


# Protecting the Flock or Policing the Sheep? Differences in School Resource Officers' Perceptions of Threats by School Racial Composition

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## ABSTRACT

Law enforcement officers (often called school resource officers or SROs) are an increasingly common feature in schools across the United States. Although SROs' roles vary across school contexts, there has been little examination of why. One possible explanation is that SROs perceive threats differently in different school contexts and that the racial composition of schools may motivate these differences. To investigate this possibility, this study analyzes interviews with 73 SROs from two different school districts that encompass schools with a variety of racial compositions. Across both districts, SROs perceived three major categories of threats: student-based, intruder-based, and environment-based threats. However, the focus and perceived severity of the threats varied across districts such that SROs in the district with a larger proportion of White students were primarily concerned about external threats (i.e., intruder-based and environment-based) that might harm the students, whereas SROs in the district with a larger proportion of Black students were primarily concerned with students themselves as threats. We consider how these results relate to understandings of school security, inequality among students, racially disparate experiences with school policing, and school and policing policy.

**KEYWORDS:** school safety; race; police in schools; school-based law enforcement; education.

Students of color in the United States are excluded from school, arrested, and incarcerated at alarmingly high rates ([Musu-Gillette et al. 2018](#)). Some critics have pointed to schools' use of school resource officers (SROs) as one potential reason for these outcomes. SROs are sworn law enforcement

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officers who work in schools rather than patrolling a particular neighborhood or other assignment. At a national level, the most recent estimates indicate that 30 percent of elementary schools and 58 percent of secondary schools had a minimum of one SRO on, at least, a part-time basis (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018). Although one of the main purposes of SROs is to prevent crime and violence in schools, they are involved with many other parts of school life as well, including teaching, mentoring, and maintaining discipline (Jackson et al. 2018). Critics have pointed to SROs' involvement in these other activities—particularly in maintaining school discipline—as an inappropriate overreach of the criminal justice system in which the presence of SROs criminalizes students of color by increasing punishment and referrals to the criminal justice system (Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik 2010). Indeed, the bulk of the empirical research points to increased levels of arrest and other forms of punishment in schools with SROs, particularly for relatively minor offenses (Fisher and Hennessey 2016; Homer and Fisher 2020; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Theriot 2009). The implications of this for society more broadly are potentially large, with some estimates suggesting that the yearly use of exclusionary discipline, like suspensions, may cost the United States over \$35 billion from lost societal economic productivity and that these effects are disproportionately experienced by racial minority students (Rumberger and Losen, 2016).

However, research indicates that this trend of criminalization occurs in some schools but not others (Fisher and Hennessey 2016; Hirschfield 2010). One possible reason for this variability is that SROs function differently according to what they perceive as threats to the school. However, to date, research has not examined what SROs perceive as threats in schools. On one hand, because of the salience of school shootings in conversations about school safety, SROs may be primarily concerned about the threat of gun violence. On the other hand, because school shootings are rare, SROs may instead perceive more common occurrences (e.g., student misbehavior or angry parents) as the primary threats. Moreover, given that both school personnel and police tend to perceive Black students as more threatening than White students (Goff et al. 2014; Kunesh and Noltemeyer 2015), the racial composition of schools may inform what SROs perceive as threats (Lewis 2003; Rios 2011). In turn, SROs may draw upon racialized tropes that describe differences in socio-economic status, upbringing, and family structure as they form ideas about what constitutes a threat in their schools. Better understanding SROs' perceptions of the threats to the school is likely to inform broader conversations about SROs' motivations and goals, which can contribute to efforts to better understand racially disparate policing and punishment in schools.

The purpose of this study is to examine SROs' perceptions of threats to schools and the extent to which school racial composition shapes those perceived threats using data from 73 in-depth interviews with SROs across three school districts in two states. Given the increasing number of SROs in U.S. schools and the lack of empirical evidence about SROs' perceptions of threats, these findings are useful for discussions of policy and research. Although we do not explicitly link SROs' perceptions of threats to their actions, we nonetheless provide a foundational lens through which researchers and practitioners might better understand SROs' motivations and goals, which is a critical undertaking given the different outcomes associated with SROs' roles (Devlin and Gottfredson 2018; Fisher and Devlin 2019; McKenna and White 2017) and the importance of hiring the right people to be SROs (Finn et al. 2005).

### *Race and Perceptions of Threats*

Prior research shows the importance of racial stereotypes and other forms of racial inequality in shaping individuals' and groups' actions and perceptions (Feagin 2006; Omi and Winant 2015; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Racial stereotypes also likely shape the way that SROs perceive threats in their schools. One way that scholars have explained how race shapes social systems and interactions is through the RCM, the racial classification model (Soss et al. 2011). The RCM contends that policy decisions rely in part on assumptions about the target populations of those policies, including assumptions about race. Although this model is designed to explain how race shapes broad policy

decisions, its creators also demonstrate how it applies to individual perceptions and decision-making by analyzing the choices made by case managers working with clients of different races (Soss et al. 2011:233–261).

The RCM makes three basic contentions. First, people use “salient social classifications and group reputations” in order to simplify a complex social world (Soss et al. 2011:77). Second, given that the (typically White) people in power tend to come from a position that is socially understood as normative, the presence of a significant number of racial minorities signals to them a deviation from this normativity. This increases the likelihood that race will be one of the salient social classifications that both individuals and policymakers use, thus increasing the likelihood that racial differences are considered in decision-making processes. Third, the extent to which race shapes people’s decisions depends on their own perceptions of racial groups. These perceptions are shaped by existing stereotypes in the culture more broadly, the extent to which individuals hold those stereotypes, and the extent to which the groups under consideration demonstrate cues that are consistent with those stereotypes.

Accordingly, the RCM predicts that racial composition of schools would shape perceptions of threats, particularly when stereotype-consistent cues are observed. Given the salience of the link between Black Americans and criminality in the imagination of those in power throughout the history of the United States (Feagin 2006; Muhammad 2011), it is likely that stereotype-consistent cues related to criminality are particularly salient motivators of SROs’ perceptions of threats. Importantly, however, racial logics may also be used in schools characterized by large proportions of White people in or around the school. Given that Whiteness—as a salient power structure—accentuates the virtuosity of White people, particularly in contrast to people of color (Feagin 2013; Lewis 2003; Muhammad 2011), the perceived virtuosity of primarily White schools means that race likely shapes SROs’ perceptions of threats even in the absence of a large number of racial minorities. This is likely to be particularly true when SROs observe stereotype-consistent cues about White innocence or virtue.

Disentangling how race motivates individuals’ perceptions can be difficult. Bonilla-Silva’s 2018 work on colorblind racism found that one complicating factor when studying people’s perceptions about race is that the language they use is unlikely to foreground race as the strongest motivator for their opinions. Instead, they use various linguistic techniques to obliquely talk about race without being explicit about it. For example, rather than talking about perceived racial deficits, they may instead talk about cultural deficits. This sort of colorblind racism exists among police officers when talking about traffic stops (Welsh, Chanin, and Henry 2021), with officers’ narratives minimizing the salience of race, but relying on racialized tropes to explain their behavior. Other scholars have made similar findings in the court system (e.g., Van Cleve 2016). As such, SROs’ race-based perceptions are also likely to be explained using racialized tropes rather than language explicitly about race.

#### *School-Specific Perceived Threats and the Role of Race*

Turning to school settings, Hirschfield (2010) applies a similar logic to the RCM to distinguish between two types of threats (external and internal) that might concern schools. External threats encompass the potential for unwelcome outsiders—including school shooters—to enter the school. Internal threats refer to the potentially threatening actions of school community members, such as students. Hirschfield (2010) suggested that schools’ concern about these different types of threats can be predicted by school contextual characteristics like urbanicity. Specifically, in rural and suburban schools preventing external threats from entering the school (e.g., potential school shooters) is more of a priority than in urban schools where the focus is more on internal threats posed by students’ behavior (e.g., fighting).

Although Hirschfield (2010) largely focuses on urbanicity as a driving force behind schools’ approaches to security, race is also likely a salient factor. Piliavin and Briar (1964) found that officers’

decisions to arrest and apprehend Black boys at higher rates than White boys were driven by perceptions of Black boys' demeanors as more consistent with the officers' ideas of delinquency than White boys' demeanors. Recent work has used data from police to show that in comparison to White boys, officers viewed Black boys as less innocent and more responsible for their behavior (Goff et al. 2014). Moreover, officers that scored higher on a test assessing their implicit dehumanization of Black people were more likely to have used force against Black boys relative to White boys (Goff et al. 2014). This study's findings suggest that police officers view Black boys as particularly threatening and that their attitudes about race are linked to their actual use of force behaviors. Similar experiments consistently have found that police officers demonstrate bias against Black civilians, whether in their opinions about culpability and the severity of punishment (Graham and Lowery 2004; Rattan et al. 2012), or their decision to shoot in simulation settings (e.g., Correll et al. 2002). Other studies support this finding by studying the perceptions of youth of color about policing in communities of color, finding they are policed in particularly harsh and racially unjust ways (Durán 2009; Gau and Brunson 2015).

Similar findings exist among educators. One experiment tracked the eye movements of preschool teachers watching videos of children playing; when the teachers were randomly assigned to a condition that prompted them to expect challenging behaviors from the children—even though no challenging behaviors were actually present—their eyes followed the Black children more (particularly Black boys), suggesting they had expectations that Black children were more likely to misbehave (Gilliam et al. 2016). A related experiment found that pre-service teachers who read a vignette about a defiant student were more likely to expect future problem behaviors when it was about a Black rather than White student (Kunesh and Noltemeyer 2015). Yet another study exposed teachers to vignettes about student misbehavior that were varied by (a) student race (using stereotypically Black and White names), and (b) the number of infractions the students had committed (Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015). Teachers recommended more severe discipline for Black students than White students when there was an indication of multiple infractions, suggesting teachers viewed Black students as more threatening.

Given that Black students are viewed as more threatening than White students by both police officers and educators, it is likely that adults will perceive threats differently in schools with different racial compositions. Although this relationship has not been studied directly, related evidence supports this contention. For instance, schools with larger proportions of students of color and students from low-income families are more likely to employ exclusionary school security measures and exclusionary discipline policies (Curran 2019; Irwin, Davidson, and Hall-Sanchez 2013; Kupchik and Ward 2014; Nance 2017; Steinka-Fry, Fisher, and Tanner-Smith 2017; Welch and Payne 2010). Shedd's (2015) research complements these studies by finding that students of color in Chicago Public Schools feel the brunt of these policies—particularly the nexus of school discipline and school policing—expressing concerns about racially unjust practices.

Studies of SROs' activities lend further support to the idea that context shapes SROs' perceptions of threat. In general, SROs tend to be involved in multiple roles, often including law enforcement, teaching, and informal counseling (Fisher and Devlin 2019). SROs tend to view themselves primarily as law enforcement officers (McKenna, Martinez-Prather, and Bowman 2014; Schlosser 2014), and even their non-law enforcement tasks may be done through a law enforcement lens (Higgins et al. 2019). However, SROs are more likely to engage in law enforcement tasks in schools with higher social and educational disadvantage, but more likely to engage in education-related tasks in schools with lower social and educational disadvantage (Lynch, Gainey, and Chappell 2016). This suggests that SROs in schools with greater disadvantage are more prone to identifying threats—either internal or external to the school—that necessitate the use of law enforcement activities. Similarly, SROs' involvement in matters of school discipline is shaped by contextual factors, including their determination of when students are considered “at risk” (Curran et al. 2019). Related ethnographic work found that adding police to urban schools in New York City changed schools' approach to student behavior;

the teachers maintained responsibility for students' learning, but the police took charge of managing student behavior (Devine 1996). This reflects the officers' concern about students' behaviors as threats rather than concern about potential external threats, again providing indirect support for the salience of race in understanding SROs' perceptions of threat to the school.

### *Current Study*

SROs must balance multiple priorities in their efforts to maintain school safety, and how they address these priorities is likely driven by what they perceive to be the most salient threats to the school. However, prior research has not investigated what SROs perceive as threats to schools, nor has it examined how the racial composition of the school might influence these perceptions. To address this knowledge gap, we ask the following research questions:

1. What do SROs perceive to be the main threats to their schools?
2. How do these perceptions of threat differ by schools' racial composition?

To answer these questions, we combine qualitative data from two separate data collection efforts in which researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 73 SROs from schools ranging from high-density urban to remote rural areas, across which school racial composition varied considerably. Consequently, the SROs in this study work in different contexts that may capture a range of potential perceived threats.

In an effort to better understand how SROs influence schools and students, this study, guided by the RCM and the literature on racial perceptions more broadly, offers an in-depth qualitative investigation of what SROs perceive to be threats in their schools. Given the continuing growth of SRO programs nationwide, it is imperative that we develop a better understanding of SROs' actions and what ideas or concerns guide those actions. But perhaps more importantly, these analyses shed light on whether and how the presence of SROs could be increasing racial inequality by placing students of color at greater risk of surveillance and perceptions of criminality by police.

## **METHOD**

### *Data and Participants*

The data used in this study were derived from two data collection initiatives in separate geographic locations that examined the roles of SROs in public schools. Hereafter, we refer to these locations as the suburban-White district and the urban-diverse district. Across both sites, the researchers partnered with local school districts and law enforcement agencies to gain permission to interview SROs. Out of the 80 SROs employed in these two districts at the time of research, 73 agreed to participate (suburban-White  $n = 47$ ; urban-diverse  $n = 26$ ). Data collection in the suburban-White district also included interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys with law enforcement leadership, school district leadership, school leadership, teachers, parents, and students in addition to half-day observations of SROs. Overall, these SROs were diverse across a broad spectrum of attributes such as gender, age, and job experience, though the vast majority of them (90 percent in one district and 81 percent in the other) were White. The majority of the SROs in both districts were mid-career officers with experience in other positions, including patrol and corrections. Still, some SROs were recently out of the police academy and in their first career assignment in law enforcement and others were at the end of their careers. [Table 1](#) provides additional demographic and job-related characteristics of the SROs.

### *The Suburban-White District*

The first research site was an affluent suburban county in the South that housed two school districts—one that served the local county seat and the other that served the remainder of the county. Although there were two districts, both were in the same county, and a single sheriff's office provided SROs to both districts; thus, the two districts will be referred to as a singular district hereafter.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Interviewed SROs

	<i>Suburban-White District</i>	<i>Urban-diverse District</i>
Elementary School	51%	8%
Middle School	27%	50%
High School	20%	42%
Alternative School	2%	0%
Male	78%	81%
White	90%	81%
Sheriff's Office	100%	23%
Police Department	0%	77%

For a number of years, SROs had been used in secondary schools in the district; however, after the shooting that took place in Newtown, CT, in December 2012, an SRO was placed in every public school in the county. Although the county is described as suburban, the schools operated within a range of settings, including a small city, large suburbs, fringe rural areas, fringe town, and distant rural areas. Compared to the other schools in this county, the schools in the small city were more racially and socioeconomically diverse, with roughly 15 percent African American students, 25 percent Hispanic students, and 40 percent of these students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. The remainder of the county schools had approximately five percent African American students, five percent Hispanic students, and ten percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch. When examining arrest data from the Uniform Crime Reporting program from 2016, we found that the county housing both school districts had a low arrest rate compared to the rest of the state with an overall arrest rate in the 12th percentile. Yet the juvenile arrest rate was substantially higher compared to the rest of the state with a juvenile arrest rate in the 74th percentile ([United States Federal Bureau of Investigation 2018](#)).

In the suburban-White district, approximately three quarters of the SROs interviewed were male, and a majority were positioned in elementary schools; almost all identified as White. On average, they had been in law enforcement about twelve years and had spent almost five years working as an SRO. All interviews occurred in the SROs' assigned schools throughout the regular school day and covered a variety of topics related to the implementation of SROs in the district, their daily activities, primary roles and responsibilities, and views about the impacts they have made on students and schools. Interviewers from the suburban-White district were nearly all White and Asian and consisted of an even number of males and females. All of the interviewers were either enrolled in or had already completed advanced education degrees and none of the interviewers had a law enforcement background. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average.

#### *The Urban-Diverse District*

The second research site was a large urban school district in the Midwest. Out of roughly 150 schools in this district, SROs were present in 30 of these schools. Whereas the suburban-White district had a clear motivation for adding SROs to its elementary schools, there was no clearly articulated motivation behind SRO implementation in the urban-diverse district. This district's use of SROs was controversial; after our data collection was complete, community groups urged the district to end its contracts with the law enforcement agencies. The district served roughly 50 percent White, 40 percent Black, and 10 percent Hispanic students, with 65 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch. The arrest rate in this county in 2016 was close to the highest in the state, with an overall arrest rate in the 97th percentile, an arrest rate almost 2.5 times higher than in the county where the suburban-White districts were located. Even though the juvenile arrest rate in this county in 2016 was one of the highest in the state (99th percentile), the actual juvenile arrest rate was very similar to the arrest

rate in the suburban-White district. The ratio of the juvenile arrest rate in the urban-diverse district to the juvenile arrest rate in the suburban-White district was 1.06 (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation 2018).

In the urban-diverse district, the majority of the SROs were male (81 percent) and nearly all were White. SROs were primarily found in middle and high schools, with only two elementary schools having an SRO. In the urban-diverse district, SROs were drawn from four different policing agencies in the county, including three different local police agencies and the county's sheriff department. Most of the SROs were mid-career officers who had considerable experience in other positions or fields—such as patrol officers or correctional officers. Interviews took place in the SROs' assigned schools and a number of locations outside of the schools, covering topics related to SROs' daily activities in school, major roles and responsibilities, training, and perspectives on their jobs. Interviewers from the urban-diverse district were nearly all White and also had an even number of males and females. All interviewers had completed doctoral education and none had a law enforcement background. Interviews lasted 62 minutes on average.

### *Data Analysis*

Across both data collection efforts, we used semi-structured interviewing to explore predetermined themes while allowing flexibility in the interview process. Protocols for the interview were based on prior research on SROs' activities (Covert 2007; Jackson et al. 2018; Rippetoe 2009) and in conjunction with local stakeholders. Research team meetings took place after many of the interviews to allow team members to provide feedback and an opportunity to improve the questions and probing techniques, or to adjust interview protocols. Team members collaborated on a number of themes that had emerged organically throughout the interview process. All of the interviews that took place were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

We analyzed data in Nvivo 11, using open and axial coding techniques to identify themes regarding what SROs view as major threats to the school, including internal and external threats (Charmaz 2006). We began by open coding transcripts of the interviews and establishing themes from various sections of the transcripts (and notably, in analyses for the suburban-White district, we also established a set of *a priori* codes). We followed this process by various discussions with the research team concerning areas of discrepancy. Finally, we used an axial coding scheme to recode transcripts and solidify the primary themes that are discussed below. Two members of the research team read and coded all interview transcripts.

## **RESULTS**

Existing research (see above) illustrates that students' race shapes perceptions of threatening behaviors as well as punitive school responses. Indeed, race is central to understanding how school staff perceive and respond to threats. And yet the data we analyze below include very few direct references to students' race or ethnicity, with some SROs even claiming to not "see color." Instead, we find that SROs often discuss student disadvantage, explicitly discussing class rather than race, or by discussing cultural deficits, such as the "poor upbringing" or unique cultural codes that match "disrespect" with violence. Although class biases are salient among educators (Calarco 2014; Lareau 1987), in the following analyses we interpret many of these comments to be about disadvantage in general, but also about race, for two main reasons. First, the cultural deficits referred to by SROs mirror racialized tropes about African American families that are used to justify punishment (Muhammad 2011; Van Cleve 2016), including school discipline (Dunning-Lozano 2018). This is consistent with colorblind racism that uses the language of cultural deficits to mask race-based perceptions (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Second, although SROs might know about many students' backgrounds, and whether they are low-income, income status is typically less salient as an ascribed characteristic than race or ethnicity; thus, perceptions may be more likely to be based on ascriptions of race, as derived from skin tone and other features (Lewis 2003).

**Table 2.** Summary of Results by District

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Suburban-White District</i>	<i>Urban-Diverse District</i>
<p><u>Student-Based Threat:</u> <i>The threat to school safety posed by the students themselves.</i></p>	<p>Students were generally not considered a threat with the exception of cyber bullying. Students not seen as threats because they come from a “wealthier area.”</p>	<p>Seen as one of the most important threats to safety. Cited cases of student fights, bullying (in person and cyber), aggression towards school staff. Students’ background cited as the reason for aggressive behavior.</p> <p><i>Top-quartile White schools:</i> Concerns focused on school rule violations.</p> <p><i>Bottom-quartile White schools:</i> Concerns focused on student criminality.</p>
<p><u>Intruder-Based Threat:</u> <i>The threat to school safety of outsiders entering the school to do harm. Includes school shooters who are not current students.</i></p>	<p>Highest priority threat, “it’s not if, it’s when.” Self-identified demographic similarities with school districts that had experienced school shootings. Keeping exterior doors secured a major priority.</p>	<p>Took the threat seriously, but viewed as having a low-likelihood of occurring.</p>
<p><u>Environment-Based Threat:</u> <i>Danger to the school posed by the surroundings like traffic, weather, and the community. Includes threat posed by parents who, as neither students nor intruders, can pose a different kind of threat to safety.</i></p>	<p>More important than student-based threat but less important than intruder-based threat. Particularly concerned about parents’ custodial disputes. Other threats included reckless drivers, busy roads, and nearby railroad tracks.</p>	<p>Rarely discussed. When mentioned, the concern was based on upset parents. Also mentioned reckless drivers and strangers wandering onto campus.</p>

Across both districts, SROs generally expressed similar conceptions of threats across three broad categories: student-based, intruder-based, and environment-based threats. However, there were clear distinctions across districts in how SROs thought about these potential threats and which were of greatest concern (see Table 2). Below we analyze these distinctions, focusing on differences across settings and the extent to which disadvantage in general and race in particular might shape these different conceptualizations of threats.

#### *Student-Based Threat*

The first category of threats conceptualized by SROs focused on students. Across both research sites, SROs suggested that student aggression—threatening or physical behavior from a student towards another student, staff, or the SROs themselves—was a potential threat to the school. SROs discussed aggression between students as being the most common form of student-based threat, though physical aggression towards school personnel was seen as the most serious form. SROs in both settings also mentioned substance use, student self-harm, and bringing weapons to school as potential threats. Yet we found that the urban-diverse district SROs placed far greater emphasis on student-based threats compared to the suburban-White district SROs.



*The Suburban-White District*

SROs in the suburban-White district placed relatively little emphasis on the salience of student-based threats. Although several stated that student aggression was conceivably a possible threat to the school, concerns about student-based threats were rarely voiced. For example, when one SRO was asked, “Do you see any threats from within the school?” he responded, “Actually, I don’t. No, no.”

SROs in the suburban-White district rarely described students’ aggressive behaviors; instead, any discussions of student-based threat tended to focus on cyberbullying. As one stated: “Uh, social media, number one. Um, because kids, bullying, and not just bullying, but they can sit behind this computer and they can say anything they want to, and it’s out there for everybody to see. . . .” As SROs described it, aggression via social media use could range from verbally bullying other students online to sexual harassment:

With the kids with cell phones . . . I don’t think these kids realize they’ll send pictures, boyfriend and girlfriend, naked picture[s] to each other. But, then that boy or girl will screenshot it, then they’ll start sending it out to the whole . . . kids throughout the whole school. Then everybody sees that picture of that girl or boy.

In explaining their lack of concern about students as threats, SROs commonly suggested that students were not threats because they were from upper- and middle-class homes: “Everybody in this school, they’re all pretty well off so I don’t have thefts.” Based largely on their judgments about the socioeconomic status of the students’ families, the SROs in the suburban-White district described students as conforming to behavioral expectations: “This school? It’s in a . . . wealthier area of the county. Not the wealthiest, but it’s in a wealthier area. Overall, the kids are not much of a problem.” Although the SROs did not explicitly mention students’ race, the demographics of the county were such that the wealthier students were likely to be White students. Given that SROs were able to readily see students’ race but not their household income (although they may make inferences from the communities zoned to the schools and know information about students in other ways), it is likely that race influenced this logic.

This view is consistent with prominent ideologies that link Whiteness to ideas of purity and innocence (Feagin 2013; Lewis 2003; Muhammad 2011), a view that the RCM would suggest shapes SROs’ perceptions (Soss et al. 2011). Thus, although there were relatively few racial minority students in the suburban-White district, racialized considerations about the virtuosity of the district’s (mostly White) students appeared to motivate SROs’ perceptions of danger. This is particularly noteworthy given that multiple SROs in this district’s middle and high schools referenced problems of drug possession and sales in the school building, suggesting that even in the face of criminal activity, the SROs tended to minimize the salience of student-based threats.

*The Urban-Diverse District*

In contrast to SROs in the suburban-White district, SROs in the urban-diverse district frequently emphasized the salience of student-based threats, a finding that is again consistent with what the RCM would predict (Soss et al. 2011). Generally, SROs in the urban-diverse district described student-based threat as a certainty, not a possibility. These SROs described the school environment as tense and chaotic, wherein school personnel were at risk of losing control of the students at any given moment:

The student body, I would say for the most part, they have behavior issues. It’s a public school. Majority of the kids don’t have good upbringing. They know they can get away with stuff in the school. . . . The school system has really gone downhill over the last several years. I mean, it’s to the point where it’s, I’ll be honest with you, it’s a joke. There’s no education as much as there is behavior management. That’s all schools are anymore.

Whereas SROs in the suburban-White district tended to identify high socio-economic status as a reason that students were not a threat, the SROs in the urban-diverse district tended to identify students' poor upbringing or other cultural and family deficits as the reason for violence and aggression. Though neither students' race nor ethnicity was explicitly mentioned, the SRO does refer to family breakdown, a common racialized trope found in prior research to be used as a way to blame problems in schools (or elsewhere) on students of color and their families (Dunning-Lozano 2018; Moynihan 1965; Muhammad 2011; Valencia 2010).

The urban-diverse district SROs' descriptions of student threats often located the source of threat within individual students who were beyond control. Our results are consistent with prior research, which finds that school discipline is shaped and justified by racialized views of student behavior (Dunning-Lozano 2018). In sharp contrast to the suburban-White district SROs, who suggested that students were rarely a source of threat to the school, urban-diverse district SROs discussed the threats that come from "kids who create chaos":

Well, I guess one of the difficult things is for me is in a public-school setting, in a public-school district, has a no expel policy is to see kids who create chaos, who create concern in the building, but they don't do anything with them.

SROs suggested that the behaviors of students who "create chaos" were the result of multiple factors, including the characteristics of the surrounding community, a failure of parents to effectively instill virtues in their children, and an ever-lenient school system that has become less about education and more about managing behavior. Again, although the SROs did not explicitly mention race, the rationale they gave can easily be read as racially-coded language. Another SRO explained how chaos in the urban-diverse district schools is a result of students' deficits:

[The] majority of the time is we're having to deal with out-of-control kids and kids who are very disrespectful and don't know how to function properly in society. . . . My role in the school is shaped because of the fact that being that it's tense and chaotic, I have to constantly keep my eyes on and trying to keep things broken up or try to keep people from . . . I try to educate them on if somebody disrespects you, the solution isn't to go up and punch 'em in the face. We're trying to keep that. . . . Conflict resolution skills . . . they have no conflict resolution skills. It's violence. That's it.

This SRO's articulation of students responding to disrespect with violence mirrors cultural codes espoused by low-income communities of color that are structurally barred from participating in the economy of broader society (Anderson 1999). These cultural codes are inextricably tied into race and socioeconomic status, suggesting that these demographic features likely shaped SROs' perceptions about which students were causing chaos and lacking conflict resolution skills.

Thus, SROs in both districts depicted student and community characteristics as motivating their understanding of students as threats. The urban-diverse district SROs described how a poor upbringing (in a low-socio-economic status home) may catalyze behavioral issues at school, and the suburban-White district SROs described how students brought up in wealthier homes largely do not represent threats. Again, although SROs were consistent in avoiding mentioning race explicitly, their statements across both districts were closely linked to racialized tropes. At the same time, the SROs' perceptions of student-based threat could be influenced by crime in the community. Although the two geographic areas had similar juvenile arrest rates, the urban district area had a higher overall arrest rate. Thus, SROs might be responding to overall community crime in their threat assessment of students, particularly because the SROs often had experience in other roles, such as patrol and corrections.

*Intruder-Based Threat*

A second type of threat that SROs discussed was intruder-based. At times, SROs described a potential intruder as a shooter ready to enter the school building and cause widespread harm to staff and students. At other times, SROs described intruders as those whose presence was unwarranted, but it was unknown if the individual's intent was to cause imminent harm. Regardless of whether the intruder was defined as a school shooter or otherwise, SROs viewed intruders as a potential threat to students and school personnel.

*The Suburban-White District*

The SROs clearly and consistently described the most salient threat in the suburban-White district as the possibility of a school shooter coming from outside the school. SROs in the suburban-White district viewed the possibility of a school shooter or potentially violent intruder entering the school to be high, with some SROs suggesting that it was inevitable:

... generally, the school is safe now. I mean, everybody knows that anything could happen at any time. It's not "if," it's "when." Uhm, hopefully that "when" never comes. . . . You know, comparatively, our demographics match almost identically with the demographics of what, uh, Newtown . . . same thing with Columbine.

SROs in the suburban-White district saw similarities between the demographics of their own district and those where high-profile school shootings occurred. Shootings—such as those at Sandy Hook or Columbine—were deeply concerning to SROs in the suburban-White district, given the perceived similarities in school characteristics and demographics.

In fact, many SROs in the suburban-White district elementary schools were implemented as a direct response to the Sandy Hook tragedy; policymakers mentioned the similarity between the demographics of students in their schools and those at Sandy Hook as part of their justification for the expansion of the district's SRO program. SROs in this district also talked about additional investments in policing equipment and strategies for responding to a shooting incident, including large safes in each of their offices that included military-grade firearms and ammunition as well as body armor. One SRO mentioned: "They're also working on trying to get us helmets for like what SWAT would have, so if we have an incident happen, we can throw the helmet on."

The suburban-White district SROs clearly and repeatedly expressed their concerns about the need to protect the students in their buildings from external threats such as intruders. The problem of open doors captured this concern—almost all suburban-White district SROs discussed the effort they placed on ensuring that school staff keep exterior school doors closed and locked. SROs described how teachers often propped open exterior doors for air circulation, without realizing that this allowed access to intruders. Although an open door is not a threat in and of itself, open doors embodied a sense of vulnerability to external threats that was commonly expressed among SROs. For example:

The biggest threat . . . open doors. That's like what I tell- that's what I try to tell all my teachers and my administration and everything. It's like, "When you open these doors and they're not locked or anything like that, you're offering anybody in." Because we have so many different doors that can lead to the inside of the school. I said, "You are offering anybody in this world to walk in." I said, "And you don't know what their intentions are or anything like that." That's I think the biggest threat.

The deep concern about open doors among the suburban-White district SROs illustrates their perceptions of students as vulnerable youth in need of protection from outsiders, a perspective

consistent with prevailing views of White innocence (Lewis 2003; Muhammad 2011). In line with the expectations of the RCM, SROs' prevailing views about the student body in the suburban-White district as innocent and vulnerable meant that race shaped the SROs' perceptions, particularly in light of the stereotype-consistent observations they made of the students. The suburban-White district SROs noted the demographic similarities between their district and those that had experienced high-profile school shootings; these similarities motivated their understanding of their (mostly White) students as potential targets, not perpetrators, of violence.

#### *The Urban-Diverse District*

In contrast, SROs in the urban-diverse district were less concerned with intruder-based threat than were SROs in the suburban-White district. Whereas SROs in the suburban-White district saw the potential of an intruder as the most important threat, SROs in the urban-diverse district expressed fewer concerns about intruder-based threat than other threats (particularly student-based threats). Even though SROs in the urban-diverse district primarily discussed students as the main source of threat, they did take the potential for a school shooter seriously:

Whenever a kid asks me something like that, I make sure I explain this is why this. . . . “Why do you have to carry a gun in here? Because, if someone else comes through one of these doors with a gun, I need to be able to deal with that and not run. I’m not running. I need to deal with that to keep you safe.”

However, SROs in the urban-diverse district were careful not to overestimate the likelihood of an intruder-based threat occurring:

So, yeah people start talking about school safety and police officers policing the schools and threats to a school campus. . . . The first thing that pops in their mind is a school shooting. You know, somebody coming in with a gun shooting people. Yeah, sure that’s a threat, but on a day-to-day basis, that’s not imminent threat. That’s not an immediate threat to the campus, or the kids, or the staff or me.

In contrast to the suburban-White district, urban-diverse district SROs briefly mentioned protecting students from school shooters and intruders, but they were much more concerned about student-based threats.

#### *Environment-Based Threat*

Environment-based threats are the third category of threats that SROs identified across districts. This category consists of issues that emanated from the surrounding community and posed some type of potential danger at a school. SROs identified different aspects of the environment that could pose dangers, such as nearby railroad tracks, having a school building located on a busy road, or risk of severe weather. SROs also routinely brought up the potential to encounter irate parents who may require SRO intervention. SROs also expressed concern about individuals from the community who might wander onto the grounds despite being unaffiliated with the school, discussing the need to redirect them away from the school.

#### *The Suburban-White District*

Among SROs in the suburban-White district, environment-based threats were a far less salient threat than intruder-based threats, but considerably more salient than student-based threats. SROs in the suburban-White district mentioned several different forms of environment-based threat (e.g., irate parents, reckless drivers, wandering strangers), and discussed them at considerable length and with

serious concern. For example, SROs explained that a common threat came in the form of dealing with parents during the course of messy divorces and custody battles: “Um, well, I think that the biggest threat that we have coming in, are, are, are volatile domestic violence situations where again, you don’t know what’s happening behind somebody’s front door.” SROs suggested that messy custody battles that resulted in a parent losing legal rights to visit their children could result in emotional reactions when they were turned away at school: “And if for some reason they did show up . . . and then if they do wanna create a scene, I just have to call for backup and . . . and it gets taken care of.”

Additionally, SROs in the suburban-White district focused on potential dangers that could arise from areas of the school campus outside the building itself. In particular, SROs mentioned that reckless drivers—including parents dropping their kids off for school—offered a concern for student well-being:

And, um, usually I’ll get that going as far as I’ll put the cones out. Get the kids coming in. Just because it’s a safety issue. I think at one time when school first started they’d done that and they’d gotten away from it. And we had, um, right after I got here we had a kid almost hit out front. He was getting out of the other side of the car and another car was trying to go around him. So, I talked to the principal and we come up with just shutting it down to one lane to stop some of that.

In a similar vein, SROs in the suburban-White district mentioned potential dangers found in the physical characteristics of the schools’ surroundings—such as the inherent dangers of a railroad track located next to campus:

At the end of this parking lot, or this playground, the big park and playground, we have a, a rail line that runs through there. So, we have three or four trains that go by every day. Um, so there’s a safety aspect of that maybe, you know, a train getting derailed or crashing or you know . . . somebody being on the rail line, or you know, what not, that being right next to the playground.

SROs in the suburban-White district were keenly aware of the threats posed by the people and infrastructure surrounding the school, although they did not explicitly articulate these concerns in light of students’ race, socioeconomic status, or other demographic characteristics.

#### *The Urban-Diverse District*

SROs in the urban-diverse district rarely discussed environment-based threats, focusing on these threats less than either of the other two threat categories. Similar to the suburban-White district SROs, when SROs in the urban-diverse district discussed environment-based threats, these often involved dealing with irate parents: “a lot of times we’ll get parents coming in here that are upset or irate with the school, and then we’ll have to step in and escort them out maybe.” SROs discussed diffusing situations with irate parents as only an occasional occurrence.

Other environment-based threats that the urban-diverse district SROs mentioned included reckless drivers in the parking lot and strangers wandering onto the school campus: “We had a couple weeks ago a guy living in a car in the back parking lot. I had to get that towed off. That’s about it.” Some SROs reported the importance of taking stock of the school campus surroundings to look out for community members who were occupying space on school grounds, but had no intention of entering the school building. However, SROs in this district did not address these environment-based threats in detail, but rather mentioned them as threats that were infrequent and uncommon, though still possible.

We find it unsurprising that suburban-White district SROs, but not urban-diverse district SROs, discussed their concern for environment-based threat in depth. Like their concern about intruders, concern about environment-based threat is rooted in a focus on protecting perceived vulnerable students from outside forces that may harm them. Similar to concerns about intruders in the district, this reflects racialized notions of White vulnerability that appear to motivate the SROs' perceptions (Lewis, 2003; Muhammad, 2011). This vision of vulnerability for the relatively affluent and mostly White students they work with contrasts sharply with the urban-diverse district SROs' vision of responsibility and threat among the primarily low-income youth of color they work with, which appeared to motivate their overwhelming concern with student-based threats.

### *Alternative Comparisons*

We also conducted two separate analyses in an effort to further understand the role of race in our findings. First, because the suburban-White district had many SROs that were assigned to elementary schools (whereas the urban-diverse district did not), it was possible that the differences we found between the two districts were due to differences in grade level rather than racial composition. To address this, we reanalyzed the data using only data from SROs in middle and high schools in the suburban-White district and compared the themes to those derived from the full sample of SROs. The themes were essentially identical to those from the full sample, suggesting that the differences we detected between the two districts were not due to the different levels of schools to which the SROs were assigned.

Second, we examined within-district differences by schools' racial composition. Whereas our primary analyses examined differences in perceived threats between SROs in a district with many youth of color (the urban-diverse district) and one with few youth of color (the suburban-White district), this within-district analysis allowed for an examination of how the racial composition of an SRO's own school (rather than the district as a whole) may shape perceptions of threats. These two types of comparisons represent slightly different potential mechanisms. First, SROs' perceptions of threats may be influenced by the district-wide demographics of students that their department serves. This could manifest through department leadership's views of students and articulated goals and policies of the SRO program as well as collective dialogue among SROs in the district. Second, SROs' views of threats may be shaped by their perception of students in their own school, with their school's racial composition mattering in ways that may or may not align with those of SROs in the district as a whole. To explore this, we identified the SROs in schools within each district in the highest and lowest quartiles of the percent of White students and reanalyzed the data using only these schools, making comparisons within the same district between schools in the top and bottom quartiles of percent White students.

Within the suburban-White district, the sample of bottom quartile White schools had an average of 55 percent White students, whereas the sample of top quartile White schools had an average of 90 percent White students. After analyzing data from only these schools, there were no evident differences between the two groups in what SROs perceived as threats or why they perceived certain things as threats. As with the broader findings from the suburban-White district, intruder-based threats—specifically, school shooters—were consistently of greatest concern to the SROs in both the bottom and top quartile White schools, and students were consistently viewed as not a serious threat to the schools. Again, these findings were linked with ideas about the students coming from good families and communities and the demographic similarity of the broader community to the locations of other high-profile school shootings such as Columbine and Sandy Hook. These findings may reflect the county's strong emphasis on protecting the schools from gun violence and suggest that the SROs working in schools with relatively more students of color were influenced by the broader context of the district in ways that may have minimized the influence of their specific school's demographics on their views of threats.

Within the urban-diverse district, the sample of bottom quartile White schools had an average of 33 percent White students, whereas the top quartile had an average of 56 percent White students. Unlike the suburban-White district, the SROs in the two quartiles within the urban-diverse district had quite different understandings of the threats to their schools. Although student-based threats were the most salient threat for both groups (there were again only passing comments about intruder-based threats), these threats were explained differently in terms of both the forms that they took and the reasons for the threats. Specifically, in the top quartile White schools, SROs were primarily concerned about disruptive behaviors and rule violations, with little concern about criminal behaviors from students. Even these potential criminal behaviors, though, were explained as resulting from mental health issues or the heightened emotional states that occur in adolescence. In the bottom quartile White schools, on the other hand, SROs considered weapons, violence, and more serious (criminal) behavior as the primary student-based threats to the schools, and explained these threats largely in terms of the “troubled” neighborhoods and families that the students came from. They also were concerned about community violence encroaching onto the school campus. These findings suggest that within the urban-diverse district, SROs understood threats differently according to the racial composition of their own schools, lending further credence to the conclusion that race conditions the way that SROs perceive threats in schools and specifically that SROs are responsive to their school’s racial composition.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although SROs are presumably placed in schools to improve school safety, prior research provides little guidance about what SROs perceive as threats to schools, and how the racial composition of schools might shape these perceptions. Using in-depth interview data from 73 SROs across two geographical areas, we find that SROs’ perceived threats generally fell into three categories: student-based, intruder-based, and environment-based threats. However, the manifestations and perceived seriousness of these threats differed across contexts such that SROs in the suburban-White district tended to view external threats—particularly school shooters—as the most salient threat to school safety, and consistently emphasized the need to protect students from potentially dangerous outsiders. On the contrary, SROs in the urban-diverse district spoke more about students themselves as threats, believing that students had a potential for committing crime and violence that stemmed from their negative family and community environments. Despite the two geographic areas having very similar juvenile arrest rates, SROs perceived the students in the urban-diverse district as more dangerous.

These findings support the use of the RCM for understanding how SROs perceive threats in schools. The RCM contends that assumptions about racial minorities are likely to be particularly salient in shaping SROs’ perceptions in schools with a larger proportion of racial minorities, as was the case in the urban-diverse district (Soss et al. 2011). That was largely true in this study, with SROs’ perceptions of threats reflecting stereotypes of Black dangerousness that have been part of the American imagination for centuries (Muhammad 2011). Consistent with colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018), the officers did not articulate the different threats explicitly in terms of race, but instead relied on racialized tropes about deficient families, and neighborhoods and low socioeconomic status (Valencia 2010). These patterns held when comparing findings across districts and within the urban-diverse district. In the suburban-White district, SROs’ racialized assumptions about their students’ virtues shaped their perceptions of threats in line with what the RCM would predict. The SROs used race as a key factor when assessing threats, even in schools with relatively low proportions of racial minority students. Districtwide, the SROs in the suburban-White district articulated racialized tropes related to White virtue and innocence (Lewis 2003; Muhammad 2011), leading the SROs to understand their students not as threats, but as needing protection from external threats. Thus, these

findings suggest that, given the salience of Whiteness as a power structure in the United States, the RCM is useful for explaining SROs' threat perceptions across multiple contexts.

Our findings align with prior research that finds that authority figures perceive Black students to be more threatening than White students, including educators (Gilliam et al. 2016; Kunesh and Noltemeyer 2015; Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015) and police officers (Correll et al. 2002). Although the current study did not assess SROs' perceptions of individuals—whether students, intruders, parents, or any other person—the fact that SROs in the urban-diverse district found students to be the most serious threats to the school, whereas those in the suburban-White district did not, speaks to a similar racialized phenomenon. Given that existing research has largely found that SROs do not reduce crime or punishment in schools (e.g., Fisher and Hennessey 2016; Gonzalez, Jetelina, and Jennings 2016; Homer and Fisher 2020; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Theriot 2009), the current study's findings suggest that any negative consequences attributable to SROs are likely to be borne particularly heavily by schools with large proportions of Black students.

Moreover, the different threat perceptions across the two districts may explain findings from prior research that SROs in more disadvantaged schools were more likely to engage in law enforcement tasks than SROs in schools with less disadvantage, who were more likely to engage in tasks related to education (Lynch et al. 2016). That is, when SROs perceive students as the primary threats, they are more likely to police the students themselves; alternatively, when they perceive outsiders as the primary threats, they are more likely to take action to protect the students from external threats and engage in more prosocial tasks with the students. This may be particularly problematic given that prior research has shown that SROs have a high degree of discretion in their decisions to arrest students, and that the decision to arrest is often motivated in part by subjective assessments of the students—including their attitudes and history of misbehavior—and is used to calm students and teach them lessons about the consequences of their behavior (Wolf 2014). Given that SROs' perceptions of students as threats differed so much across context in the current study, it is likely that SROs are much more willing to arrest Black students than White students, particularly in schools with larger proportions of Black students.

Given the many concerns about SROs criminalizing students of color (Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik and Monahan 2006; Nance 2014; Petteruti 2011), schools and law enforcement agencies may seek to reshape what SROs perceive as threats, shifting their attention away from policing students to protecting students. First, schools might reconsider whether SROs are needed. If a school implements an SRO with a clear objective in mind (such as stopping drug sales) and this objective is met, the SRO may no longer be necessary. Second, schools with SROs that are meant to address ongoing objectives (such as preventing gun violence in schools) might align their SROs' activities around that objective. A clear delineation of activities may guard against the sort of mission creep that likely occurs when SROs try to find ways to spend their time in the absence of gun violence. Third, school administrators may wish to assume more responsibility for student behavior rather than depending on SROs. That is, even if students commit crimes in school, if school administrators have full responsibility for addressing those behaviors, SROs may be less likely to police the students in light of their lack of responsibility for overseeing student behavior. Fourth, SROs could be made aware of the structural racism that works against students of color (including within the criminal justice system) as well as their personal biases.

This study's limitations should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, although we used data from a diverse range of schools, they do not encompass all school settings, nor SRO programs, thereby limiting the transferability of this study's findings. For instance, many school districts use their own law enforcement agency rather than contracting with city or county law enforcement; this dynamic may lead to differences in how SROs perceive threats. Second, only limited information on SROs' background and training was available. Further information may help explain why SROs perceive some things as threats and not others. Third, characteristics of the interviewers may have influenced the SROs' responses. For example, most of the interviews held advanced post-secondary



degrees, which may have led the SROs to respond differently than they would have to less educated interviewers. Similarly, given that most of the interviewers and SROs were White, the SROs may have spoken differently about race than they would have with racial minority interviewers. Fourth, we were unable to assess the consequences of SROs' threat perceptions. Given that criminalization can affect students and families (Kupchik 2010; Mowen 2017), future research may benefit from examining the consequences of SROs' racialized threat perceptions. Finally, we note that SROs' reports to us of what they perceive as threats facing their school communities might be shaped by what they felt they were expected to voice, or what they perceived that we as researchers expected to hear, rather than coming only from their perceptions. This limitation is common within qualitative studies like ours, which seeks to understand how stakeholders' statements relate to important trends in school policing rather than establish generalizable trends.

Policing in schools is now common throughout the United States, but its consequences, particularly for students of color, are unclear. In particular, the extent to which SROs interact differently with White students and students of color is poorly understood. Prior theory and empirical evidence suggest that SROs may perceive threats differently across school contexts; in this study we empirically examine this claim using unique data from diverse schools across two geographically different school districts. Analyses of these interviews from 73 SROs yielded two major findings. First, SROs perceive threats that can generally be categorized as student-based, intruder-based, and environment-based threats. Second, the racial context of SROs' schools shapes their views of these threats, with SROs in urban schools with higher proportions of students of color perceiving the students themselves as threats, and SROs in suburban schools with lower proportions of students of color perceiving students as needing protection from outside threats. These findings help explain how SROs' perceptions might expose students of color to more frequent and intense police interactions. Given the harms, such as potential for school punishment and justice system involvement, that students can suffer due to police interactions in schools (Fisher and Hennessy 2016; Homer and Fisher 2020; Na and Gottfredson 2013), our findings help explain how SROs' presence can result in growing racial inequality. Our results indicate the need to rethink whether and how SROs engage with students and schools, particularly in how they interact with student behaviors.

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