

Supporting School-Law Enforcement Partnerships: Evidence from a Content Analysis of Memorandums of Understanding

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ABSTRACT

School-law enforcement partnerships benefit from well-written memorandums of understandings (MOUs) that have been collaboratively developed with input from school law enforcement agencies and school divisions. While many school-law enforcement partnerships report having MOUs, little is known about what information the MOUs provide. We conducted a content analysis of 73 MOUs from school-law enforcement partnerships in Virginia. We coded the MOUs to obtain information about MOU structure and format and the coverage of three topic areas: school resource officer (SRO) roles, SRO training, and SRO role in school discipline. Our analysis revealed most MOUs cover the three topic areas, but what the MOUs said about these topics varied tremendously. The findings suggest all those involved in MOU development might benefit from easily accessible, streamlined resources that outline what specific issues need to be addressed when creating MOUs and how to navigate nuanced discussions about the roles and training of SROs.

Keywords: school resource officers, school discipline, law enforcement, memorandum of understanding, school safety

The issue of police in schools is receiving increased attention as the number of school resource officers (SROs) in the United States increases and society grapples with school safety, police violence, and social justice (Goldstein, 2020; James & McCallion, 2013; Justice Policy Institute, 2011). In the academic literature, there appears to be no agreement on whether police belong in schools; however, one frequent, if not universal, recommendation for SRO programs is the development of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between school districts and law enforcement agencies (Counts et al., 2018; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Javdani, 2019). Calls for MOUs to support school-law enforcement partnerships have also been issued outside of academia from education- and police-related professional associations (e.g., Klinger & Klinger, 2018; National Association of School Resource Officers, 2018), government agencies (e.g., Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.), and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Thomas et al., 2013). Some states in the U.S. have begun to legislate MOUs as a requirement for SRO programs (Counts et al., 2018; Shaver & Decker, 2017), and many school districts and law enforcement agencies appear to have adopted MOU creation as a best practice, regardless of whether MOUs are required by law. It remains unclear, however, what MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies are covering and whether they are being written in a way that helps address important issues that arise when police officers are placed in schools.

An MOU is a formal written agreement involving two or more parties such as universities, school districts, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and individuals. An MOU serves as a contract that outlines the intent to form a partnership to achieve a specific goal and articulates partner expectations. Unless otherwise noted, MOUs are non-obligatory and legally non-binding (USAID, 2020). The main function of a school-law enforcement partnership MOU is to record agreement between school districts and law enforcement agencies by outlining the roles and responsibilities of each involved party (Counts et al., 2018). MOUs are usually developed cooperatively among those involved and with guidance from legal

representation. In practice, MOUs can help guide overall program structure and day-to-day operations (Clark, 2011). MOUs are also used as public relations documents to educate the school community about school-law enforcement partnerships and SRO programs (Starr, 2018) and to address legal liability issues regarding the scope of SRO programs (Sawchuck, 2019). Experts recommend regularly updating and revising MOUs to reflect changing needs and missions of the partnering organizations (Shaver & Decker, 2017), and they urge educators and law enforcement agencies to take the MOU creation process seriously by following MOU guidelines and models (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Hurley Swayze & Buskovich, 2014). Done correctly and thoughtfully, the creation of an MOU can be a proactive process rather than a reactive process (of which there are numerous examples; Archerd, 2017; Cray & Weiler, 2011).

What is covered in the MOU is likely to vary based on the needs, desires, and philosophies of the specific partners involved and the local community in which the school-law enforcement partnership exists (Rosiak, 2018). Several MOU models are publicly available, including one provided by the National Association of School Resource Officers (n.d.), as well models from numerous states (e.g., Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, 2018; Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2017). Reviewing these models alongside other resources (e.g., Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015; Thomas et al., 2013) and research on SRO programs (e.g., Javdani, 2019; Lopez, 2019) reveals a list of recommended topics to be addressed in an MOU. Experts frequently cite the following four topics for inclusion in MOUs: (1) roles and responsibilities of each partner and the SROs, (2) SRO training, (3) SRO involvement in school discipline, and (4) operational procedures. Other topics recommended to be addressed in an MOU include the use of physical restraint, ethical considerations, integration of SROs into the school community, and training for administrators, among others.

Although there is a strong call for MOUs and many states are beginning to require them for school-law enforcement partnerships, not all SRO programs have MOUs. Prior research reports anywhere from 40% to 90% of SRO programs have an MOU (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Eisert, 2005; Shaver & Decker, 2017). However, little research exists exploring what is covered in MOUs. One exception is a review of seven MOUs from school-law enforcement partnerships in South Carolina (Lesley, 2021). The author reported misalignment between what an SRO can do as outlined in the MOUs and what is allowed by state law. A study of SROs in Minnesota asked SROs about topics covered in their MOUs (Hurley Swayze & Buskovich, 2014). Commonly reported MOU topics were the supervisory structure for the SRO program, salary, equipment, training, evaluation, and duty hours. The sampled SROs reported SRO involvement in school discipline was not commonly addressed in MOUs. Additionally, the researchers reported 20 to 30% of SROs in their sample were not aware of what the MOU covered, a finding that highlights other researcher's concern that SROs and other SRO program stakeholders need to be aware of the MOU, familiar with the MOU, and involved in regularly updating the MOU (Lopez, 2019; Ofer, 2011; Thureau & Wald, 2009). As Shaver and Decker (2017) stated, "Importantly, the MOU must be a 'living document' that the parties use to govern the everyday activities at school, not a pro forma document that gets filed away and forgotten" (p. 280).

School-Law Enforcement Partnerships and MOUs in Virginia

In this section, we briefly describe school-law enforcement partnerships in Virginia, the region of study in this paper. SRO programs in Virginia public schools are overseen by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). State law requires the Virginia DCJS to conduct an annual school safety audit, which includes surveys completed by the principals of all 1,961 public schools in Virginia and by the school superintendents from all 132 school divisions in Virginia (Virginia DCJS, 2020). As part of the 2019 Virginia School and Division Safety Survey (Virginia DCJS, 2020), 96% of Virginia's 132 public school divisions reported having an SRO program in at least one of the schools in their division. Data from school principals indicates 55% of Virginia public schools had at least one SRO in their school on either a full-time or part-time basis in the 2018–2019 school year. SROs were reported in 33% of the elementary schools, 95% of the middle schools, and 95% of the high schools.

Based on the results from the 2018–2019 Virginia School Safety Audit, 90% of school superintendents (representing 119 school divisions) reported having an MOU with the local law enforcement agency as part of their SRO program. Further, 87% of school principals reported they were aware their school division had an MOU for their SRO program, and 74% of school principals were extremely or moderately familiar with the MOU expectations.

Study Purpose

The value of an MOU for school-law enforcement partnerships has been widely established, and resources and research related to SRO programs have identified several topics deemed critical to cover in an MOU. Given the lack of research on

what MOUs actually cover, we were interested in the contents of existing MOUs in Virginia and whether these MOUs addressed important topics. To this end, we conducted a content analysis of 73 MOUs from public school divisions in Virginia. We specifically examined the MOUs for coverage of the roles of SROs, SRO training, and the role of SROs in school discipline. While operating procedures have also been identified as an important topic, due to the broad and expansive nature of this topic and the possibility the topic is covered in separate documentation, we did not focus on operating procedures in this study.

METHOD

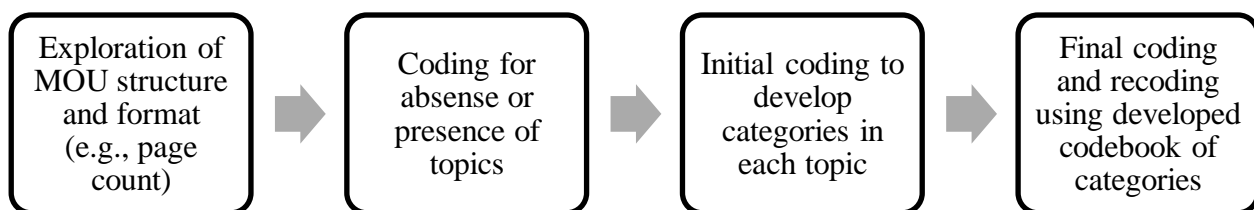
In June 2018, we emailed all public-school divisions in Virginia and asked them to submit the MOU for the SRO program in their division. We contacted superintendents and other central office support staff using publicly available email addresses. The wording of the request emails followed an approved IRB protocol. In the request email, we informed recipients our study would not identify specific school divisions but would focus on general trends. We received a large number of MOUs (via email or fax) in the week following the initial request. We sent one follow-up request and over the course of two months received a total of 75 MOUs. An initial review of the MOUs indicated two school divisions had submitted two MOUs for their division. To simplify results and discussion, we chose to analyze only one MOU from each school division. We selected the MOU with the most recent date. This left us with a sample of 73 MOUs. As the Virginia School Safety Audit from the 2018–2019 school year had reported 119 school divisions had an SRO program, a sample of 73 MOUs means we received MOUs from 61% of Virginia public school divisions with an SRO program. In each MOU, we masked any identifying information such as names of individuals, schools, school divisions, law enforcement agencies, cities, and counties. Each MOU was assigned a randomized number as a file name.

Data Analysis

We used NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, to conduct a content analysis of the MOUs. Content analysis is an appropriate method for interpreting and categorizing textual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Morse, 2008). Specifically, we used conventional content analysis, an inductive coding approach that results in emergent categories, rather than relying on preconceived categories or existing frameworks (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The 73 redacted MOUs were imported into NVivo and analysis consisted of four stages (see Fig. 1). We first investigated the overall structure and format of the MOUs. For example, we counted the total number of pages in each MOU, developed a list of the structural headings and subheadings in each MOU, and reviewed each MOU to determine if a model MOU had guided the development of the document.

Figure 1

Stages of Analysis after Importing MOUs into NVivo



Next, we explored the coverage of our topics of interest by coding for absence or presence of each topic (i.e., SRO roles, SRO training, role of SROs in school discipline). If a coder identified any text within the MOU as related to each topic, that text was coded to the corresponding code in NVivo. This allowed us to quickly obtain counts for how many MOUs covered each topic. The next stage of coding involved a mixture of descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) to create a preliminary list of coding categories. Using descriptive or in vivo coding allowed the categories to emerge directly from the data, encouraging novel insights into the topics (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Once we developed an initial codebook, we recoded all 73 MOUs using the emergent codebook as the final stage of coding. Table 1 provides an excerpt from the codebook showing the coding category of *law enforcement officer* under the topic of SRO Roles.

Table 1

Codebook Excerpt Showing Example Topic, Coding Category, and MOU Text

Topic	Coding category	Example MOU text
SRO Roles	Law enforcement officer	“As sworn law enforcement officers, SROs’ primary role in schools is as a law enforcement officer.” “The SRO facilitates the effective delivery of law enforcement services and assists with matters related to safety, security, and the exchange of information.” “[The SRO role is] To promote an atmosphere of safety for students and faculty members through the enforcement of criminal and traffic laws.” “The SRO is responsible for law enforcement activities that occur on the school campus.”

RESULTS

Table 2 presents a summary of the categorical findings. The main, emergent coding categories are listed and are accompanied by the number of MOUs that were coded at each category. The rest of this section provides a narrative description of the findings.

Coverage of SRO Roles

All 73 MOUs (100%) contained text describing the agreed-upon roles of SROs. The three most common roles described were: (1) law enforcement officer, (2) law-related educator, and (3) informal mentor/role model. Two additional roles, liaison and counselor, also emerged from the coding process. In the rest of this section, we present each of the major roles described in the MOUs and provide example text from the MOUs to illustrate each role.

Law Enforcement Officer

All 73 MOUs (100%) described one SRO role as a law enforcement officer. This role involved law enforcement duties such as investigating crimes, making arrests, promoting a safe and secure school environment, and preventing crime. The following MOU excerpt exemplifies how MOUs described the SRO role as a law enforcement officer:

As sworn law enforcement officers, SROs’ primary role in schools is as a law enforcement officer. SROs assume primary responsibility for responding to requests for assistance from administrators and coordinating the response of other law enforcement resources to the school. SROs should work with school administrators in problem solving to prevent crime and promote safety in the school environment. SROs should also collaborate with school personnel to reduce student engagement with the juvenile justice systems and divert students from the courts when possible.

Some of the MOUs prioritized the role of law enforcement officer explicitly through statements such as, “The SRO is first a police officer whose primary job is enforcement of the law” and “First and foremost, they [SROs] are law enforcement officers whose primary purpose is to keep the peace in their communities so that students can learn.”

Law-related Educator

Seventy-one MOUs (97%) included description of the SRO as a law-related educator. These descriptions included having the SRO teach in a classroom, providing training for school staff, and giving presentations to parent and community groups. The MOUs described how SROs might use standardized curriculum (e.g., Virginia Rules or D.A.R.E.) or address specific topics such as conflict resolution, crime awareness, safe driving, or the legal system. MOUs also identified specific topics for teachers and staff including school security, symptoms of drug use, and first aid techniques. Additionally, MOUs

described SRO presentations for the school community on law-related topics such as law enforcement practices, changes in laws, crime trends and prevention, school safety strategies, and crisis response procedures.

Table 2

Summary Table of Coding Categories and Associated Frequencies

Coding category	# of MOUs
Roles of SROs	73
Law enforcement officer	73
Law-related educator	71
Informal Mentor/Role Model	68
Liaison	50
Counselor	18
SRO Training	58
Training specific to SROs/working in schools	42
Training in law enforcement (in general)	18
Specific training topic named	32
Joint training involving SROs and school administrators	9
SRO Role in School Discipline	56
Conflicting information about SRO role in school discipline	6
SRO not involved unless safety or law violation	42
SRO involved under specified circumstances	8
SRO involvement in school discipline determined by school policy	3
No limitations on SRO involvement in school discipline	2

Informal Mentor/Role Model

Sixty-eight MOUs (93%) contained text that identified informal mentor/role model as another SRO role. One MOU clearly talked about this role:

Students often seek approval, direction, and guidance from adults in the school setting about various problems. Through formal and informal interaction with students, SROs serve as informal mentors and role models. SROs are expected to communicate clearly to students about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, to set a positive example in handling stressful situations and resolving conflicts, to show respect and consideration of others, and to express high expectations for student behavior.

Another MOU emphasized the need for SROs to be positive role models and how SROs need to be careful of their actions: “The SRO is expected to be a positive role model because students learn from every observation of or interaction with the SRO.”

Liaison

Fifty MOUs (68%) contained text about the role of the SRO coded under the category of liaison. This text described how the SRO serves as a connection between the law enforcement agency and a range of audiences, including students, parents, schools, community agencies, neighborhoods, and the general public. For example, one MOU stated,

SROs can coordinate the response of other law enforcement resources to the school with school administrators to include assisting other law enforcement officers with outside investigations concerning students attending their assigned school, essentially serving as a liaison between the Sheriff's Office or other law enforcement agencies and the students and school officials.

Another MOU detailed, "The SRO will act as a liaison with various community youth services agencies and work with school personnel on student referrals to these agencies."

Counselor

Eighteen MOUs (25%) contained text that referenced counseling as an SRO role. It was not always clear if the use of the terms "counsel," "counseling," and "counselor" referred to a general giving of advice or to cases where a person is trained specifically to provide psychological services. For example, one MOU referred to informal counseling as it described one SRO role: "Develop and maintain a positive and open relationship with students while providing informal counseling to students upon the student's request or making referrals to the guidance department." Some MOUs appeared to reference the counselor role as someone who provides law-related advice to students. Another MOU seemed to describe a more formal structure of counseling:

Further, it was deemed appropriate that each student be provided an avenue where they could find guidance and support through the services of a full-time law enforcement officer who could offer individual and group counseling when deemed necessary, provide guidance on ethical issues in a classroom setting, act as a resource with respect to delinquency prevention, and, through the application of formal instructional sessions, explain law enforcement's role in society.

Often the end goal of the counseling appeared to be keeping students out of the criminal justice system as shown in this excerpt: "The SRO program will focus on . . . identifying and counseling troubled youth, thereby diverting them from the criminal justice system."

Coverage of SRO Training

Of the 73 MOUs analyzed, 58 (79%) referenced the SRO training. Training was addressed in several ways including references to specific topics for SRO training, training needed to maintain law enforcement officer certification, the need for SROs to be away from school to attend training, and decisions about which agency/organization provides training.

Type of SRO Training

Forty-two (58%) MOUs generally described training specific to police officers working in schools and focused on training for SRO certification, training that connects to the school mission, and training that addresses unique needs of SROs. For example, a common statement about training was: "The school system shall provide in-service training, when available, to the SRO in areas that will increase the effectiveness of the officers and their ability to accomplish their respective duties and responsibilities."

Eighteen MOUs (25%) referenced training SROs need to obtain and maintain law enforcement officer certification (not specific to being an SRO) or training that is a standard part of employment as a law enforcement officer in their respective law enforcement agency. For example, one MOU stated, "all SROs continue to participate in ongoing Police Department provided in-service training as mandated by the Police Department command structure."

Thirty-two MOUs (44%) named specific training topics in which SROs should receive training. Commonly named topics included seclusion and restraint, child and/or adolescent development and school discipline policies and procedures, working with students with special needs, contents of the MOU, confidentiality of student information, restorative justice techniques, and cultural competence.

Nine MOUs (12%) described joint training involving both SROs and school administrators. For example, one MOU stated, “The SO will ensure the SRO receives . . . ongoing joint training with school administrators.”

Coverage of SROs’ Role in School Discipline

Of the 73 MOUs, 56 (78%) contained text addressing SRO involvement in school discipline. Six MOUs (8%) provided conflicting information about the SRO’s role in school discipline. In these six MOUs, some text indicated SROs should not be involved in school discipline, but other text in the same MOU provided information on how the SRO can become involved in school discipline.

Forty-two MOUs (58%) contained text indicating SROs should only be involved in school discipline when there is law violation or a safety concern. For example, one MOU stated:

The School District administrators and employees shall make every effort to handle routine student discipline (violations of the code of student conduct) within the school without involving the SRO in a law enforcement capacity, unless necessary for the safe operation of the school or as required by law.

MOUs sometimes referenced other actions SROs could take to support administrators and school safety, rather than becoming directly involved in school discipline. One MOU communicated, “The SRO assigned to the school should be available to advise, assist, and counsel, but those matters which are the exclusive concern of the school administrator, should be handled by school officials rather than being referred to the officer.” Another MOU suggested, “Emphasis is to be placed on de-escalating issues, familiarity with school implantation of the Student Code of Conduct, and restorative approaches to misconduct, unless it is a violation of existing law.”

Eight MOUs (11%) described circumstances where the SRO may become involved in school discipline even if the incidents are not a law violation or a safety concern. Three (4%) MOUs described how the SRO may become involved in school discipline at the request of school administration. For example, one MOU contained the following text: “Clearly said, SROs must be invited into discipline situations unless there is a violation of existing law,” and another MOU reported, “All normal discipline matters should be referred to the principal for appropriate action with the SRO assisting when requested.”

Three MOUs (4%) indicated the level of SRO involvement in school discipline is determined by the individual policy of each school. All three MOUs contained some version of the following text: “The SROs will address violations of school policy not otherwise defined as crimes whenever necessary according to procedures set forth by the school.”

Two MOUs (3%) supported SRO involvement in school discipline seemingly without limitations. One MOU stated, “The SRO will assist school administration with violators of school policies. Likewise, the officer will be involved in the enforcement of administrative rules and regulations.” The other MOU described the SRO role as “to enforce Federal, State and Local criminal laws and ordinances, and to assist school officials with the enforcement of Board of Education Policies and Administrative Regulations regarding student conduct.”

DISCUSSION

The content analysis revealed MOUs generally covered the three main topics identified as critical in our review of resources and research on MOUs for school-law enforcement partnerships: (1) SRO roles, (2) SRO training, and (3) the SRO role in school discipline. All 73 of the MOUs addressed the roles of the SRO. SRO roles and the balancing among those roles can be complex (Rhodes, 2015, 2019), but naming distinct, agreed-upon roles for the SRO provides a good foundation for clarifying SRO roles and expectations (Finn et al., 2005). When it comes to carrying out SRO roles in practice, confusion and discrepancies may arise between the stated, expected roles of an SRO and what takes place on a daily basis in the school environment (McKenna et al., 2016). MOUs may not be able to foresee and address these critical nuances; however, the MOU development process is invaluable for uncovering the philosophical differences that may exist among the partner agencies and ensure all stakeholders agree on basic roles (Raymond, 2010). Informal policies may develop in practice to address unclear areas, and these evolving policies and practices can be incorporated into revisions of the MOUs (Atkinson, 2002).

While the most common SRO roles named in the MOUs were three roles frequently referred to as the triad model of SRO roles (law enforcement officer, law-related educator, and some version of mentor/role model/informal counselor; Brown, 2006; McKenna et al., 2016), our content analysis also suggested additional roles of liaison and (formal) counselor. This finding aligns with research and practice suggesting an expansion of the triad model that acknowledges the complex, overlapping, and context-dependent nature of SRO roles (Denham et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2016). While both liaison

and counselor roles have been noted in other SRO literature (Eklund et al., 2018; Girouard, 2001), the specific role of counselor raises particular issues as law enforcement agencies and school divisions need to be sure SROs are only taking on roles for which they are qualified. Eighteen MOUs made references to counseling students as part of the SRO's responsibilities, and much of the language used was unclear as to whether the MOU developers were suggesting SROs act as informal counselors (more akin to mentors and role models) or if MOU developers were suggesting SROs serve as mental health or school counselors. Language in the MOU needs to be clear about the type of counseling provided as SROs are usually not trained and licensed counselors (McDaniel, 2001).

Nearly 80% of the MOUs addressed some aspect of SRO training, again an encouraging finding as numerous experts suggest appropriate training is essential to the success of any SRO program (Counts et al., 2018; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Thomas et al., 2013). Training is important to facilitate the transition of SROs, who may have no previous experience with youth, into a school environment. MOU developers seem to acknowledge this by stating SROs would need to be provided training designed for police officers who work in schools rather than additional law enforcement training without a focus on working with youth. However, less than half of the MOUs (44%) named specific training topics. Not being specific about training topics may represent a missed opportunity to ensure SROs receive adequate training in issues such as child and adolescent development, working with students with special needs, working with students of different races and cultures, working with LGBTQ students, and alternative approaches to discipline (Archerd, 2017; Homer & Fisher, 2020; Persaud & Wheeler, 2018). Naming specific topics in the MOU can help address knowledge and skill gaps in law enforcement training and can also send a message about what type of school culture is valued and desired by the school community.

The topic of SRO involvement in school discipline has been heralded as a critical issue by experts in school-law enforcement partnerships (Gupta-Kagan, 2017; Hurley Swayze & Buskovich, 2014; Kim & Geronimo, 2009; Shaver & Decker, 2017; Smith, 2019) and has received coverage in popular news media (Ryan et al., 2018). Over three quarters (78%) of the MOUs in our sample included text addressing the SRO role in school discipline. Similar to SRO roles in general, the role of the SRO in school discipline is complex, and what may seem to be clear when written in an MOU may be less clear in practice. For example, while many SRO programs may assert SROs are not involved in school discipline, gray areas emerge when an SRO is in a school and witnesses a violation of school rules. When developing MOUs, it may be useful for those involved in the SRO program to discuss a range of scenarios where SROs may have opportunities to be involved in school discipline. While several of the MOUs contained conflicting language about the role of the SRO in school discipline, the majority (58%) clearly stated SROs would only be involved in school discipline when a law had been broken or when there was concern about safety. A much smaller number (11%) suggested a role for SROs in school discipline even when there was no law violation or safety concern, with most of those MOUs indicating SRO involvement would occur at the request of school administration and with the idea the SRO could refuse to become involved.

Limiting the role of SROs in school discipline has been advocated by some educational experts as one way to address systemic racism in both schools and police culture (Morris, 2019). While it may seem like the MOUs that contain text suggesting a larger role for SROs in school discipline are going against this advice, the developers of the MOUs may in fact be acknowledging the complexities of having law enforcement officers in schools. These complexities may be part of the reason some experts call for an end to police in schools (Justice Policy Institute, 2011), but SRO programs are increasing and appear likely to remain as part of school safety programs (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). MOUs represent one of the best options educators and law enforcement have to help navigate the issues of police in schools. In the era of Black Lives Matter and the racial reckoning occurring in the U.S., more conversations about police in schools are overdue. Recent research into SRO programs demonstrate such discussions and thought (e.g., Fisher et al., 2022; Turner & Beneke, 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2020). At the practitioner level, the MOU development process can be an important step in starting dialogue about issues of racism, the role of police, and equity in education.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of our study to be considered when interpreting the findings is the sample of 73 MOUs may not be fully representative of all MOUs for school-law enforcement partnerships across Virginia or nationwide. We received MOUs from 73 public school divisions, which represents 61% of the 119 school divisions that reported having an SRO program in the 2018–2019 school year (Virginia DCJS, 2020). We do not know if the MOUs we received are similar or dissimilar to the MOUs from school divisions we did not hear from. Future research could be designed to follow up with school divisions from which we did not receive MOUs and obtain their MOUs for analysis.

Further, MOUs represent what was agreed on and recorded at one moment in time. These static documents cannot tell us what happens in practice. For example, while many MOUs in our sample suggested SROs have no role in school

discipline unless there is a law violation or safety concern, we do not know the degree to which this guideline is followed by the SROs in their day-to-day work in the schools. Future research could explore the role MOUs play in SRO programs by directly asking SROs and school administrators about how familiar they are with their MOU, how often the MOU is updated, and how frequently the MOU is consulted.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we explored the contents of MOUs from school-law enforcement partnerships in Virginia public school divisions. A content analysis revealed the majority of 73 submitted MOUs addressed three issues identified as critical topics to cover in MOUs: SRO roles, SRO training, and the SRO role in school discipline. These high levels of coverage may be the result of the use of models to guide MOU development, as many of the MOUs appeared to use a model MOU and other MOU developers likely consulted MOU guidelines. Our findings emphasize a need for well-written, easy-to-access resources to assist in MOU development. Guidelines for development are particularly useful as many issues related to SRO programs are complex and have far-reaching, impactful implications. Having resources to guide MOU development can help law enforcement agencies and school divisions plan for and deliberate issues, such as the role of police in schools; how law enforcement officers can adapt to a school environment; and how SROs can improve their work with students with special needs, LGBTQ students, and students who have been historically treated unfairly by police. As an SRO program matures and develops and as society and communities evolve, the MOUs that guide school-law enforcement partnerships will need to be revised and updated.

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