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School Resource Officer Contacts and Perceptions
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INTRODUCTION

Sworn police officers assigned to public schools, often called School Resource Officers (SROs), represent a controversial approach to school safety. SROs were established to deter and respond to criminal activity, assist in solving school problems, and support community policing goals, such as increasing police-citizen partnerships (Girouard, 2001; Johnson, 1999; McDaniel, 2001). Yet, legitimate concerns exist that SROs can create an oppressive environment where children and adolescents are treated harshly or cited when they misbehave (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008).

While some SROs identify as educators and adopt strategies to support school needs as both officers and mentors (Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes & Clinkinbeard, 2018), schools with SROs also tend to see increases in arrests for less serious offenses, though school staff play

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

• As compared to school population demographics in each respective county, American Indian/Alaskan Native youth in Sheridan county and Hispanic youth in Howard county were disproportionately contacted. A large proportion of race/ethnicity data was missing in Dakota county.

• Younger youth and youth without a previous law violation were less likely to have a punitive discharge (i.e., expulsion, citation, referral to probation) from SROs; youth from Howard county were more likely to have a punitive discharge than youth in Dakota and Sheridan.

• SROs reported that most interactions with students were positive and that there was a general sense of school safety and positive school climates. Though the majority of interactions were perceived to be positive, older students and parents were more likely to express negative views of police to SROs.

a large role in the referral-to-arrest process (May et al., 2015; Theriot, 2009). Such findings support concerns about a "school-to-prison pipeline" where misbehaving youth enter the Juvenile Justice System (Hirschfield, 2008; Mallet, 2016). Disparities also exist in who is arrested at school; nationwide, males, Black youth, and youth with a disability are overrepresented among referrals and school-based arrests (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018). These concerns arise in a national context where school shootings appear to be increasing and the numbers of SROs are growing. Thus, it is crucial to develop best practices for SROs so they positively impact students and schools.

Nebraska, like other states, has recently introduced policies to promote SRO effectiveness (i.e., LB390). Policies have intiated requirements for memorandums of understanding, SRO training, and police-citizen contact records to address unclear roles, lack of preparation, and limited information about SRO activity. The initial goal of Evidence-Based Nebraska was to determine whether three programs receiving community-based aid (CBA) were "effectively" keeping youth out of the juvenile justice system; however, evaluation of SRO effectiveness is difficult for many reasons. SRO programs are often already established without baseline measurements of school functioning, program goals evolve over time, and suitable comparison schools or students may not exist. Ideally, a test of effectiveness would include an experimental design with random assignment of SROs and comparison to equivalent schools, including baseline and follow-up measures (i.e., pre-tests and post-tests).

A determination of SRO effectiveness was beyond the scope of this evaluation because of the limitations in data quality and the research design; however, collected data can inform ongoing conversations about SROs by providing key information about the funded programs. In this report, we examine SRO program context, profiles of students who interact with SROs, nature and outcomes of SRO contacts with students, and SRO perceptions of citizens.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

The study includes 4 SROs[1] in 3 programs across 3 counties (Dakota, Howard, Sheridan) in Nebraska (see Table 1 for Census data on these counties). Within the 3 counties, 12 schools are served across 6 cities/villages (Homer, Cairo, Elba, St. Paul City, Gordon City, Rushville City). Schools represent elementary, middle, and high schools with variations in how grades are housed (see Appendix). School districts reported an average student population of 393 students (Dakota), 1,293 students (Hall/Howard), and 532 students (Sheridan) over 3 years (see Table 3 Appendix).

COUNTY TOTAL POPULATIONS
DAKOTA: 20,083
HOWARD: 6,468
SHERIDAN: 5,190

COUNTY YOUTH* PERCENTAGES
DAKOTA: 28.5%
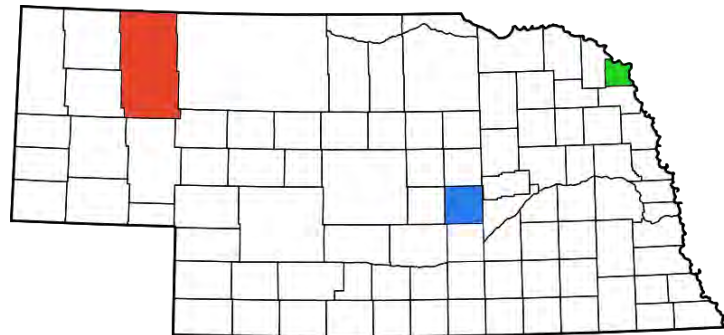**HOWARD: 24.0%**
SHERIDAN: 22.3%

Figure 1. Sheridan (red), Howard (blue), & Dakota (green) counties.

*Persons under 18

County	Female	White	Black	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic	HS/GED+	Bachelors+	Median Household Income	Poverty
Dakota	49.7%	85.0%	4.8%	4.1%	3.3%	39.7%	73.5%	12.6%	$52,401	12.7%
Howard	49.3%	97.5%	<1%	<1%	<1%	2.6%	92.2%	20.1%	$53,648	10.0%
Sheridan	51.1%	84.1%	<1%	10.9%	<1%	5.3%	90.7%	25.8%	$41,209	14.3%

Table 1. County-Level Census Data

The evaluation involved analysis of police-citizen contact data recorded by SROs in three programs in Dakota, Howard[2], and Sheridan counties in Nebraska. These data provided information on student demographics and the outcomes of student-SRO contacts. In addition, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with each of the SROs in these programs via phone. In-depth interviews allowed for deeper exploration of how SROs experienced and interpreted their work, providing contextual understanding of each SRO program. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and were audio-recorded and later transcribed for accuracy (questions are attached to the Appendix).

FINDINGS

1. What is the context of each SRO program?

Establishment of Programs: The SRO programs in Dakota and Sheridan were established prior to the CBA grant and the program in Howard was established as a result of the CBA funding.

Program and SRO Details: In each county, the SROs served multiple schools within school districts. One SRO served three separate districts. SROs in Dakota and Sheridan worked 40 hours; the SRO in Howard currently worked 10 hours (previously 25 hours; cut due to loss of police department staff). Three of the SROs had been employed for 14 years or longer, though a new SRO assigned in Sheridan (as of January 2019) had two years of employment.

Recruitment/Training: Three (of four) SROs applied for the position; in two cases, the school system was involved in the hiring decision, and in Dakota the SRO was assigned by the police department without input from the school. All SROs had some prior experience (e.g., former high school teacher, SRO for another agency) or prior training. All SROs received some form of training, most of them through the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO).

Reporting/Monitoring: All of the SROs reported to the police department but some interacted more frequently with police administration (the new SRO in Sheridan; the Dakota SRO), while others did only if there is a problem at the school. The SROs typically interacted with school administrators (principals and superintendents) on a daily basis. The SROs said they have flexibility to decide their own work. In other words, their daily tasks were not directly monitored.

Official Policies/Tasks: In Dakota and Howard SROs were required to notify parents for any type of referral. In Sheridan, the SROs had fewer contacts with parents and refer/arrest in only the most serious cases of crime, while school staff respond to all other behavior.

Role Expectations: In all three counties, SROs were expected to provide a secure presence, protect school staff and children, prevent/respond to emergencies, and address crime-related matters (specific issues varied by school, including underage drinking, truancy, theft, harassment/bullying). SROs reported they serve as role models, mentor youth, provide advice when needed, and give presentations when requested.

2. What are the demographic and risk profiles of the students who come into contact with the SROs?

The average age of students was 12-13 years old across programs. Gender and race/ethnicity fluctuated across counties, as did student history of violations, aggressive behavior and living environment (Table 2). Of particular note, 56% of the students served in Sheridan county were American Indian/Alaskan Native. According to information from the Nebraska Department of Education (see Table 3 in the Appendix), this number is more than double the overall proportion of American Indian/Alaskan Native students in the three schools served in Sheridan county, which was approximately 18-21%. Similarly, 17% of youth who had contact with SROs in Howard were Hispanic compared to 2-12% in the school population. White youth in Dakota county were underrepresented among contacts (18% versus 73-77%), though race information was missing or unspecified for 65% of students. Students in Hall/Howard county had the highest rates of prior violations, aggressive behavior, and high-risk living situations.

3. What is the nature of SRO contacts with students?

Across the three programs, SROs entered data on 263 students, though Sheridan county recorded many more contacts than did SROs in the other two counties (Table 2). The majority of initial referrals[3] were made by school administrators (52%), followed by guidance counselors (16%), the SRO (7%), the student/self (5%), and teachers (3%). Top initial referral reasons for the overall sample were family problems, truancy, and fighting (Figure 2). In Dakota county, harassment and fighting were the most common reasons, though referral information was missing for nearly 1/3 of students. Fighting and truancy were the top referral reasons in Howard county and family problems and truancy topped the list in Sheridan. Parental involvement varied across cases. SROs reported that parents were active in 22% of cases, minimally active in 31% of cases and inactive or no participation in 36% of cases (12% missing/unknown). Of the 263 students served, approximately ¾ had at least one contact entered into the JCMS system (26% of cases had no contacts entered)4. On cases with contacts entered, the number of contacts ranged from 1-40 (M = 3.46, SD = 6.20) and 85% of students had five or fewer contacts. Howard County entered 28 contacts for 13 students (per student contacts: M = 2.15, SD = 1.14). No contacts were reported for 78% of Howard County's 59 cases. Dakota entered 22 contacts for 16 students (per student contacts: M = 1.38, SD= 0.89). No contacts were reported for 53% of Dakota County's 34 cases. Sheridan entered 622 contacts for 165 students (per student contacts: M = 3.77, SD = 6.66), with no contacts reported for 2% of 169 cases. When contacts were entered, the most common reason given was "Other", followed by Truancy, Behavior, School Engagement, Homework/Grades, and Check-In Appointment (Figure 3). This may indicate that additional reason codes need to be added to the JCMS system. Further, additional training may be required to be sure that contacts are entered for all youth. SROs were also asked to report on the outcome of each contact, however, missing data was a significant issue. Specifically, outcome codes were missing or unspecified for 64% (Dakota = 52%; Howard = 63%; Sheridan = 65%) of the contacts entered into the JCMS system. For those contacts where an outcome was listed, No Agreement Reached (46.2%) was most common followed by Personal Reflection (36.4%), Apologies (6.8%), Behavior Contract (5.1%), Pro Social Instruction (5.1%), and Restitution (<1%).

4. What are the primary school-based and justice outcomes for kids in the SRO programs?

SROs entered a final disposition for each youth in the system. The most common dispositions are presented in Figure 4. Approximately 24% of cases were closed when youth completed requirements, 25% were closed when kids transferred to other schools, 16% were closed with no further action upon intake.

We also looked at the profile of kids who had a punitive discharge (i.e., expulsion, citation, referral to probation) which represented 11% of the overall sample, or 29 out of 249 youth with recorded discharges. The majority

(86%) of the punitive discharges were reported in Howard county where 42% of youth who had contact with the SRO received a punitive outcome. Sheridan made up 10% of all punitive discharges, though only 2% of youth who had contact with the SRO were expelled, cited, or referred to probation. Last, Dakota accounted for 3% of punitive discharges and about 3% of youth in the county received a punitive discharge. Most of the youth who received a punitive discharge were White (69%), followed by Hispanic (24%) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (7%). Approximately half (52%) of the youth were in high school (elementary = 14%; middle school = 34%). Half of these youth had prior law violations, 42% had a history of aggressive behavior, and nearly all of them lived in high-risk environments (86%). When these characteristics were considered together in a statistical regression analysis, age, county, and prior violations emerged as significant predictors, accounting for 33% of the variance in punitive discharge[6]. The likelihood of a punitive discharge decreased slightly with age. Youth served in Howard county and those with previous violations were significantly more likely to receive a punitive discharge than those in Sheridan and Dakota counties and youth without previous violations. Finally, race and environment approached significance with Hispanic youth being slightly more likely than White youth to receive a punitive discharge and those in high-risk environments also being more likely to receive a punitive discharge.

5. How do SROs view student, staff, and parent interactions and the school environment?

Student Interactions: Qualitative interviews revealed more information on how SROs perceived and interacted with students. SROs in all three programs communicated with students in hallways, during lunch, during presentations, and when students come to them with questions. The SROs all agreed that most interactions are positive, though they acknowledged that a few students have negative views of police created by their parents. All the SROs noted differences in interactions by grade level. Elementary school-aged students were overwhelmingly positive, middle school-aged students had mixed encounters, and high school-aged students often would not directly approach officers; however, many were interested in communicating with officers (e.g., if the SRO approached them).

SRO contacts varied by year with some years involving more misbehavior than other years. Contacts also varied by school district. SROs reported different kinds of school problems were more prevalent, including theft, harassment/bullying, and child abuse (Dakota); underage drinking and truancy (Howard); and truancy and basic safety issues (Sheridan).

There may also be differences in the nature of SRO contacts by officer and student gender. There was only one female SRO, but she reported differences in the kinds of interactions she had with male and female students. Males asked more general questions (e.g., about legal consequences), while females asked more for personal advice. This is evident in the higher number of female contacts in Dakota County (Table 2).

School Staff Interactions: All SROs communicated with school staff on a daily basis and reported mostly positive interactions. SRO relationships with school staff were influenced by turn-over and the degree of agreement about SRO roles (e.g., how to respond to disciplinary versus criminal matters). SROs reported a fairly consistent process of communicating with staff at all schools. Most disciplinary matters are handled by the school and SROs are only brought in 1) to tell students about potential criminal consequences, and 2) to handle criminal matters. Occasionally, situations are immediately apparent as being criminal or issues are reported directly to the SRO by a student. In these cases, SROs will respond first and then contact school staff (administrators or counselors) and parents as required.

Parent Interactions: SROs in all three programs communicated with parents less frequently. Overall, parent interactions can be positive but the SROs felt parents sometimes have negative views of police or are unlikely to believe their child misbehaved. Parent interactions may also be influenced by the broader community context (size of town and relationships between citizens; in small towns many people may be related to one another as noted by the Dakota county SRO). Parents seem to support the SRO program; many were upset when a program was closed due to a budget shortfall prior to CBA funding.

School Environment: SROs reported generally high levels of safety and positive school climates, though views varied slightly by school district. Most SROs believed their presence makes others feel more safe and secure. Interviewees also identified areas for slight improvement in security, though schools were largely considered safe.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the methodology must be noted. First, information in the police-citizen contact data set did not allow for comparisons to other SRO programs or beyond the three years of data collection. Data in the first school year (2015/2016) were limited as SROs began learning how to record contacts. Second, we found that SROs appeared to be tracking student contacts differently. For example, the new SRO in Sheridan county said he first tried to record as many contacts as he could, but later he recorded only the most serious actions. Similarly, the Dakota county SRO seemed to record more serious student interactions (e.g., truancy, fighting, etc.).

SROs were not always sure what types of contacts to report. SROs had many non-crime-related encounters with youth and believed it would be impractical to record all the contacts they make each day; however, these types of contacts are important for understanding SRO activity. For example, the previous SRO in Sheridan county said it was difficult to record every student interaction and he probably actually had "five to fifteen times" the number of interactions than were recorded each day. Third, we were unable to collect data on other school-based and justice outcomes other than referral and discharge. Information on school disciplinary actions and suspensions would provide greater understanding of how schools respond to student misbehavior. Finally, the interviews and contact data resulted in a relatively small sample, and findings cannot be generalized beyond the programs in this evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

Community-based aid (CBA) supported the SRO programs in Dakota, Howard, and Sheridan Counties, and SROs reported consistent role expectations and a high degree of flexibility in performing their work. Policies and SRO responses varied by school. Clear policies, specialized training, and frequent communication between SROs, school staff, and police supervisors seemed to help the SROs understand others' expectations.

Counties varied in the types of youth who experienced SRO contact with apparent differences in the number of students with prior violations, a history of aggressive behavior, and a high-risk living environment who interacted with SROs. Youth in Howard County were more likely to have a history of violations, aggressive behavior, and high-risk living environment compared to Dakota and Sheridan Counties. Similarly, racial/ethnic differences in contacts were evident; American Indian youth in Sheridan and Hispanic youth in Howard were overrepresented among SRO contacts, though this trend did not extend to punitive outcomes.

Of those who experienced SRO contact, most were referred by school staff (administrators and counselors) and predominantly for family problems, truancy, and fighting. Nearly 11% of youth experienced a punitive outcome (i.e., expulsion, citation/arrest, referral to probation). Punitive outcomes were more common for students in high school with a history of prior law violations, aggressive behavior, and a high-risk living environment. Howard county reported a much higher percentage of punitive discharges compared to Dakota and Sheridan counties, though there is no clear explanation for differences in punitive discharges. While Howard county included a larger student population than Dakota and Sheridan, Sheridan county accounted for more than 60% of all SRO-student contacts, so the difference in punitive outcomes is not a result of differences in the baseline number of students. It is possible that differences across school districts or student characteristics are not fully represented in the data. For example, the SRO for Howard County reported that one school district – Elba – receives a number of expelled kids from Grand Island. These youth may represent a different population with different likelihoods of engaging in delinquency and experiencing punitive outcomes. Compared to Dakota and Sheridan, Howard youth were twice as likely or more to have prior violations, a history of aggression, and live in a high-risk environment, which may account for differences in outcomes. However, it is also possible that the difference simply represents an artifact in SRO reporting. Ultimately, findings suggest SRO-student contacts are highly school-specific, though it is difficult to draw hard conclusions about student profiles and outcomes at this point due to missing information and differences in SRO record-keeping and approaches.

Finally, SROs believed that most interactions with students, school staff, and parents are positive and that school safety is relatively high at most schools. SROs had a high degree of contact with school staff and students, and they spoke with parents much less frequently. Student interactions were influenced by youth age and the reason for the contact (e.g., having a conversation versus responding to misbehavior), and SRO gender may play a role in how students approach officers. Moving forward, it is important to examine the perceptions of school staff and students to fully evaluate how satisfied they are with SRO responses and to provide a full picture of school climates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on information collected through this evaluation, we offer four recommendations. Most of these recommendations revolve around tracking SRO-student contacts. Tracking will soon be required by state law (LB390) and records provide useful information to evaluate SRO behavior, school-specific needs, and problems that may arise (from turnover, lack of school cooperation, lack of SRO preparation/training, etc.). Consistency between SRO programs in definition and quality are important for ensuring apples-to-apples comparisons and accurate data-based conclusions.

1. Continue working to standardize SRO tracking of student contacts. One important source of clarification is what "counts" as a contact. It is not clear that the funded programs are all tracking the same types of contacts. Although SROs cannot practically record every single interaction, non-crime-related interactions are still important to document. A simplified system (e.g., with checkboxes) might be created for brief, less involved interactions. As tracking requirements evolve in the state, it might help to identify exemplar programs to help model and train record-keeping in Nebraska.

2. Increase sustainability of contact tracking. Turnover in SRO positions can cause changes in record-keeping. It might be helpful to provide step-by-step instructions online and continue to direct SROs to a contact person to respond to questions, especially as data collection becomes more widespread.

3. Carefully consider what information is collected. In addition to tracking referrals, dispositions, warnings, etc. it might also be informative to have information on other activities (e.g., maintained hallway presence for # hours, spoke to groups of students in cafeteria, etc.), perhaps in a daily log format. Of course, tracking needs should be balanced by time and feasibility as burden can impact data quality.

4. Ensure accuracy and completeness of collected data. Finally, policy decisions can only be made with complete and accurate records of SRO contacts. Missing data on student race/ethnicity make it difficult to draw conclusions and may lead to misinterpretations about SRO activity. It is worth exploring further whether SROs self-identify student race/ethnicity or ask the student. It may also be possible to collect more precise information on some items, such as the specific reasons why police come into contact with youth. Additional data needs may become evident after implementation of tracking systems across Nebraska.

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[1] Due to turnover in one program, we interviewed both the current SRO (started in January 2019) and the former SRO. The other 2 SROs were assigned to their programs for the entirety of the CBA-funded timeframe.

[2] The Howard county SRO works in Centura Schools, which are in Howard county, but have a mailing address located in Cairo, which is in Hall county.

[3] SROs entered the reason for initial referral at intake.

[4] Some youth had intake/discharge data but not contacts because SRO programs did not complete the contacttab in some instances.

[5] Missing data for the Howard County SRO is because this program only completed contacts for any youth who the SRO served more than once. The SRO has since been trained to enter a contact for each youth to be consistent with other SROs.
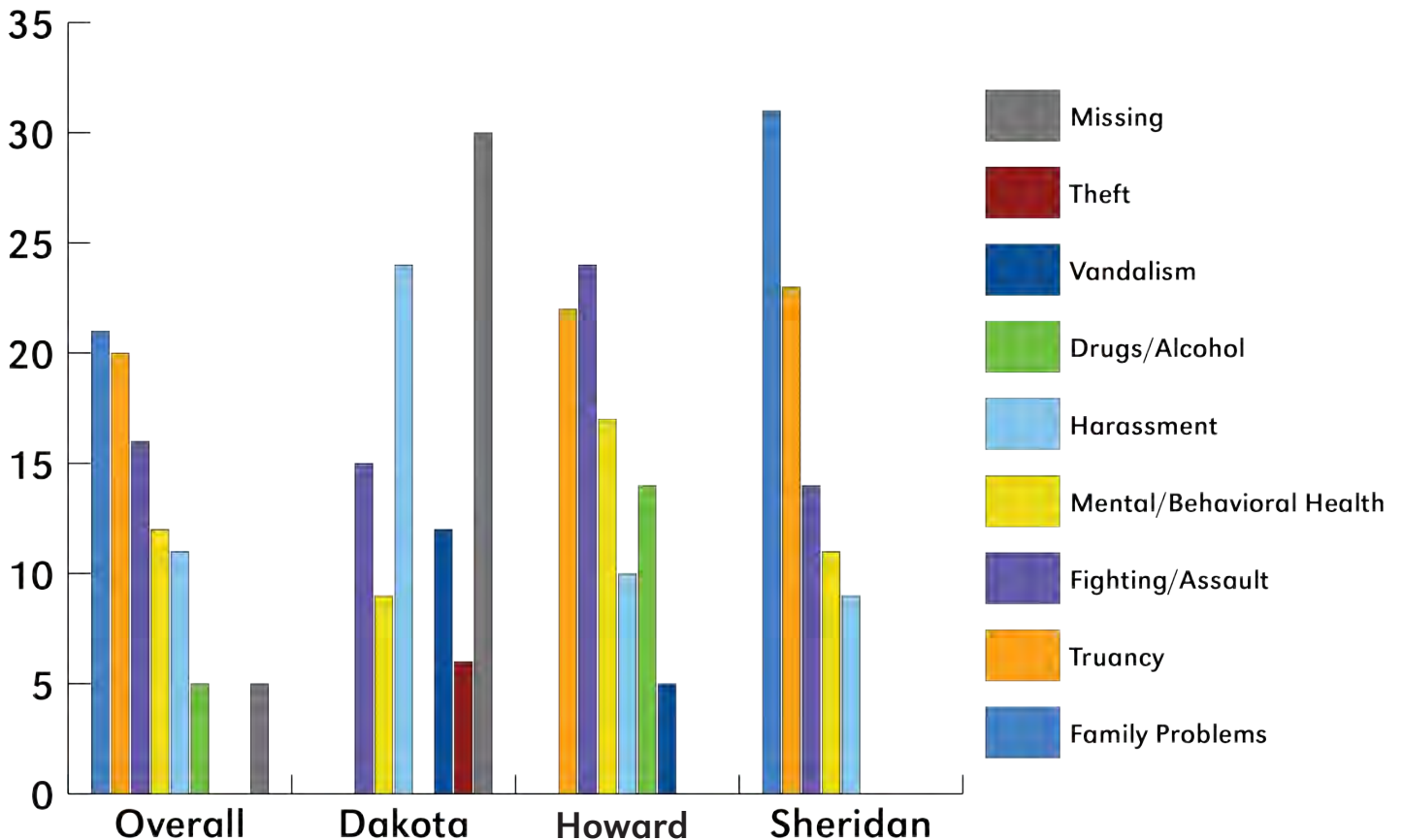
[6] Results should be treated with caution due to the small sample, missing data, and possible data entry differences between programs. For the regression, missing information dropped the sample from 263 contacts to 168; as such, there are unknown differences between those with contacts (64%) and those with missing data (36%).

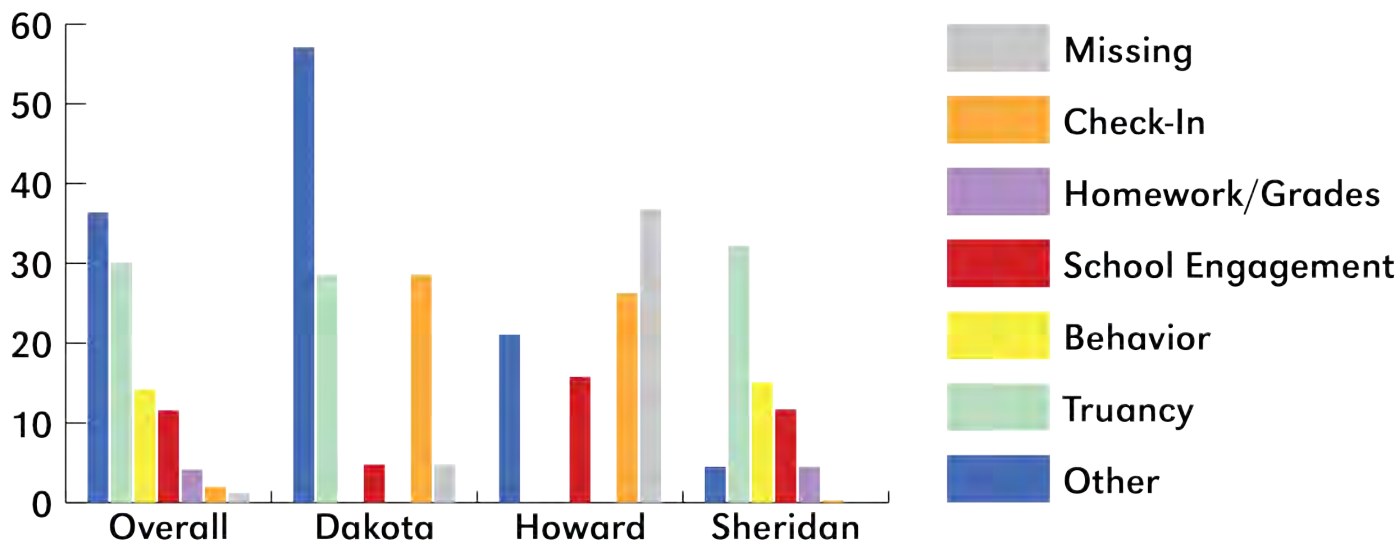| Table 2. Demographic and Risk Profiles of Contacted Students				
	Overall (*N* = 263)	**Dakota** (*N* = 34)	**Howard** (*N* = 59)	**Sheridan** (*N* = 169)
School Population	2264	382	1248	634
Female	39%	52.9%	18.6%	43.8%
Age	*M* = 13.13 *SD* = 3.35	*M* = 13.69 *SD* = 2.86	*M* = 13.92 *SD* = 2.65	*M* = 12.79 *SD* = 3.58
Race Ethnicity				
White	45%	17.7%	83.0%	37.3%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	37%	8.8%	–	56.2%
Hispanic	9%	8.8%	17.0%	5.9%
Black	0%	0%	0%	0%
Multiracial	<1%	0%	0%	<1%
Unspecified/Missing	9%	64.7%	–	–
Prior Violations	19%	3.3%	33.9%	16.7%
History of Aggressive Behavior	15%	3.3%	39.0%	9.6%
High-Risk Living Environment	42%	13.3%	67.8%	36.9%

Figure 2. Initial Referral/Participation Reason

Legend: Missing, Theft, Vandalism, Drugs/Alcohol, Harassment, Mental/Behavioral Health, Fighting/Assault, Truancy, Family Problems
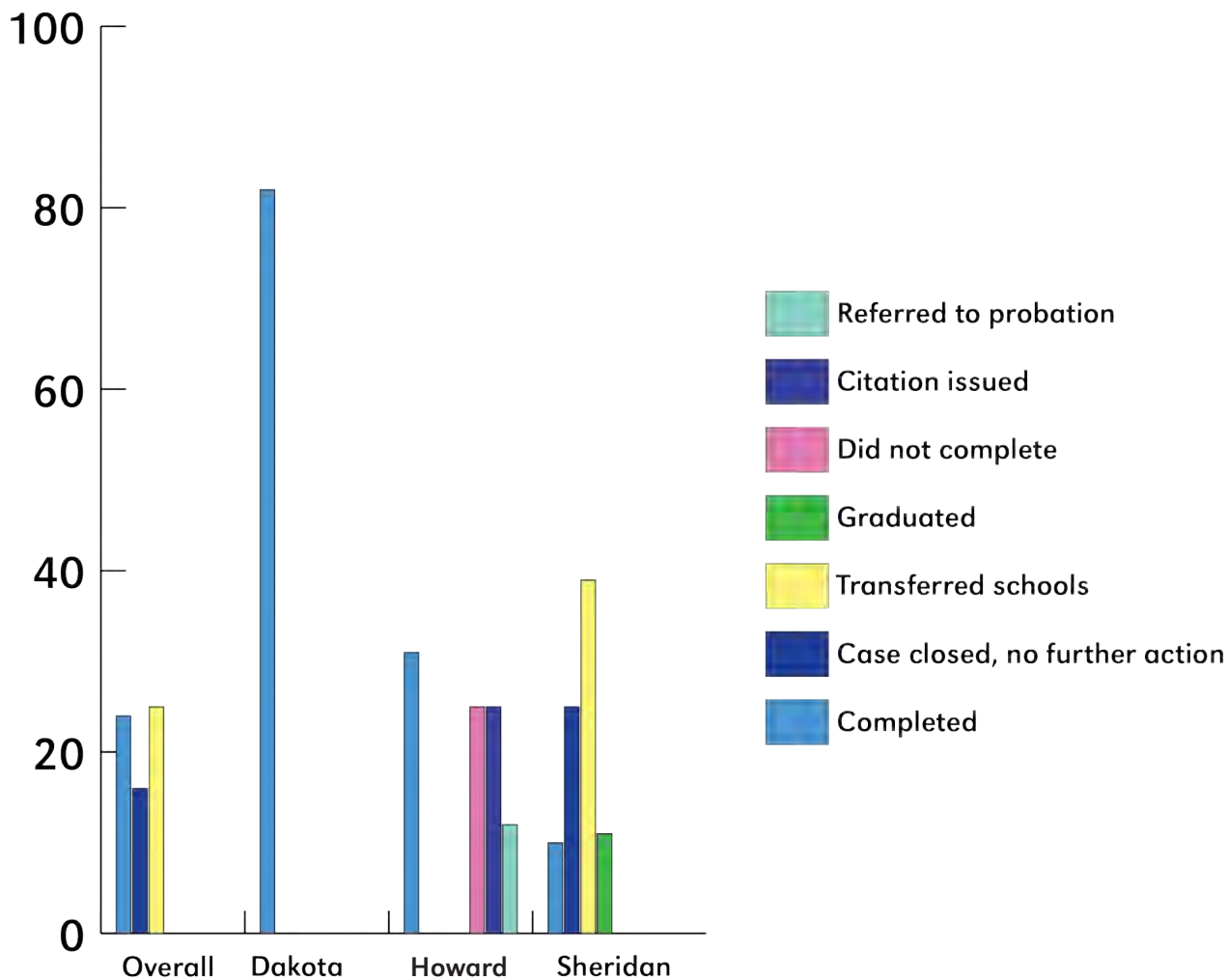
Note. Only reasons with more than 5% were included in the chart.

Figure 3. Contact Reasons

Note. Bars represent percent of contacts reported. Overall, 26% of cases had no contact data entered (Dakota County – 53%; Hall County – 78%; Sheridan – 2%).

Figure 4. Top Discharge Reasons

Note. Only dispositions with more than 10% were included in this chart.

Table 3. Three-Year Trends in School Populations and Demographics, Dakota, Howard, Sheridan

School Name	County	Grades	Total Population	Female	White	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Hispanic	Black	Other
Homer Elementary	Dakota	PK-6	216	54%	73%	18%	5%	<1%	4%
Homer High	Dakota	7-12	177	52%	77%	12%	7%	<1%	2%
Centura Elementary	Howard	PK-6	270	47%	93%	0%	5%	<1%	<1%
Centura Secondary	Howard	9-12	221	47%	90%	0%	7%	<1%	2%
Elba Elementary	Howard	PK-6	57	54%	91%	4%	4%	0%	<1%
Elba Secondary	Howard	11-12	51	47%	79%	4%	12%	3%	3%
St. Paul Elementary	Howard	PK-6	406	46%	95%	0%	4%	0%	<1%
St. Paul Jr./Sr. High	Howard	7-12	288	46%	97%	0%	2%	<1%	<1%
Gordon-Rushville Elem.	Sheridan	PK-5	194	50%	58%	18%	9%	0%	13%
Gordon-Rushville Middle	Sheridan	6-8	142	44%	61%	21%	10%	0%	8%
Gordon Rushville High	Sheridan	9-12	196	45%	63%	18%	9%	0%	10%
All Counties		PK-12	2217	48%	80%	9%	7%	<1%	4%

Note: School demographic data were retrieved from data reports provided by the Nebraska Department of Education. Data were averaged over three school years from 2015/2016 to 2017/2018. Students of other racial groups were predominantly multiracial.