



## An Examination of School Resource Officers' Attitudes Regarding Behavioral Issues among Students Receiving Special Education Services

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For many parents and educators, school safety is one of the most important issues in the United States. Despite anecdotal evidence that students receiving special education services are often negatively stereotyped by school administrators and educators for behaviors threatening school order and safety, and despite increased media attention to the interaction between students receiving special education services and law enforcement officers in schools, no research has examined perceptions of school resource officers toward these students. Because school resource officers are now a permanent part of the school culture, and because disproportionate numbers of students receiving special education services are disciplined (e.g., school suspensions and arrests) each year, research is needed to examine attitudes of SROs regarding the presence and behaviors of students receiving special education services. Data collected from 130 School Resource Officers (SROs) in Kentucky revealed that large portions of SROs perceived that behaviors of students receiving special education services had a negative impact on the school environments and these perceptions had little association with the SRO's demographic and experiential variables. Implications for policy and future research are addressed.

*Keywords:* school resource officers, students receiving special education services, special education

America has witnessed a growing awareness of school violence within the past two decades. As public concern has grown, school administrators have been prompted to take action. Technological devices, frequent locker checks, and school uniforms are just a few of the many practices that public schools are using to promote safety.

One response to school safety concerns has been the implementation of school resource officers (SROs).

Although SROs have become more prevalent in recent years, Mulqueen (1999) reported that the first SRO program began in Flint, Michigan in 1953; by 1998, 40 states had SRO programs. These programs have continued to grow rapidly nationally. According to a 2005 publication of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing, over 6,500 school resource officer positions have been funded through the Cops in Schools (CIS) program (U.S.

Department of Justice, 2005), and some estimates put the number as high as 20,000 officers patrolling the nation's schools (Brown, 2006).

In theory, SRO's improve community-law enforcement relations, prevent crime, and educate students on law related issues. The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), through its COPS in Schools (CIS) Program, has awarded more than \$753 million to law enforcement agencies to fund SRO's (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). However, despite public approval and the millions of dollars spent, there is scant evidence as to the actual effectiveness of SRO programs. Mayer (2008) called for standardized data collection systems to promote reliable and valid evaluations and identified a "strong need for rigorous causal research demonstrating effects of SRO programs in schools" (p. 1).

Although no attempt is made to ascertain the effectiveness of SROs in this study, perceptions of SROs regarding behavior and treatment of students receiving special education services in schools are examined herein. This effort is important for three reasons. First, and most importantly, no research examining the SROs' perceptions about and interactions with students receiving special education services is currently available. Second, media and advocacy groups periodically report accounts of students receiving special education services being "tasered" (Oregon Advocacy Center, 2005) and "beat up" (Cop Caught On Camera, 2010) by police officers in the school setting. Third, because students receiving special education services have a wide variety of emotional and psychological developmental needs, and because these students present a wide range of behaviors that are often unexpected in the school setting, there is a strong likelihood that SROs may be called by teachers or school administrators to assist in efforts to guide these students into more acceptable behavior. The attitude of the SRO (or any other adult) toward the students involved in these situations will often impact the strategies chosen by that SRO to deal with the situation. Thus, school administrators, teachers, parents, and law enforcement officers seeking to understand the interaction between these two groups currently have no research to examine to further their understanding about the interaction between SROs and students receiving special education services, or the attitudes of SROs toward these students. This research is an attempt to fill that gap.

### **SRO Responsibilities**

Although SROs have become increasingly popular components of school safety programs (Theriot, 2009), not all SROs perform the same duties. The responsibilities vary from state to state and even within states. For example, Chicago public schools implemented the Safe School program that focuses on character qualities such as honesty and integrity, while the SRO program in Fresno, California emphasizes community relations (Johnson, 1999). The SROs in each of these

programs are required to perform different tasks in order to target the desired goal. While some SROs focus more on building relationships with the students, others act as liaisons between law enforcement agencies and the students in order to stay informed about possible problems.

There are several formal definitions for SROs that address the roles and responsibilities of the SRO. The federal definition, as defined by the U.S. Federal Code 20 U.S.C. §7161 (2012) states that an SRO is, "a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing, and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations" (p. 1). A second definition of SROs was developed by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence (n.d.):

An SRO is a certified law enforcement officer who is permanently assigned to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools. The SRO is specifically trained to perform three roles: law enforcement officer; law-related counselor; and law-related education teacher. The SRO is not necessarily a DARE officer (although many have received such training), security guard, or officer who has been placed temporarily in a school in response to a crisis situation but rather acts as a comprehensive resource for his/her school.

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) adds that, in addition to their law enforcement role, SROs should also (a) act as a liaison between the school, the police and the community, (b) teach law-related education classes, and (c) counsel students (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

As implied in the definitions of SROs, the job encompasses a wide range of duties and tasks. Kennedy (2000) stated that an SRO must combine three elements: law enforcement, education, and counseling. SROs serve as armed police officers, counselors to help answer students' questions, and teachers of the law. They are responsible for establishing trust with students so that others will be deterred from crime and delinquency.

The extant research supports the multifaceted nature of the SRO role. Lockyer (2000) and Kennedy (2000) found many duties of an SRO including: preventing vandalism, reducing truancy, investigating allegations of crime, teaching classes about law enforcement and drug prevention, attending school activities, working with vice principals on discipline matters, and acting as liaisons to law enforcement agencies (Kennedy, 2000; Lockyer, 2000). May, Corder, and Fessel (2004) determined that while SROs often fulfilled all three roles in the SRO triad (law enforcement, law-related counseling, and law-related

education), the majority of their time was spent in law enforcement duties and other duties that might be more accurately labeled “school bouncer” duties (e.g., monitoring hallways, helping teachers control classroom behaviors).

Perhaps the most significant task of a school resource officer is to be a mentor and counselor to at-risk students, a disproportionately high number who display special education needs (Minor, Williams, & Minor, 1997). SROs are assigned to schools to not only reduce and prevent crime, but to act as role models to those students who need it most. By establishing a trusting relationship with students, there is a greater chance that potential problems will be reported and information will be shared.

### **SRO Effects on Student Behavior**

Previous research on the effectiveness of SRO's in schools has relied primarily on opinion surveys and research designs that do not provide solid evidence of actual impact (Mayer, 2008). For example, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (2001), using content analysis of reports submitted by 78 SRO programs in the state, determined that SRO's were effective in reducing school crime. Results indicated that 37.3% of SROs and 82% of school staff stated that a reduction in fighting at the school where they served since the SRO arrived. In addition, 99% of staff and 91% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they “support having a SRO assigned to my school...” (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2001, p. 3).

Information collected via surveys by NASRO at their national conference during the spring of 2001 indicated that 99% of the SRO's felt their presence increased school safety. Two in three SRO's reported that they had prevented a student or other individual from assaulting a teacher or staff member during their employment as an SRO. Respondents also indicated they had good relationships with administrators at the schools where they worked (Trump, 2001).

In a study of the impact of an SRO program on school violence and school disciplinary programs, Johnson (1999) found evidence that SROs were meeting their goals of reducing school crime. Her evaluation of SRO programs in a southern city included data collected from a number of sources at four high schools and one middle school from 1995 to 1996. Results indicated that school fights, gang activities, possession of drugs, suspensions, and minor and major offenses decreased after SROs were assigned to school (Johnson, 1999).

While all of these studies suggest that SRO programs are effective at increasing school safety, the limitations cannot be ignored. Although studies may demonstrate a correlation between the placement of SROs and improvements in students' behaviors and attitudes, other possible causal factors of behavioral and/or

attitudinal change are not taken into account. In other words, the placement of SROs may not necessarily have caused students' behavioral changes. There may have been other impulses for such changes that also need to be measured; therefore, future research should control for such variables.

### **Students' Perceptions of SROs**

Student reactions are a helpful tool to measure SRO program effectiveness. Students may be resistant to the presence of SROs if they do not hold a positive view of SROs. On the other hand, students could be neutral to the idea but actually develop a negative view as a result of being around the SRO.

According to Johnson (1999) school officials in Alabama stated that students, as well as their parents, were generally supportive of SROs. Most students felt that SROs provided a sense of security and were necessary to reduce the availability of guns, drugs, and gang-related activities. They also appreciated the actions taken when disciplinary problems arose and their support in dealing with disciplinary problems (Johnson, 1999).

Hopkins and Hewstone (1992) described the importance of youths' attitudes toward police. Police-school liaisons emphasize the relationship between the police and youth and therefore, must improve the image youth hold of the police. Because SROs are highly visible in schools, they have an opportunity to correct or change stereotypes students may have about police. Hopkins and Hewstone found that while females held more positive views of the police than males and that students in schools that have an SRO display less positive attitudes and general liking of the police than those in schools without an SRO. Over time, the approval for the officer significantly decreased; however, the students held a more positive image of the SRO than the police in general. Although this study had negative implications, research has indicated that student attitudes become less positive toward authority figures between the ages of 14 and 16 (Hopkins & Hewstone, 1992). In other words, resistance to authority is typical during adolescence, suggesting that negative attitudes toward police may be something youth simply grow out of. Additionally, students' perceptions of SROs may be influenced by their contact with police outside of school.

### **School Officials' Perceptions of SROs**

In general, school officials are supportive and optimistic about the effectiveness of SRO programs (May, Fessel, & Means, 2004). California's school officials noted the program is a huge success in effectively reducing school crime and truancy as well as building mentoring relationships with the students. At-risk juveniles on probation are less likely to commit more serious offenses because of the SRO/probation officer's intervention and their recommendations to the court. Overall, California's school administrators seem enthusiastic about the program (Lockyer, 2000).

Johnson's (1999) study revealed similar findings. The majority of school officials (76.5%) thought police officers were very effective and should be placed in school. Teachers felt comfortable, but some thought SROs should assist more in the classrooms and hallways. School officials reported that they would like more than one SRO assigned to each school and SROs assigned to the schools should work well with the student population. Some administrators (41.2%) suggested SROs should make themselves more visible to improve their services. In general, officials were satisfied with school resource officers' performance.

May, Fessel, and Means (2004) further explored perceptions of school administrators regarding the presence of SROs in their schools. In general, May, Fessel, and Means (2004) found that school administrators indicated that SROs were valuable additions to school safety in their schools. However, these investigators also found significant gaps in communication between principals, SROs, and law enforcement supervisors regarding the nature of the SRO role at school.

The perceptions school officials' hold of SROs is significant because vital information must be communicated between the two groups. If SRO programs are to be successful, consistent interaction between all parties involved is a necessary component. Although SRO's now appear to be permanent fixtures in schools, there is little research exploring SROs' perceptions of school officials (May et al., 2004a; May et al., 2004b) and no research examining SROs' perceptions of students as indicators of their effectiveness. Perceptions that SROs hold of students receiving special education services are of particular interest, given that these students are such a unique and often stigmatized population.

#### **Students Receiving Special Education Services**

Teachers must possess adequate training to meet the needs of students requiring special education services. Teachers often attribute the failures of students receiving special education services to factors unique to the individual student (e.g., faulty social judgment, difficulty processing social clues) (Sprouse, Hall, Webser, & Bolen, 1998). This may lead to the development of a poor self-concept among these students (Hastings, Hewes, Locke, & Witting, 1996).

In an effort to test this idea, Sprouse et al. (1998) found that students with learning disabilities did not misperceive nonverbal social cues significantly more than students without learning disabilities. However, teachers rated them as having greater social perception difficulties (Sprouse et al., 1998). Research by Cook (2001) concluded that teachers also spent less individual time with students with severe disabilities.

Poor academic performance and stigmatization and harassment from other students can cause students receiving special education services to have poor

attendance and even drop out of school (Winters, 1997). Lack of educational success is associated with juvenile crime because these youth may feel they have no other outlet for gaining money or status.

Youth receiving special education services account for 28% to 43% of the juveniles in correctional centers (Winters, 1997). The most frequently represented needs among juvenile justice clients include learning disabilities, mental disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders. In comparison to the general population, all of these conditions appear to be overrepresented among youth involved with the juvenile justice system (Minor et al., 1996). These learning disabilities have serious implications for involvement in the juvenile justice system. As Winters (1997) stated, "LD students may be at risk for future incarceration if their disability is not remediated or at least lessened in severity so that they become self-sufficient and participate fully in all economic and social opportunities that are available to the nonhandicapped..." (p. 8). This research portrays an overwhelming correlation between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency (see also Minor et al., 1996). Proper intervention and adequate resources are essential for addressing the problems of learning disabled students.

#### **SROs and Students Receiving Special Education Services**

According to the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (Rausch & Skiba, 2006), a study conducted in the Indiana school system found that students receiving special education services were suspended more often than general education students. This finding was mirrored in other states as well (May & Chen, 2011). In Indiana, students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) were at a higher risk of being removed compared to students with other types of disabilities, while in Kentucky, students who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) were suspended at higher rates than their counterparts without IEPs.

Because students receiving special education services are disproportionately at-risk for disciplinary action in the school setting, SROs can serve as effective and positive role models for educational development and success. Likewise, students receiving special education services may feel less de-valued and be deterred from delinquent involvement as a result of a positive relationship with a SRO. Thus, SROs have the potential to improve these students' attendance at school, counsel them about personal problems, and even help them with their schoolwork.

On the other hand, SROs may actually do more harm than good with students who receive special education services. Without the proper knowledge of special education, coupled with skills and attitudes appropriate for working with special education

populations, SRO's may find themselves ill-equipped for the challenges that can arise, and the frustrations that can ensue, in dealing with such students. Additionally, if SROs witness teachers and/or staff negatively stereotyping these students, they may, in turn, form similar perceptions and treat these students in the same manner. Negative views of students receiving special education services could lead SROs to ignore, reject, or treat these students more harshly than other students, possibly resulting in higher numbers of students receiving special education services receiving suspensions or being arrested.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 is especially pertinent when discussing SRO's and students receiving special education services. IDEA contains regulations applicable to students with disabilities who are facing disciplinary action. The Act's provisions are intended to ensure that schools use an approach to discipline that balances the need to protect the rights of children with disabilities against the need to provide orderly and safe schools (United States Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 1997). Intended to protect students' right to an education, IDEA provides procedural safeguards before students receiving special education services can be removed from their current educational placement due to disciplinary action and allows school officials to consider the unique circumstances of special education in their disciplinary decisions.

SROs' perceptions of students receiving special education services in Kentucky are investigated in this study. Although some of the aforementioned research has examined school officials' perceptions of both students receiving special education services and SROs, as well as students' perceptions of SROs, we were unable to uncover any study that examined SRO attitudes toward students receiving special education services in schools. Because students receiving special education services are overrepresented in juvenile justice agencies and instances of school disciplinary action, and because prior research is lacking in this area, it is important to explore SROs' perceptions of these students. This is particularly relevant because, as suggested above, SROs may be uniquely positioned in the school environment to help students receiving special education services avoid behavior that could lead to disciplinary action.

#### **Research Questions**

SROs play an important part in maintaining the safety and security of the schools where they serve. Given the wide variety of circumstances they encounter, one of the most important traits of SROs is their discretion. While there are a number of positive aspects of discretion for the SRO, if SROs perceive that students receiving special education services are responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behaviors, then they may use their power of discretion to treat students

receiving special education services differently than they would if they had a different attitude about these students. Thus, understanding SRO attitudes about the involvement of students receiving special education services in problem behaviors is an important endeavor. Given the lack of extant research on this subject, the following research questions (in place of hypotheses) are used to guide the study:

1. To what extent do SROs perceive students receiving special education services as being responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behavior in school?
2. To what extent do SROs believe that students receiving special education services who exhibit problem behaviors should get less punitive treatment for these behaviors than they currently receive in schools?
3. To what extent do SROs perceive students receiving special education services as using their status as an excuse for problem behaviors and to avoid accountability for their actions?
4. What demographic and experiential differences exist among SROs in these perceptions?

#### **Method**

##### **Data Collection**

In early April of 2004, researchers at the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) conducted the third phase of a panel study examining the attributes of SROs throughout the state of Kentucky. Using an existing database created in 2002, a letter was mailed to all SROs in the database notifying them that they would be receiving a self-report questionnaire in approximately two weeks and requesting their participation in the study. A questionnaire and cover letter explaining the importance of the project was then mailed two weeks later. A second letter and questionnaire were mailed to those who did not respond to the original questionnaire. A final questionnaire and letter were mailed to nonrespondents three weeks later. Of the 216 SROs who received a questionnaire, 132 responses were received, for a response rate of 61.1%. Thus, approximately three in five SROs in the state of Kentucky provided data for this report.

The final SRO survey in 2002 was eight pages long and required approximately 40 minutes to complete. Based on responses to those questionnaires, and reviews of extant research and policy, the survey was revised again for 2004. The questionnaire used to collect the data for this study was seven pages long, requiring approximately 30 minutes for completion.

##### **Data Analysis**

After electronically coding the questionnaires, the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies and descriptive statistics were first estimated. These results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Given the nature of the dependent

variables utilized herein, and the exploratory nature of this work, the SPSS bivariate correlations procedure was then used to estimate the association between the four dependent variables and the demographic and contextual factors about SROs that might predict their perceptions of students receiving special education services. Those results are presented in Table 3.

**Results**

The descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1. The vast majority of the respondents were male (90.8%) and white (88.5%). Approximately one in four officers were high school graduates, while almost one in four was a college graduate. Three in five (59.5%) worked primarily in high schools, while one in five worked primarily in middle

schools and 1 in 10 worked in more than one school. Over half had not received either academic training (58.8%) or in-service training (56.5%) on special education issues. The average SRO was about 43 years of age, with 16 years of law enforcement experience and over 3.5 years as an SRO. SROs estimated that about one in three (36.75%) of their law related incidents involved students receiving special education services. The average SRO spent the majority (55.57%) of their time as a law enforcer, with smaller proportions of their time being spent as a law-related counselor (26.51%) and a law-related educator (16.06%).

SROs were also asked four questions about their perceptions of students receiving special education services in the educational environment.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Sample*

| <b>Variable</b>  | <b>N</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|----------|----------|
| <i>Gender</i>  |          |          |
| Male   | 119      | 90.8     |
| Female   | 12       | 9.2      |
| <i>Race</i>  |          |          |
| White  | 116      | 88.5     |
| Nonwhite   | 15       | 11.5     |
| <i>Education</i>   |          |          |
| High School Graduate   | 36       | 27.5     |
| Some College   | 49       | 37.4     |
| College Graduate   | 29       | 22.1     |
| Some Graduate Work   | 14       | 10.7     |
| Missing  | 3        | 2.3      |
| <i>Type of School SRO Supervises</i>   |          |          |
| Elementary   | 9        | 6.9      |
| Middle   | 27       | 20.6     |
| High   | 78       | 59.5     |
| More than One School in District   | 13       | 10.0     |
| Missing  | 4        | 3.1      |
| <i>Received Academic Training on Special Education Issues</i>  |          |          |
| Yes  | 52       | 39.7     |
| No   | 77       | 58.8     |
| Missing  | 2        | 1.5      |
| <i>Received In-Service Training on Special Education Issues</i>                                      |          |          |
| Yes  | 52       | 39.7     |
| No   | 74       | 56.5     |
| Missing  | 5        | 3.8      |
| <i>Mean Age</i>  |          | 43.38    |
| <i>Mean Years as Law Enforcement Officer</i>   |          | 16.24    |
| <i>Mean Years as School Resource Officer</i>   |          | 3.53     |
| <i>Mean Percent of Law-related incidents involving Students Receiving Special Education Services</i> |          | 36.75    |
| <i>Mean Percentage of Time Spent as Law Enforcer</i>   |          | 55.57    |
| <i>Mean Percentage of Time Spent as Counselor</i>  |          | 26.51    |
| <i>Mean Percentage of Time Spent as Educator</i>   |          | 16.06    |

Table 2  
*School Resource Officer's Perceptions of Students Receiving Special Education Services*

| <b>Variable</b>   | <b>Strongly Agree</b> | <b>Agree</b> | <b>Somewhat Agree</b> | <b>Somewhat Disagree</b> | <b>Disagree</b> | <b>Strongly Disagree</b> |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Special education students are responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behaviors at my school.   | 10.7                  | 26.0         | 18.3                  | 7.6                      | 26.7            | 4.6                      |
| Including kids with special education needs in classrooms with other students is detrimental because of the problem behaviors of the special education students.                    | 11.5                  | 16.8         | 26.0                  | 17.6                     | 15.3            | 16.9                     |
| Students with special education status who exhibit problem behaviors should receive less punitive treatment for their problem behaviors than they currently receive in the schools. | 3.1                   | 4.6          | 8.4                   | 13.7                     | 41.2            | 24.4                     |
| Some students in the school where I work use their special education status as an excuse for their problem behavior to avoid accountability for those actions.                      | 34.4                  | 34.4         | 16.0                  | .8                       | 6.1             | 3.8                      |

The wording of those questions is included in Table 2. Approximately 55 percent of the SROs agreed that “students receiving special education services were responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behaviors at school,” and 54.3 percent agreed that “including students receiving special education services in classrooms with other students is detrimental because of their problem behaviors.” While most SROs (79.3%) disagreed that “students receiving special education services should receive less punitive treatment for their problem behaviors,” the vast majority (84.8%) at least somewhat agreed that “some students receiving special education services used their special education status as an excuse for their problem behavior to avoid accountability for their actions.”

Bivariate correlations between the SROs’

responses to the questions included in Table 2 and the demographic and experiential variables presented in Table 1 were then estimated. Findings appear in Table 3. SROs that spent more time in law enforcement activities and less time in law-related education at school were significantly more likely to feel that including students receiving special education services in the regular classroom was detrimental because of their problem behaviors. Male SROs were significantly more likely to feel that students receiving special education services use their special education status as an excuse for their problem behaviors. Finally, those SROs who spent more time in law-related education as part of their role as an SRO were less likely to feel that students receiving special education services were responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behavior at school<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Multivariate linear regression models were estimated for all four dependent variables. Only age was significant and it was significant in only one model. Given the lack of significant findings in the multivariate models, we limit our discussion to the bivariate models included here.

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations Between Perceptions of Students Receiving Special Education Services and Predictor Variables*

| Variable            | Including SE Kids is Detrimental | SE Students should receive less punitive treatment | SE Students use status as an excuse | SE Students are responsible for disproportionate amount of problems |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| Race (W=1)          | .048                             | -.034  | -.143                               | -.101   |
| Gender (M=1)        | -.043                            | .029   | -.148*                              | -.117   |
| Age                 | .091                             | .001   | -.099                               | -.012   |
| Education           | .130                             | -.029  | .051                                | .118  |
| L.E. Experience     | .069                             | .083   | .075                                | -.033   |
| Size of School      | -.071                            | .024   | -.042                               | .027  |
| SRO Experience      | -.100                            | .094   | .020                                | -.039   |
| Academic Training   | -.080                            | .118   | -.021                               | -.005   |
| In-Service Training | -.140                            | -.006  | -.023                               | .019  |
| Percent LEO         | .163*                            | -.010  | .040                                | .112  |
| Percent LRC         | .025                             | -.051  | .029                                | .046  |
| Percent LRE         | -.204**                          | .004   | -.088                               | -.209**   |

\* p<.10

\*\* p<.05

### Discussion

Data from 132 SROs in Kentucky were utilized to examine perceptions of students receiving special education services and the demographic and contextual predictors of those perceptions. Regarding the research questions that guided the study, the majority of SROs who responded agreed that (1) students receiving special education services are responsible for a disproportionate amount of problem behaviors at school and (2) including students receiving special education services in classrooms with other students is detrimental because of their problem behaviors. The vast majority of respondents also suggested that (1) students receiving special education services who exhibit problem behaviors should not receive less punitive treatment for these behaviors than they currently receive at school and (2) some students receiving special education services use their special education status as an excuse for their problem behavior to avoid accountability for their actions. This is indicative of a pattern of negative stereotypes held by many SROs toward students receiving special education services. Moreover, there were few significant demographic and experiential differences across SROs in these perceptions; in general, the demographic and experiential variables examined were not predictive of variations in SROs' perceptions of students receiving special education services.

One possible explanation for negative SRO perceptions of students receiving special education services could be a lack of understanding and knowledge

of the unique characteristics and needs of this population. This, in turn, might be rooted in the law enforcement training and orientation of many SROs. Consistent with this interpretation, our data revealed that SROs who reported spending more of their time in the law enforcement role were significantly more likely to see inclusion of students receiving special education services in the regular classroom as detrimental, while SROs who reported spending more time in the law-related education role were significantly less likely to perceive students receiving special education services as disproportionately responsible for troublesome behavior at in the school. With a disproportionate number of students receiving special education services being disciplined by school officials (Kresmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Miller et al., 2011; Rausch & Skiba, 2006), disciplining itself could, across time, conceivably instill, solidify, and expand negative perceptions of students receiving special education services among SROs. As such, to avoid both real and perceived net widening of the police in schools already being put forth (Justice Policy Institute, 2011; Thierot, 2009) it is essential that SROs receive specialized training to develop the necessary knowledge and skills for effectively understanding and working with the students receiving special education services.

SRO training programs and education requirements differ throughout the United States. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers' training guidelines (n.d.), the current Basic SRO training (40 hour training) devotes eight hours

to cover topics including counseling, adolescent emotional issues, child abuse, dysfunctional families, and special education. Nevertheless, none of this training directly addresses the unique challenges students receiving special education services pose. Additionally, although little is known about training of SROs throughout the United States, we do know quite a bit about SRO training in Kentucky. Currently, SROs in Kentucky are required to attend the Department of Criminal Justice Training Academy or a regional training academy (in Jefferson County, Bowling Green, or Lexington) as part of their eligibility to serve as law enforcement officers. The training is intensive and includes a wide variety of courses on law, investigation, use of force, and many other topics. Working with students receiving special education services in a school environment, however, is only now being considered to be part of Kentucky SRO's required training and/or education.

The findings presented here suggest that lack of training is not the only cause of these perceptions. We found that the two training related variables (representing whether or not the SRO had received academic training on special education issues and whether or not they had received in-service training on special education issues) did not significantly predict SRO's perceptions of students receiving special education services. In other words, those SROs who had received training about working with students receiving special education services did not have significantly different perceptions of students receiving special education services than their counterparts without such training. Thus, it could be that negative perceptions are so strong among officers that training cannot offset those perceptions. It could also be that the type and/or duration of the training the SRO's received in the area of special education was inadequate. These questions cannot be answered with data from the present study but are important to consider in future research and training design initiatives.

In view of the negative perceptions of students receiving special education services uncovered in this study, it seems possible that law enforcement agencies should be more selective in their choice of officers for SRO duty. The Consortium to Prevent School Violence (Mayer, 2008) recommends that officers selected for SRO duties be highly motivated and a good fit for the program. Additionally, the findings presented here suggest that selected officers should be screened for amenability to at least partial role transfer, away from the traditional law enforcer dictums toward the educator role. In the present study, officers who were more oriented toward law enforcement and less oriented toward law-related education were more likely to perceive efforts to mainstream students receiving special education services as being detrimental to regular classrooms, something potentially problematic given the national trend toward

greater use of mainstreaming. By contrast, those officers more oriented toward law-related education were less likely to see students receiving special education services as disproportionately responsible for problem behaviors in the school setting. This suggests that these officers may "find" fewer problem behaviors from students receiving special education services precisely because they are not expecting them from the outset; approach can direct response.

One important initial step in addressing negative perceptions SROs may have toward students receiving special education services is to increase interaction between SROs and each school's resident expert on these students—the school's special education teacher(s). Informal conversations, question and answer sessions, and even formal training sessions with these teachers may assist SROs in gaining a better understanding of the challenges faced by students receiving special education services and may also help SROs find ways to serve as law-related educators and mentors to help the youths navigate those challenges. When attempting law-related education and mentoring with students receiving special education services, it is critical that functional assessments and functional curricular approaches be utilized (Minor et al., 1997). Functional assessments are meant to identify the specific skill deficits underlying a given student's impaired educational performance, and assessment outcomes are used to structure curricular and instructional approaches in a manner tailored to meet the student's special needs (Lewis & Sugai, 1996). It is important that instructional approaches be modified and adapted to the needs of the learner, lest the student receiving special education services be prematurely (and often mistakenly) judged recalcitrant and therefore deserving of discipline. Special educators can readily convey to SROs what assessment information is most essential and the types of instructional modifications and adaptations that are in order for a given special education learner; in many instances, modifications and adaptations need only be slight as opposed to drastic. In this manner, SROs can become contributing members to multidisciplinary teams assigned to particular students receiving special education services (especially those diagnosed with behavioral disorders), rather than persons who special educators perceive as members of another group unfairly biased against special education learners.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

The present study is not without limitations. The findings derive from a single state and can be generalized to other contexts only to the extent that SROs in those contexts display characteristics similar to the characteristics of respondents in this study. Additionally, we had insufficient data on the type and duration of special education training received by SRO respondents. The most important limitation of this work revolves around the measurement of the perceptions of students

receiving special education services. Because this effort was not the primary focus of the original research project, only four measures of SRO perceptions of students receiving special education services were employed. Additionally, because of the exploratory nature of this research, the instrument used in this work did not clearly distinguish between the range of students receiving special education services (e.g., students with learning disabilities, students with behavior disorders) when examining the SROs' perceptions of the students. Doing so may have more clearly articulated differences in SROs' perceptions of these students. Additionally, we only examined a limited range of potential predictors of these perceptions.

Future research in this area should aim for clearer distinctions and definitions of the student population in question; doing so would allow for richer data regarding the SROs' perceptions of these students and predictors of those perceptions. Researchers should also use expanded perceptual measures and larger numbers of participants in the future. This would permit multivariate modeling with a greater number of potential predictor variables, including improved proxies for special education training as well as measures of communication with school counselors and special educators.

### Conclusion

The findings presented here reveal some insight into the relationship between SROs and students receiving special education services in the educational environment. In general, SROs in this sample had a relatively negative view of students receiving special education services and this perception was particularly acute among male SROs and those SROs that view themselves as primarily law enforcers. On the other hand, those SROs that spent more time in law-related education as part of their role as an SRO were less likely to share those negative perceptions of students receiving special education services. No other variables (e.g., tenure as an SRO, training about special education topics, education level) had an impact on these negative perceptions. The results presented indicate that (1) additional training about the intricacies of special education in the school setting is needed among SROs and (2) SROs should work closely with special education teachers in an attempt to gain a better understanding of this world.

Nevertheless, like many exploratory studies, the results presented here provide more questions than answers. Research is needed in this area to better understand not only perceptions of SROs regarding students receiving special education services, but SROs' treatment of students receiving special education services. This work serves as a foundation for these efforts.

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