example, in their studies of students’ perceptions of SROs, Brown (2006) and Brown and Benedict (2005) found that female students were more likely than males to report that SROs did a good job of keeping them safe, but Jackson (2002) found that gender did not impact students’ perceptions of SROs. Brown and Benedict (2005) also found that students’ who had experienced a prior assault while at school were more skeptical of the ability of SROs to enhance school safety than students who had never been victimized at school. To date, these two variables – gender and prior assault while at school – are the only ones that have been shown to have an effect on students’ perceptions of SROs in multivariate models. To assess any potential

effects of gender or prior victimization on the general public’s perceptions of the efficacy of SRO programs, the analyses that follow include the following variables: *gender* (0=male, 1=female) and two measures of previous assault victimization, *felony assault victimization, past 12-months* (0=No, 1=Yes, any household member) and *misdemeanor assault victimization, past 12-months* (0=No, 1=Yes, any household member). In addition, the analysis includes a measure of respondent *fear of victimization by youth*, (0=No fear of victimization, 1=At least some fear of victimization).

In addition to respondent gender, the following respondent demographic characteristics are included in the analyses as well: *age* (continuous), *race* (0=All Other, 1=White/Caucasian), *educational attainment* (0=All Other, 1=High school degree or less), *employment status* (0=Not employed, 1=employed), *marital status* (0=All Other, 1=Single, never married), *parent of child enrolled in Anchorage School District* (0=No, 1=Yes), and *residential tenure in Anchorage* (continuous, in years).

To assess the potential influence of household characteristics on public perceptions of SRO programs, the following three variables are also included: *gross household income* (scored 1 “Less than \$20,000” to 6 “\$100,000 or more”), *total household size* (continuous), and *language spoken at home* (0=All Other, 1=English).

Based on findings from previous research which suggest that over-arching attitudes have a powerful influence on more specific assessments of police (Brandl, Frank, Worden, and Bynum 1994; Brandl et al. 1997), items are included that measured respondents’ overall evaluations of the Anchorage Police Department (APD) across three specific performance domains: *crime prevention*, *order maintenance*, and *fairness*, as well as a measure of the public’s level of *confidence* in the APD. The first three items were re-coded into binary measures (0=“Poor” or “Fair,” 1=“Good” or “Excellent”), as was the fourth (0=“None,” “Very little” or “Some,” 1= “Quite a lot” or “A great deal”). Two additional measures are included to account for the potential influence of prior contact with police on perceptions of SRO programs. Prior research has consistently demonstrated that previous interactions with police officers is a factor associated with citizens’ evaluations of police performance (Brown and Benedict 2002). This study incorporates two separate measures of police contact: *official contact with police, past 12-months* (0=No, 1=Yes) and *social contact with police officer, past 12-months* (0=No, 1=Yes).

Also included are two measures that capture residents’ opinions about K-12 education in Anchorage and prior knowledge of SRO programs, in general. Respondents were asked to register their level of satisfaction with the local K-12 education system on a scale ranging from 1 (“Very dissatisfied”) to 5 (“Very satisfied”). This measure was dichotomized (0=“Very dissatisfied,” “Dissatisfied” or “Neither dissatisfied or satisfied,” 1=“Satisfied” or “Very

TABLE 4. Descriptive Statistics for Predictor Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Valid N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>s.d.</i>
Individual demographics					
Age	1,983	18	101	49.351	14.219
Race	1,951	0	1	0.799	0.401
Gender	1,973	0	1	0.498	0.547
Education	1,953	0	1	0.188	0.391
Marital status	1,968	0	1	0.100	0.210
Parent ASD student	1,983	0	1	0.362	0.481
Employment status	1,930	0	1	0.626	0.484
Anchorage residency	1,963	0	71	23.664	14.738
Household characteristics					
Income	1,831	1	6	4.599	1.456
Language spoken at home	1,949	0	1	0.967	0.178
Crime/Victimization					
Prior felony assault	1,974	0	1	0.044	0.205
Prior misdemeanor assault	1,972	0	1	0.070	0.254
Fear youth victimization	1,970	0	1	0.742	0.438
Attitudes/perceptions police					
Crime control	1,983	0	1	0.360	0.480
Order maintenance	1,983	0	1	0.524	0.500
Fairness	1,983	0	1	0.543	0.498
Confidence	1,983	0	1	0.552	0.498
Official contact	1,926	0	1	0.487	0.500
Social contact	1,952	0	1	0.225	0.418
K-12 education/SRO					
Satisfaction K-12 education	1,983	0	1	0.477	0.500
Knowledge SRO programs	1,974	0	1	0.693	0.462
Neighborhood context					
Street crime	1,981	0	1	0.103	0.303
Social disorder	1,981	0	1	0.151	0.358

satisfied”). Participants were also asked if they had ever heard of a school resource officer program (0=No, 1=Yes).

Finally, two measures are included that capture residents’ perceptions about the neighborhood in which they live. Recent studies have shown that neighborhood-level factors, particularly the presence of crime and/or social disorder, play an important role in shaping citizen perceptions and evaluations of local police (e.g., Reisig and Parks 2000; Sampson and Bartuch 1998; Wu, Sun, and Triplett 2009). In order to gauge potential neighborhood-level influences on public opinion of SRO programs, this study includes two composite measures of street crime and social disorder within respondents’ neighborhoods. The first measure, *presence of street crime*, consists of three items indicating the presence of public drug sales, prostitution, or street gangs. If respondents reported that any of these were present in their neighborhood, the variable was coded 1=Yes, otherwise 0=No. The second measure, *presence of social disorder*, was constructed in similar fashion. Respondents reported whether or not people loitered in public spaces, and whether or not youth in their neighborhood were known to be truant. If participants responded in the affirmative to either of these items, the variable was coded 1=Yes, otherwise 0=No. Descriptive statistics for all of the predictor variables are presented in Table 4.

Multivariate analyses. Table 5 presents the results of the ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression analyses for each SRO performance subscale. Overall, the results support the notion that public support for police is multi-dimensional: respondent confidence in the ability of SRO programs to achieve their programmatic goals was not uniform. While a few variables were consistent predictors of public perceptions of SRO programs, each model was unique with respect to which variables exerted significant influence. Among the variables found to have an effect only one – social contact with a police officer within the past 12 months – was found to be significant in every model. Those who reported interacting with an officer in an informal social setting expressed more confidence in the potential positive outcomes of SRO programs and were less likely to be wary of their unintended consequences than those who did not.

Respondent age, gender, belief in the crime prevention capabilities of the police, overall confidence in the police, and prior knowledge of SRO programs were each found to exert a significant influence on public perceptions in four of the five models estimated. Respondent age was positively associated with respondent belief in the ability of SRO programs to accomplish their goals, but negatively associated with potential unintended consequences. This was also the case for gender, with female respondents expressing significantly higher levels of confidence in SRO programs than males (although the coefficient for Model 5 was not statistically significant). Citizens’ evaluations of police crime control capacity and their

overall level of confidence in the police each had a positive effect on their perceptions of SRO program efficacy. However, while the former was not associated with concerns about potential negative outcomes, the overall level of confidence was found to be highly significant. Respondents who reported higher levels of confidence were more skeptical of unintended consequences of SRO programs. Prior knowledge of SRO programs exhibited mixed effects on respondents’ faith in them. Those who reported prior knowledge of SRO programs expressed significantly less confidence in the ability of an SRO program to reduce delinquency or improve community quality-of-life than those who had no prior knowledge of the concept. However, respondents with prior knowledge of SRO programs were more likely to state that assigning police to schools was a good way to improve police-community relations, and were less likely to be concerned about unintended consequences.

Three measures – race, language spoken at home, and satisfaction with K-12 education – were significant in two of the five models. Notably, while race was found to affect citizens’ confidence in SRO programs (Community Quality-of-Life and Unintended Consequences), this effect was in the opposite direction suggested by most of the research published on public attitudes and perceptions of police. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Sampson et al. 1998; Wu et al. 2009), the bulk of extant research has found that Whites hold much more favorable views of police than members of other racial groups, particularly those who identify as Black/African American. However, the results presented in Table 5 show that Whites consistently expressed less confidence in SRO programs than members of other racial groups (although this effect was statistically significant only in Model 4). To explore this finding in more detail, each model was re-estimated with five binary race variables (Alaska Native/American Indian, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic, and All Other; White/Caucasian was the reference group). The results (not shown) reveal very specific race effects. There was a significant White-Black contrast in each of the first four models (with Whites/Caucasians providing significantly lower scores), but none of the other comparisons were statistically significant. (Notably, the direction of the coefficients for all of the other contrasts was mixed, depending on the subscale, while the White-Black contrast was consistent.) Thus, the significance of race-based differences in public perceptions of the potential positive outcomes of SRO programs detected in the original models was primarily driven by the differing views of White and Black respondents. With respect to the potential negative outcomes of an SRO program, the White-Black difference disappeared and was replaced by two other contrasts: White-Asian and White-All Other, with Whites expressing significantly more enthusiastic outlooks. Language spoken at home was significant in Model 1 and Model 4. Respondents living in households in

TABLE 5. OLS Regression Results

	<i>MODEL 1</i>	<i>MODEL 2</i>	<i>MODEL 3</i>	<i>MODEL 4</i>	<i>MODEL 5</i>
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
<i>Individual Demographics</i>	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)
Age	.112*** (.002)	.009 (.002)	.098*** (.002)	.107*** (.002)	-.064** (.002)
Race (White)	-.044 (.052)	-.023 (.050)	-.014 (.051)	-.051* (.052)	-.069** (.053)
Gender (Female)	.121*** (.036)	.061** (.033)	.055** (.034)	.103*** (.037)	-.037 (.036)
Education (L/T high school)	.015 (.049)	.032 (.041)	.005 (.043)	.017 (.049)	.088*** (.046)
Marital status (Single, never married)	.003 (.066)	-.025 (.059)	-.035 (.064)	.003 (.068)	.045* (.064)
Parent ASD student	.040 (.040)	.033 (.036)	.056** (.037)	.002 (.041)	.013 (.040)
Employment status (Employed)	.001 (.041)	-.013 (.038)	.013 (.038)	.006 (.042)	.026 (.040)
Anchorage resident (Years)	-.013 (.001)	-.040 (.001)	-.044 (.001)	-.053* (.001)	.004 (.001)
<i>Household Characteristics</i>					
Income	-.027 (.015)	.002 (.013)	-.033 (.014)	-.051* (.015)	-.020 (.014)
Language spoken at home (English)	-.054** (.121)	-.035 (.113)	-.022 (.107)	-.059** (.114)	-.032 (.110)
<i>Crime/Victimization</i>					
Prior felony assault (Household)	-.012 (.113)	-.034 (.103)	-.043 (.105)	.002 (.109)	.049 (.122)
Prior misdemeanor assault (Household)	-.006 (.085)	.002 (.075)	.014 (.075)	-.021 (.086)	.001 (.084)
Fear youth victimization	-.016 (.043)	-.007 (.039)	-.006 (.041)	-.006 (.044)	-.007 (.042)
<i>Attitudes/Perceptions of Police</i>	Beta (SE)	Beta (SE)	Beta (SE)	Beta (SE)	Beta (SE)
Rating: APD crime control	.118*** (.039)	.068*** (.035)	.080*** (.036)	.107*** (.040)	.022 (.040)
Rating: APD order maintenance	.027 (.041)	.018 (.036)	.018 (.037)	.009 (.041)	-.040 (.039)
Rating: APD fairness	-.006 (.042)	-.003 (.036)	.020 (.038)	.010 (.041)	-.026 (.040)
Rating: Confidence in APD	.103*** (.041)	.129*** (.036)	.157*** (.038)	.095 (.041)	-.133*** (.040)
Official contact APD officer	-.035 (.036)	-.007 (.033)	.019 (.034)	.003 (.036)	-.030 (.036)
Social contact APD officer	.044* (.041)	.061*** (.037)	.088*** (.038)	.064*** (.041)	-.078*** (.042)
<i>School/SRO</i>					
Satisfaction: K-12 education	.018 (.037)	.055** (.033)	.030 (.035)	.064** (.037)	-.017 (.039)
Prior knowledge of SRO programs	-.048** (.040)	.006 (.036)	.063*** (.037)	-.040* (.040)	-.163*** (.039)
<i>Neighborhood</i>					
Neighborhood problem: Loitering	-.032 (.058)	-.004 (.054)	-.011 (.053)	-.053* (.058)	-.014 (.056)
Neighborhood problem: Street crime	.027 (.064)	-.008 (.061)	-.008 (.061)	.036 (.065)	.033 (.075)
Constant:	3.459	3.840	3.431	3.587	3.049
F:	5.820***	4.010***	7.230***	6.050***	9.420***
R ² :	.077	.053	.092	.075	.118
N:	1,745	1,745	1,745	1,745	1,745

Note:

Model 1: Delinquency prevention, Model 2: School climate and safety, Model 3: Police-community relations, Model 4: Community quality-of-life, Model 5: Unintended consequences.
Standardized coefficients reported. * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$

which English was not the primary language were more optimistic about the ability of SRO programs to prevent delinquency and improve community quality-of-life than their English-speaking counterparts. With respect to evaluating the effect of people's opinions of the educational system on their views of the efficacy of SRO programs, the results show that the two were positively associated: those who held positive opinions of K-12 education tended to view SRO programs more favorably, particularly when it came to the ability of SRO programs to improve police-community relations and community quality-of-life.

A number of variables – six in all – were significant in only one model. Among these six, one in particular stood out for its lack of predictive power: being the parent of a child enrolled in the Anchorage School District. Curiously, despite the stakes involved for parents, the only model for which parental status was a significant predictor of public perceptions was Police-Community Relations. Parental status was not associated with respondents' confidence in the ability of police to prevent delinquency, enhance school climate and safety, improve community quality-of-life, or with their concern for potential negative outcomes of SRO programs. Respondents' educational attainment and marital status were significant predictors in Model 5 (Unintended Consequences). Those without a high school education and those who had never been married expressed greater concern for the potential of negative outcomes of SRO programs than others. The effects of residential tenure, household income, and perceptions of neighborhood social disorder were limited to respondents' perceptions of the possible effects of SRO programs on community quality-of-life. Citizens with longer residential tenures and lower incomes, and who reported problems of social disorder in their neighborhood, were more pessimistic about the ability of SRO programs to improve the quality-of-life of the larger community.

Finally, a number of variables did not have an impact on public perceptions of SRO programs in any of the models. Perhaps the most surprising was the consistent lack of effect for each of the three victimization measures. Neither of the violent victimization measures – past 12-month misdemeanor and past 12-month felony assaults of one or more household members – exerted any influence on citizens' perceptions of SRO programs, nor did the fear of victimization by youth measure. Moreover, the item measuring respondents' perceptions of neighborhood-level street crime was not significant in any model. In general then, there was very little evidence to suggest that public confidence in SRO programs stems from concerns about crime. Given the results of prior research, a null finding for the effect for previous official contacts with police officers in each of the models was also unexpected. Perceptions about the police, in general, produced mixed results as well. As mentioned previously, perceptions of the crime prevention capabilities of police, as well as overall

confidence in police, were consistent predictors of respondents' confidence in SRO programs. However, the other two measures of police efficacy – order maintenance abilities of the police and assessments of police fairness – were not found to be significant in any of the five models examined. Employment status was the only demographic variable not found to influence public perceptions of SRO programs.

DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that little is known about their effectiveness, the number of school resource officer initiatives in operation in the United States has expanded dramatically since the 1990s. This expansion can be attributed to both increased demands to improve school safety, as well as the advocacy of the federal government, which has provided not only the conceptual grounding for the movement (community policing), but also the financial resources (via the COPS in Schools grant program) for police departments to hire and train SROs. Additionally, although the extent to which they succeed in accomplishing their programmatic objectives remains unclear, the proliferation of SRO programs has met with little opposition. In fact, key stakeholder groups – including school administrators, teachers, students, and parents – believe that these programs are effective and express strong support for them. Furthermore, as this article demonstrates (see Table 2), the public at large shares similar sentiments. The question that remains is, Why? In the absence of empirical evidence documenting the effectiveness of SRO programs, what accounts for such strong public support for them?

This paper examined a variety of potential explanatory factors known to influence public perceptions of police in general (e.g., age, race, previous encounters with police, neighborhood-level crime, and social disorder), as well as some variables that have been shown to influence perceptions of SROs more specifically (e.g., gender, parental status, prior victimization). The influence of some additional measures that have not been seen before in prior SRO research, but which might be expected to impact public perceptions of SRO programs, were also examined (e.g., prior knowledge of SRO programs, primary language spoken at home, and global perceptions of police efficacy). Each of these variables, plus additional measures of respondents' demographic and household characteristics (education, marital status, employment, residential tenure, household income) were entered into a series of regression models in order to estimate their effects on five dimensions of SRO program performance: Delinquency Prevention, School Climate and Safety, Police-Community Relations, Community Quality-of-Life, and Unintended Consequences.

The results of these analyses confirm what other researchers have found previously – namely, that public

support for police is multidimensional and “fuzzy” (Schafer et al. 2003; Worrall 1999). Not only was public confidence in the ability of SRO programs to prevent delinquency, enhance school safety, improve police-community relations, and make a positive contribution to community quality-of-life not uniform, the factors that were found to influence public support for these initiatives

were found to differ according to which SRO activity domain respondents were asked to assess. Some variables exerted a consistent influence on the public’s perceptions of SRO programs, while others were significant in only one or two models. Still others had no effect whatsoever (see Table 6 for a summary).

TABLE 6. Ranking of Predictor Variables: Public Perceptions of SRO Programs

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Total</i>
Social contact APD officer	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(-)	5
Age	(+)		(+)	(+)	(-)	4
Gender (Female)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)		4
Rating: APD crime control	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)		4
Rating: Confidence in APD	(+)	(+)	(+)		(-)	4
Prior knowledge: SRO programs	(-)		(+)	(-)	(-)	4
Race (White)				(-)	(-)	2
Language spoken at home (English)	(-)				(-)	2
Satisfaction: K-12 education		(+)		(+)		2
Education (L/T high school)					(+)	1
Marital status (Single, never married)					(+)	1
Parent ASD student			(+)			1
Anchorage resident (Years)				(-)		1
Income				(-)		1
Neighborhood problem: Loitering				(-)		1
Employment status (Employed)						0
Prior felony assault (Household)						0
Prior misdemeanor assault (Household)						0
Fear youth victimization						0
Rating: APD order maintenance						0
Rating: APD fairness						0
Official contact APD officer						0
Neighborhood problem: Street crime						0
Note:						
(+)= Statistically significant, positive regression coefficient. (-) = Statistically significant, negative regression coefficient.						
Model 1: Delinquency prevention, Model 2: School climate and safety, Model 3: Police-community relations, Model 4: Community quality-of-life, Model 5: Unintended consequences.						

The most consistent predictor of public perceptions of SRO programs was past 12-month social contact with a police officer. Respondents who reported socializing with a police officer in the past year expressed more confidence in the ability of SRO programs to achieve their aims, and were less concerned about potential unintended consequences of introducing police into school settings.

This finding may represent a significant advance in our understanding of how citizens understand and evaluate the police. In previous research, measures of police-citizen contact have been limited to *official* contacts – that is, interactions characterized by the performance of official police business, and in which officers are acting within the confines of their institutionally prescribed role as coercive

agents of the state. As important as these interactions may be in the formation of citizens' attitudes and perceptions, however, contact between police and members of the public are not limited to these sorts of circumstances. (Fully 22% of all ACS respondents reported socializing with a police officer in the past year.) To the extent that these findings apply to public opinions of the police more generally, future research should examine the influence of informal police-citizen interactions.

Although their consistency and magnitude of effect varied, respondents' demographic characteristics were also found to have important effects on public perceptions of SRO programs. Most notably age and gender were significant factors in four of the five models estimated. A number of other individual-level characteristics had impacts as well: race (2 models), education (1 model), marital status (1 model), and parental status (1). Significant effects were also found for two household-level measures: language spoken at home (2 models) and household income (1 model). Taken as a whole, these results provide important clues to the complexity that surrounds the formation of public perceptions of SRO programs, and perhaps public opinions of police more generally. The fact that so many demographic characteristics were found to exert influence on respondents' perceptions of SRO programs suggests that people's mental conceptions of the police are deeply intertwined with their sociological and cultural experiences. Therefore, their perceptions of police may be, in large measure, a reflection of their socio-cultural identities rather than simply straightforward evaluations of police practices based on previous experience (Liu and Crank 2010). Given that the prior official contact with a police officer measure was not statistically significant in any of the SRO performance models that were estimated, such a proposition is made even more plausible.

The analyses presented here also highlight the important role institutional legitimacy plays in engendering public confidence for specific police initiatives – like an SRO program. Respondents' perceptions of the efficacy of SRO programs were directly tied to their faith in the ability of police to control crime and, perhaps more importantly, to their overall confidence in the police department. Those who rated the police highly with respect to these two items expressed significantly more optimistic assessments of SRO programs, and vice versa. That the other two measures of police performance were not found to be significant also suggests that public support for SRO programs is contingent upon perceptions of one dimension of the police role (crime control), but not others (order maintenance, quality of treatment). Put another way, the results presented here imply that the public views SRO programs primarily as a crime control strategy. Given the emphasis police departments place on the law enforcement component of their SRO programs, and the dominance of

the cop-as-crime-fighter myth in our cultural discourse, this is not surprising.

This research also directs attention to the influence citizens' contextual knowledge and awareness have on their perceptions of police efficacy. The results presented here show that both respondents' understandings of the social contexts police are embedded in, and expected to impact, as well as their knowledge of the specific strategies police use, influenced their evaluations. On the one hand, the people in this study who held favorable opinions of the K-12 education system tended to put more faith in the ability of SRO programs to be effective. On the other hand, prior knowledge about SRO programs produced skepticism about some of their goals (Delinquency Prevention and Community Quality-of-Life), but increased confidence in others (Police-Community Relations and the potential for Unintended Consequences). In addition, people who lived in neighborhoods in which social disorder was in evidence were less likely to believe SRO programs could achieve their objectives.

Limitations

A significant limitation of this study is the measurement of several key concepts. As a secondary analysis of data collected as part of the ACS, this study relied on a number of proxy measures. Three of these proxy measures, in particular, are worth noting. First, the influence of respondents' past 12-month contacts with police was limited to formal and informal interactions with police officers *in general*, rather than encounters with *SROs* specifically. To the extent that people perceive SROs to be "different" than other police officers (see Hopkins 1994), it is possible (perhaps even likely) that the models incorrectly specified the effect of previous contacts with police. In addition, the ACS did not measure respondents' perceptions of crime and social disorder *in schools*; rather, respondents were asked only about their perceptions of crime and disorder in their *neighborhood*. Because public concern about violence *in schools* has been a driving force behind the SRO movement, there is reason to believe that it would also influence public perceptions of SRO programs. As with the measurement of prior police contact, because of the lack of school-specific measures, it is possible that the contextual effects of crime and social disorder have been incorrectly specified. Future research examining public perceptions of SRO programs should make efforts to directly measure these variables.

Additionally, because the ACS measured only Anchorage residents' perceptions of the Anchorage SRO program, the results of this study are also limited in their generalizability. It may be that the findings presented here apply to cities of similar size (approximately 286,000 residents) that have school districts and police departments of similar size (approximately 50,000 students and 340 sworn officers, respectively), but ultimately the validity of

such an assumption is subject to empirical verification. Efforts should be made in the future to replicate this study's findings in cities of varying sizes, school districts of varying size, composition, and levels of crime/delinquency, as well as SRO programs of differing size, scope and strategy.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, the findings presented suggest that police researchers and practitioners alike should be cautious about making overly broad statements concerning public support (or lack thereof) for police, even when these statements pertain to a specific program or initiative. The public's views of police are remarkably nuanced and the efforts of researchers to understand these views should reflect this reality. This study also offers some grist for the mill of debate regarding the influence that citizens' direct experiences with the police and crime have on public perceptions of police efficacy. The five empirical models presented here included two measures of prior contact with police, two measures of previous household victimization, and two measures of neighborhood crime and social disorder. Of the 30 regression coefficients estimated for these measures, only six were statistically significant, and five of those were for the measure of previous *social* contact with a police officer.

Importantly, while it appears that the public views SRO programs as a delinquency prevention strategy, confidence in them seems to be unrelated to recent experiences with crime or underlying concerns about future victimization. The one experiential variable that did have a consistent influence on public perceptions of SRO programs – prior social contact with a police officer – was an especially notable finding, particularly when contrasted with the null findings for the official police-public contact measure. That informal, social interactions were found to impact citizens' assessments of SRO programs, but official contacts were not, provides important new insights into the ways in which people's mental conceptions of the police are formed. These findings highlight the importance of police-citizen interactions that occur outside the context of an official police action, and the way officers conduct themselves in those situations, for shaping public perceptions and attitudes toward the police. It is often said that police officers "never get a day off" because they are compelled to enact their institutional role whenever the need arises, without exception. Those who take the oath are police officers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The data presented here confirms just that.

Endnotes

¹ Coding for all items: 0=No, 1=Yes.

² Coding for all items: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree nor agree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree.

³ In its promotional pamphlet, the Anchorage Police Department (APD) states that the aim of the Anchorage SRO program is to "provide a positive law enforcement influence that concentrates on safety and security, encourages relationships between officers, administrators, teachers and students, and fosters education." In addition, APD identifies five specific goals for the program: (1) to enhance safety in and around schools, (2) to reduce juvenile delinquency and crime in the community, (3) to build trust and positive relationships with students, (4) to increase school attendance, and (5) to enhance the learning environment, specifically through anti-bullying efforts (Anchorage Police Department, n.d.).

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APPENDIX A. SRO Program Awareness Survey Questions

<i>Question Text</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Have you ever heard of a School Resource Officer program, whereby police officers are permanently assigned to work in a school in an effort to provide a safe working and learning environment for students, teachers, staff and administrators?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In your opinion, <u>should</u> the Anchorage School District participate in a School Resource Officer program?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To your knowledge, does the Anchorage School District <u>currently</u> participate in a School Resource Officer program?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

APPENDIX B. SRO Program Effectiveness Survey Questions

<i>Permanently assigning police to schools is a good way to:</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Disagree nor Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Reduce drug use by kids	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enhance safety in schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve police-community relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Establish order in schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increase school attendance by children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make students, faculty and staff more fearful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instill in children the ideal of “respect for the law”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduce violent crimes committed in schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Broaden the perspectives of police officers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Undermine the authority of school officials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enhance the safety in neighborhoods surrounding schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Build trust between students and police	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduce property crimes committed in schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Control bullying	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Build a partnership between the police and schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prevent drug dealing near schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduce vandalism of school property	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Educate students about law and the legal system	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Limit vandalism of property of neighborhoods near schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Deter children from committing acts of delinquency or crime	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Create additional barriers between students and the police	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Help police conduct investigations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve the quality of life in the community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduce rates of juvenile crime	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve students’ attitudes toward the police	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Help students learn more about law enforcement careers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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