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Journal of Rural Social Sciences

Volume 31
Issue 2 *Special Issue: Rural Crime*

Article 5

8-31-2016

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Recommended Citation

May, David, Raymond Barranco, Rick Ruddell, and Angela Robertson. 2016. "Do Rural School Resource Officers Contribute to Net-Widening? Evidence from a Southern State." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 31(2): Article 5. Available At: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol31/iss2/5

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Journal of Rural Social Sciences, 31(2), 2016, pp. 62–85.
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DO RURAL SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS CONTRIBUTE TO NET-WIDENING? EVIDENCE FROM A SOUTHERN STATE

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ABSTRACT

There has been considerable recent scholarly commentary about the existence of a school-to-prison pipeline. In this research, several authors have questioned whether the presence of school resource officers (SROs) has increased the proportion of students being referred to juvenile justice systems for status or minor offenses. Research to date, however, has not established a clear relationship between the presence of SROs and these referrals. In this study, we examine the relationship between referrals made in urban and rural schools to determine whether rural students are disadvantaged by net widening when compared with their urban counterparts. To carry out this study of justice by geography, the referrals of 57,005 urban and rural students into the juvenile justice system of a southeastern state over a three-year period were analyzed. The findings presented here suggest that there are important rural/urban differences in the impact of the Department of Human Services and schools in the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline. Implications for policy and future research are also discussed.

In the late 1990s and early 21st century, a series of school shootings and public perceptions that schools were becoming increasingly violent and out-of-control focused public and scholarly attention on the issues of disorder, antisocial behavior, and crime within schools (Noguera 1995). Events such as the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass murder continue to contribute to public fears, although students or teachers in kindergarten to grade 12 schools have a low risk of being injured in such events (Robers et al. 2015). A range of violence reduction strategies has been proposed to reduce the likelihood of future tragedies, and some interest groups and policymakers have advocated that armed guards be placed in every United States school (for review of this discussion, see Kupchik, Brent, and Mowen 2015).

Although much of the attention about school-based crime has focused on high-profile violent events, most police-reported incidents occurring at schools are minor offenses such as theft, drug use, and vandalism (Robers et al. 2015). There are also several aggressive acts—such as bullying and minor assaults—that are also prevalent (Robers et al. 2015). In the past, these acts were handled informally by

school administrators through counseling and school-related sanctions such as suspensions. Today, however, there is a growing acknowledgment of the serious short- and long-term repercussions of these acts of violence on youngsters, including reducing their self-confidence as well as contributing to anxiety and depression (Malecki et al. 2015). Moreover, there is evidence that some victimized students have responded with violence and several school shooters have been described as victims of bullying (Leary et al. 2003; Vossekuil et al. 2004; Wike and Fraser 2009). Gerard et al. (2015: 13), for example, found that 93% of school shooters 18 years and younger "reported feeling depressed and/or having suicidal ideation." As a result, there is a growing interest in reducing these acts of intimidation, incivility, and violence. There is, however, a lack of consensus on how to best respond to these acts, and whether involving the justice system creates more problems than it solves.

Since the mid-1990s, school administrators and justice system officials have introduced several strategies to ameliorate these problems. Less intrusive measures include controlling access to school grounds and buildings, requiring students to wear uniforms or enforcing strict dress codes. More intrusive measures, such as having students pass through metal detectors, employing drug sniffing dogs, carrying out random searches for contraband and using security cameras to monitor school activities, have also been implemented. Robers and colleagues (2015) found that these measures have been used in an increasing number of schools over the past decade. A more controversial order maintenance strategy in schools in recent years has been expanding the presence of school resource officers (SROs).

Theriot (2009: 281) observes that while SROs have been used since the mid-1900s, their presence in schools has increased since the 1990s. Although these police officers were initially well-accepted in schools, there has been growing concern that they engage in net-widening, where youngsters now entering the juvenile justice system would have previously been handled informally by school administrators. This net widening has led to the concept of the "school-to-prison pipeline," which was the focus of a Northeastern University's Institute of Race and Justice symposium in 2003. In that symposium, Wald and Losen (2003) argued that the introduction of increasing safety measures, police officers in schools, and the use of zero tolerance policies had a disproportionate impact on minority students. They claimed that these measures had resulted in increased suspensions, school failure, and entry into the juvenile justice system, all of which have been identified as pathways toward adult incarceration (Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson, 2005), and

that these measures have disproportionately affected students of color. This school-to-prison pipeline, and its impact, have been featured in publications from the American Civil Liberties Union (2015) and National Educational Association (Flannery, 2015). While long on anecdotal accounts, however, there is a lack of empirical research that examines whether the claims of net widening that originate with minor offenses at school are valid.

Consequently, it is important that the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline be examined to determine whether SRO practices have increased the proportion of youth being referred to the juvenile justice system, and if the location of a school in a rural area affects referrals. While acknowledging that our knowledge of the impact of SROs on referrals of students to the juvenile justice system is underdeveloped (see May et al. 2016, for a notable exception), we have even less knowledge of what occurs in rural schools (Ruddell and May 2011). As a result, the purpose of this study is to extend our knowledge of the school-to-prison pipeline, rural schools and rural policing.

One limitation in our knowledge is whether there are meaningful differences in the manner that individuals involved in urban and rural justice systems are treated. Although writing about juvenile justice administration rather than police practices, Feld (1991) described the practice of justice by geography, where juvenile justice administration in urban counties is more formalized and sanctions on youth were often more severe, contrasted against their rural counterparts. Feld and Schaefer (2010) later found that the rural youth in Minnesota were significantly less likely to be represented by counsel in juvenile courts (for felonies, misdemeanors or status offenses) than youth appearing in urban or suburban courts. Subsequent studies have also found county-level variation in juvenile justice outcomes (Males and Teji, 2012). It is plausible that variation in the outcomes of juvenile offenders in courts depends on referral practices, and thus relates to whether these referrals are coming from schools or elsewhere.

To carry out this study, the referrals of 57,005 urban and rural students into the juvenile justice system of a southeastern state over a three-year period were analyzed. The question that drives this research is whether there is a significant difference between the referral practices of urban SROs and their rural counterparts. In the following sections, a short review of the literature around both urban and rural crime differences and SROs is presented. Those reviews are followed by a description of the data and analytical strategies used in this study and then a description of the findings from the analyses of the data. We close this study

with several recommendations about how those findings can inform our understanding of urban-rural SROs.

Policing Urban and Rural Schools

Rural crime and the responses to these acts have received comparatively little attention from the public, policymakers, and academics (Carrington, Donnermeyer, and DeKeseredy 2014). One obstacle to our understanding of rural crime and justice is that little research is carried out in these systems. With respect to policing, for example, most scholarly work has focused upon what occurs in cities (Liederbach and Frank 2003). This urban bias is not surprising given that most social scientists are employed in cities and many scholars often overlook what happens in the countryside.

Falcone, Wells, and Weisheit (2002: 372) observe that rural and small-town police are "portrayed by popular culture as amateurs" and they are seldom considered innovative, whether that perception is accurate or not. Moreover, we often have better access to information from urban agencies compared with their rural counterparts. Many smaller rural justice agencies, for example, do not have the administrative capacity to provide timely and accurate crime and justice statistics (Ruddell et al. 2014).

Overlooking what occurs in rural America is short-sighted, given that the United States Department of Agriculture (2014: 3) estimates that "the number of people living in non-metro (*sic)* counties stood at 46.2 million in 2013—about 15 percent of U.S. residents." Extrapolating that proportion to the number of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (about 49.8 million students in fall 2014–see Robers et al. 2015) suggests that there are almost 7.5 million rural students. Of those students, some are headed for trouble. Losen et al. (2015, n.d.) reported that "nearly 3.5 million public school students were suspended out of school at least once in 2011-12." Applying the same 15% figure to the total number of suspensions suggests that about 525,000 rural students are suspended each year.

Issues of rural youth justice have to be placed into the context of the communities where these youngsters attend school. Officers in rural jurisdictions confront the same sorts of challenges as their counterparts working in larger urban areas and while a commonly held public perception is that the countryside is tranquil and crime is rare, rural areas have more in common with their city and suburban counterparts than many realize. For instance, Truman and Langton's (2014: 10) analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) reveals that

the violent victimization rate in 2013 was 16.9 per 1,000 rural residents compared with 23.3 for suburban residents and 25.9 for residents. There was convergence in terms of serious violent crime (a category including rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated and simple assaults), with a rural victimization rate of 6.1 contrasted against 6.8 for suburban and 8.8 offenses per 1,000 urban residents. With respect to property crimes, the rural victimization rate was 109.4 which was less than the suburban (115.3) and urban (165.3) rates per 1,000 residents (Truman and Langton 2014: 10). As a result, levels of crime in rural areas are only marginally lower than that of their suburban and urban counterparts (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy 2014).

When it comes to students, a review of the school victimization rates per 1,000 public school students between 2009 and 2010, collected by Robers and colleagues (2015) and presented in Table 1, reveals that rural schools typically report having marginally less crime than their city, suburban or town counterparts and that city schools generally have the highest levels of reported victimization. When it comes to violent incidents, for example, the city and town schools had the highest rates (with 28.8 and 28.2 per 1,000 students respectively) while rural schools had higher victimization rates than suburban schools (22.5 and 22.4 per 1,000 students respectively). Rates of serious violence, by contrast, are similar among all four types of schools, with city schools only slightly higher than rural schools (1.3 and 1.1 respectively). Rates of victimization by theft are also quite similar among the four school types, and the city schools had the highest rate per 1,000 students (6.2) which was followed by the town (5.7), rural (5.3) and suburban schools (4.9). Robers et al. (2015) report that only a proportion of these offenses are actually reported to the police; this likely has implications for the number of referrals that are ultimately made to juvenile courts.

With respect to discipline problems, Robers et al. (2015) found that the highest rates of discipline problems occur in the city schools, although these problems are also very prevalent in rural schools. Student sexual harassment and harassment in rural schools is second only to the city schools, and higher than those rates in town or suburban schools. The rate of bullying, by contrast, is highest in the city schools (27.0) which is followed by bullying taking place in town (26.2), rural (21.2) and suburban (19.9) schools. Rural schools reported having the lowest level of gang activities and incidents of student disrespect toward teachers.

TABLE 1. CRIME AND DISORDER IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY GEOGRAPHICAL JURISDICTION, 2009-10

VICTIMIZATION RATE PER 1,000 STUDENTS	CITY	SUBURBAN	TOWN	RURAL
Public Schools Reporting Incidents				
All violent incidents	28.8	22.4	28.2	22.5
Serious violent incidents	1.3	1.0	1.1	1.1
Theft	6.2	4.9	5.7	5.3
Other incidents	11.7	8.0	9.3	7.8
Incidents Reported to the Police				
All violent incidents	6.8	6.5	6.6	5.7
Serious violent incidents	0.7	0.4	0.4	0.4
Theft	2.7	2.4	2.8	2.7
Other incidents	6.6	5.2	6.1	4.5
Discipline Problems				
Student bullying	27.0	19.9	26.2	21.2
Student sexual harassment	3.6!	2.6	2.9!	3.6
Student harassment (based on sexual orientation/gender id)	2.9!	2.0	2.0	2.9
Student disrespect of teachers (other than verbal)	11.7	8.1	11.6	5.0
Gang activities	28.3	14.6	13.9	9.1

NOTES: ! interpret with caution as “the coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent”. Source: Tables 6.2, 6.3 and 7.1, Robers et al. (2015)

While the review of crime presented above shows that rates of crime in both rural communities and schools are similar to that of the cities or suburbs, the agencies tasked with responding to crime in the countryside often draw upon fewer resources because of the impoverished status of many rural counties. The United States Department of Agriculture (2014: 2-3) reports, for example, that rural unemployment and poverty rates are higher than non-rural counties, and the rural median household income in 2012 was $41,198 whereas the median for the remainder of the nation was $52,988. Given those facts, rural county governments have a smaller tax base from which to draw. Consequently, law enforcement agencies, the local juvenile court, and agencies that support their operations (e.g., alcohol and drug counseling agencies) have fewer resources to devote to the unmet needs of rural students.

School Resource Officers

School Resource Officers (SROs) are law enforcement officers from local police departments assigned to patrol schools in their local jurisdictions (Kennedy 2000). Although the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) estimates that there are currently more than 3,000 SROs internationally (NASRO 2013), most scholars argue that the actual number of SROs is far higher (Brown 2006; Reaves 2010; Theriot 2009).

SRO responsibilities as law enforcement officers in school are based on the "Triad Concept." The Triad concept suggests that SRO roles should include the roles of 1) law-related teacher, 2) law-related counselor, and 3) law enforcement officer (Hickman and Reeves 2003; NASRO 2013; Petteruti 2011). Intuitively, the presence of an SRO in schools would deter crime and increase the likelihood of conforming behavior; in fact, several researchers support this claim (Brown 2005; Jennings et al. 2011; Johnson 1999; May 2014; May, Fessel, and Means 2004; Trump 2001; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services 2001). As reviewed earlier, however, several researchers argue that the presence of SROs in public schools is not beneficial, and is in fact harmful, to the students (e.g., Jackson 2002; Mayer and Leone 1999; Petteruti 2011; Rimer 2004).

In 2011, the Justice Policy Institute determined that having SROs in schools increased student arrest rates and significantly reduced the ability of school administrators to handle misbehavior with school disciplinary measures (Petteruti 2011). Jackson (2002) further argues that SROs also alienate students, hinder student participation in education, and cause further student resentment toward law enforcement officers.

As reviewed earlier, the main concern of opponents to the SRO system is the use of harsh punishments for minor offenses. SROs have the discretion to determine what constitutes assault, fighting, disorderly conduct, class disruption, felony robbery, and petty theft, to name only a few examples (Theriot 2009). Unnecessary arrests of students for minor and often frivolous incidents contradicts the purpose of education programs to inform students and enhance their well-being (Petteruti 2011; Skiba 2000) and some research suggests that the presence of SROs leads to a significant increase in reports of less serious (e.g., fighting, disorderly conduct) and drug- and weapon-related offenses (Kupchik 2010; Na and Gottfredson 2013).

In sum, critics of SROs suggest that the presence of law enforcement officers in schools "pushes" even more kids out of school with arrests that would not have occurred had the SROs not been present (Justice Policy Institute 2011; Kupchik

2010; Theriot 2009). This argument is intuitive. If SROs in schools are doing their job, they will make more arrests than law enforcement officers that are not assigned entirely to schools but patrol in the community and are called to schools only as a reaction to alleged crimes committed on school grounds.

Despite the intuitive nature of this argument, few researchers have used official data to examine these assertions. In a forthcoming paper, May and his colleagues (2016) examined three years of referral data from a juvenile justice system in a southeastern state to determine that SROs did not increase the size of the school-to-prison pipeline. They determined that SROs were responsible for approximately 3 percent of all referrals over a three-year period, and that only a few of those referrals (95 over a three-year period) were categorized as minor offenses. Based on that finding, they argue that removing police from schools would have a minimal impact in reducing referrals for minor offenses. Furthermore, they determined that referrals to the juvenile justice system were similar for both SROs (7% of all referrals were for status offenses and 32% were for serious offenses) and law enforcement outside schools (10% and 30%, respectively) and that SROs were significantly less likely than their counterparts outside schools to refer juveniles for minor offenses. May et al. (2016) use this evidence to suggest that the school-to-prison pipeline is a school issue, rather than an SRO issue. They argue that schools (and, to some extent, families), not SROs, play an important role in shaping the school-to-prison pipeline.

In their conclusion, May et al. (2016) suggest that law enforcement officers outside schools are significantly more likely than SROs to refer juveniles to the justice system for minor offenses. They also posit that, in counties with schools that do not have SROs, school officials may be more likely to call law enforcement for minor offenses. Because law enforcement officers are more likely to process citizen complaints when the victim is present (Kappeler and Gaines 2015), May et al. (2016) suggest that future research should explore patterns that might predict differences in referrals other than just the presence of an SRO in the school. Consequently, this research is an answer to that call.

In this study, we compare referral sources in rural and urban areas to determine (1) whether rural SROs are more likely than urban SROs to refer juveniles to the justice system for less serious offenses and (2) whether there are other distinctive differences in referral sources in rural and urban areas. No research of which we are aware has examined this topic; however, as Feld (1991) and others have found that

juvenile justice practices vary widely by geography, we suspect that may be the case for referral practices as well.

Nevertheless, based on our current understanding of rural/urban juvenile justice issues and SRO practices in the United States, we expect that SROs in rural areas will refer students to the juvenile justice system for less serious offenses than their counterparts in urban areas. As reviewed above, urban schools typically experience more serious crime at school than suburban and rural schools. Thus, we expect that urban SROs will have a larger proportion of their referrals for serious crimes than rural SROs.

We also expect that there will be rural/urban differences in other referral sources as well. Given the dearth of juvenile justice services often found in rural areas, we also expect that schools and the Department of Human Services will refer juveniles to the juvenile justice system for less serious offenses than their urban counterparts because they are more likely to serve as a proxy for law enforcement and other juvenile services in rural areas. Our hope is that the answers to these questions will expand the knowledge base regarding rural and urban differences in the juvenile justice system and will provide guidance to juvenile justice professionals to better utilize the resources they have available to them.

METHODS

Data were obtained from the Youth Information Delivery System (YIDS) of a southeastern state by members of the author team and are discussed in detail elsewhere (May et al. 2016). The data under study here capture all referrals to the juvenile justice system in the state from 2009 to 2011. For this research, a referral occurred when any person involved in a youth's case referred that youth to the county youth court. As workers entered the referral into the system, they typically entered the charges for which the youth are referred, the reason for referral, the date of the referral, and the source of the allegation (hereafter called the referral source) into the system.

Multiple referral options are available to the worker entering the data. For example, a juvenile that has run away from home may be referred by their parents, their school, and/or by law enforcement (if they are arrested for runaway). In the data files analyzed herein, each referral source is treated as a separate variable. Thus, the first source listed becomes "Referral_Source1," the second becomes "Referral_Source2," and so on. Between 2009 and 2011, there were referrals for 72,447 separate offenses entered into YIDS.

Across the three-year period, there were 72,447 individual referrals made for 168 separate offenses. We categorized the 168 offenses into one of four categories: 10 status offenses (e.g., truancy, running away, etc.), 25 minor offenses (e.g., shoplifting, petit larceny), 68 moderate offenses (e.g., simple assault, probation violations), and 65 serious offenses (e.g., domestic violence, residential burglary) (May et al. 2016).

Referrals were then categorized as originating from either a rural or an urban county using the 2013 rural-urban continuum codes of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2013). Using this classification, four in five counties (79.3%) in Mississippi were classified as rural. The tables below thus provide the first examination of rural/urban differences in referral sources for less serious offenses of which we are aware.

RESULTS

In Table 2, we display the five most common referrals for each of the four types of offenses for urban areas. The most common referrals for status offenses were for children in need of supervision (4.9% of all referrals during the three-year period), ungovernable/incorrigible behavior (3.8%), and truancy (3.3%). Larceny/shoplifting (7.8%), malicious mischief (3.3%), and petit larceny (2.8%) were the most common offenses for the minor offense category, while simple assault (9.9%), disturbing family peace (4.2%), and disorderly conduct: breach of peace (4.2%) were the most common offenses in the moderate category. Simple assault/domestic violence (4.2%), burglary of a dwelling (3.0%), and burglary, non-dwelling, motor vehicle, boat (2.1%) were the most common serious offenses.

In Table 3, we display the five most common referrals for each of the four types of offenses for rural areas. Although the order in which they appeared varied between rural and urban referrals, the most common referrals were generally the same for both rural and urban areas. The most common referrals for status offenses were for truancy (10.9% of all referrals during the three-year period), ungovernable/incorrigible behavior (2.2%), and children in need of supervision (1.8%). Malicious mischief (4.0%), larceny/shoplifting (3.6%), and petit larceny (2.9%) were the most common minor offenses, while probation violations (10.5%), simple assault (10.0%), and disturbing public school session (5.4%) were the most common moderate offenses. Burglary of a dwelling (2.9%), simple assault/domestic violence (2.0%), and burglary, business, and commercial property (1.5%) were the most common serious offenses.

TABLE 2. MOST COMMON TYPES OF REFERRAL OFFENSES BY SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE CATEGORY, URBAN AREAS

SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE				
RANK	STATUS	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS
1	Child in Need of Supervision (4.9%)	Larceny: Shoplifting (7.8%)	Assault: Simple (9.9%)	Assault: Simple Domestic Violence (4.2%)
2	Ungovernable Behavior/Incor rigible (3.8%)	Malicious Mischief (3.3%)	Disturbing Family Peace (4.2%)	Burglary: Dwelling (3.0%)
3	Truancy (3.3%)	Larceny: Petit (2.8%)	Disorderly Conduct: Breach of Peace (4.2%)	Burglary: Non-Dwelling, Motor Vehicle, Boat (2.1%)
4	Running Away (3.2%)	Trespass (2.4%)	Probation Violation (3.7%)	Burglary: Business, Commercial Property (1.1%)
5	Curfew Violation (1.4%)	Vandalism (0.5%)	Controlled Substance: Possession of Marijuana (3.4%)	Weapons: Possession on School Property (1.0%)

TABLE 3. MOST COMMON TYPES OF REFERRAL OFFENSES BY SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE CATEGORY, RURAL AREAS

SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE				
RANK	STATUS	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS
1	Truancy (10.9%)	Malicious Mischief (4.0%)	Probation Violation (10.5%)	Burglary: Dwelling (2.9%)
2	Ungovernable Behavior/ Incorrigible (2.2%)	Larceny: Shoplifting (3.6%)	Assault: Simple (10.0%)	Assault: Simple Domestic Violence (2.0%)
3	Child in Need of Supervision (1.8%)	Larceny: Petit (2.9%)	Disturbing Public School Session (5.4%)	Burglary: Business, Commercial Property (1.5%)
4	Running Away (1.8%)	Trespass (2.1%)	Disorderly Conduct: Failure to Comply (3.2%)	Larceny: Grand (1.1%)
5	Possessing or Drinking Alcoholic Beverages (1.1%)	Vandalism (0.5%)	Controlled Substance: Possession of Marijuana (3.1%)	Burglary: Non-Dwelling, Motor Vehicle, Boat (1.1%)

In Table 4, we present the referral sources included in the dataset. For the purposes of these analyses, we categorized referrals into one of six categories: law enforcement only, school only, family only, Department of Human Services (DHS) only, victim, and SROs. For the victim category, we included all referral sources that included a victim. Referrals that originated from a law enforcement officer assigned to a school (SRO) were originally coded as having two referral sources-law enforcement and school. Thus, any referral that included those two sources was coded as SRO. After excluding any referrals that did not list a referral source, and those that had three or more referral sources or referral sources that could not be

TABLE 4. CODING OF REFERRAL SOURCES

ONLY ONE REFERRAL SOURCE	SECOND REFERRAL SOURCE	CATEGORY
Law Enforcement	–	Law Enforcement only
School	–	School only
Parent, Relative, Other Family Member	–	Family
DHS	–	DHS
Law Enforcement	School	School Law Enforcement
School	Law Enforcement	School Law Enforcement
Victim	Any other source or no other source	Victim
Law Enforcement	Parent, Relative, Other Family Member	Family
DHS	Law Enforcement	Law Enforcement
Other	–	Missing

categorized logically (e.g., other, medical personnel, loss prevention personnel), the data analyzed here include approximately 57,017 referrals. A more detailed discussion of the coding schemes is found in May et al. (2016).

In Table 5, we display the results of a cross-tabular analysis where we categorize the types of offenses by referral sources for both urban and rural areas. Most of the offenses for each referral for both rural and urban areas were moderate/serious offenses, although SROs in both urban and rural areas (90% in urban, 86% in rural) were the most likely to refer youths for moderate (52% and 58%, respectively) and serious (38% and 28%) offenses. In both urban and rural areas, the school (33% and 52%, respectively) and family members (42% and 35%) were far more likely than law enforcement (10% in both areas), SROs (5% and 9%, respectively), and victims (1% in both areas) to refer youths for status offenses. Interestingly, over half referrals from DHS in urban areas (52%) were for status

TABLE 5. SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE BY REFERRAL SOURCE WITH STATUS OFFENSES, URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

URBAN AREAS	SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE				
REFERRAL TYPE	STATUS	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS	TOTAL
LE Only	1,699 (10%)	4,225 (24%)	6,513 (36%)	5,513 (31%)	17,950
School Only	1,011 (33%)	108 (4%)	1,189 (39%)	729 (24%)	3,037
LE & School . . .	37 (5%)	46 (6%)	434 (52%)	311 (38%)	828
Victim.	16 (1%)	642 (30%)	276 (13%)	1,244 (57%)	2,178
Family	1,386 (42%)	117 (4%)	1,046 (32%)	762 (23%)	3,311
DHS	1,276 (52%)	25 (1%)	771 (31%)	394 (16%)	2,466

NOTES: $\chi^2 = 7.78$ (p=.000) Cramer's V = .28

RURAL AREAS	SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE				
REFERRAL TYPE	STATUS	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS	TOTAL
LE only	1,438 (10%)	2,385 (17%)	5,927 (43%)	4,097 (30%)	13,847
School only	2,924 (52%)	173 (3%)	1,921 (34%)	665 (12%)	5,683
LE & school. . . .	89 (9%)	49 (5%)	547 (58%)	263 (28%)	948
Victim.	43 (1%)	979 (29%)	436 (13%)	1,887 (57%)	3,345
Family	702 (35%)	141 (7%)	690 (34%)	472 (24%)	2,005
DHS	79 (6%)	14 (1%)	1,063 (76%)	251 (18%)	1,407

NOTES: $\chi^2 = 8.9$ (p=.000) Cramer's V = .330

offenses while only 6% of referrals from DHS in rural areas were for status offenses. In both urban and rural areas, victims (30% and 29%, respectively) were most likely to refer juveniles for minor offenses while victims (57% for both areas) were also more likely to refer juveniles for serious offenses. Differences in referral sources were significantly different by type of area and by referral source.

Beyond differences in referrals across types of offenses, there were also significant differences between rural and urban referral sources as well. Rural schools were significantly more likely than urban schools (52% of all school referrals v 33% of all school referrals) to refer youths to the juvenile justice system for status offenses while urban schools were significantly more likely than rural schools (24% v. 12%) to refer youths to the juvenile justice system for serious offenses. Additionally, rural SROS were significantly more likely than urban SROs (9% v. 5%) to refer youths for status offenses while urban SROs were significantly more likely than rural SROs (38% v. 28%) to refer youths for serious offenses. Finally, and perhaps the most dramatic rural/urban difference, over half DHS referrals (52%) in urban areas were for status offenses while only 6% of DHS referrals in rural areas were for status offenses. The vast majority of referrals in rural areas from DHS were for moderate offenses (76%); in urban areas, only 31% of all DHS referrals were for moderate offenses.

As May et al. (2016) suggest, handling of status offenses by the juvenile justice system often complicates comparisons of referral sources, as some sources (e.g., family, schools, DHS) are uniquely positioned to refer youths to the system for status offenses that do not involve lawbreaking (e.g., ungovernable behavior/incorrigible, child in need of supervision). To allow for a more direct comparison of referrals for only lawbreaking behaviors between SROs and both schools and law enforcement without the interference of status offenses in rural and urban areas, in Table 6 we display the results presented in Table 5 with status offenses excluded. When status offenses are excluded from consideration, referral sources in urban and rural areas look much more similar than they did when status offenses were included although when there were differences in referrals by referral source or by area, these differences were significantly different. When status offenses were excluded, referrals from urban victims mirrored those from rural victims, with most referrals in both areas being for serious offenses (58% and 57%, respectively). Additionally, in both areas, referrals from DHS were practically all for moderate and serious offenses (99% for both groups) while referrals from law enforcement were for mostly minor and moderate offenses (66% in urban areas and 67% in rural areas).

Nevertheless, there were significant differences between rural and urban referral sources for schools, SROs, and families. Rural schools were significantly more likely than urban schools (70% of all school referrals in rural areas v 59% of

TABLE 6. SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE BY REFERRAL SOURCE WITHOUT STATUS OFFENSES, URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

URBAN AREAS	SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE			
REFERRAL TYPE	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS	TOTAL
LE only	4,225 (26%)	6,513 (40%)	5,513 (34%)	16,251
School only	108 (4%)	1,189 (39%)	729 (24%)	1,582
LE & school	46 (7%)	434 (55%)	311 (39%)	791
Victim	642 (30%)	276 (13%)	1,244 (58%)	2,162
Family	117 (6%)	1,046 (54%)	762 (40%)	1,925
DHS	25 (1%)	771 (65%)	394 (33%)	1,190

NOTES: χ^2 = 2.13 (sig.=.000) Cramer's V = .209

RURAL AREAS	SERIOUSNESS OF OFFENSE			
REFERRAL TYPE	MINOR	MODERATE	SERIOUS	TOTAL
LE Only	2,385 (19%)	5,927 (48%)	4,097 (33%)	12,409
School Only	173 (6%)	1,921 (70%)	665 (24%)	2,759
LE & School	49 (6%)	547 (64%)	263 (31%)	859
Victim	979 (30%)	436 (13%)	1,887 (57%)	3,302
Family	141 (11%)	690 (53%)	472 (36%)	1,303
DHS	14 (1%)	1,063 (80%)	251 (19%)	1,328

NOTES: χ^2 = 2.93 (sig.=.000) Cramer's V = .258

school referrals in urban areas) to refer youths to the juvenile justice system for moderate offenses while urban schools were significantly more likely than rural schools (36% v. 24%) to refer youths to the juvenile justice system for serious offenses. Additionally, rural SROS were significantly more likely than urban SROs

(64% v. 55%) to refer youths for moderate offenses while urban SROs were significantly more likely than rural SROs (39% v. 31%) to refer youths for serious offenses. Finally, referrals from families for minor offenses were significantly higher in rural areas (11%) than they were in urban areas (6%).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we used referrals obtained from the Administrative Office of the Courts in a southeastern state to examine rural/urban differences in referrals of juveniles to the juvenile justice system. We further examined whether referral sources varied by rurality with the hope of understanding how rurality affected what referral sources were responsible for referrals across four categories of crimes. The data analyzed herein (all referrals from a statewide juvenile justice system, categorized as either originating from an urban or rural county) provide a novel approach to considering this important research question. Consequently, the discussion below provides an important contribution to the understanding of rural/urban differences in the impact that referral sources have on the school-to-prison pipeline.

As May et al. (2016) have argued, the analyses provided here indicate that SROs (whether in either a rural or urban area) have little impact on the school-to-prison pipeline. SROs were responsible for approximately 3 percent of all referrals in both urban (2.8%) and rural (3.5%) areas. Additionally, only 83 of those referrals in urban areas and 138 of those referrals in rural areas were for status or minor offenses. We concur with May et al. (2016) that removing SROs from schools would have a minimal impact in reducing referrals for minor offenses, and this impact would be minor in both rural and urban areas. The results from these analyses further suggest that both urban and rural SROs are significantly less likely than their law enforcement counterparts outside schools to refer juveniles for minor offenses (as seen in both Table 4 and Table 5).

These data also provide only limited support for our hypothesis that rural SROs would be more likely than urban SROs to refer juveniles to the juvenile justice system for less serious offenses. When status offenses were considered, approximately 1 in 10 referrals from rural SROS (9% of all referrals) were for status offenses; only 1 in 20 referrals from urban SROs (5% of all referrals) were for status offenses. Thus, if there are distinct rural/urban differences in the impact of SROs on the school-to-prison pipeline, these differences are most likely found in the

handling of status offenses by SROs. Further research is needed to untangle this relationship.

The most important contribution made by this research, however, involves the differences found between referrals for offenses that do not involve law enforcement officers. In urban areas, when status offenses were included, one in four referrals from schools (24% of all referrals) were for serious offenses, a proportion twice as high as that found in rural areas (12% of all referrals). When status offenses were excluded, this proportion rose to more than one in three referrals (36%) in urban schools, as compared with only one in four (24%) in rural schools. Thus, as reviewed earlier, schools in urban areas often deal with more serious criminal offenses than schools in rural areas. Intuitively, then, referrals for serious offenses should be higher from urban schools than from rural schools.

A somewhat unexpected finding, however, involved referrals from the Department of Human Services (DHS) in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, over half of all referrals from DHS were for status offenses (52%); in rural areas, less than 1 in 10 referrals from DHS was for status offenses (6%). Conversely, three in four (76%) referrals from DHS in rural areas were for moderate offenses, whereas only one in three referrals from DHS in urban areas (31%) were for moderate offenses. Thus, it appears that DHS in rural areas deals with far more serious offenses than DHS in urban areas. This is likely due to the lack of available juvenile justice alternatives in rural areas (e.g., diversion programs, juvenile probation) that are found in urban areas which forces DHS to serve as a more formal criminal justice role in rural communities than in urban communities (where they are more likely to deal with noncriminal cases of dependency and neglect).

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, as May et al. (2016) describe, the referral data used herein do not allow us to infer anything about the schools from which referrals originate. While the data provide information about where the referrals originated, characteristics about the school (such as enrollment, racial heterogeneity, urbanicity, and the proportion of students receiving free/reduced lunch) are unknown. These data do not provide any information about the individual SROs making the referral either. Future research should thus consider school characteristics as well. Finally, generalizations outside of these data should be made with caution, as these data are limited to one state for only a three-year period. Data from different states, or different periods, may yield dissimilar results.

Nevertheless, we feel this research makes important contributions to the understanding of rural SROs and how they compare with urban SROs in the referrals they make as part of their daily tasks at school. Additionally, these findings also highlight the important role of DHS in the school-to-prison pipeline in urban areas. Thus, the findings presented here add to the research in this area and are important in their own regard, despite these limitations.

CONCLUSIONS

To begin this effort, we posed one primary research question. This question asked whether SROs in rural areas referred youths to the justice system for less serious offenses than SROs from urban areas. Conclusions based on the data presented here would suggest that the answer is a qualified yes. When status offenses are considered, proportionally, rural SROs are almost twice as likely to refer juveniles to the juvenile justice system for status offenses as their urban counterparts. If status offenses are removed from consideration, referrals from rural SROs look remarkably like referrals urban SROs.

In response to a second question of whether referral sources in rural areas handle serious and non-serious referrals differently than their counterparts in urban areas, the answer is also a qualified yes. However, that answer again is contingent on whether status offenses are under consideration. When status offenses are considered, DHS in urban areas is far more likely to refer youths to the system for status offenses than their rural counterparts while DHS in rural areas is more likely to refer youths to the system for moderate offenses than their urban counterparts. Conversely, schools in rural areas are far more likely than their urban counterparts to refer youths to the juvenile justice system for status offenses. Additional study is needed to determine if this finding is an artifact of the state under consideration here or is a finding replicated in other jurisdictions and times.

Implications

There are two important implications from this research. The first and most important implication of this research involves the role of status offenses in the juvenile justice system. May et al. (2016) have examined this finding in detail. They suggest that finding methods to handle status offenses outside the juvenile justice system would make great strides in reducing the school to prison pipeline from both the school and SRO perspective. We concur with their suggestion, and further argue that this is of particular concern in rural areas, where both SROs and schools

were significantly more likely than their urban counterparts to refer youths to the system for status offenses. Any program that can divert youths from the system for status offenses would be a step in the right direction, and is particularly important in rural areas. Finally, a second implication of the findings discussed here is further confirmation of the role of SROs in the school-to-prison pipeline. Analyses of the data presented here suggests that, in both rural and urban areas, SROs have little impact on referrals for less serious offenses. Thus, we join May et al. (2016) in suggesting that further study is needed to better understand what sources contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline and SROs alone are not the answer to that question.

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