

## Police Ambassadors: Student-Police Interactions in School and Legal Socialization

Aaron Kupchik  
Benjamin W. Fisher

F. Chris Curran  
Samantha L. Viano

The recent influx of police officers into US public schools has reshaped the context and frequency of children's interactions with police. Yet we know little about how the presence of these officers in schools impacts the legal socialization of students, and whether youth of color might be affected or socialized in different ways than white youth. In this study, we analyze data from interviews with school police officers as well as focus group data from school staff, parents, and students that shed light on how school police interact with youth. In particular, school police officers discussed their desire to build relationships with students that instill trust in police among students. Officers discussed their efforts to teach students that police should be trusted and relied on, and that negative views of policing and involvement with the justice system are the result of a negative news media and individual citizens' criminality, respectively. Importantly, officers discussed how they devote particular attention to imparting these lessons on youth of color and others who may see police in a negative light. We consider how these outreach efforts, what we call acting as police ambassadors, might have different impacts on youth of color compared to white youth, given existing racial disparities in interactions with police.

**T**he importance of individuals' perceptions of law and law enforcement is well established. Concepts such as procedural justice, legitimacy, and moral cynicism have clarified channels through which individuals perceive the law and legal institutions, and how these perceptions shape behaviors, including willingness to report crimes and even to follow the law (e.g., Bell 2016; Desmond et al. 2016; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Tyler 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002). Given that perceptions of law and law enforcement begin early, scholars such as Tyler and Trinkner (2017) and others (e.g., Fagan and Tyler 2005; Wolfe et al. 2017) have

---

We would like to thank Emily Hayden and John Skinner for valuable research assistance as well as Susan Sterett for useful feedback on an earlier draft of this manuscript. This project was supported by Award No. 2016-CK-BX-0020, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Please direct all correspondence to Aaron Kupchik, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Delaware, 325 Smith Hall, Newark, DE 19716; e-mail: akupchik@udel.edu

*Law & Society Review*, Volume 54, Number 2 (2020): 391–422  
© 2020 Law and Society Association. All rights reserved.

focused on how children learn to trust—or not—legal institutions. This body of work has provided important insights into the process of legal socialization, whereby individuals learn about the law, legal institutions, and their rights, and has established the importance of youths' interactions with police and other representatives of legal institutions in shaping their legal socialization.

Yet children's exposure to the law and law enforcement has changed drastically over the past two decades as a result of the spread of police officers in public schools across the US. Most commonly, this follows the school resource officer (hereafter SRO) model. SROs are sworn police officers (not security guards) who typically wear their traditional police uniform and carry firearms and are assigned to a school rather than to a community or other duties. In most cases, they are employees of local law enforcement agencies, though in some cases, school districts directly run their own police agency (Education Week 2018). They receive the same training as their peers who work in other policing tasks, and, like other police officers, they are supervised by a supervising law enforcement officer (not a school administrator). While some jurisdictions require additional training (i.e., beyond what all officers would learn when training for a job as a police officer), such specific training for how to work with children or in school contexts is locally determined. As of 2017, less than a third of US states had laws requiring SRO-specific training beyond that required of regular law enforcement officers (AIR 2018).

SROs are now common in US public schools. In 2015–2016, 57 percent of all public schools and 72 percent of public high schools in the US reported having at least one security guard, SRO, or other law enforcement officer on site (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). Although research has considered what these officers do and whether they are effective at preventing crime on campus (e.g., Brown 2018; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Nolan 2018), we know little about the explicit and implicit lessons they teach students. In other words, children across the US are exposed to police officers in a different context (schools) than students were a generation ago, and (for many) much more frequently (every school day)—yet we do not know how this exposure shapes perceptions of the law and law enforcement.

School is indeed a crucial site for socializing youth into future roles as citizens (Durkheim 2002). It is where young people learn about social and behavioral norms, and, importantly, about authority structures (Kupchik 2010). Historians of education have noted that training young people to internalize rules and the demands of authorities was a primary function of American schooling since the birth of modern US schools (e.g., Tyack 1974; Wiebe 1967). Critical scholars described late nineteenth to early

twentieth century schools as training grounds where young people learned their class-defined roles in the industrial labor market (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Today's public schools look very different than schools of just a generation ago, let alone schools from the early twentieth century, in terms of how youth interact with authority. Several scholars have written about the changed landscape of school discipline and security and the shift to zero-tolerance policies, high suspension rates, ubiquitous surveillance, and the common presence of SROs (Casella 2003; Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik 2010; Lyons and Drew 2006; Simon 2007). Although the Obama Administration advised reductions in use of exclusionary discipline, resulting in policy changes by many states and school districts toward this end (Steinberg and Lacoë 2017; US Department of Education and US Department of Justice 2014), schools today are still considerably more invested in partnerships with law enforcement and exclusionary punishments than they were a generation ago. The spread of SROs throughout the US illustrates this trend well. Furthermore, recent high-profile school shootings have resulted in calls to place even more law enforcement in schools (Curran 2018a).

Our understanding of children's legal socialization—the process by which they develop perceptions of and attitudes toward the law and law enforcement—is clearly incomplete, because no prior research considers how this new, common type of interaction (i.e., with SROs in schools) shapes their legal socialization. As we discuss below, studies have considered how the presence of SROs shapes students' perceptions of police (e.g., Theriot 2016), but no prior studies guide us to better understanding the role that SROs play in teaching students about the law and law enforcement in general. In this article, we address this gap in our knowledge, and, as a result, we advance our understanding of the content and potential ramifications of previously unexplored patterns of children's legal socialization. We analyze data from interviews with SROs as well as data from focus groups with staff and the parents and students at the schools they serve to explore how SROs teach students about policing and the law, with an eye toward whether and how SROs influence the legal socialization of children. We find that SROs act as police ambassadors, in that they intentionally teach students positive messages about law enforcement in general: that students should trust police officers, and that legal troubles are the result only of criminal behavior. These SROs dismiss concerns of aggressive policing in communities of color or other inequities as the product of a negative news media. Instead, they individualize problems with policing in the US, characterizing these problems as either the result of a rare

“bad apple” officer or the fault of individuals who commit crime. While this practice is found across all of the schools we studied, we found that SROs in elementary schools take particular care to impart positive messages about police and the law, believing that younger students are particularly malleable in their beliefs about legal institutions. Moreover, we find that SROs seek out students whom they feel are most likely to experience negative interactions with police—youth of color, low-income youth, students whose parents are incarcerated, and immigrant youth—with their pro-law enforcement message. As we describe below, while this practice might have the benefit of encouraging cooperation with the law and legal authorities, it also raises several concerns about the harms that might come, particularly to youth of color.

### **Background on Policing in Schools**

The presence of SROs has been steadily growing for decades, despite decreasing school crime rates (Kupchik and Monahan 2006; Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). As we describe above, SROs are trained, (typically) uniformed, and armed police officers<sup>1</sup> who are most often hired and supervised by their local police department but whose daily assignment is to work in one or more schools. Thus, they have full arrest powers as well as other privileges and responsibilities of other police officers and differ from other police officers only in where they are assigned to work. Other forms of school security have become more common as well, including security cameras and metal detectors, along with a growing emphasis on zero-tolerance discipline policies, which was initially spurred by the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Casella 2003; Curran 2016; Kupchik 2010; Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). Although recent federal recommendations have discouraged the use of zero-tolerance policies, US schools still reflect cultures of security and surveillance that were not in place to this extent only a few decades ago (Hirschfield 2008; Wacquant 2001). Thus, the presence of police in schools represents one element of a broader agenda of security and control in schools.

One particularly common model of school policing is the triad model, which is described and encouraged by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the largest professional organization of SROs (Canady et al. 2012). This model includes three broad categories of roles: teaching, informal counseling, and law enforcement. According to NASRO, SROs’

---

<sup>1</sup> SROs may be sheriff’s deputies or other sworn law enforcement officers as well. Throughout this article, we refer to all SROs as police officers, as this mirrors the language most commonly used by SROs in our interviews.

roles are not expected to be the same across schools, but instead they should be responsive to the particular needs of the school in which they are placed. This might mean that in one school, an SRO might be engaged in law enforcement activities the majority of the time, whereas in another school, an SRO might be engaged most frequently in mentoring and informal counseling. One national survey encompassing nearly 1400 schools and over 1100 law enforcement agencies found that SROs' most common activities were conducting patrols on and off school grounds, with other common activities including responding to reports of crime and disorder and mentoring students (Travis and Coon 2005). This pattern of roles was also found in a more recent nationally representative survey in the 2015–2016 school year in which school administrators reported that their SROs most frequently engaged in roles related to security enforcement and patrol, coordinating with local police, and identifying problems and seeking solutions (Jackson et al. 2018). At a national level, therefore, it seems that SROs' most common roles align with the law enforcement segment of the triad model.

Most of the research on the effects of SROs in schools has focused on their impact on crime, behavior, and discipline. In short, these studies have provided mixed findings. Some studies report positive effects of SROs, though, with one notable exception (Owens 2017), these are mostly based on school administrators' (e.g., May et al. 2004; Time and Payne 2008) or students' (e.g., Jackson 2002) perceptions of school safety rather than more objectively measured outcomes. A greater number of studies finds null or mixed impacts of SROs (Devlin and Gottfredson 2017; Zhang 2018), or negative results, including that the presence of SROs is associated with increased exclusionary discipline (Fisher and Hennessy 2016), higher rates of arrest of students for minor behaviors (Na and Gottfredson 2013; Theriot 2009), or that it reshapes the school social climate in ways that can be harmful to youth (Kupchik 2010).

One important limitation of this body of research is that most studies focus on effects of the mere presence of SROs, rather than investigating how the quality and nature of their interactions with students might shape student outcomes or students' views of the law and/or police. Only a handful of studies have investigated the social consequences of SROs' interactions with students. For instance, ethnographic work in New York City in the early 1990s found that as police became more involved in the schools' discipline processes, teachers began to back away from their involvement in discipline (Devine 1996). Students learned that teachers were there to shape their minds and police were there to manage their behaviors. This has the potential of socializing students into

lives where they monitor and restrict their own actions out of fear of making contact with the criminal justice system if they engage in nonconforming behaviors. Other qualitative work finds that when schools incorporate practices or logics typically found in the criminal justice system—either through the use of SROs, other security personnel, or security measures more broadly—students may experience a sense of alienation rather than connectedness to school (Nolan 2011). Recent quantitative research offers some support for this argument. Specifically, Theriot (2016) found that students who interacted more with SROs had higher opinions of the SROs but had a lower sense of connectedness to the school more generally. A related study found that students in schools with security personnel tended to have weaker relationships with their teachers (Fisher et al. 2018). Together, these studies suggest that the presence of SROs in school may shape students' patterns of behaviors and relationships in school, and even their perceptions of SROs, but they do not investigate how the presence of SROs influences students' perceptions of the law, law enforcement, or other legal institutions outside of school. Given that schools are foundational socializing institutions (Durkheim 2002; Eccles and Roeser 2011), lessons learned from SROs in schools are likely to influence how young people view their roles within social institutions more broadly.

### **Legal Socialization and SROs**

Research on legal socialization can help us understand how interactions with SROs might influence youth. Legal socialization refers to how individuals develop attitudes toward the law and legal authorities (i.e., police, judges, and other representatives of the justice system) in ways that can influence their behaviors. A great deal of scholarship considers how the process of legal socialization influences perceptions that the law and legal actors are legitimate authorities, which in turn relates positively with law-abiding behavior (Paternoster et al. 1997; Tyler 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002). Individuals learn these attitudes toward law and legal authorities through both direct and indirect experiences (i.e., learning of others' interactions); as Tyler and Huo (2002) point out, interactions specifically with law enforcement are both unique and common, and therefore crucial for understanding legal socialization. Those who perceive these interactions with the law and legal authorities to be fair and just are more likely to perceive them as legitimate authorities. This may include perceptions of procedural justice (the belief that they have been treated fairly) or motive-based trust (trust in the motives of legal authorities). In

contrast, those who learn to view legal authorities as illegitimate, unresponsive, or incompetent develop what is often called legal cynicism (Kirk and Papachristos 2011), which can result in community members refusing to report crime to or seek help from the police (Desmond et al. 2016).

Although the majority of research on legal socialization pertains to adults, several studies find it applicable to juveniles as well. These studies find that juveniles develop attitudes toward legal institutions based on their experiences, including their interactions with police officers and other criminal justice professionals, and from the experiences of others about which they hear (e.g., Fagan and Tyler 2005; Gau and Brunson 2010; Hinds 2007). Furthermore, youth begin this process early in life and are influenced substantially by their interactions with authority figures in their family, school, and the justice system (Tyler and Trinkner 2017).

Typically, research on youth and legal socialization (as it pertains to interactions with police) focuses on how police officers interact with youth who are suspected of criminal activity (e.g., Fagan and Tyler 2005; Gau and Brunson 2010). No prior studies consider how the presence of police officers in schools can shape the legal socialization of youth, by either instilling positive or negative perceptions of the police. Given the growth of police within school campuses across the US, and the resulting daily interactions most school-aged children have with police as a result, there is now an important gap in our understanding of how SROs influence the legal socialization of children.

Research on policing of youth in communities of color might also inform our study of how police interact with students and what lessons about authority and law SROs teach. Scholars such as Gau and Brunson (2010), Carr et al. (2007), and Durán (2009) find that youth of color tend to report perceptions and experiences of police harassment. Across these studies, Black and Mexican American youth reported somewhat similar experiences: that they are targeted unfairly by police when doing nothing wrong, that their rights (e.g., protection against unlawful search and seizure) are routinely violated, and that they are treated disrespectfully by police. Some youth reported experiencing or knowing about police brutality as well. These studies of youth in communities of color mirror research results based on adults in similar areas, which find that people of color tend to view police as unfair, sometimes abusive, and potentially illegitimate in their use of authority (e.g., Butler 2017; Tyler and Huo 2002; Weitzer 2000), resulting in high rates of legal cynicism (e.g., Bell 2016; Epp et al. 2014; Kirk and Papachristos 2011).

The 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement to protest police brutality and overly aggressive policing in communities of color across the US, shows the relevance and ubiquity of these views. The U.S. Department of Justice's report on policing in Ferguson gave legitimacy to these protests by uncovering aggressive, unlawful, and racially biased policing practices in Ferguson (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2015). Recent work by Desmond et al. (2016) demonstrates the power of the legal cynicism that rises after publicized episodes of excessive police violence; they found that after a well-publicized case of police violence against a black man in Milwaukee, calls to police decreased, particularly from black neighborhoods, likely signaling a decrease in trust.

Given the distinct experiences with policing between youth of color and white youth, one would expect many youth of color to develop legal cynicism and view police as illegitimate authorities (Tyler 2006). This is indeed what both Gau and Brunson (2010) and Durán (2009) found, as both studies described how juveniles see the police as an agency to be feared and avoided, not one to be trusted or to rely on for safety (see also Carr et al. 2007; Rios 2011; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler et al. 2014). It seems likely that this is the case for students' perceptions of SROs as well. Scholars have described very aggressive policing by SROs in urban areas with large populations of youth of color (Mukherjee 2007; Nolan 2011; both of these studies were in New York City), but we have very little information on interactions between SROs and students in other types of communities. As a result, we do not know whether students are trained to distrust and fear police, or whether they are taught to trust and seek protection from police by the presence of SROs, and how this varies across groups of students.

In sum, our understanding of the legal socialization of youth is incomplete because it does not consider the consequences of placing SROs in schools nationwide. Prior research tells us a good deal about outcomes of putting police in schools, about the legal socialization of youth, and about racial inequity in experiences with and perceptions of the law and legal authorities, but we know little if anything about the intersection of these three topics: how the presence of SROs influences the legal socialization of youth, and how it may do so differently for white youth and youth of color. This is an important gap in our knowledge, given recent calls to increase the use of SROs even further (Curran 2018b; Oppel 2018). To address this gap in our knowledge, we use data from interviews and focus groups to explore how SROs teach students to trust police, using a framework that individualizes



problems with policing. We then consider how such legal socialization, if representative of SROs' work in other jurisdictions, might result in different outcomes across white youth and youth of color.

## Data and Setting

We draw on data from a research project examining school safety and the scale-up of SROs in two affluent, suburban school districts in the southeastern US. The two school districts, Fairfield County Schools and Washington City Schools (pseudonyms), serve a single county, with the city district covering the local county seat and the county district covering the rest of the county. Although residents generally refer to the area as suburban, across the two districts a quarter of the schools are located within a small city, a quarter of the schools within large suburbs, a quarter of schools in fringe rural areas, and the remainder of schools are in fringe town and distant rural areas. Both school districts are among the highest performing districts academically in the state.

Despite both being high-performing districts academically, the two districts vary on other measures. As shown in Table 1, the racial/ethnic demographics of the two districts are somewhat different. About 40 percent of the students in Washington City Schools are African American or Hispanic whereas only about 10 percent of the students in Fairfield County Schools are African American or Hispanic. Washington City Schools also have a more diverse population, economically, with about 40 percent of their students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch compared to about 10 percent in Fairfield County Schools. Finally, the Fairfield County system is about four times as large in terms of number of schools and student enrollment. At the same time, it is important to note that the two districts are both within (and the only two school districts within) the same county. In fact, the two districts even share student feeder patterns, such that many

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics by School District

	Fairfield County Schools	Washington City Schools
No. of schools	40 <sup>1</sup>	10 <sup>1</sup>
Student enrollment	37,000 <sup>2</sup>	3000 <sup>2</sup>
No. of African American students	5% <sup>3</sup>	15% <sup>3</sup>
No. of Hispanic students	5% <sup>3</sup>	25% <sup>3</sup>
% Qualifying for free/reduced lunch	10% <sup>3</sup>	40% <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rounded to the nearest ten.

<sup>2</sup> Rounded to the nearest thousand.

<sup>3</sup> Rounded to the nearest five.

Source: The state's Department of Education.

students will attend a school from both districts during their educational trajectory. As a result of these similarities and close cooperation, the two districts often make policy and implementation decisions in conjunction with each other. Given that these two districts share a geographic space, the SROs come from the same agency, there is a close working relationship between the two districts, and also the relative imbalance of the number of schools (and students) across districts, we analyze them as a single entity rather than attempting to compare and contrast the role of SROs across them.

Most relevant to our study was a joint decision that both school districts made in conjunction with the local law enforcement agency to expand the presence of SROs to all schools on the heels of the 2012 school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. This resulted in a dedicated SRO for all elementary schools in both districts, in addition to pre-existing SRO coverage at all middle and high schools. At the time of data collection, every school in the districts had one SRO, regardless of school enrollment or level. All SROs had an office at the school and worked full time in the school during the school year. However, the SROs were hired, trained, and supervised by a local sheriff's department. Their direct supervisors were two high-ranking law enforcement officials, one of which had experience as an SRO. The principals of the schools explicitly had no supervisory role over SROs. The sheriff's department assigned SROs to schools and was neither required to consult with principals about SRO placement nor notify principals about SRO staffing changes. As employees of a sheriff's department, the SROs typically spent school breaks in other roles including patrol and staffing the county jail (though SROs might take unpaid leave during the summer or accrue enough overtime by working at afterschool events to avoid taking on other law enforcement duties). The prior background of SROs was highly varied, from those who specifically applied to join law enforcement to be an SRO, to retired detectives with decades of experience in a different jurisdiction. The majority of SROs spent time in law enforcement in other capacities (e.g., jail, patrol, university police) before becoming an SRO, with less than 10 percent of SROs reporting that they had spent their entire law enforcement career in schools. About 10 percent of SROs at this time had over 20 years of law enforcement experience. SROs in the district received some SRO-specific training prior to beginning their position, although there was variability in how, and how extensively, officers were trained based on the year they were hired. In general, however, training consisted of several days of classroom instruction that focused on

juvenile law, followed by 2–3 weeks of shadowing SROs at other schools in the district.

Across both districts, we conducted interviews with almost all SROs ( $n = 47$ ) and district leaders ( $n = 5$ ), including the sheriff department personnel who oversaw the SRO program ( $n = 4$ ). Within the city school system, we also conducted interviews and focus groups with school administrators ( $n = 17$  interviews), teachers ( $n = 17$  focus groups), students ( $n = 9$  focus groups), and parents ( $n = 6$  focus groups). We sought interviews with all SROs and district-level leadership across both school districts and all administrators in the city school system. In Table 2, we present data on the percentage of SROs we interviewed at each school level including gender, their average reported number of years in law enforcement, and average number of years working as an SRO. As shown in Table 2, about three-fourths of the SROs we interviewed were male and a slight majority were in elementary schools. SROs reported over 12 years on the police force, on average, with an average of 4.7 years working as an SRO specifically. Almost all of the SROs who we interviewed identified as white, thus we had insufficient variation in race/ethnicity of SRO to consider its role. Interviews with SROs lasted 50 minutes on average.

In the case of teachers, students, and parents, the sampling approach was a convenience sample with stakeholders often selected by the school's administration due to availability. Teachers were selected by administrators if they had common planning periods, and the focus groups often took place during part of the teachers' grade-level or subject-specific meeting times. Students were typically selected if they either participated in after school programming or were enrolled in a noncore course (i.e., courses other than math, English language arts, social studies, or science), and included if their parents completed a consent form. Participating parents were either those who were available after dropping their children off in the morning or members of a parent-school organization who agreed to be part of the focus

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Interviewed SROs

	Percent	Mean
Elementary school	51	
Middle school	27	
High school	20	
Alternative setting	2	
Male	78	
Average experience as an SRO (years)		4.7
Average experience in law enforcement (years)		12.1

*Note:* Three SROs did not provide number of years as an SRO in the interview. Sixteen SROs did not provide number of years of experience in law enforcement (36%). Alternative setting schools include students across levels (elementary/middle/high).

group before or after their meeting. The focus groups lasted, on average, 35 minutes.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by the authors and graduate research assistants at the school sites during the spring of 2017. We followed original open-ended semi-structured protocols that were meant to guide the conversation without demanding strict adherence to the protocol (see King and Horrocks 2010). The interview and focus group protocols included questions about school safety, security, discipline, and the day-to-day activities of SROs; they were designed to explore the logistics of policing in schools as well as to inform inquiries into ramifications of SRO activities and inequities in student outcomes that might result. The interview protocols were largely motivated by prior research that has emphasized the importance of understanding SROs' roles as an avenue to understand their impacts (Covert 2007; Devlin and Gottfredson 2017; Finn et al. 2005; Lynch et al. 2016; Rippetoe 2009; Schlosser 2014). Most salient to this study, we asked detailed questions and probed for examples of the ways that SROs interact with students on a daily basis and the ways in which these interactions shape students' views of law enforcement. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

### **Data Analysis**

Our analysis plan followed an iterative, constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1965). We coded all transcripts in NVivo, with each transcript being coded by at least two project personnel. Although a number of predetermined themes were included, the iterative process allowed for emergent themes to be identified through the coding process. Continuing discussions among the research team on emergent themes and coding contributed to consistency across the coding process. For the project as a whole, broad thematic categories included relationships between the SROs and other populations in and outside of the school, disciplinary systems, school security/school safety, the purpose of the SROs in the schools, the different roles of the SROs in the schools, the impacts of the SROs in the schools, SRO training/background, and mentions of various subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities). Within these thematic categories, more specific themes were identified and coded based on group conversations.

Following the broad coding of all transcripts, we further analyzed segments of text that had been coded to a number of relevant themes, including: SROs' views of their purpose and ideal role in the school, relationships between SROs and students,

public perceptions of SROs, and impacts SROs have on students (particularly their impact on perceptions of police). Three researchers then read segments of the coded text noting commonalities in the ways that respondents discussed SROs' teaching of law enforcement to youth, how SROs approached different subgroups of students, and how students responded to interactions with SROs. We then considered differences in resulting codes found across groups of schools, searching in particular for patterns across different student age groups (i.e., elementary, middle, or high schools).<sup>2</sup> Memo notes were made from each researcher along with supportive or exemplary quotations. The research team then collectively discussed these memos and their meaning in relation to the posited research questions.

During our analyses, we were mindful of the distinct methodological approaches taken to interview different respondent groups. Our data collection with SROs involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews with almost all SROs (approximately 94 percent) working in the county. The length of these interviews afforded us the opportunity to explore issues in great depth, and to probe in ways that clarified these individual SROs' perceptions and experiences. The fact that almost all participated also means that we avoid any potential problem of sample selection bias that might arise if we were to hear from only a small subset of nonrandomly chosen participants. As a result, these interviews were prioritized in our data analysis, and the themes of our results are based on these interviews. In contrast, our focus groups with teachers, parents, and students involved nonprobability (convenience) samples with small subsets of each group, leaving us with less confidence that the results obtained from them are representative of all teachers, parents, and students. As a result, we use these data as a secondary data source to illustrate these themes and explore the extent to which the themes that arose out of the SRO interviews are reflected by other stakeholders as well. As we describe below, results from analyses of the two sources of data were consistent with one another, leaving us greater confidence in our results.

## Results

We found that the SROs in our study focus a great deal on shaping students' perceptions of the police in general. Above we refer to their efforts as being police ambassadors because they actively work to legally socialize children in a way that targets

---

<sup>2</sup> Initially we considered distinctions in our results across the two districts as well. Such a comparison proved to be not feasible, however, given the similarities in the districts we discuss above.

motive-based trust, teaching students that police are to be trusted and used as a resource, and that negative interactions with police (including the arrest of a loved one) are the result of an individual's criminality. SROs make particular efforts to teach this lesson to younger students and to those who might have negative prior experiences with police. Furthermore, focus groups with students confirm these results based on SROs' statements, and further suggest that these efforts at legal socialization have an impact on youth. We discuss each of these in turn, followed by a discussion of the potential consequences, particularly to youth of color, of these lessons.

### **SROs' Efforts to Teach about Police**

During interviews with SROs, we asked them about their role and purpose in schools. SROs' responses were consistent across respondents, noting two primary roles: (1) to maintain safety, and (2) to develop relationships with students. Although there is variation in how they seek to maintain safety, most see this job as requiring that they seek out vulnerabilities in the school's security (e.g., unlocked doors), respond to any threats, and other security duties. The second role, which is more relevant to our analysis, was discussed in remarkably similar terms across respondents in both districts. SROs described their efforts to build rapport and foster supportive relationships with students. Different officers use different tactics to do so, but most tend to make themselves approachable through behaviors like greeting students with a smile as they enter for the day, fist-bumping and high-fiving them in the hallways, eating lunch with students in the cafeteria, and so on. They try to learn students' names and to get to know students on a personal level.

Several SROs told us that they do this in order to teach students that police officers can be trusted—that they are there to help you if you need it. They reported wanting to teach students that police are the “good guys” who one can turn to. Consider these examples:

You know, and it's like, I want them to feel like they can talk to me. You know, and that way, if they see a police officer on the road, hey that, “I bet I could talk to this guy,” you know, a guy or woman, whatever. (SRO 118 interview)

So I'm definitely I almost say I'm a counselor, a mother, a brother, a sister. Um, I'm what they need and it also shows them that like any law enforcement officer could be that so when they see someone on the street and they need help they feel more

comfortable approaching them knowing that we're not just always gonna' get them in trouble. (SRO 141 interview)

Some SROs mentioned how getting to know students helps them maintain security as well, because knowing students' typical demeanors allows them to notice if something is wrong and take steps to prevent conflicts within the school, or because students' trust in SROs facilitates students acting as an informant (see Kupchik 2010) by coming forward with information (e.g., about a potential school shooting). But this aspect of rapport-building was mentioned far less often than the lessons about law enforcement that it taught.

Importantly, SROs endeavor to teach students about police in general, not just to develop a level of comfort with them as individual officers; like ambassadors, they seek to improve relationships between entire groups, not just individuals. While they do not identify it as such, they clearly intend to foster motive-based trust in youth, where students learn to trust in the motives of police officers in general (Tyler and Huo 2002). Several reported that they want students to learn in schools about police and to apply their trust and warm feelings about police to other officers with whom they interact. They teach children that police are a force for good and that police only arrest people because these people commit crimes; arrests are the fault of those committing crimes and are not a reason to be angry at police officers who are just doing their jobs. For example, in a focus group, one teacher described a student whose parent was in jail, and whom the SRO tried to counsel; this teacher summarized the SRO's approach as communicating to the student "We weren't out to get your father, your father broke the law..." (Teacher focus group 113).

A few respondents expanded on this theme to discuss how this pro-police message is necessary due to both the "negativity" about police in the news and anti-police "bias" or "stereotypes" that students might have learned at home. Others were more moderate in suggesting that news stories about abusive police actions may be true but are not representative of police in general; these are isolated incidents resulting from the rare "bad apple" police officer and thus should not be relied on in making generalizations about police. The message that SROs described imparting is that negative police-citizen interactions are caused by individuals, and negative views about police, even among youth of color and others who are at heightened risk of negative police interaction, are an unfortunate and misrepresentative view that is either created or exacerbated by the news media and parents. For example:

I don't take it personally that they don't like me just because they ha-had a stereotype already in their mind of what cops should be and what they are. Um, and I'm trying to correct that stereotype. (SRO 112 interview)

And that's the big thing, is kind of teaching a younger age that that's not what we're here for, and try to work, you know, understand, you know, if I came from that background [note: prior statements indicate he is referring to Black and Latinx students] too, I might think the same thing, so that's the big thing is to break that mold and build some trust in the community. That's what, that's the biggest factor I see besides security in law, um, is the SRO program, it gets more back to community-oriented policing, and get to knowing our, uh, community better and maybe help some of these biases out and, this, as these kids get older, they can realize not every cop is out to get me. But they, it is definitely an issue. (SRO 120 interview)

One of the main things is, there's a lot of kids here that, um, they've kind of grown up thinking police are bad. And whether it's home life or TV or, or wherever they're getting it from and they kind of see a different side. You know, they see the, the [SRO] playing with them and hanging out at lunch with them and going in the classroom parties with them and ... And they see that we're not these bad guys trying to get everybody. So, I think that's really important to kind of change the attitudes of some of these children that think otherwise. (SRO 133 interview)

SROs also discussed the importance of beginning these lessons early in a student's academic career, particularly in elementary school. They described efforts to teach children at an early age about trusting police, so that by the time these youth are in middle school and high school, there is already a foundation in place for trusting relationships between police and the youth at greatest risk of distrusting the police (as we describe below).

...like I said, you got to, we try to, particularly on the elementary kids, got to kind of plant that seed early and establish that trust and that bond and then when they go to middle school (coughs), or when they get to um, high school, it will still kind of resonate with them. (SRO 101 interview)

Um, I like being with kids and um, just ... I think it's great having SRO and Elementary schools to get 'em prepared, um, for, you know, interaction with police, and to not be scared of police. ...'Cause, you know, uh, a lot of the news media, and stuff like that, or social media, mainly. Uh, puts a bad rep on a lot of



police officers. You know. You got one bad apple, they tend to think everybody's bad. So. And uh, I ... I just think it's a great thing for kids to interact with police officers when they're at a ... at a younger age- So they don't ... 'cause if you ... 'cause I worked in a high school before. And if they've never dealt with SRO, they think you're just out to bust 'em for anything they can. (SRO 150 interview)

Multiple SROs noted distinctions in how they interact with elementary school students in comparison to middle and high school students. Specifically, SROs believed that younger students are more willing to interact with adults in general—and SROs in particular—than are older students, who SROs saw as both more skeptical of police and too focused on their social standing at the expense of interacting with adults. Thus, although teaching positive lessons about law enforcement was a priority for all SROs in this study, those assigned to elementary schools were particularly ardent in their efforts toward legal socialization.

Teachers' and school district leaders' descriptions of SROs' interactions with students help validate these results by mirroring the SROs' self-reports. Most teachers described how personable their SROs are with students and how this is good because it teaches students to trust police. Thus, the SROs' efforts at legal socialization are explicit enough to be noticed by others in the school community. As one district leader stated:

And I think that is desperately needed to understand that law enforcement are a positive in our society, that are needed in our society, and they're an important part of our society. What better way to instill that than having a young, impressionable, elementary-aged student see that person and develop that relationship. Um, and, and just know that that is something that is good, uh, in our society. Because in America, you very well know that it's not hard to find a news story, in which law enforcement is seen in, in a bad light. (Fairfield County Schools District leadership interview 3)

The SROs, who are employees of the local sheriff's department, were instructed by their supervisors to teach students these positive messages about police. A supervisor at the sheriff's department noted in an interview that the SROs were told from "day 1" that part of their jobs was to build relationships with students in order for them to teach a positive view of law enforcement: "...They need to let people know who we are and what we do and, therefore, you build confidence in the community in us" (Law Enforcement Agency interview 2). This was particularly true for elementary school SROs, who were instructed by their

supervisors to avoid engaging in traditional law enforcement activities (i.e., arrests) with children unless absolutely necessary for others' safety. A handful of SROs noted their role in doing "PR" (public relations) for the police in ways that illustrated such a planned, coordinated effort.<sup>3</sup> For example, one SRO stated:

Um, just kinda being there as a face, and you know, out there also as a- it's a PR thing of ... on the elementary side, we're wanting to make sure that those kids know that, you know, police are not the bad guys. Police are not these- this negative aspect. We're not-, we shouldn't be seen in this negative light, so we're trying to develop that relationship with our students, so they know that if they ever have a problem, be it at home, be it at school, they can come to us and come talk to us if they aren't comfortable talking to anybody else. (SRO 125 interview)

### **Efforts at Legal Socialization across Students**

Above we discuss the additional efforts SROs make to build relationships with younger students. Here we turn to another crucial point of variation, and discuss how student race/ethnicity and disadvantage relate to SROs' efforts at legal socialization. Our comparisons are based on SROs' own reports of different strategies used when interacting with different students within the same schools, and mirrored by parent and teacher focus group responses.

As we note above, youth of color are at greater risk than white youth of experiencing negative interactions with police and developing legal cynicism. Given this, we were interested in whether SROs' efforts to teach students to trust police are consistent across student groups. In both school districts, we found that SROs claim to work hardest at developing relationships with students most at risk of negative views.

Although SROs did not discuss race/ethnicity often—when they did, it was usually to express a color-blind approach, in that they "treated everyone the same"—they did discuss other cues of either disadvantage or risk of negative police encounters. Police talked about making extra effort to befriend students from families with low-socioeconomic statuses, from "tougher backgrounds," with family members who had been arrested, and who had special educational or behavioral needs. Multiple SROs described the importance of teaching these students in particular to trust in police, because these students were most likely to only know police as "the person who arrests Mommy or Daddy" (SRO

---

<sup>3</sup> The National Association of School Resource Officers also cites improved perceptions of law enforcement as a benefit of SRO programs (Canady et al. 2012: 26).

124 interview). Consider the following, one of the few instances where an SRO discussed race specifically:

African-American community and law enforcement has some issues of trust. And it's more, um, I would say, because of, uh, the stuff that's happened with, uh, what was that shooting? Michael Brown incident, that was a big thing. And there are, you can still see even in the young ages there is some type of, you can tell their parent maybe has said something. They're not as open to you as a lot. And, um, I would even say Hispanics sometimes, because of the immigration issue. ... Um, so even at this age, it can affect the, how the kids come up to you. Of course, most of them aren't like that, but there are some, I can tell that they do either have a bias already, or they've been told something, just by questions they ask. Like, I've been asked, by the ones that kind of act that way, like, "Are you here to arrest me?" I go, are you here to arrest some, yeah, you're like arrest people. So questions like that, you can tell, like, on face value, you're like, "Oh, that's just a kid being goofy," but then you start thinking about it, it's like they probably have been told that that's what we, all we do is arrest people. So yes, even at this age, you can see the biases society's created, even at that young age it's already, you know, it's a full circle. They are starting to create their own, so. (SRO 120 interview)

Again, teachers and parents validated these reports by commenting on how SROs make extra efforts with low- socioeconomic status youth and misbehaving youth, but particularly with youth of color. As stated in one focus group with parents:

I think today ... in today's political environment, especially for minority students, it is super important to have a friendly SRO so that they start interacting with law enforcement in a positive way from the very early point. (Parent focus group 122)

Some respondents described SROs' efforts to impart their lessons on immigrant students, because these youth might be afraid of police as immigration law enforcers. One Vice Principal stated:

But um, so Officer [xxxx], he'll run through the cafeteria and, you know, at lunchtime, and, um, he'll escort kids, like some of the little ones, he'll walk 'em down to their class, and ... you know, one of the goals is for kids to not be afraid of law enforcement. Um, again, goin' back to the media, there's a lot going on right now, and, and sometimes those perceptions are out there.

<sup>4</sup> This Vice Principal described the Hispanic population as being a substantial number; we have redacted it to preserve anonymity.

Especially with, you know, [xx]%<sup>4</sup> of our population is Hispanic, and especially, you know, they, a lot of them are, the parents are illegal. (VP 122)

Or, as described by teachers during a focus group:

Teacher 1: ... One of the elementary students was asking the SRO officer if she was gonna' take their dad away when they were talking ...

Teacher 2: Oh, for the deportation?

Teacher 1: Yes. And I was like, "Oh my gosh." But she wasn't scared to ask her knowing ... because she was a fourth grader ... She walked right over to [the SRO]. I was so proud of her for doing that because she was scared that that person was going to take her dad, but then at the same time, she trusted her enough to know she could ask her and it would be okay. I was like, "Oh." Like, it gave me chills. It was ... it was a good thing though, you know? (Teacher focus group 132)

It is important to note that at no point in *any* interview with an SRO did we hear critical thought about policing itself, legitimate reasons for some students to have negative views of police, or about how reforms to police practice might help establish greater legitimacy of and citizen trust in police. Instead, the problem of negative interactions with police was consistently individualized, or described as the result of individuals' criminality, and the problem of negative perceptions was clearly framed as a problem of perception (i.e., unfairly negative views of police officers) that is influenced by a negative news media and parents. SROs' descriptions conveyed the belief that a student who knows of police as the agents who took away a parent, or a student who is an undocumented immigrant and avoids police out of fear of deportation, can and should be taught that police are to be trusted because they are a resource for help rather than a threat. Below we discuss implications of these lessons—how such an individualized perception of criminality and lessons of trust in police might be problematic, particularly for students of color

### **How Do Kids Respond?**

Focus groups with students offered us an opportunity to explore how students perceive SROs, and whether their interactions with SROs make them more or less likely to trust police officers or turn to an officer if they needed help (e.g., in case of victimization). In general, students reported liking their SROs; they see their SROs as friendly and approachable, and expressed no fear about the police who patrol their schools. For some

students, this translates into trust in police in general. Others, however, see their SRO (whom they trust) as different from other police—whom they see as “real” police—whom they still view with some distrust. Consider, for example, the difference between the following two focus group discussions. Here, one student describes how the SRO in his school has caused him to rethink negative views of police in general:

Well it definitely changes my way of thinking about police officers because I always see on the news police officers doing everything to hold people down and stuff and I'm like nope, don't want to run into them. (laughs ... collective laughter from other children)...Uh, and since I was wit-I had been with Officer [xxxx], uh, it makes me think about them, they are doing the right thing, they like, sometimes it doesn't say the whole story about it ...So, you're thinking, oh man, like why are doing that, um, so ... it just makes me think different about them they may be doing the right thing, so makes me feel safe around them. (Student focus group 113v1)

In a separate student focus group, students discussed their SRO, and how he does not act “like a police officer” unless an incident occurs in school. Because they learned to trust their officer, one student said that if she witnessed or experienced victimization “I would go right away to go tell him.” Another student in this group further delineated the difference between good and bad officers (with their SRO being a good one) as follows:

Uhm the good part is what [xxxx] said ... like to keep safe because you have someone to keep you safe, but the bad part to me, but not to everyone I think, like the bad part to me is what kind of police officer you get, because like some officers can be really really really really mean to you and like hurt your body and stuff, but some of them can be really really really nice. If you know them, but you don't even have to know them, you could tell- uhm if they're nice. (Student focus group 120)

There were more students in the former group, who expressed few or no reservations about police, than there were in the latter group. Furthermore, SROs told us stories about how their relationships with students have resulted in students wanting to be police officers, or gave us other indicators that their relationship building efforts are appreciated by students (e.g., students writing “thank you notes,” or contacting them long after graduating to thank them). Although our data do not allow us to assess the effectiveness of their efforts, reports of SROs, school staff, and students all lead us to believe that SROs were likely successful at

socializing students to have greater trust in law enforcement in general. Furthermore, Bell's (2016) findings that low-income African American mothers often turn to police for help when they trust individual officers suggest that SROs' efforts may result in student willingness to seek help from police if needed.

### **Implications of SROs' Efforts at Legal Socialization**

As we describe above, our research illustrates clear and intentional efforts by SROs to be police ambassadors: to teach students lessons about the police, and law in general, as being just and helpful. We continue our analysis by considering how these efforts at legal socialization might influence youth and how any potential influence might vary across students. Our data do not allow us to measure the actual effects of SROs' practices on youths' lives; nevertheless, our findings point out both potential benefits and harms that may come from these practices, particularly for youth of color and low-income youth.

To begin on a positive note, teaching students to trust and rely on police can have positive implications for the police, communities, and the youth themselves. As work on procedural justice and motive-based trust has shown (e.g., Tyler 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002), community members are more likely to obey the law when they view the law and legal institutions as legitimate. Thus, if SROs' lessons successfully teach students that police have trustworthy motives and that criminal justice involvement is fair and based on criminality alone, then students might perceive greater legitimacy in the law and might in turn be more likely to abide by the law. They would also be more likely to turn to police to settle disputes rather than engaging in violence to handle disputes themselves (e.g., Durán 2009; see also Desmond et al. 2016).

If successful, the SROs' actions also benefit law enforcement efforts, as police can cultivate informants by developing relationships of trust with students (see Kupchik 2010). To the extent that students share their lessons about police and law with their families and others in their community, this legal socialization might reduce criticisms of the police in the community (which is particularly important for elected law enforcement leadership, as we heard frequently in our interviews with SROs). Importantly, trust between students and SROs could also mean students being more likely to tell SROs if they hear about another student's plan to commit violence such as a school shooting; given prior research finding that fellow students often know about school shootings, and that informant reports can avert such events (Madfis 2014;

Newman 2004), this seems a promising aspect of pro-SRO views among students.

Yet this process of legal socialization puts youth at risk of negative consequences, particularly those youth who are at the greatest risk of arrest and of negative police interactions to begin with. As we describe above, SROs reported going out of their way to interact with low-income youth, youth of color, and others who demonstrated disorderly behavior or came from “tough backgrounds,” as SROs described it. These students—and particularly students of color, since they are more recognizable to SROs as members of marginalized groups than are low-income youth or others—can therefore expect to have SROs watching over them more frequently than SROs watch over other students. A disparity in police surveillance means a disproportionate risk that the SRO becomes aware of criminal behavior. Here we question whether students who discuss a weekend activity or friends’ behaviors, without regard to whether these activities are illegal, might open themselves up to a mandatory police response; given that students of color and low-income youth have more interactions with police than do other students, they are at heightened risk of such incidents. As Gascon (2018) points out, prior efforts among Los Angeles police officers to bond with people of color have often been ineffective at building true relationships of trust, and instead have resulted in intensified policing; our concern is that a similar process may occur among the students who are socialized by SROs to trust police.

Another problem that might particularly affect youth of color would be a disjuncture between legal socialization from SROs at school and community understandings. Youth who learn in schools that police are fair and trustworthy might risk conflict in their communities, particularly if their peers see police and the law differently. This concern echoes Rios’ (2011) findings that black and Latino boys in Oakland who seek to avoid criminal behavior and police contact are shunned and even bullied by others; peers see these conformist youth as part of a system that the majority in the community finds to be oppressive and grow resentful. It is easy to imagine that some youth of color who learn in schools that police are the “good guys,” and that arrests only happen when individuals commit crimes, face ostracism, bullying, and suspicions of being “snitches” in their communities where legal cynicism is high (Desmond et al. 2016).

Learning to trust police in schools might also leave youth of color more vulnerable to a disconnect between SROs’ behaviors and responses by police more broadly in the community. It is important to keep in mind that teaching and counseling young people are central aspects of SROs’ jobs as they represent two legs

of the commonly used triad model of SRO activity (teaching, informal counseling, and law enforcement). Thus, SROs are instructed and often trained to act differently—in ways that emphasize counseling, education, and mentoring of youth—than other police officers (Canady et al. 2012). Police without this training (i.e., those who have not worked as SROs), or those not instructed to educate and counsel youth, would likely act differently toward youth than do SROs. Such a disjuncture between what a juvenile is taught in school to expect from police, and how a police officer might respond to them in the community, could easily result in tense interactions or frustration among both youth and police. Given the aggressive nature of policing often found in communities of color (Smith and Holmes 2014), youth of color are at greatest risk of initiating interactions with police that might result in such problematic encounters.

The lesson students are taught—that criminality and police involvement are solely the responsibility of individuals—is particularly problematic for marginalized youth. Prior scholars have written extensively and persuasively of the problem that occurs when learned scripts about how the world works contradict one's structural position, in ways that mirror the disjuncture we observed. Consider, for example, the seminal texts, *The Exclusive Society* (Young 1999) or *Crime and the American Dream* (Messner and Rosenfeld 2013), among others (e.g., Merton 1996; Nightingale 1993). These texts each consider what happens when those who are socially and economically marginalized learn cultural values of individualism and equality. For Merton (1996) and Messner and Rosenfeld (2013; though on a macro-level), for example, this occurs when those without legitimate means to achieve economic success still expect to achieve the "American Dream" of financial success. This disjuncture can result in criminal behavior among those seeking culturally valued goals but without legitimate means to achieve them.

We see a direct connection between these prior works and our results, suggesting how the pro-police legal socialization can harm youth of color. Again, we heard no discussion among SROs of the possibility that policing tends to be disproportionately directed at people of color, despite evidence showing this to be the case (e.g., Kochel et al. 2011). Rather, the SROs taught an opposite message—that policing and the law in general were fair and neutral, with problems (e.g., being arrested) the result of individuals' criminality alone. In ethnographic work on how youth navigate the ubiquitous controlling presence around them, Rios (2011) discusses the importance of recognizing inequality and discriminatory treatment rather than ignoring it. He argues that for youth like those he studied, the path toward productive lives is to



recognize unfairness and channel it productively. The legal socialization we heard SROs and others consistently articulate, and that we describe above, works in an opposite way, by denying any unfairness and placing all blame for criminal involvement on criminal defendants. Importantly, SROs described situations where they used this framework to describe students' own parents' criminal involvement, and in relation to immigration law for youths who may be undocumented. Thus, their argument was not always about hypothetical situations or individuals whom students might know casually, but sometimes placed blame on themselves and their parents. While we have no data on how students actually respond to this disjuncture between what they might experience and what they learn in school, our exploratory results lead us to be concerned about how students of color in particular respond to these lessons.

A related and important harm that the legal socialization we found might have for marginalized students (those with whom SROs seek to interact most) is the internalization of negative labels and lowered self-esteem. In a recent study, Godfrey et al. (2017) found that "traditionally marginalized" students who were taught that society is a meritocracy tended to show declines in self-esteem during their adolescent years, relative to others. In other words, learning that society is fair, rather than discriminatory, can be harmful to those with fewer opportunities for success. We see this as directly relevant to our findings, because the SROs were clear in their efforts to teach that the law is fair to all, despite evidence that the ubiquity, intensity, and aggressiveness of policing tends to vary across neighborhoods.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our discovery that SROs work as police ambassadors is important for understanding the legal socialization of youth. SROs are now commonplace throughout the US, resulting in novel and previously unexplored types of police-youth interactions. Though the topic of children's legal socialization is well studied by sociolegal scholars (e.g., Fagan and Tyler 2005; Tyler and Trinkner 2017; Wolfe et al. 2017), this is the first analysis of an important and common formative experience youth have with police. Relatedly, our findings also contribute to the literature on school-based policing, illustrating goals and practices of SROs that might be found in other jurisdictions as well. Prior work on legal socialization of youth has not previously taken into account the exposure of youth to SROs on a daily basis and how this might influence their development as citizens. And, despite research into

a variety of consequences of SROs' growing presence in schools, no prior studies of SROs have considered the outcome of students' learning about the law and legal authorities. Our work also demonstrates the efforts by police to actively teach motive-based trust among youth, as prior scholars have recommended; yet prior scholars, most notably Tyler and Huo (2002), also call for policing reform that makes policing more equitable and therefore facilitates development of this motive-based trust. We question whether pro-police legal socialization will benefit students in absence of these broader efforts to recognize and address inequity in policing.

Above we consider the potential implications to students, particularly students of color, of these efforts by SROs. Our results also offer a lesson for policing policy more broadly. Importantly, the legal socialization of students to trust SROs and the law in general contains no voice—at least none that we observed during our research—for the reform of policing in the US. This is despite evidence that people of color are policed in different ways than Whites (e.g., Legewie 2016), and that policing in urban, low-income areas in which mostly people of color live tends to be more aggressive than in other areas (e.g., Smith and Holmes 2014). Certainly, one can be supportive of police officers and also desire an honest conversation about how race and ethnicity may affect policing. Yet the lessons SROs teach students preclude such a conversation, teaching students that criticism of policing is a media-created fiction or unrepresentative of policing in general. If such practices are widespread, they represent a real threat to reforms of police practices that might have a chance of improving the fairness and racial equity of police work.

One way that schools and districts might capitalize on the potential positive effects of legal socialization via the use of police in schools, while simultaneously mitigating the possible negative effects, may be to engage in a process of collaborative decisionmaking about SROs' presence and roles in schools. In particular, having parents, students, and community leaders as part of those decision-making processes is likely to provide additional insights that may not come from school leaders who often focus on doing anything necessary to prevent tragedies (Madfis 2014), and who may be less aware of the unintentional consequences that may come along with police in schools. Additionally, schools who have already implemented police should regularly reassess—along with meaningful input from additional stakeholders—whether it is useful to continue to have the police officer (1) remain in the school, or (2) engage in the same set of activities. In many cases, schools and communities are likely to

agree that things are going in a positive direction and they should continue to maintain the status quo. In other cases, this reassessment would likely bring important issues to the surface and allow for collaborative problem solving in an effort to improve the schooling experiences for students.

A second mechanism for addressing SROs' role in legal socialization may be to more explicitly address how SROs are trained to work with students. As of 2017, less than a third of states had laws requiring SRO-specific training beyond that required of regular law enforcement officers (AIR 2018). Where training is required by state law, it tends to focus on law enforcement issues such as firearms, the use of force, and emergency responsiveness. We suggest that expanding required training to explicitly acknowledge the role SROs play in the legal socialization of youth and the explicit and implicit messages that they communicate regarding legal structures and the role of police could potentially be beneficial. By involving a diverse set of stakeholders in this training, schools and law enforcement agencies may be able to better ensure that a nuanced and self-reflective view of policing is adopted by SROs and communicated to students.

Our focus in this research was on the implementation of SROs and on school processes. Although we heard from students about how they interact with SROs and what they learn from these interactions, future research should address this student learning in greater depth, including research on students' actual behaviors over time to understand how they relate to legal institutions after receiving these messages in schools. Survey research that gauges what specific lessons students learn from SROs with whom they build relationships would be particularly helpful. Such analyses could be used to address our concerns about whether legal socialization in schools might contribute to existing racial and class inequalities among youth. It would also be beneficial for future research to include schools with greater racial and class diversity of both students and SROs, and to consider SROs' efforts at legal socialization in other locations. The fact that there are few racial/ethnic minority SROs in our research is a particular limitation, for it forbids us from considering how SROs' race/ethnicity may matter in the ways that they interact with students of color and what lessons about legal institutions they impart. It is also important to acknowledge that our research occurred in a single county, and that the SRO program expanded in this county after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School; the timing of this program expansion might have resulted in more positive perceptions of SROs than one might find if studying another

jurisdiction where SROs were hired at a different time and/or in response to different stimuli.

## References

- AIR. 2018. "Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations." National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, Available at: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-compendium>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- Bell, Monica C. 2016. "Situational Trust: How Disadvantaged Mothers Reconceive Legal Cynicism." *Law & Society Rev.* 50: 314-47.
- Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 1976. *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brown, Ben. 2018. "Evaluations of School Policing Programs in the US." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance and Social Control*, edited by Jo Deakin et al. London: Palgrave.
- Butler, Paul. 2017. *Chokehold: Policing Black Men*. New York: The New Press.
- Canady, Maurice, Bernard James, and Janet Nease. 2012. *To Protect and Educate: The School Resource Officer and the Prevention of Violence in Schools*. Hoover: National Association of School Resource Officers.
- Carr, Patrick J., Laura Napolitano, and Jessica Keating. 2007. "We Never Call the Cops and Here Is Why: A Qualitative Examination of Legal Cynicism in Three Philadelphia Neighborhoods." *Criminology* 45: 445-80.
- Casella, Ronnie. 2003. "Zero Tolerance Policy in Schools: Rationale, Consequences, and Alternatives." *Teachers College Record* 105: 879-92.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Press.
- Covert, Stephen P. 2007. "The Roles and Functions of School Resource Officers in Virginia Public Middle Schools as Perceived by Virginia Middle School Administrators." Ph.D. diss., Virginia Commonwealth Univ.
- Curran, F. Chris. 2016. "Estimating the Effect of State Zero Tolerance Laws on Exclusionary Discipline, Racial Discipline Gaps, and Student Behavior." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 38: 647-68.
- . (2018a). "Improving School Climate, Not Just Security, Is Key to Violence Prevention." The Conversation, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/improving-school-climate-not-just-security-is-key-to-violence-prevention-96898>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- . (2018b). "A School Resource Officer in Every School?" The Conversation, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/a-school-resource-officer-in-every-school-94721>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- Desmond, Matthew, Andrew V. Papachristos, and David S. Kirk. 2016. "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community." *American Sociological Rev.* 81: 857-76.
- Devine, John. 1996. *Maximum Security: The Culture of Violence in Inner City Schools*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Devlin, Deanna N. and Denise C. Gottfredson. 2017. "The Roles of Police Officers in Schools: Effects on the Recording and Reporting of Crime." *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 16: 208-23.
- Durán, Robert J. 2009. "Legitimated Oppression: Inner-City Mexican American Experiences with Police Gang Enforcement." *J. of Contemporary Ethnography* 38: 143-68.
- Durkheim, Emile. 2002. *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*. New York: Free Press.

- Eccles, Jacquelynne S. and Robert W. Roeser. 2011. "Schools as Developmental Contexts during Adolescence." *J. of Research on Adolescence* 21: 225-41.
- Education Week. 2018. "School Officers: Who They Are; What They Do." Education Week, Available at: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/survey-data-school-officers-who-they-are.html>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- Epp, Charles R., Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel. 2014. *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Fagan, Jeffrey and Tom R. Tyler. 2005. "Legal Socialization of Children and Adolescents." *Social Justice Research* 18: 217-41.
- Finn, Peter, et al. 2005. *Case Studies of 19 School Resource Officer (SRO) Programs*. Document Number 209271. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.
- Fisher, B. W., J. H. Gardella, and E. E. Tanner-Smith. 2018. "Social Control in Schools: The Relationship between School Security and Informal Social Control Mechanisms." *J. of School Violence*.
- Fisher, Benjamin W. and Emily A. Hennessy. 2016. "School Resource Officers and Exclusionary Discipline in US High Schools: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Adolescent Research Rev.* 1: 217-33.
- Gascon, Luis Daniel. 2018. "Why Can't We Be Friends?: A History of Community Policing in Black & Brown L.A." Paper presented at 2018 Law and Society Association Conference, Toronto, Canada on June 7-10, 2018.
- Gau, Jacinta M. and Rod K. Brunson. 2010. "Procedural Justice and Order Maintenance Policing: A Study of Inner-City Young Men's Perceptions of Police Legitimacy." *Justice Q.* 27: 255-79.
- Glaser, Barney G. 1965. "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis." *Social Problems* 12: 436-45.
- Godfrey, Erin B., Carlos E. Santos, and Esther Burson. 2017. "For Better or Worse? System-Justifying Beliefs in Sixth-Grade Predict Trajectories of Self-Esteem and Behavior across Early Adolescence." *Child Development*.
- Hinds, Lyn. 2007. "Building Police—Youth Relationships: The Importance of Procedural Justice." *Youth Justice* 7: 195-209.
- Hirschfield, Paul J. 2008. "Preparing for Prison? The Criminalization of School Discipline in the USA." *Theoretical Criminology* 12: 79-101.
- Jackson, Arrick. 2002. "Police-School Resource Officers' and Students' Perceptions of the Police and Offending." *Policing: An International J. of Police Strategies & Management* 25: 631-50.
- Jackson, M., et al. 2018. "2015–16 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS): Public-Use Data File User's Manual (NCES 2018-107)." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- King, Nigel and Christine Horrocks. 2010. *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kirk, David S. and Andrew V. Papachristos. 2011. "Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence." *American J. of Sociology* 116: 1190-233.
- Kochel, Tammy R., David B. Wilson, and Stephen D. Mastrofski. 2011. "Effect of Suspect Race on Officers' Arrest Decisions." *Criminology* 49: 473-512.
- Kupchik, Aaron. 2010. *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear*. New York: NYU Press.
- Kupchik, Aaron and Torin Monahan. 2006. "The New American School: Preparation for Post-Industrial Discipline." *British J. of Sociology of Education* 27: 617-31.
- Legewie, Joscha. 2016. "Racial Profiling and Use of Force in Police Stops: How Local Events Trigger Periods of Increased Discrimination." *American J. of Sociology* 122: 379-424.
- Lynch, Caitlin G., Randy R. Gainey, and Allison T. Chappell. 2016. "The Effects of Social and Educational Disadvantage on the Roles and Functions of School

- Resource Officers." *Policing: An International J. of Police Strategies & Management* 39: 521-35.
- Lyons, William and Julie Drew. 2006. *Punishing Schools*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press.
- Madfis, Eric. 2014. *The Risk of School Rampage: Assessing and Preventing Threats of School Violence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- May, David C., Stephen D. Fessel, and Shannon Means. 2004. "Predictors of Principals' Perceptions of School Resource Officer Effectiveness in Kentucky." *American J. of Criminal Justice* 29: 75-93.
- Merton, Robert K. 1996. *On Social Structure and Science*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Messner, Steven F. and Richard Rosenfeld. 2013. *Crime and the American Dream*, 5th ed.. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Mukherjee, Eloka. 2007. *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools*. New York: NYCLU.
- Musu-Gillette, L., et al. 2018. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017 (NCES 2018-036/NCJ 251413)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.
- Na, Chongmin and Denise C. Gottfredson. 2013. "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors." *Justice Q.* 30: 619-50.
- Newman, Kathleen S. 2004. *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. New York: Basic Books.
- Nightingale, Carl H. 1993. *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams*. New York: Basic Books.
- Nolan, Kathleen. 2011. *Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban School*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- (2018. "Policing Student Behavior: Roles and Responsibilities." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance and Social Control* (edited by Jo Deakin et al.) 309-326.
- Oppel, Richard A. Jr. 2018 "Texas Governor's School Safety Plan: More Armed Guards, No Big Gun Controls." *The New York Times*, May 31, 2018, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/us/texas-guns-schools-abbott.html>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- Owens, Emily G. 2017. "Testing the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *J. of Policy Analysis and Management* 36: 11-37.
- Paternoster, Raymond, et al. 1997. "Do Fair Procedures Matter? The Effect of Procedural Justice on Spouse Assault." *Law and Society Rev.* 31: 163-204.
- Rios, Victor M. 2011. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: NYU Press.
- Rippetoe, Sarah J. 2009. "Teachers' and students' Perceptions about the Roles of School Resource Officers in Maintaining School Safety." Ph.D. diss., East Tennessee State Univ.
- Schlosser, Michael D. 2014. "Multiple Roles and Potential Role Conflict of a School Resource Officer: A Case Study of the Midwest Police Department's School Resource Officer Program in the United States." *International J. of Criminal Justice Science* 9: 131-42.
- Simon, Jonathan. 2007. *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Smith, Brad W. and Malcolm D. Holmes. 2014. "Police Use of Excessive Force in Minority Communities: A Test of the Minority Threat, Place, and Community Accountability Hypotheses." *Social Problems* 61: 83-104.
- Steinberg, Matthew P. and Johanna Laco. 2017. "What Do We Know about School Discipline Reform?" *Education Next* 17: 1.

- Theriot, Matthew T. 2009. "School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior." *J. of Criminal Justice* 37: 280-7.
- . (2016). "The Impact of School Resource Officer Interaction on Students' Feelings about School and School Police." *Crime & Delinquency* 62: 446-69.
- Time, Victoria and Brian K. Payne. 2008. "School Violence Prevention Measures: School Officials' Attitudes about Various Strategies." *J. of Criminal Justice* 36: 301-6.
- Travis, Lawrence F. and Julie Kiernan Coon. 2005. *The Role of Law Enforcement in Public School Safety: A National Survey*. Univ. of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research.
- Tyack, David B. 1974. *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Tyler, Tom R. 2006. *Why People Obey the Law*, 2nd ed.. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Tyler, Tom R., Jeffrey Fagan, and Amanda Geller. 2014. Street stops and police legitimacy: Teachable moments in young urban men's legal socialization. 11 *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 751-785.
- Tyler, Tom R. and Yuen Huo. 2002. *Trust in the Law: Encouraging Public Cooperation with the Police and Courts Through*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Tyler, Tom R. and Rick Trinkner. 2017. *Why Children Follow Rules: Legal Socialization and the Development of Legitimacy*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice. 2014. "Notice of Language Assistance: Dear Colleague Letter on the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline." Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.pdf>. (accessed 16 April 2020).
- U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. 2015. "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department." Available at: [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson\\_police\\_department\\_report.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf). (accessed 16 April 2020).
- Wacquant, Loic. 2001. "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Punishment & Society* 3: 95-133.
- Weitzer, Ronald. 2000. "Racialized Policing: Residents Perceptions in Three Neighborhoods." *Law & Society Rev.* 34: 129-55.
- Wiebe, Robert H. 1967. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. New York: Macmillan.
- Wolfe, Scott E., Kyle McLean, and Travis C. Pratt. 2017. "I Learned It by Watching You: Legal Socialization and the Intergenerational Transmission of Legitimacy Attitudes." *British J. of Criminology* 57: 1123-43.
- Young, Jock. 1999. *The Exclusive Society*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Press.
- Zhang, Gary. 2018. "The Effects of a School Policing Program on Crime, Discipline, and Disorder: A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation." *American J. of Criminal Justice* 1-18.

**Aaron Kupchik** is Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. He studies the policing and punishment of youth in schools, courts, and correctional facilities. His books include *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment* (U. California Press, 216) and *Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear* (NYU Press, 2010).

**F. Chris Curran** is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy and Codirector of the Education Policy Research Center at the University of Florida's College of Education. His research examines the ways

*in which educational policies and practices impact equity in educational outcomes for historically marginalized groups with a particular focus on school discipline and safety, early childhood education, and teacher labor markets. More on his work can be found at [www.fchriscurran.com](http://www.fchriscurran.com)*

**Benjamin W. Fisher** is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Louisville. His research examines school safety, security, and discipline through an equity lens with a focus on context.

**Samantha L. Viano, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Education at George Mason University. Her research agenda reflects a dedication to improving the long-term outcomes of marginalized students and professional lives of the educators who teach them by conducting rigorous evaluations of policies and programs.