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ABSTRACT
Fueled by concerns about school violence, the number of School Resource Officers (SROs) in the United States has soared. SROs are law enforcement officers who work in elementary and secondary schools and who are tasked to increase school safety. As of 2016, 48 percent of US public schools had SROs, compared to less than one percent in the 1970's, yet there are few studies that measure their effects. In particular, the literature largely ignores rural/urban differences. This study uses survey data from SROs working in public schools in Oklahoma to understand their roles and to determine if there are differences between rural and urban SROs. We look at jurisdiction and school characteristics as well as SRO perceptions of disciplinary practices, school climate, referrals, and community involvement. Identifying variability in these areas is a requisite first step in understanding the effect of the SRO on school safety.

KEYWORDS: Rural versus urban public schools, school disciplinary practices, school resource officers

The safety of students, staff, faculty, and visitors is a concern in public schools across the United States. While the media and public focus on high-profile school shootings (e.g. Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School), Robers et al. (2015) find that most school-based crimes are minor offenses such as vandalism, drug use, and theft. Nonetheless, school personnel have a responsibility to teach and reward appropriate social behavior, and to respond to all offenses on their campuses (Jenkins 1995). Since the 1990s, one popular anti-crime response has been to place sworn law enforcement officers in public schools (Theriot 2009; May, Rice, and Minor 2012; May et al. 2016). These school resource officers (SROs) are tasked with the overall goal of ensuring safety on their campuses while remaining school personnel create and maintain a supportive learning environment such that students can focus on their studies (Burdick-Will 2013).

As defined by the U.S. Federal Code 20 U.S.C. §7161 (2012), an SRO is “a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations” (p. 1). Although state and local definitions of the SRO may differ from this federal code, the primary goal of SRO placements in schools is to foster a safe learning environment through crime prevention and education. Although SROs are now commonplace in US schools, a review of the literature demonstrates a dearth of empirical studies on the overall effectiveness of this program (May and Higgins 2011; May et al. 2012; May, Ruddell, Barranco, and Robertson 2016).

There are only a few studies systematically focusing on SROs which address even basic questions such as their selection, extent of training, specific duties, etc. (Stinson and Watkins 2014). Moreover, while rural school districts cover more of the US than their urban counterparts, a comparison of rural to urban SROs is further lacking (May, Fessel, and Means 2004; Ruddell and May 2011; Fitzgerald, Hunt, and Kerr 2019). In response to this gap in the literature, Ruddell and May (2011) used state-wide survey data from Kentucky to compare the tasks, characteristics, and perceptions of SROs working in rural schools to those working in urban schools in that state. We continue and expand this research through a similar study using data from Oklahoma.

The purpose of this study is to understand the characteristics and roles of SROs as well as their perceptions of school administrators in urban and rural school districts in Oklahoma. Specifically, we seek to determine whether there are significant differences in the demographic, job-related attributes, and perceptions of urban and rural SROs and, as Ruddell and May (2011) examined in their Kentucky data, explore some of the contextual characteristics of rural and urban Oklahoma schools in which the SROs are placed. We intend to address the gap in the literature related to SROs placed in and responsible for safety in rural public schools and extend our understanding of characteristics, activities, perceptions of, and any significant differences between, rural and urban SROs placed in public schools throughout Oklahoma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1970s, fewer than 100 police officers were positioned in all of the US public schools. By 2007, this number rose to 19,088 (Redfield and Nance 2016: 51). With the overall goal of keeping public schools safe, Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA). The GFSA requires all states receiving federal funds to direct their school districts to automatically expel any student caught with a weapon on the school's grounds (Yell and Rozalski 2000; Kafka 2011) and to refer these students to law enforcement for supplementary punishment (Kafka 2011). By the end of 1995, all 50 states had enacted legislation in compliance with the GFSA (Yell and Rozalski 2000). Additionally, the GFSA led to the increased use of zero tolerance policies to punish a wide range of offenses. By the 1996-1997 school year, 94 percent of US schools had zero tolerance policies for weapons possession, 88 percent had such policies for possession of drugs, 87 percent for alcohol, and 79 percent for tobacco use or fighting (Kafka 2011). Such zero tolerance policies illustrate the trend towards student conduct criminalization, prompting schools to greatly increase the number of law enforcement officers tasked to implement these policies (Hirschfield 2008; Aull 2012; Ramey 2015).

In our schools, student safety is sought by a combination of teachers, school staff and administrators, and SRO(s). According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the SRO's best practice is to employ a triad of roles: law enforcement officer, informal mentor/counselor, and guest lecturer (i.e. law-related courses). "SROs, as a result, possess a skill set unique among both law enforcement and education personnel that enables SROs to protect the community and the campus while supporting the educational mission" (NASRO 2018: 21).

Stressed throughout the NASRO literature is the importance of the use of community policing techniques and strengthening community and school ties as both values and practice by SROs working in US public schools. According to a National Center for Education Statistics report, in the 2015-2016 school year, 48 percent of all US public schools had SROs on their campuses, an increase of 33 percent from a decade ago (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018).

With the need for a balanced and coordinated response among the school personnel to school safety concerns, it is critically important to understand the role of SROs in promoting and maintaining school safety. A review of existing literature reveals studies examining potential factors contributing to the increase of officers in schools (Addington 2009; Nance 2016; Scully 2016), SRO effectiveness in the prevention or reduction of disorder or violence (Time and Payne 2008; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Kim 2012) and juveniles' legal rights invoked within SRO interactions (Blumenson and Nilsen 2003; Torres and Stefkovich 2009; Inbau et al. 2013; Hyland, Langton, and Davis 2015). Additional studies examine whether student behavior, historically handled by school personnel informally (e.g. student misconduct or disorder), is now handled formally (e.g. criminalization of student conduct) through the use of SROs (Theriot 2009; Kafka 2011; Kupchik 2010), while other studies examine the relationship between students and SROs (Brown 2006; Eckholm 2013; Theriot 2016) and describe select roles and duties, perceived and/or assigned, of SROs (Johnson 1999; May and Chen 2009; Kupchik 2010; Ruddell and May 2011).

SROs are usually employed by a law enforcement agency and assigned to work in one or more schools pursuant to a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the school or school district and the law enforcement agency. Under these MOUs, SROs are generally tasked to accomplish (among other duties as assigned): order maintenance; security; routine patrol; and investigation of and arrest for law violations occurring in the school(s) to which they are assigned (Ruddell and May 2011; May et al. 2016). Other assigned duties may include law-related counseling to students, school personnel, and families as well as educating teachers and school administrators on violence prevention and school climate improvement (May, Cordner, and Fessel 2004; Lawrence 2006). Regardless of their role or the primacy of their roles, the SRO is usually armed, in uniform, and expected to secure and maintain the order and safety of the school campus (May and Higgins 2011).

Other than Ruddell and May's (2011) study, the existing literature on SROs suffers from an urban-centric or "big city" bias (Liederbach and Frank 2003; Ruddell and May 2011). That is, these studies either focus on urban schools or aggregate all schools in a given jurisdiction without differentiating between rural and urban. Ignoring what may occur uniquely in rural schools where more than one-sixth of the US population lives (Reaves 2010) and where 57 percent of all school districts exist (Robers, Kemp, and Truman 2013) will not allow researchers nor policymakers to be aware of nor address school safety concerns within those schools.

Compared to their counterparts, rural schools typically have fewer resources and rural areas typically have fewer access points to health, human, and social service agencies. Thus, SROs (as well as law enforcement officers off-campus) may be asked to handle student behavior/activity outside their MOU designated duties and perhaps outside their training/expertise (Coon and Travis 2007; Leone and Weinberg 2010; Ramey 2015; Seigle, Walsh, and Weber 2014). Because these rural resource characteristics may help explain some potential differences in a wide range of characteristics, resources, and practices of rural SROs, scholarship in school safety issues and policy making must attend to and include an analysis into potential differences between rural and urban SROs.

Using state-wide (Kentucky) survey data, Ruddell and May (2011) compared characteristics, tasks, and perceptions of SROs working in urban schools to those in rural schools, finding significant differences in school size, county incomes, professional association memberships, and specialized training. While the SROs in urban school districts outpaced SROs in rural schools in these categories, Ruddell and May also found several significant differences specific to the rural SROs. That is, rural SROs were more likely than urban SROs to perceive that school administrators were much less tolerant of gang-involved students, drug use, and violence, and that those rural school administrators were more supportive of strict enforcement of school rules and investigation cooperation (Ruddell and May 2011). This perceived strict enforcement approach in rural Kentucky schools regarding certain student crime and disorder is interesting, complex, and worthy of further examination. A strict enforcement approach has the advantage of offering structure or awareness to students and school personnel. On the other hand, taking this approach to a zero tolerance level may have the disadvantage of criminalizing previously non-criminal student behavior (e.g. disorder, petty

theft) that may induce increasingly severe consequences, even for minor violations (Mittleman 2018).

Another interesting finding in Ruddell and May's (2011) study is that rural SROs, as compared to urban SROs, were almost two times as likely to sponsor student organizations and as such, they appear to engage more with students after school. This finding is consistent with existing research which holds that rural law enforcement officers have stronger ties to the community they serve as compared to city police (Pelfrey 2007; Torres and Stefkovich 2009). If one ties this observation with the earlier findings of fewer resources and service access points in rural jurisdictions, it is fair to suggest that interactions between rural SROs and their students may be handled more informally (e.g. less punitively, largely handled within the school house) than their urban counterparts. Ruddell and May (2011) conclude that overall there are more similarities than differences between urban and rural SROs working in Kentucky schools but ask that similar studies be undertaken as well as national-level research into similarities and differences in SROs operating in rural and urban school districts. We take on this challenge by examining jurisdictional, school, and SRO training characteristics; specific SRO characteristics and perceptions of school administrators related to SRO-student interactions in response to student crime and disorder; and SRO-involved activities including teaching, mentoring, counseling, and community linkages.

DATA AND METHODS

In this study, we used data from a survey of Oklahoma School Resource Officers (SROs), the US Census Bureau, and the Oklahoma Department of Education. The SRO surveys[1] provided rich data on SRO demographics, training, and experience, as well as SRO perceptions of school disciplinary practices, school climate, student referrals, and SRO involvement with the community. Jurisdictional data on population and household income were obtained from the US Census Bureau, and school population and per pupil expenditure data were gathered from the Oklahoma State Department of Education. We included this information to better understand the jurisdictional and school characteristics situated within the schools in which our study SROs work. The research team identified 199 total SROs in the state by contacting all 1,352 schools in Oklahoma. A mixed-mode of survey administration was used in an effort to increase the sample size. SROs could respond via paper or electronically using an online survey instrument. Our research design was reviewed and approved by our institution's institutional review board (IRB).

All of our survey respondents gave their informed consent prior to their research participation and adequate steps were taken to protect respondents' anonymity and confidentiality.

Data collection commenced in June 2017 and ended in February 2018. Of the 199 SROs working in Oklahoma school districts, 100 ultimately returned survey responses, thus an initial 50 percent response rate. However, respondents who did not provide their assigned school district or complete answers to question(s), could not be included in the analysis. Ultimately, we were able to collect 87 usable surveys bringing our overall survey response rate to 44 percent. Although Ruddell and May's (2011) response rate was approximately 70 percent, we believe that given the uniqueness of this study, only the second study of its kind, and goal of tracking and accessing statewide SRO participation, our 44 percent response rate is acceptable for our study purposes.

The focus of this research is on the differences between rural and urban SROs. Our respondents were classified into rural (n=55) or urban (n=32), based on the US Census classification of the region in which they worked. Two types of inferential statistics are applied to assess the relationships between the dependent variables. A chi-square test is used to examine the association between the categorical measures and a t-test is used to investigate the differences in continuous variables. For determining the magnitude of association derived from chi-square, we use phi correlation coefficient.

We anticipate significant differences in several descriptive statistics, specifically that urban school jurisdictions will be larger, less racially homogenous, and wealthier, and will put more resources into education than rural school districts. In addition, we expect urban SROs will be more educated, have more training, employ fewer community-oriented policing practices, respond more formally to student-related infractions and misconduct, and be affiliated with SRO programs that have been in existence longer than their rural SRO counterparts.

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 reflect the demographics, education, training, experience, and duties of SROs. Rural SROs were significantly different than urban SROs in terms of race, education, and several areas of training. As expected, the rural group consisted of a higher percentage of white SROs (87 percent) with fewer college graduates (65 percent). A higher proportion of rural SROs attended several basic SRO training courses, while a higher percentage of urban

SROs completed implicit bias training. These findings are inconsistent with our expectations and Ruddell and May's (2011) findings. We did not observe any statistical difference between the two groups on law enforcement years of experience, SRO years of experience, or duties performed as an SRO. A majority of an SRO's time is spent in law enforcement related activities, followed by role model/informal counseling, acting as a public safety liaison, and finally, involvement in education related activities. These findings related to duties are consistent with Ruddell and May (2011) and earlier research (May et al. 2004; Lawrence 2006). Among other similarities are mean age and gender. On average, Oklahoma SROs are males in their mid-forties.

Jurisdiction and School Characteristics

Table 2 represents the comparison between rural and urban SROs in relation to jurisdiction and school characteristics. As we expect and consistent with Ruddell and May (2011), there are significant mean differences in city/town population and county income. Urban SROs serve in jurisdictions with larger city/town and school populations. The length of time the SRO program has been in existence is also statistically different for urban and rural SROs. As expected, rural SRO programs, on average, have been in place 11 years as compared to urban programs at 21 years. The results also reveal differences in the SRO school assignment. The highest proportion of urban SROs report that they are assigned to one school and on call at others, while the highest percentage of rural SROs spend their time at two or more schools. Again, we expected this finding given the limited resources and smaller student populations in rural schools when compared to urban schools.

SRO Perceptions

We hypothesized that there would be significant differences between rural and urban SROs with regard to practicing community-oriented policing (COP). Given the earlier research reviewing rural law enforcement officers and their stronger orientation to community service when compared to urban officers (Pelfrey 2007; Torres and Stefrovich 2009), we expected urban SROs would be more likely than rural SROs to address student infractions more formally and thus, through procedures typically outside of COP practice. To the contrary and as Table 3 illustrates, we observe that the urban SROs, rather than rural SROs, place a higher priority on COP.

Table 1: Demographics, Training, and Experience

Oklahoma School Resource Officer Characteristics				
	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
Locale (Percentage Rural)	63%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Race (Percentage White)	78%	87%	63%	.0066**
Age (Mean Years)	45	47	43	.0794
Gender (Percentage Male)	91%	89%	94%	.4683
Education (Percentage College Graduate)	76%	65%	94%	.0025**
LEO Experience (Mean Years)	18	18	18	.9680
Certified OK Police Officer	95%	95%	97%	.6375
SRO Experience (Mean Years)	6	6	6	.9800
Years at Current School (Mean)	6	6	6	.5035
Training- Basic				
Special Law Enforcement Process	24%	23%	28%	.5701
Basic SRO Course	63%	64%	63%	.9156
How to teach	67%	65%	69%	.7532
How to mentor	46%	55%	31%	.0355*
How to counsel students	47%	55%	34%	.0691
How to counsel families	30%	38%	16%	.0267*
How to counsel school personnel	32%	42%	16%	.0117*
How to work with youth in a school setting	57%	67%	41%	.0153*
Training- Specialized				
Mental health	72%	71%	74%	.7444
Adolescent development and communication	38%	36%	41%	.6928
Implicit Bias	20%	13%	31%	.0356*
Trauma-informed care	55%	59%	47%	.2648
De-escalation techniques	70%	67%	75%	.4477
Cultural competence	46%	44%	50%	.5658
Advice or mentoring activities with school	37%	42%	28%	.2015
Duties				
LEO	33%	36%	28%	.2525
Public safety specialist	15%	12%	19%	.1213
Community liaison	17%	15%	21%	.1263
Educator	7%	8%	6%	.4372
Role model/Informal counselor	22%	21%	22%	.8746
Other	4%	4%	4%	.9031

Note: N/A = not applicable, *$p \le .05$*, ** $p \le .01$, *** $p \le .001$. To calculate the observed significance level (p-value), a chi-square test was used for categorical data and a t-test was used for continuous data.

Table 2: School and Jurisdiction Characteristics

School Characteristics				
	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
School Population (Mean)	9,701	3,808	19,646	<.0001***
Expenditure Pupil (Mean)	$ 7,122	$7,131	$ 7,107	.9337
SRO Program Existed (Mean Years)	15	11	21	<.0001***
School Assignment				
One school	20%	24%	13%	.2657
One school + on call (others)	45%	36%	59%	.0380*
Two schools	9%	6%	13%	.2611
More than two schools	32%	41%	17%	.0236*
School Type				
Elementary	2%	4%	0%	N/A
Middle School	16%	7%	31%	N/A
Junior High	5%	4%	6%	N/A
High School	30%	27%	34%	N/A
Multiple	47%	58%	28%	N/A
Employer				
Sheriff	10%	20%	14%	.1934
City/town	59%	58%	59%	.9132
School	37%	33%	44%	.3039
Jurisdiction Characteristics				
	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	
City/town Population (Mean)	120,007	21,855	285,639	<.0001***
County Income (Mean)	$ 50,131	$ 48,249	$ 53,364	.0365*
County Percentage White (Mean)	75	75	74	.7854

Note: N/A = not applicable, *$p \leq .05$,** $p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$. To calculate the observed significance level (p-value), a chi-square test was used for categorical data and a t-test was used for continuous data.

Looking more specifically to the types of student infractions handled by the SRO, we predicted that urban SROs would be more likely involved in all disciplinary matters—including routine disciplinary matters (traditionally the responsibility of teachers and school personnel) and matters that, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), may constitute a referral or report to law enforcement. The data, however, indicate that urban SROs are more often responding to matters that may constitute a

referral or report to law enforcement than their rural counterparts, yet are less involved with routine student disciplinary matters.

Table 3: School Disciplinary Practices

School Disciplinary Practices				
Variable	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
SRO signed Memorandum of Agreement that clearly describes duties, objectives, and rules that govern SRO program (Q21)	62%	56%	72%	.1505
SRO primary responding party to specific student behaviors that may constitute a referral or report to law enforcement (Q22)	75%	73%	78%	.4070
SRO places priority on Community Oriented Policing (COP) by getting the community and school officials involved in improving the school climate (Q23)	64%	60%	71%	.3875
School offers school-level diversion in lieu of citation or petition (Q24)	To be discussed			.3215
SRO involved in routine disciplinary matters such as tardiness, loitering, dress code violations, etc. (Q25)	32%	42%	16%	.0117*
SRO frequently employs interventions that address the root cause of misbehavior, e.g. mediation, mental health, etc. (Q26)	62%	65%	60%	.6556
SRO allowed to use suspension or expulsion for minor and typical youth behaviors (Q27)	34%	36%	30%	.5543
School has a discipline system in place that uses non-punitive approaches focused on misbehavior prevention and intervention (Q28)	87%	84%	94%	.1711
School uses graduated approach to assigning consequences (Q29)	93%	94%	91%	.5016
School rules of acceptable student behavior are clearly communicated (Q30a)	96%	98%	94%	.2909
School rules of acceptable student behavior are consistently enforced (Q30b)	83%	91%	71%	.0200*

Note: *$p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$.* To calculate the observed significance level (p-value), a chi-square test was used for categorical data and a t-test was used for continuous data.

Research findings have suggested that the lack of clear and consistently enforced school rules can lead to student alienation and increase delinquency while removing all discretion in the application of

rules can have the effect of criminalizing minor infractions (Theriot 2009; Kupchik 2010; Gottfredson and DiPietro 2011; Kafka 2011; Ramey 2015). Both rural and urban SROs report that school rules are clearly communicated but we find that there are statistically significant differences with rule enforcement. Ninety-one percent of rural SROs perceive that school rules are consistently enforced. This is in contrast with urban SROs, where only 71 percent make the same observation. This difference may be related to the type of rules being enforced. As law enforcement officers, SROs are geared towards dealing with law infractions rather than school policy infractions. Thus, urban SROs my be less likely than their rural counterparts to enforce rules outside of law violations since teachers should enforce those rules traditionally considered teacher or school based infractions. Again, given the benefits and pitfalls of strict-enforcement of school rules, this finding is certainly in need of future evaluation and research.

School climate factors/attributes contribute to student, faculty, administrator, and SRO perceptions of school safety (National School Climate Council 2007). In Table 4, we present SRO perceptions of school climate. Survey questions concerned school policies aimed at reducing disciplinary incidents, increasing a school's sense of safety, and supporting student academic outcomes. Nearly all SROs report that the school principal supports the SRO program. Urban and rural schools also have similar rates of the presence of surveillance and student participation in and implementation of strategies that reduce misconduct. On other measures of school climate, significant differences exist. Ninety-three percent of rural SROs state that they have the freedom to develop special programs and customized responses to problems in their schools, compared to 74 percent of their urban counterparts. This particular finding may be due to fewer resources (e.g. funding, supplies, and personnel) in the rural, rather than urban, Oklahoma schools which may demand more discretion and duties from all personnel, including the SRO. Only 35 percent of rural SROs cite that their schools have instructional programs that teach self-control and social competency to students, whereas 68 percent of urban SROs report having such a program.

Results in Table 5 focus on the interactions between schools and the juvenile justice system in the context of school-based student referrals to law enforcement or the juvenile justice system. A greater percentage of rural SROs (60 percent) compared to urban SROs (44 percent) perceive that the school discipline code is clear on arrest offenses. A greater percentage of rural SROs (61percent) (compared to 29 percent of urban

SROs) report having the authority to refer students to the Oklahoma Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA) or the Oklahoma Juvenile Bureau. This is a statistically significant difference. However, urban SROs indicate at a higher rate that their school districts have objectives in place to minimize the number of student referrals, 35 percent, compared to rural SROs who report at 24 percent.

Table 4: School Climate

School Climate				
Variable	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
Metal detectors and other forms of surveillance present (Q31)	66%	64%	69%	.4579
SRO has freedom to develop special programs and customized responses (Q32)	86%	93%	74%	.0274*
School has instructional program that teaches self-control or social competency skills to students (Q33)	47%	35%	68%	.0205*
School implemented system of Positive Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Q34)	45%	43%	50%	.6611
SRO perceives that principal supports SRO program (Q35)	97%	96%	97%	.9206
Students have participated in establishing mechanism for reducing behavior (Q37)	53%	53%	53%	.9793
School-based strategies in place for reducing youth violence, aggression, and problem behavior (Q38)	54%	49%	61%	.2780

Note: *$p \le .05$,** $p \le .01$, ***$p \le .001$. To calculate the observed significance level (p-value), a chi-square test was used for categorical data and a t-test was used for continuous data.

Table 5: Referral Practices

Referral Practices				
Variable	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
School discipline code is clear on "arrest" offenses (Q39)	54%	60%	44%	.1425
SRO and others have authority to refer a student to either OJA or JB (Q40)	49%	61%	29%	.0044**
School district objective in place to limit referrals to the justice system (Q41)	28%	24%	35%	.2607

Note: *$p \le .05$,** $p \le .01$, ***$p \le .001$. To calculate the observed significance level (p-value), a chi-square test was used for categorical data and a t-test was used for continuous data.

Variables related to the interaction between the SRO and the community, shown in Table 6, revealed statistical differences only in terms of SRO program assessments. In seemingly more formalized urban settings, urban SRO programs are receiving higher rates of annual evaluations,

Table 6: Community Involvement

Community Involvement				
Variable	Total (N=87)	Rural (n=55)	Urban (n=32)	p-value
SRO proactively engaged the community in problem solving (Q42)	63%	62%	66%	.7225
Community has worked with SRO to define SRO mission to the school (Q43)	36%	31%	45%	.1863
Annual assessment of SRO program (Q44)	47%	38%	63%	.0284*
SRO gets to choose where s/he works (Q46)	31%	28%	34%	.5560

Note: *$p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$*

63 percent compared to the 38 percent of rural SROs who reported the presence of annual program assessments. As Ruddell and May’s (2011) related study finds, we did not observe statistically significant differences between urban and rural SROs in terms of their ties to their respective communities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Programs and policies designed and implemented to ensure safety in US public schools have been on the rise since the 1990s. The School Resource Officer (SRO) program is a prominent example of these types of programs. Currently, this program has several research gaps. With our research, we extend Ruddell and May’s (2011) state-wide (Kentucky) study, the first of its kind, to Oklahoma by comparing the characteristics, roles, and perceptions of SROs working in rural school districts to those working in urban school districts. From survey data including 87 SROs working in urban (n =32) and rural (n=55) public schools in Oklahoma, our analyses indicate commonalities between urban and rural SROs, as well as significant differences between urban and rural SROs regarding their

education and training, domain, and degree of program transparency. These findings aim to address existing research gaps and offer an opportunity for school administrators, local and state-level policy makers, SROs, and law enforcement agencies to enhance their understanding of their SRO program.

Education and Training

Regarding SRO education and training, our findings share a mixed consistency with those of Ruddell and May (2011). First, while Ruddell and May (2011) found nearly identical levels of education and experience among urban and rural SROs in Kentucky, our study of Oklahoma SROs finds significantly greater levels of education among urban SROs. Second, Ruddell and May (2011:12) find that SROs posted in urban Kentucky schools were more likely to have received basic SRO (or NASRO) training. Our findings indicate that, though rural SROs tend be less educated, they are attending more basic training courses than urban SROs and only lag behind urban SROs in one category of specialized training (implicit bias). Given the greater discretion and authority reported by rural SROs in Tables 5 and 6, their propensity to receive basic SRO training would likely serve them well in this regard. While the differences in education and training among urban and rural SROs are illuminating, we find that SROs maintain relatively similar routine duties regardless of locale.

SRO Domain

Consistent with Ruddell and May (2011), SRO jurisdiction and school characteristics varied among urban and rural SROs (e.g. local area population, county income, and school population). These results affirm the distinctive nature of urban and rural schools in which SROs work. Given that these school settings inherently differ, the SRO domain is a complex and dynamic one. To better understand the SRO domain, we asked SROs to share their perceptions of school-based disciplinary practices, school climate, and referrals (to juvenile justice agencies in Oklahoma). First, contrary to our expectations, urban rather than rural SROs place a higher premium on community-oriented policing (COP). Given the contrast between rural SROs' involvement in routine disciplinary matters and urban SROs' involvement in student behaviors that may constitute a referral or report to law enforcement, rural SROs are participating in more school "discipline." This finding runs contrary to previous research (Pelfrey 2007; Torres and Strefrovich 2009). We cannot

readily explain this finding especially given what we observed regarding rural SRO training, which may imply the rural SROs would be expected to handle more, rather than fewer student infractions.

Second, SRO perceptions of school climate appear to be indicative of urban and rural schools' distinctive environments. We find that urban schools are more likely to offer an instructional program teaching self-control or social competency skills to students. This finding, along with implicit bias training, could be merely a consequence of a relatively diverse urban school environment (when compared to the typically homogenous rural school environment). As well, rural SROs more often perceive that they have the freedom to develop special programs and customized responses to student problems than their urban counterparts. This level of agency seems in conflict with perceptions of strict enforcement in rural Oklahoma schools. Since rural SROs have more training in mentoring and counseling, perhaps the proliferation of special programs and customized responses in rural schools may be attributed to these mentoring and counseling duties. Given the limited resources and demographic composition of rural schools, these programs may have limited utility in rural settings.

Finally, the referral practices of Oklahoma SROs may be due in part to the distinctive urban and rural school environments. As compared to urban SROs, significantly more rural SROs perceive their authority, along with other school personnel, to refer students to either the Oklahoma Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA) or the Oklahoma Juvenile Bureau (JB). The contrasting enforcement policies of urban and rural schools reported by SROs may offer an explanation of these perceptions – whereas rural schools may be more prone to a strict approach, urban schools, with greater access to resources, may have more formalized processes in place to minimized student referrals. Findings illuminating the SRO domain bode well for current training and development programs, fit neatly in NASRO's triad model, and help those advocating (May and Higgins 2011 for the development of consistency in SRO training curriculums. The goal would be to enhance transparency and transferability across school districts, assuming tasks and experiences do not differ significantly across multiple school districts.

Transparency

Regarding transparency, we found that both rural and urban SROs believe that school rules are communicated clearly, yet rural SROs believe that their school's rules are more consistently enforced. This finding raises

more questions than answers. Again, a strict enforcement approach affords transparent boundaries to students and all school personnel regarding appropriate and acceptable conduct in a school. However, this approach limits SRO discretion to consider underlying and intervening factors contributing to the behavior or incident occurring outside "appropriate" school conduct—discretion and analysis law enforcement officers do routinely outside the school yard—and in the aggregate, complete adherence to this approach may operate to criminalize previously non-criminal behavior (Theriot 2009; Kupchik 2010; Hirschfield and Celinska 2011; Na and Gottfredson 2013). This may also explain our findings related to how rural SROs are practicing COP less than and performing more disciplinary practice than their urban counterparts. Future research is necessary to untangle the multifaceted nature of this approach and its impacts on SRO disciplinary practice in rural and urban schools.

Finally, SROs' level of involvement within the communities they serve may be indicative of program transparency. We find that urban SROs are receiving higher rates of annual program assessments. This difference is not unexpected and is indirectly related to community ties between the SROs and the communities they serve. Moreover, and consistent with Ruddell and May (2011), we did not find any statistical difference in other factors indicative of community involvement in such activities as collaboratively working on school problem solving and defining the SRO mission as well as the SRO's choice of school(s) assignment(s).

Limitations

Additional investigation is necessary to better understand SRO characteristics and perceptions in rural as compared to urban school districts. Although our findings provide interesting and complex differences between rural and urban SROs, our study has several limitations. First, our data are cross-sectional and as such, we cannot account for changes in characteristics, duties, or perceptions over time. Second, our results, akin to Ruddell and May (2011), might not be generalizable beyond the state of Oklahoma. It has been shown that within Oklahoma, SRO program implementation will vary. As well, given that findings from our Oklahoma study occasionally depart from those of Ruddell and May's (2011) Kentucky study, SRO program implementation will vary at the state level.

A third limitation regards the sample size used in our analyses. Given the overall sample of 87 SROs (55 rural SROs and 32 urban

SROs), we selected an alpha level of .05 for the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when true. Therefore, a p-value of .05 or less would be considered a significant result. While the smaller of our two group sizes may suggest greater care for improved power by selecting an alpha level of .01, our findings as presented were to a degree of consistency with Ruddell and May (2011) that an increased risk of retaining the null hypothesis when false was undesirable. Though these limitations are important, so too are our study findings. Our study is only the second examining potential differences between rural and urban SROs and although we found similar results to that of Ruddell and May's (2011) Kentucky-wide study, we also found some interesting departures from their findings. In addition to interesting, these departures are complex and worthy of future examination.

Conclusions

Our study shows that there are differences between rural and urban SROs assigned to public schools in Oklahoma. Some of these differences have one or more logical explanations but others do not. We observed that, consistent with Ruddell and May (2011), rural SROs in Oklahoma serve in jurisdictions of significantly smaller populations, smaller county incomes, and newer SRO programs, and are more likely to be assigned to multiple schools. As well, the distinctive nature of urban and rural school environments plays a role in SRO education and training, domain, and program transparency. Due to these observations, the potential for resource shortfalls in rural school districts persists. Practical implications of these findings are two-fold. First, our findings suggest enhanced program transparency and transferability across school districts where similar tasks and experiences permit the standardization of associated policies and methods. Second, by addressing gaps in SRO research, our findings may offer an opportunity for school administrators, local and state-level policy makers, SROs, and law enforcement agencies to enhance their understanding of SRO programs.

Finally, research implications drawn from this study are two-fold as well. First, the potential for resource shortfalls in rural school districts, while not unexpected given earlier research, reinforces the need to sustain examinations of SRO duties and responsibilities in future research (Coon and Travis 2007; Leone and Weinberg 2010; Ramey 2015; Seigle et al. 2014). Second, future studies in other states, nation-wide studies, or even revisiting Oklahoma through a longitudinal/time series research project would provide a more comprehensive examination of these critical

members of the school staff tasked with securing and maintaining order and school safety in US public schools. These studies are important not only for uncovering differences in training, resources, and SRO perceptions, but they are a critical step on the path to addressing the biggest unanswered question remaining in the literature: Are schools to which SROs are assigned safer than those schools without SROs? (May and Higgins 2011.

ENDNOTES

[1] Survey questions were derived from Ruddell and May (2011) and Coon and Travis (2012). Please contact the corresponding author, Dr. Valerie Hunt, for a complete copy of the survey questionnaire used in this study.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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