

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES' IMPACT ON ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED
MINORITY STUDENTS: A MULTICASE STUDY

by

Ashley Simone Proctor

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers' (SROs') perceptions of zero-tolerance policies' impact on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. The theory guiding this study was Gibbs's deterrence theory because deterrence ideals are the basis of exclusionary disciplinary policies. The theory states that punishment reduces crime or, as it relates to zero tolerance, reduces the likelihood of discipline infractions. The central question for the current research was "How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers?" This research utilized interviews, document analysis through digital journals, and two focus groups for data collection. Categorical aggregation and pattern matching were implemented for data analysis. The five major themes revealed through the data analysis were (a) the Primary Role of Safety, (b) Diverting the Students, (c) Zero-tolerance Implementation, (d) Student Life Factors, and (e) Charging the Students. The study did not support previous research that found African American students to be associated with higher rates of juvenile justice referrals or the placement of SROs in the school to support a system that harms and criminalizes youth of color, particularly African American youth. This study suggests a minimal relationship between zero-tolerance policy implementation and the role of SROs.

Keywords: school resource officers, deterrence, zero-tolerance policies, school-to-prison pipeline, criminalization, minority

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my grandfather Elmer: You taught me that although the road is treacherous at times, one can always persevere. Although you passed before I could achieve this milestone, you were my reason for finishing. To my grandmother Janie, the heart of our family: Thank you for the sacrifices you made and the love you continue to give. To my mom, Debora, my best friend for as long as I live: Thank you for never giving up on me. Your love brought me so far. To my dad, Bobby: You called me your “go-getter.” Thank you for pushing me. To my brothers, Bobby and Monte, my troupe: Thank you for always supporting me and giving me so much to laugh about. To my niece, Ivy: I hope you do more than I ever have and know that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. I want to give special thanks to my guardian angel, John “Boot” Vick.

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List of Abbreviations

common core of data (CCD)

community oriented policing services (COPS)

explicit zero tolerance (EZT)

Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

mandatory expulsion (ME)

Massachusetts Department of Elementary

National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA-DESE)

school resource officer (SRO)

Youth Information Delivery System (YIDS)

Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Zero-tolerance policies are individual or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined and typically harsh punishments, such as suspensions and expulsions for a wide variety of rule violations (National Association of School Psychologists, 2001). While zero-tolerance policies were implemented with the intention of deterring disruptive behavior and increasing school safety (Thompson, 2016), they have been characterized as the most extreme form of punishment (Smith, 2015). School resource officers (SROs) serve an integral part of zero tolerance and have become increasingly common across the nation, and their role and purpose in educational institutions have also evolved over time (Counts et al., 2018). However, contemporary regimes of school discipline criminalize student misbehavior, and these new punitive policies disproportionately impact minority students (Morris & Perry, 2016). This research focused on the perceptions of middle and high school SROs regarding the effect of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority students. Chapter 1 presents the background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions.

Background

Zero-tolerance policies were initially propagated through the War on Drugs. The disparities of racial profiling and punishment quickly made zero-tolerance policies an accepted and normal part of the social disposition toward criminal justice and public safety (Mauer, 2009; Nunn, 2002). Overdependence on zero-tolerance policies has resulted in the development of a system of transmittal of students from schools to the prison system, a process facilitated by the insertion of SROs. While zero-tolerance policies were intended to keep students safe, schools continued to

implement zero-tolerance policies across many facets of subjective behavioral infractions to quickly remove unwanted students and to exert a police-like level of control, specifically in urban contexts (Curtis, 2014; Petteruti, 2011). Studies have shown race to be a strong and consistent predictor of student discipline (Petras et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2015).

The Safe Schools Act of 1994 provided funds to combat school violence and criminal behavior, but it inadvertently began a cycle of harsher punishment and stricter disciplinary action through the assignment of SROs to schools under the umbrella of zero tolerance (Theriot & Orne, 2016). Zero-tolerance policies enforced by SROs have resulted in a criminalization in education that has disproportionately impacted certain students, mainly minorities and those living in lower economic environments (Mallett, 2016). Studies have shown that African American boys and girls share a common racialized risk of punishment in schools, and African American female students have a statistically greater chance of suspension and expulsion compared to other girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Furthering the implementation and utilization of zero-tolerance policies, the assignment of SROs as a means of safety for the schools has led to a prison-like atmosphere involving armed police officers, creating an unhealthy and unfriendly atmosphere, unsuitable for an academic environment (Raufu, 2017). The role of SROs as an important part of school discipline has increased the level of severity of punishment (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). The insertion of police officers into schools has been shown to contribute to a potentially negative experience for many students who may also have negative and indifferent views of law enforcement (Theriot, 2016). Furthermore, in lower-income neighborhoods with poorly funded schools, the impact of police presence can be much harsher on students and create negative feelings and resentment (Mallett, 2016).

Historical

The baby boomer explosion of 80 million individuals born between 1946 and 1964 created a dramatic increase in school enrollment (Insley, 2001). Educators quickly realized that they needed an alternative approach to school regulation and discipline. Corporal punishment was no longer an effective practice, and the implementation of school suspensions and expulsions began to emerge (Insley, 2001). Subsequently, by the 1970s and 1980s, in-school suspensions were implemented as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions as the result of lawsuits such as *Goss vs. Lopez* (Insley, 2001). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, schools began to abandon the rehabilitative approach to school discipline such as in-school suspension, in which the student could still engage in school assignments and activities albeit removed from the classroom (Insley, 2001). Instead, schools began to adopt the rigid “get tough” approach to school discipline later called “zero tolerance” (Insley, 2001, p. 1045).

The term *zero tolerance* was nationally recognized during the Reagan administration due to the War on Drugs and was adopted by schools as a means to call for student expulsion for drug and gang-related activity (Mallett, 2017). By 1993, many schools began to use the term *zero tolerance* as a philosophy that stipulated severe predetermined consequences for unsafe or unacceptable student behaviors (Mallett, 2017). Yet, the term *zero-tolerance policies* refers to individual school or district-wide policies that have been mandated and predetermine typically harsh punishments often associated with suspensions and expulsions for a wide range of rule violations (Smith, 2015). Zero-tolerance policies are considered the most extreme form of punishment under the punishment paradigm (Smith, 2015). When the term was first used in the 1980s, it was defined as suspension and expulsion policies consistently enforced in response to violent acts in the school setting (National Association of School Psychologists, 2001).

By the early 1990s due to a high number of school shootings, President Bill Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA), which required local school districts to expel for at least one year any student who brought a weapon to school (Pigott et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). School districts also had the option to enact zero-tolerance policies at that time, but in doing so they would lose some federal funds (Smith, 2015). The 1999 Columbine shootings were a pivotal moment in the school system and led to the expansion of zero-tolerance policies worldwide (Smith, 2015). By 2000, the policy was being implemented for simple infractions such as speaking too loudly or truancy (NASP, 2001). The policy was not only being used to keep students safe but also as a means of “keeping them under control” (Smith, 2015, p. 127).

SROs were first implemented in school systems during the 1950s in Flint, Michigan, to deter crime through proactive crime control (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). The term *school resource officer* was developed in the 1960s and a number of SRO programs and school policing were implemented in subsequent decades (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). The increased number of SRO programs was a result of federal funding programs that provided grants to jurisdictions (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). A 2018 report from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 42% of U.S. schools reported that they had at least one SRO present at least one day a week (NASRO, 2019). The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) states that the responsibilities of SROs are divided into three equal parts of teacher, counselor, and law enforcement officer (NASRO, 2015). The Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) recommended that school-based law enforcement officers should be law enforcers, informal counselors, educators, and emergency managers (DOJ COPS, 2016).

Ryan et al. (2018) stated that first and foremost SROs are police officers responsible for

the protection of life and property through the enforcement of laws and ordinances. SROs also work closely with educators on attendance issues and counselors in the school and community to assist to help build positive working relationships (Ryan et al., 2018). As complaints concerning challenging student behavior increased among teachers and administrators along with lack of training in positive behavioral interventions, schools became overly reliant on harsh and aversive behavioral interventions, including suspension and restraint, which pushed SROs into the disciplinary role (Ryan et al., 2018).

Social

Cuellar and Markowitz (2015) and Aldridge (2018) argued that the expansion of zero-tolerance policies is one of the primary causes of the school-to-prison pipeline, a term that describes the criminalization of schools as institutions of social control that place more emphasis on security than on education (Marchbanks et al., 2018). Schools with high levels of racial and ethnic minorities are more “prison-like” with features such as police presence, security measures, and surveillance (Marchbanks et al., 2018). Zero-tolerance policies in schools have created minimum requirements for disciplinary action for student misbehaviors (Aldridge, 2018). Many states and schools expanded the original zero-tolerance statutes from infractions involving weapons and drugs to also include aggressive behavior (Heilbrun et al., 2015). Morrison (2003) describes student misbehaviors as a violation of a relationship, either with teachers, administrators, or other students. Components of zero-tolerance policies assert that the removal of troubled students is an effective way for increasing the success rate of the student body (Karanxha, 2017). Zero-tolerance policies instead contributed to the disparity in arrests between students with disabilities as well as minority students, and neither students nor members of the community understood the added implications of SROs in their roles and responsibilities

(Zausch, 2018).

The presence of SROs in schools has become so prevalent with zero-tolerance policies that the roles of officers of the law and school employees have become blurred; critiques of the role of SROs include the violation of civil liberties (Pigott et al., 2017). Research has shown that the presence of police officers in the school atmosphere can be a challenging and potentially negative experience for many students (Theriot, 2016; May et al., 2018). Studies have shown that adolescents have the tendency to be critical of police and may hold negative or indifferent views of law enforcement officers (Theriot, 2016). However, positive interactions with police officers have been shown to yield favorable reviews, while negative interactions can lead to negative evaluations of officers of the law (Theriot, 2016). In 2016, African Americans made up 2.3 million of the incarcerated population, and 35% of African American children Grades 7–12 had been suspended or expelled at some point during their time in school (Pigott et al., 2017). A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights showed that African American students are suspended at a rate three times greater than White students are (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

The Justice Policy Institute found that having SROs in schools increases student arrest rates and reduces the agency of school administrators in resolving disciplinary infractions (May et al., 2018). Adolescent behavior is subsequently criminalized where school discipline is delegated to SROs rather than being handled by internal school personnel (Fisher & Hennessy, 2015). The training of SROs and their responsibility to the police department leads them to view problematic behaviors as crimes in comparison to school personnel who are trained to view them as obstacles to learning and developmental challenges (Fisher & Hennessy, 2015). A study conducted in a southeastern school district found that schools with SROs had five times more

arrests than schools without an SRO presence (Maddox, 2016).

Theoretical

Modern deterrence theories, which have their foundation in classical criminological theory, posit that punishments for crimes should be swift, certain, and proportionate to the crime (Tomlinson, 2016). Deterrence theory was revived in the 1970s by various economists and criminologists interested not only in an explanation of why people commit crimes but also in a solution to crime (Tomlinson, 2016). Deterrence was separated into two categories—general deterrence and specific deterrence (Tomlinson, 2016). General deterrence suggests that the general population will be deterred from offenses when made aware of others being punished (Tomlinson, 2016). The concept of specific deterrence suggests that if individuals who commit crimes are caught and punished, they will be deterred from committing other crimes in the future (Tomlinson, 2016). The fear of punishment is considered a major incentive in deterring crime, and deterrence theory is associated with severe and disproportionate punishment (Lee, 2017). According to deterrence theory, a form of punishment is justified by its deterrence value, meaning that for crime or behavior to be deterred, the punishment needs to be severe enough for change (Lee, 2017). Zero tolerance operates under two core assumptions: (1) harsh punishments will deter student misconduct and (2) the removal of the most serious offenders will improve the school climate (Skiba et al., 2011). Deterrence theory has had little impact on educational policymaking but mirrors zero-tolerance policies in its intentions.

Situation to Self

My motivations for this research were the continued struggles that some minority students are facing, specifically those related to their education. I remember that while working on my master's degree, I attended a community meeting for the board of education in my

hometown. The concern was the school-to-prison pipeline because so many students were receiving discipline referrals. In a school district that has a large percentage of families with low educational levels and in the low-income category, it was a major concern that those students were becoming a part of the never-ending flow through the school-to-prison pipeline. The questions discussed were how we can help this situation and what resources and programs we can implement to help decrease this occurrence. Considering the area that I am from and my familiarity with the impact of socioeconomic status on students' ability to excel in school, I am aware that biases may be present.

My axiological assumptions were that I value an equal-opportunity educational system and the important responsibility that persons of power and position in education have to ensure that all students are treated equally. I do have personal biases about school policies and the prevalent negative effects on minority students and students from poorer families. My feelings regarding this bias stem not only from being an African American woman but also from witnessing the struggles of minority youth in multiple avenues of the social and academic structure. It is also clear that racism is a very sensitive topic in today's social and political climate. Considering the research presented on the referral rates of African American students and the consequent relation to the school-to-prison pipeline, my bias would be to consider zero-tolerance policies as overutilized by school due to a lack of understanding on the part of SROs.

The ontological assumptions of the research relate to the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2015). My ontological assumptions in this research were that the reality of the perceptions of zero tolerance and its effects on students, specifically minority students and students from economically disadvantaged homes, would be revealed through the relationships the SROs describe with the students. The perceptions of the SROs and their relationships with the students

will be essential in how the SROs describe zero tolerance and how they do their job. Therefore, I investigated the relevant relationships of the SROs shown to be essential for the accomplishment of their duties in their schools.

The epistemological assumptions of the research rely on the data collected from the participants. My epistemological assumption was that what counts as knowledge for the study is represented by the statements of the participants. My collaboration with the participants was established by spending time with them during data collection through interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, the participants helped me become an insider in their field through their weekly detailed journal entries. Knowledge in this study was the direct quotes and statements of the participants, who are SROs. This knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The length of the study was four months for in-field study, which I believed would allow for enough time to get to know the participants. This was because the participants had served in the SRO capacity for at least a year beforehand and thus had already established a knowledge base for their position and school policies.

The constructivism paradigm was represented in this study as I utilized the viewpoints of SROs in their social interactions with the students. Constructivism is more interpretive (Patton, 2015) and views the world as socially constructed (Theys, 2017). In constructivism, the meaning and implications of zero-tolerance will be defined as a result of the social interactions of the SROs with the students and school staff they encounter as a part of their role in the school. The goal of the research under the constructivism paradigm was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of zero tolerance and its subjective meaning as formed by the participants through interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The meaning given to zero-tolerance policies and the role of SROs was a part of the inquiry with the SROs. Consequently, this inquiry included

SROs' understanding of the effects of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students, mainly through their interactions with the students.

Problem Statement

The problem was that the implementation of zero-tolerance policies has created a system of immediate punishment for students that results in a criminalization in education that disproportionately impacts economically disadvantaged students (Mallett, 2017; Thompson, 2016). The implementation of security measures with zero-tolerance policies, such as police officers serving as SROs, has created a prison-like environment and is found to be much harsher on students in lower-income neighborhoods with more poorly funded schools (Mallett, 2016). SROs represent the nexus between schooling and policing as sworn police officers are placed in the school environment with the intent of deterring violence and misbehavior by students; this strategy is solely based on the view of the police officer as the authority figure (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The objectives of SROs were outlined as bridging the gap between officers and students, encouraging students to cooperate with law enforcement, and decreasing deviant behavior and crime in schools (May et al., 2018). Police and SRO presence in schools has become so common that the line between the roles of officers of the law and school employees has become blurred (Pigott et al., 2017). The influx of police into schools ultimately can result in the diminishment of the discretionary roles of teachers and staff (Pigott et al., 2017) as SROs have become increasingly involved in addressing the behavior of students (Glenn, 2019). The presence of SROs in the school environment also allows for the temptation of police officers to misuse their authority as a behavior management strategy (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018).

Deterrence theory, which has served as a foundation in criminal policymaking throughout American history, is based on the principal assumption that a message is relayed to a target

group, the target group receives the message and perceives it as a threat, and the group makes rational choices based on the information received (Tomlinson, 2016). Zero-tolerance policies were developed to deter adult crime, and developers held to the belief that harsher punishment would lead to a decline in crime (Lester et al., 2015). The introduction of zero tolerance into the school system was expected to have the same effect on school discipline but instead has been associated with negative outcomes for students (Lester et al., 2015). The added incorporation of police personnel as SROs in this policymaking blurred the distinction between schooling and policing. Deterrence theory applied to criminal behavior had the intent of deterring acts of crime through severe punishment (Tomlinson. 2016), and school zero-tolerance policies were also intended to deter problem behaviors through severe punishment. Deterrence theory applied to the current study will help understand the implications of zero-tolerance policies as it applies to the school system from the perspective of SROs. Furthermore, understanding the perceptions of SROs regarding zero-tolerance policies and economically disadvantaged students will help with the development of alternative strategies to assist these students who are being disproportionately punished and criminalized by zero-tolerance policies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers' perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. At the time of this research, zero-tolerance policies were generally defined as individual school or district-wide policies that mandated predetermined typically harsh punishments, such as suspensions and expulsion for a wide range of rule violations (Smith, 2015) that are perceived to be threatening to students or faculty (Pigott et al., 2018). Criminalization was defined as a collective process by

which a criminal identity is ascribed to an individual or group of individuals through modes of punishment, monitoring, and control (Basile et al., 2019). The theory guiding this study was Gibbs's (1985) deterrence theory, which incorporates the action of deterrence that occurs when a criminal or offender refrains from criminal activity because he or she perceives some threat of punishment.

Significance of the Study

Zero-tolerance policies have been defined as a form of school discipline that imposes severe punishment, such as the removal of students from school, for a broad array of minor to major offenses (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). SROs play an important role in the applications of zero tolerance within the schools, and while the implementation of SROs was meant to create a safer school environment for students, it has instead caused more harm than good through increasing the criminalization of school-based offenses and minor problems (Mallett, 2016).

Empirical Significance

The empirical significance to the field is that this research contributes to the continued understanding of zero-tolerance policy and its implications as perceived by SROs. Previous research on zero-tolerance policies has focused on their effects in urban schools and communities on the academic performance and mental health of students, parents, and the communities surrounding them (Mowen, 2017; Perry & Morris, 2014). Previous researchers focused on specific populations, such as African American girls (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017), African American students with disabilities (Annamma, 2015; Erevelles, 2014), and LGBTQ youth (Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Numerous studies have emphasized the increased suspension and expulsion rate of African American students because of zero-tolerance policies (Curran, 2016a; Howard, 2016; Hoffman, 2014). However, there is a lack of research on the

perceptions of SROs, who play an integral part in the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. This study sought to bridge this gap by focusing on their perspective and will add to the current literature on zero-tolerance policies.

Theoretical Significance

Deterrence is a longstanding idea from the 18th century that states that an individual can be drawn away from behaviors as a result of severe punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Deterrence has two main criminological aspects—general and specific (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). General deterrence states that individuals respond to the threat of punishment while specific deterrence states that individuals respond to the effects of punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Deterrence theory has served a purpose in criminology by developing policies and practices to reduce criminal behavior (Tomlinson, 2016). The application of deterrence theory to education is evident in the intentions of zero tolerance as the basis of exclusionary disciplinary policies meant to decrease problem behaviors (Mongan & Walker, 2012). This study sought to add to the current literature on deterrence theory with new implications for policymaking in educational institutions. Furthermore, the research explored the actual impact of deterrence practices on students.

Practical Significance

This research offered the opportunity for an interpretive view into the perspectives of SROs regarding zero-tolerance policies and the impacts of these policies on specific student populations. SROs are considered the gatekeepers of the juvenile justice system, and the impact of zero-tolerance policies implementing the SRO program in schools has not only been an increase in youth contact with law enforcement but has also brought more legal repercussions (Layton & Shaler, 2019). Research has shown that many in the SRO role experience conflict

between being a law enforcement officer versus being a mentor and counselor to students (Rhodes, 2017). The current research contributed to the development of further training for SROs to establish the boundary between schooling and policing and further limiting the aspect of criminalization of students in school disciplinary practices. School expectations of SROs and their roles differ widely, and such expectations influence how SROs perform their work (Rhodes, 2017).

Research Questions

Central Question: How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers?

RQ1: How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies?

SRO programs were implemented as the second approach to school safety following the implementation of zero-tolerance policies to work in collaboration with schools to address crime and disorder problems (Dohy & Banks, 2018). Since the incorporation of the SRO program, it is estimated that 43% of public schools now utilize the services of an SRO and researchers have argued that the effect of SROs mirrors the expansion of sentencing for criminal offenders (Pigott et al., 2018).

RQ2: How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies?

African American students are sent to the office, suspended, and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their White counterparts, and these differences cannot be explained by different rates of problem behaviors (Girvan et al, 2017). Research on the juvenile justice system indicates that minoritized students are more likely to receive frequent harsh

treatment from educators and African American high school students are suspended at a higher rate everywhere in the U.S. (Turner & Beneke, 2020). Furthermore, SROs are a feature of the trend of the criminalization of American public school students (Wolf, 2018).

RQ3: How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies?

In the law enforcement role, SROs monitor schools for both safety issues and disorder, but in the counselor role they are expected to form meaningful relationships with students to help guide them away from delinquency and toward success (Wolf, 2018). Since many SROs have not been sufficiently trained to interact with school-aged children, scholars have pointed out that the law enforcement and counselor roles may sometimes conflict (Wolf, 2018).

RQ4: What do school resource officers believe makes zero tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline?

The American Psychological Association (2008) conducted a review of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies and found that they failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline. The removal of students was touted as an effective measure to promote school safety, but studies have not shown zero-tolerance policies to be an effective method of alleviating school disruptions (Bell, 2015).

Definitions

1. *Criminalization*—a collective process by which a criminal identity is ascribed to an individual or group of individuals through modes of punishment, monitoring, and control (Basile et al., 2019)
2. *Deterrence*—a coercive strategy based on conditional threats with the goal of persuading the opponent to behave in a desirable way (Taddeo, 2018)

3. *Deterrence theory*—a theory based on the principal assumptions that the target group receives a message perceived as a threat and that the group makes rational choices based on the information received (Tomlinson, 2016)
4. *School-to-prison-pipeline*—the policies and practices that push schoolchildren out of the classroom and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015)
5. *School Resource Officers (SROs)*—law enforcement officers from local police departments who are assigned by their departments to work in a specific school or school district (May et al., 2018).
6. *Zero-tolerance policies*—individual school or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined typically harsh punishments, such as suspensions and expulsion, for a wide variety of rule violations (Smith, 2015)

Summary

The problem is that the implementation of zero-tolerance policies has created a system of immediate punishment for students and results in a criminalization in education that disproportionately impacts economically disadvantaged students (Mallett, 2017). It is not known how SROs perceive the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority students. Zero-tolerance policies were developed with the intention of improving school culture and school environment but instead have had negative impacts on the caring culture of American schools (Lester et al, 2015). Furthermore, the continuance of zero-tolerance policies with the implementation of SRO programs has resulted in the criminalization of student behavior (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). This research contributes to current knowledge of the implications of zero-tolerance policies and SROs, who are the culmination of the process of implements zero

tolerance in schools. This research is also relevant to the further policy developments in the school system related to disciplinary practices and the corresponding effects on specific student populations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers' perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina schools. The implementation and utilization of zero-tolerance policies along with the assignment of school resource officers as a means of safety for the schools have led to a prison-like atmosphere in some schools that is unhealthy, creating an unfriendly atmosphere unsuitable for an academic environment (Raufu, 2017). SRO duties vary across school districts (Nolan, 2018), and the SRO job description can be difficult due to the lack of specific roles and definite responsibilities (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). SROs may also have a significant influence on the number of disciplinary referrals and arrests (Nance 2015; Owens 2016). Furthermore, heavy reliance on zero-tolerance policies has been viewed as a major contributing factor to the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). Research has also shown these policies to disproportionately affect African American students (Javdani, 2019; Nance, 2015) and the protocols to serve special populations (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). This chapter includes the theoretical framework, a survey of related literature, and a summary of the chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of deterrence theory is derived from criminology and traces its intellectual origin to Beccaria (1963) and Bentham (1948) and its empirical roots to Gibbs (1968) and Tittle (1969). These scholars were interested in the relationship between punishment severity with lower crime rates (Schell-Busey et al., 2016). Deterrence theory is based off the argument that individuals will be deterred from engaging in delinquent or criminal behavior if the

consequences assigned for that behavior are appropriately swift, severe, and certain (Pratt et al., 2006; Nagin, 2003; Nagin, 1998). Deterrence, a concept from the 18th century (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017), has long been a useful concept in criminology as well as in security policy such as the influence of nuclear weapons in going to war (Bendiek & Metzger, 2015). Criminologists and economists, having long studied determinants of recidivism in criminal activity, identify three main factors in criminal behavior—incapacitation, rehabilitation, and deterrence (Hansen, 2015).

Taddeo (2018) characterized deterrence as a coercive strategy based on conditional threats with the goal of persuading an opponent to behave desirably. Of the three core concepts in the theory of deterrence, the first states that individuals respond to changes in certainty: the second is that individuals respond to changes in severity; the third is that individuals respond to changes in immediacy as it relates to punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Deterrence theory is characterized as being general or specific in the application (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017; Schell-Busey et al., 2016). General deterrence states that individuals respond to the threat of punishment, while specific deterrence states that individuals are responsive to the experience of punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Byrne et al. (2016) describe general deterrence as the ability to prevent undesirable behaviors through sanctions or punishment and specific deterrence as the ability to prevent further offenses by those who have already offended and been subjected to punishment.

The economic model of deterrence asserts that offenders face a gamble in their behaviors (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). This means that the offender can either commit the offense and receive the criminal benefit with subsequent punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017), such as choosing to steal and receiving the criminal benefit of the stolen property but also facing

subsequent punishment for the behavior. The offender could also choose to not commit the offense and receive no benefit, aside from this choice being risk-free from punishment (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Utilizing the basics of deterrence theory, the original model was expanded to a reconceptualized model of deterrence that asserted four central deterrent mechanisms: (1) direct experience with punishment, (2) indirect experience with punishment, (3) direct experience with punishment avoidance, and (4) indirect experience with punishment avoidance (Bates et al., 2015). Essentially, illegal behavior is deterred via direct and indirect experiences of threat of punishment and encouraged by direct and indirect experiences of punishment (Bates et al., 2015). Bates et al. (2015) found that using deterrence strategies to try and create compliance was ineffective.

Deterrence in the military dates to the 1920s and 1930s and grew as a military strategy for deterring opposing behaviors of the enemy (Bendiek & Metzger, 2015). Bendiek and Metzger (2015) defined *deter* as meaning to discourage or turn aside or restrain by fear. The intent was to discourage people from acting in a way that gave them advantages but harmed others (Bendiek & Metzger, 2015). Deterrence continues to be a strategy used in the military (Powell, 2008; Zagare & Kilgour, 2000) and cybercrime (Sterner, 2011). Deterrence theory has also been applied to the enforcement of road safety measures (Bates et al, 2012; Fleiter et al., 2013; Watling & Leal, 2012). Some researchers, however, have found that rather than serving as a deterrent, prior punishment appears to encourage future offending (Bates et al., 2017). Analysis of deterrence in drunk driving cases where individuals were faced with punishments, such as the loss of driving privileges or worse, showed that the implementation of these severe punishments did deter future offenses (Hansen, 2015). Corporate deterrence theory focuses on sanctions in the work environment (Simpson et al., 2007; Buell, 2006; Cohen, 2000). Deterrence techniques have

implications for employee behavior modification (Wall et al., 2015). Under deterrence theory, this includes the threat of sanctions for breaking rules or violating policies (Aurigemma & Matson, 2016).

Novak (2019) sought to determine if suspension by the age of 12 was directly or indirectly associated with involvement with the juvenile justice system by age 18 by studying data from the LONGSCAN consortium, which sampled 1,354 children ages four through six with continued data collection through the age of 18 for the participants. The researcher utilized self-report measures to report justice system involvement by the age of 18. Novak (2019) found that youth were more likely to report involvement with the justice system by age 18 if they had been suspended by age 12. Furthermore, the use of harsh punishments such as suspension can contribute to future problem behaviors and increases the odds of justice system involvement (Novak, 2019). Consequently, experiencing at least one out-of-school suspension directly increases the odds of a student becoming involved with the justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011).

One presumption of deterrence theory is that upon learning of the consequences of an offense, a potential offender will refrain from committing the offense (Lee, 2017). Furthermore, because the punishment is supposed to deter unwanted behavior, the punishment is usually in the form of a negative experience that has a cost or price to the offender (Lee, 2017). Deterrence ideals are the basis of exclusionary disciplinary policies, and the threat of suspension and expulsion is thought to be severe enough to deter problem behaviors, even among those without any firsthand experience of the consequence previously (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

Related Literature

Zero-tolerance policies are meant to impose harsh consequences on all learners to minimize disparities (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). Evolution in

school of zero-tolerance practices has required SROs to deal with disciplinary issues, which has inadvertently increased the likelihood of student contact with the juvenile justice system and promoted the school-to-prison pipeline (Counts et al., 2018). Teachers and students of all backgrounds are deserving of a school environment that is safe and conducive to learning, but harsh imposition of punishment is counterproductive to these essential needs (Lynch et al., 2016). Schools that neglect to prioritize the feeling of safety among the students in their educational environment often rely heavily on strict disciplinary actions such as the removal of students under zero tolerance (Lynch et al., 2016). The placement of police officers in schools has been critiqued as part of a system that harms and criminalizes youth of color, particularly African American youth (Turner & Beneke, 2020).

Zero-Tolerance Policies

The term *zero tolerance* was nationally recognized during the Reagan administration's War on Drugs in the early 1980s and was adopted by schools as a means for calling for student expulsion for drug and gang-related activity (Mallett, 2016). By 1993, many schools began to use zero tolerance as a philosophy that stipulated severe predetermined consequences for unsafe or unacceptable behaviors including illicit or disruptive behaviors (Mallett, 2016). Smith (2015) states that *zero-tolerance policies* refers to individual school or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined and usually harsh punishments such as suspension or expulsions for rule violations. Schools that have adopted zero-tolerance policies are operating on the premise that school violence is not to be tolerated and that students who display violent behavior must be severely punished (Kodelja, 2019).

Researchers have argued that the expansion of zero-tolerance policies is a direct result of the Columbine Effect (Muschert & Madfis 2013; Muschert & Peguero 2010). The Columbine

Effect originates from the 1999 massacre at Colorado's Columbine High School, a multiple-victim rampage by two students using guns and explosives. The Columbine Effect has resulted in the expansion of punitive discipline and security being deemed necessary to manage and control the perceived risks (Madfis, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies have also been called "mechanisms of expulsion" that are not effective approaches in reducing bullying or school violence (Berlowitz, 2015). Curran (2019), who researched the legal implications of zero tolerance on the federal, state, and school district levels, identified two types of zero tolerance: (1) explicit zero-tolerance (EZT), in which laws and policies explicitly use the term *zero tolerance* regardless of the punishment mandated offense or the offenses covered and (2) mandatory expulsion (ME), which refers to laws and policies that require expulsion for certain offenses without using the term *zero tolerance*. EZT will implement severe punishments such as expulsions for zero-tolerance, whereas ME policies will dictate expulsion regardless of the action being sanctioned as "zero tolerance" by definition (Curran, 2019). Curran (2019) utilized the Westlaw Legal Database to search current laws and drew a random sample of 300 school districts from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD) for the purposes of the research. The data showed that states and districts had far fewer EZT policies than ME policies (Curran, 2019). Lower-level governments were shown to apply more EZT policies and districts serving higher proportions of minority students use more ME policies for a wider range of offenses (Curran, 2019). No federal laws were found to use the term *zero tolerance* except the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 (Curran, 2019).

Al though zero-tolerance policies were intended to apply harsh punishments for a wide variety of rule violations (Smith, 2015), such policies have been expanded to include punishment for nonviolent and subjective offenses, particularly for students of color (Ruiz, 2017; Howard,

2016). It was reported that during 2006–2007 over half a million students (to be exact, 552,161 individuals) who violated school safety policies under zero-tolerance were excluded from school (Losinski et al., 2014). Ruiz (2017) found that 95% of offenses under zero tolerance were for minor violations, such as yelling at teachers or leaving class without permission.

Supporters of zero-tolerance policies argue that the problem lies in the way that these zero-tolerance policies are implemented and that the goals of zero-tolerance policies have never been an issue of controversy (Kodelja, 2019). Kodelja (2019) also states that zero-tolerance policies are controversial when punishment is imposed on students who are innocent of any actual school infractions due to a whole class disruption. Kodelja (2019) argues that this is morally wrong, and that zero-tolerance policies are imposed as unjust punishment on innocent students in the form of equal punishment for unequal offenses. Kodelja (2019) opposes the morally inappropriate action of imposing unjust punishment on innocent students rather than the actual severity of the punishments on students. The use of suspensions and expulsions in zero-tolerance policies was expected to make schools less disruptive, but some researchers have found the opposite (Skiba, 2019; Bell, 2015). Educators utilize zero-tolerance policies to further the agenda of procuring higher scores on standardized tests by punishing minor offenses such as tardiness, absence from class, and disrespectfulness to teachers (Thompson, 2016). Another aspect of zero-tolerance is the “broken glass theory,” which argues that it is necessary to punish minor offenses to avoid major ones (Smith, 2015). Evidence suggests that the utilization of zero-tolerance policies may contribute to lower academic performance, increased dropouts, and expansion of racial discipline gaps (Balfanz et al., 2015; Curran, 2016a, 2016b; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Shollenberger, 2015).

African Americans make up 50% of an incarcerated population of 2.3 million, and 35% of African American children in Grades 7–12 have been suspended or expelled at some point during their educational years (Pigott et al., 2018). Smith (2015) states that many students in urban areas arrive at school every day to the presence of metal detectors and wand searches, which has an adverse effect on the learning experience. Researchers have found that suspension is a predictor of future suspensions and not a deterrent (Raffaele & Mendez, 2003). Fableo (2011) showed that being subjected to a single suspension or expulsion for a discretionary offense not involving a weapon triples a student's likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system. The American Psychological Association Zero-Tolerance Task force (2008) found that in general the implementation of zero-tolerance policies has not been shown effective in creating safer schools. An analysis by Cuellar and Markowitz (2015) found that school suspension policies utilized to handle problem behaviors may contribute to the overall crime rates out of school, specifically out-of-school suspension. Marchbanks et al. (2018) focused on the criminalization of school discipline and the ethnic and racial disparities of school discipline policies and juvenile justice referrals. After analyzing data from seventh-grade cohorts at urban schools, Marchbanks et al. (2018) concluded that African American and Latino American students were associated with higher rates of juvenile justice referrals when compared to White students. It was also found that African American students receive higher rates of juvenile justice referrals in suburban schools as well (Marchbanks et al., 2018). Losen and Skiba (2010) identified significant differences in the number of suspensions among subgroups and found that more than 28% of middle school African American males in their sample had been suspended over the past year in comparison to 10% of White males (Heilbrun et al., 2015). When Heilbrun et al. (2015) sampled 306 high school principals' attitudes towards zero-tolerance policies, the

results showed that the principals' endorsement of zero-tolerance policies was positively correlated with higher suspension rates. Furthermore, greater support for zero-tolerance policies came from principals who believe that order is maintained in their schools through the assistance of zero-tolerance policies (Heilbrun et al., 2015).

Smith and Harper's (2015) research on school discipline found that during the 2011–2012 school year 1.2 million African American students were suspended from school in the southern states (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). According to Skiba (2014), studies indicate that the overrepresentation of minority students in the referral population is related to bias among school officials (Smith, 2015). The overuse of zero-tolerance policies has also been labeled as a “mishandling” of school discipline policies (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). According to Crenshaw et al. (2015), this allowed for African American girls to be over-policed and under-protected (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). Wallace et al. (2008) found that tenth-grade African American girls are at a disproportionate risk for suspension and expulsion since they are five times more likely than tenth-grade White girls to be suspended or expelled.

Researchers contend that the contemporary school discipline practices mirror the criminal justice system through the criminalization of the students' misbehavior (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Kupchik, 2010; Wacquant, 2001; Welch & Payne, 2010). Furthermore, the addition of SROs along with cameras and zero-tolerance policies only strengthens this argument (Morris & Perry, 2016). Huang and Cornell (2017) focused on differences in behavior between African American and White students to account for the disproportionate rates of harsh discipline and suspensions among the two populations. Huang and Cornell (2017) studied the self-reports of students for suspensions to determine the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that could contribute to the higher rate of out-of-school

suspensions for African American students. The results showed that while African American and White students were disciplined for the same incidents, African American students were more likely to be suspended for minor infractions such as bad language or arguing when compared to White students at a rate of 16.3% versus 11.5% for White students (Huang & Cornell, 2017). African Americans and boys were found to show more aggressive behaviors, but ultimately the racial disparities of zero tolerance and discipline were a result of differential decisions by school authorities (Huang & Cornell, 2017).

Berlowitz et al. (2015) interviewed educators and administrators and found that, while alternative punishments were found for White middle-class students to please parents, minority students who were considered to have behavioral problems were eliminated from the student population by strict adherence to zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, it was found that lower-income schools with higher proportions of African American students were most likely to implement and adhere to the strict enforcement of zero-tolerance policies, thus expelling students (Berlowitz et al., 2015). The upper socioeconomic schools did include zero-tolerance as part of their strategy for discipline but were found to rarely enforce out-of-school suspension in comparison to lower-income schools that were commended for strict adherence to zero-tolerance (Berlowitz et al., 2015). Berlowitz et al. (2015) stated that even though zero tolerance was intended to protect and prevent violence, the implementation of zero tolerance was supporting an undercurrent of institutional racism. Caton (2012) found that African American males who had experience disciplinary actions believed that school security measures created an unwelcoming school environment. Bell (2015) also found that many African American male students described being the target of intense scrutiny by school security officers. Zero-tolerance policies not only

increase students' likelihood of participation in the juvenile justice system, but these policies also significantly harm the educational opportunities of the students being targeted (Aldridge, 2018).

School Resource Officers

To facilitate the enforcement of zero tolerance, the Safe Schools Act of 1994 funded partnerships for in-school police officers, also known as school resource officers (Fisher and Hennessey, 2016). To ensure that the policies of zero tolerance were supported, the funding for SROs increased significantly starting in 1996 (Lynch et al., 2016). These efforts caused the number of high schools with full-time law enforcement to triple by 2008 subsequently leading to the hyper-criminalization of minor misbehaviors and higher suspensions and expulsions (Lynch, Gainey, & Chappell, 2016). North Carolina was one of the first states in the nation to establish an SRO program (Barnes, 2016). According to the NC Center for Safer Schools (2015), almost all middle and high schools in the state were assigned an SRO by 2015 (Barnes, 2016). Following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, which prompted President Obama to pledge funding for hundreds of such officers, within a few years 58% to 70% of schools had some police or security personnel (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016). Fisher and Hennessey (2016) found that those schools with SROs had roughly 21% higher rates of school-based disciplinary incidents than they had before implementing SROs.

Schools are expected to maintain some level of discipline to ensure a safe and stable learning environment for all students. Thus the joining of education and law enforcement has had a significant impact on the philosophies of behavior management (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). SROs have undoubtedly become the most visible representation of the union between schooling and policing (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The strategy is based on the belief that the police officer should be a primary source of power within the school with more power than the teacher

and that students should fear punishment under the judicial system (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). Policing in schools has become so prevalent that criminologists have taken an interest in the schools in the United States (Burton, 2017).

Role of SROs

The research on the roles of SROs is limited (Finn et al., 2005; Finn & McDevitt, 2005; Travis & Coon, 2005). Studies have shown, however, that SROs mainly spend their time in their law enforcement roles (Travis & Coon, 2005). The lack of clearly defined roles for SROs makes it difficult to describe what SROs do (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). Additionally, the incorporation of SROs into schools creates a shift of responsibility for handling disciplinary actions from the teachers and administrators to the SROs (Theriot, 2009). NASRO has established guidelines, but studies of the extent to which SRO duties reflect the guidelines have found great variation across schools and districts in terms of the actual roles and responsibilities taken on by SROs (Nolan, 2018). Many districts do not clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SROs (Gottfredson et al., 2020), leaving interpretation up to the school administration and the SROs themselves. Schlosser (2014) investigated the SRO program along with its roles and responsibilities. Utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis, Schlosser (2014) found that the roles of SROs perform include teacher, counselor, and mentor, but the role of law enforcement officer dominates in practice (Schlosser, 2014).

Lynch et al. (2016) utilized the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), a nationally representative cross-sectional survey that collects information regarding school practices and programs, to determine how schools' social and educational disadvantages affect the roles and functions of SROs. The seven different roles and functions of SROs that were examined in the study included enforcing security, identifying problems and seeking solutions,

training teachers in school safety, maintaining school discipline, coordinating with local police, mentoring students, and teaching or training students (Lynch et al., 2016). The researchers concluded that the role of SROs in more urban schools varies in education-related functions when compared to less urban schools (Lynch et al., 2016). The findings supported that SROs serve mostly in their intended roles of security enforcement and patrol (law enforcement-related functions) (Lynch et al., 2016). SROs in disadvantaged schools are more likely to be involved with school discipline than their counterparts in schools with more social and educational advantages (Lynch et al., 2016).

Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) studied the roles of SROs and their process of recording and reporting school crimes. Utilizing three years of SSOCS data, Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) found differences in the acts of SROs based on the roles they assumed. SROs were defined as acting either in a mixed approach, which includes law enforcement roles as well as the role of counselor and mentor, or in the strict role of law enforcement (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). Schools with SROs acting in mixed roles were more likely to report nonserious violent and property crimes than schools with SROs acting as only law enforcement, but the latter reported more serious crimes (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). The research shows that although the roles of mentor and teacher were added to the traditional role of law enforcement to help SROs become more embedded in students' lives while deterring crime, the added responsibilities of discipline have had the unintended effect of SROs more frequently reporting less serious offenses that might otherwise have been handled by the school in the traditional means of student discipline (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018).

The research on SROs' perceptions of their own roles is minimal; however, Kelly and Swezey (2015) investigated three metropolitan cities using a cross-sectional survey to assess the

perceptions of SROs as it relates to their duties and responsibilities as well as to the school culture. The findings were that 45% of the SROs reported spending the majority of their time in the law enforcement role while 51% reported that advising was the most time-consuming part of their job and almost as important as their role of law enforcement (Kelly & Swezey, 2015). Furthermore, SROs reported positive responses regarding school culture and the collaboration between SROs and school personnel (Kelly & Swezey, 2015). SROs believed that school personnel maintained school discipline and that the rules were fair (Kelly & Swezey, 2015). Barnes (2016) interviewed a sample of SROs across North Carolina to understand the perceptions of the SROs with regard to the SRO program. Interviewees reported that school personnel did not comprehend the role or understand how to implement their task. In some cases, SROs were used improperly, especially when enforcing school policies, procedures, and requests for help with student discipline issues (Barnes, 2016). The SROs agreed that school personnel expected them to handle school matters when their prime responsibility is law enforcement and that teachers had abandoned their disciplinary roles (Barnes, 2016). However, SROs also reported spending ample time building associations and relationships with students and said that they enjoyed being around them to help develop a positive perception of law enforcement (Barnes, 2016).

McKenna et al. (2016) were also interested in the roles of SROs, specifically what SROs believe they should be doing within their schools as well as how the roles of SROs are established. McKenna et al. (2016) sought to add to the current understanding of the actual and perceived roles of SROs. These researchers (McKenna et al., 2016) interviewed school-based law enforcement (SBLE) who worked in the same capacity as SROs but were under the control of the school district rather than local or county government. Utilizing open-ended interviews,

McKenna et al. (2016) interviewed 26 SBLEs and found that 65% of officers collaborated with school administration, police command, and school board of education and that the police ultimately determine the relevancy of their involvement in certain incidents on school grounds. Sixty-nine percent of SBLEs stated that their duties and roles should mainly be that of the law enforcement officer, and these officers believed they should not have a role in student discipline since such cases were student code of conduct violations that should ultimately be handled by the school district (McKenna et al., 2016). Yet, 54% of officers also believed they should also serve as mentors and role models for students (McKenna et al., 2016).

When Broll and Howells (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate how school administrators perceived SROs, they found that a generally positive perception of SROs existed between school administrators of elementary and high schools in one of the largest metropolitan areas in Canada. Yet, mixed feelings were reported by school administrators concerning the relationships developed between the SROs and students. Some administrators felt that SROs took little initiative in developing relationships with students while other administrators felt their SROs were sufficient in their area (Broll & Howells, 2021). Fine et al. (2019) explored the effects of juvenile contact with law enforcement in the school setting and those students' perceptions of law enforcement. The students in the study participated in an empowerment program involving first responders, such as police officers. The researchers found that students' perceptions of law enforcement personnel were much more positive following participation in the empowerment program (Fine et al., 2019). This relationship could make an important difference in how students perceive law enforcement within their life settings such as school resource officers. Connell's (2018) findings confirmed that student experiences affect

feelings of safety at school but were inconclusive regarding the relationship between school safety measures and students' feelings of safety or fear.

Effectiveness of SROs

Pigott et al. (2018) examined the persistent perception of SROs in public schools and the impact on the number of expulsions recorded by the schools. They concluded that SROs report more frequently to the police as compared to non-SRO security personnel, such as sworn officers not trained as SROs (Pigott et al, 2018). It was also found that the frequency of racial tensions is associated with increased levels of serious violent incidents reported by schools (Pigott et al., 2018). Swartz et al. (2016) also examined the rate of reporting from SROs utilizing the SSOCS and found that the presence of SROs was associated with higher rates of reported serious violence. Schools that utilize SROs appear to detect more violent incidents, which in turn leads to higher rates of reported serious violence (Swartz et al., 2016). Dohy and Banks (2018) focused on the effects on student behaviors of policing in schools with SRO presence. The researchers administered 2,583 surveys to principals, 167 of which responded, and found that increased school police presence was related to an increase in insubordination and violence (Dohy & Banks, 2018). Furthermore, it was found that students' perceptions of how they are viewed by law enforcement may affect their behavior as well the use of punitive disciplinary measures such as zero tolerance (Dohy & Banks, 2018).

Zhang (2019) studied the effects of SROs in middle and high schools on student safety and discipline. The researcher found that schools with SROs reported large numbers of out-of-school suspensions and that schools that had had SROs on site for at least three years had lower rates of crime and disorder (Zhang, 2019). Another researcher (Jackson, 2002) argued that police in schools pose a psychological threat to students who view them as threatening to their freedom

and their ability to engage in legal activities that police may see as undesirable (Zhang, 2019). Zhang (2019) attributed past negative contact that youth may have had with police as contributing to the belief that SRO presence does not reduce offending or create a safer school atmosphere. Na and Gottfredson (2013) utilized a nationally representative sample of public schools in the United States to determine the extent to which police officer presence in schools affected changes in crime-related outcomes. These researchers, who were also interested in alternative outcomes to SRO programs in schools, found that regardless of the types of offenses, they were reported more frequently with SROs (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). Furthermore, the consequences for disciplinary referrals were found to be harsher in schools with SROs (Na & Gottfredson, 2013). At the same time, the research was unable to establish any significant relationship between police association and socially or educationally disadvantaged student populations (Na & Gottfredson, 2013).

May et al. (2018) used records obtained from the administrative offices of the courts to determine if referrals of juveniles to the court system from SROs were more frequent than referrals from schools or general law enforcement. May et al. (2018) investigated whether SROs referred youth for less serious offenses when compared to other authoritative figures such as school employees, family members, and department of human services (DHS) personnel. They concluded that SROs were the most likely to refer youths for moderate and serious offenses that include simple assault and domestic violence (May et al., 2018). The school, family members, and DHS were far more likely to refer students for status offenses such as truancy and running away (May et al., 2018). Yet, some extensive research and experimental analysis (Nance 2015; Owens 2016) has found that increased police presence within the school is associated with increased referrals for serious as well as lower-level offenses (Sykes et al, 2017).

Reingle Gonzalez et al. (2016) found that increased presence of SROs and other safety measures correlated with students' feeling less safe. Theriot (2016) suggested a complex relationship between students, officers, and students' feelings and perceptions as the administered survey found that students' positive attitudes towards SROs appeared to rise as the number of interactions went up. Contrary to this, more SRO interactions also correlated with a lower level of school connectedness (Theriot, 2016) and exacerbated academic underperformance (George, 2015). Research has shown a significant relationship between greater school connectedness and less school violence, but Juvonen (2001) argued that the presence of SROs heightens students' fears of violence (Theriot, 2016).

Effects on Minority and Socioeconomic Groups

Thompson (2016) stated that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately discriminate against African Americans at three levels: the inter-institutional, the intra-institutional, and interpersonal levels. The disproportionate impact of disciplinary referrals and exclusionary discipline on African American students has been investigated by various researchers (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Rocque, 2010; Skiba, et al., 2011; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Eitle & Eitle, 2004). One explanation for the disproportionate impact on African American students is that these students are suspended and expelled more often because they engage in serious misbehaviors more often than other student racial groups (Heilbrun et al., 2015). However, based on a sample of Virginia school discipline records and the Safe Schools Information Resource (SSIR) categorization of disciplinary offenses, Heilbrun et al. (2015) concluded that White students are more likely to receive discipline for offenses deemed objective, such as smoking, whereas African American students are more likely to receive discipline offenses that are subjective, such as disrespect.

The use of exclusionary school discipline increases the probability of long-term negative effects including involvement in the juvenile justice system (Darensbourg et al., 2010). The negative effects of zero-tolerance policies include higher rates of dropout (Balfanz et al., 2013; Carmichael et al., 2005; Fowler & Lightsey, 2007), as well as more frequent school absences and the loss of instruction time for the students (Fabelo et al., 2011). A growing body of research has contributed to data showing that African American students receive more disciplinary suspensions and expulsions than White students (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Racial inequalities have been documented through research and theory regarding the frequency of school-based punishments, which suggests that arrests and incarceration rates later in life are impacted by these inequalities, leading to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Rocque 2010; Welch & Payne, 2010).

Hoffman (2014) investigated the expansion of zero-tolerance policies and the racial differences in students recommended for expulsion as well as the racial differences in the number of days that students were absent from school for any reason, which included suspensions for offenses considered less serious. An urban school district was surveyed, and using a compilation of datasets for the district that included the district's Expulsion Data Summary and enrollment information, Hoffman (2014) found that the expansion of zero-tolerance policies had a greater effect on African American students than on any other student population because of the higher number of expulsions recommended. African American students were also shown to be suspended for longer terms than their White peers at a 7 to 1 ratio (Hoffman, 2014). Gastic (2017) investigated the rate of suspension among African American and Latino students when facing disciplinary action for fighting in school. Gastic (2017) was also interested in the disproportionate rates of discipline as applied to minority populations when

disciplined under a zero-tolerance school policy view. Analyzing multiple datasets that included the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA-DESE), the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Common Core of Data (CCD) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Gastic (2017) concluded that the rate of African American students disciplined for fighting was more than twice that of White students. No significant difference in self-reporting of fighting behavior on school grounds was found between the students (Gastic, 2017). The research supported not only that there is a disparity in race as it relates to discipline and zero tolerance but also that the differences in students' behavior do not fully account for the disproportional rate at which Black students are disciplined (Gastic, 2017).

Students who receive reduced or free lunch are more likely to be punished more harshly and become involved in the criminal justice system than their wealthier peers (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2002). Morris and Perry (2016) surveyed 16,248 students in 17 schools regarding the impact of suspensions on racial differences in achievement. They found that African American students are 7.57 times more likely to be suspended than White students and students who qualify for free lunch are over six times more likely to be suspended as opposed to those who do not qualify (Morris & Perry, 2016). The results also supported the proposition that out-of-school suspension is significantly related to lower academic achievement (Morris & Perry, 2016).

Bleakley and Bleakley (2018) concluded that significant connections exist between the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies and the employment of SRO programs and that this approach can be traced to criminological theories designed to assist police officers with instances of urban disorder. The philosophy and strategy of using sworn police officers as SROs are based

on the view of the police officer as an authority with more power than the ordinary classroom teacher and the fear it creates (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The strategy also relies on the additional fear students have of being punished under the judicial system (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The negative impact of zero-tolerance policies enforced by SROs is more detrimental to minority students than to White students, and studies have shown that schools with higher populations of African American and Latino students have stricter zero-tolerance policies (Maddox, 2016). Merkwae (2015) found in a national survey that although 16% of the student population was African American, 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest were African American.

Theriot and Orme (2016) investigated the associations between the presence of SROs and feelings of safety among middle and high school students of various races. Students at seven middle and five high schools completed a comprehensive survey about their interactions with SROs, feelings of safety, experiences with school violence, and attitudes about school (Theriot & Orme, 2016). The researchers found that interactions with SROs did not affect students' feelings of safety as they hypothesized. However, students' feelings were more associated with specific locations within their schools, such as the hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms (Theriot & Orme, 2016). African American students did show more feelings of being unsafe when compared to other racial groups, but Theriot and Orme (2016) still concluded that there was more of an association between the experiences of the students at school and their feelings of safety than between their actual interactions with SROs and their feeling of safety.

The lack of youth-focused research regarding students' perceptions of SROs and their feelings of safety and connectedness to school prompted Pentek and Eisenberg (2018) to administer a survey to students from varying ethnic and racial groups to determine their

perceptions of safety as well as the differences in experiences with discipline. The researchers hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between SRO presence and school discipline experiences, as well as greater feelings of safety. The researchers also expected there would be fewer positive views of SROs among African American students. They found that the feelings of safety were significantly different across racial groups, with American Indians and African American students experiencing school discipline at three times the rate of White students (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Youth with more positive experiences with SROs received fewer disciplinary referrals, and overall students in schools with SROs reported more feelings of safety (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Positive perceptions of SROs were related to less school discipline and higher feelings of safety, but members of minority races such as African Americans do have fewer positive perceptions of SROs (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018).

SROs have a greater presence in schools with a larger segment of non-White students and this disproportionate presence contributes to disparities in school discipline (Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018). Police officers serving as SROs in schools have been viewed as agents of state violence and part of a system that harms and criminalizes youth of color, particularly African American youth (Turner & Beneke, 2020). While most research on SROs has not focused on race (Javdani, 2019), there is evidence that minority students are more likely to face harsh treatments and that African American boys are more likely to have less desirable outcomes as a result of contact with police officers than do members of other races (Turner & Beneke, 2020). Furthermore, African American girls are more likely to be expelled from schools due to their perceived “bad attitudes,” the criminalization of their appearance, and school practices such as zero tolerance (Turner & Beneke, 2020). SRO programs reproduce and exacerbate racial inequalities in school discipline (Javdani, 2019; Nance, 2015).

Concerns about students with disabilities have been a center for discussion regarding school policies (Losinski et al., 2014) and the need to ensure that zero-tolerance policies are not mishandled with this special population (Alnaim, 2018). Yet, disproportionately high reports of disciplinary infractions have been reported among students with disabilities (Losinski et al., 2014). Fabelo et al. (2011) suggested that minority students and those with disabilities were more likely to be removed from school for disciplinary reasons than White students or students without disabilities. The application of zero-tolerance policies for students with disabilities has been shown to contradict the strategies of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). Special education laws require a highly personalized inquiry before subjecting any student with a disability to significant discipline involving suspension for more than ten days or expulsion (Alnaim, 2018).

Researchers have found that there is a presumption that school discipline is based on the social construct teachers have that the misbehaviors of African American students are worse than those of White students (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Barnes and Motz (2018) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in four phases (from when the respondents were in school through young adulthood up to 32 years of age) to assess the effects of racial inequalities in arrests and the influence inequalities of school-based punishments of African American students. Racial inequalities in school discipline point to biases regarding student misbehavior (Barnes & Motz, 2018). The results of the analyses showed that eliminating the racial inequalities of school discipline between African American students and White students can reduce the arrest rate by 16% (Barnes & Motz, 2018). North Carolina public schools reported that in the 2011–2012 school year African American students had a four times greater rate for short-term and long-term suspension in comparison to White students (NC Child, 2013).

In 2017–2018, African American students (with 116,597 short-term suspensions) had more than double the number White students did (54,396 short-term suspensions) and also had more long-term suspensions (325 in comparison to 230).

School-to-Prison Pipeline and Criminalization

According to Mallett (2016), “The school-to-prison pipeline is a set of policies and practices in schools that make it more likely that students face criminal involvement with the juvenile courts than attain a quality education” (p. 15). Thompson (2016) argued that the school-to-prison pipeline is a collection of punitive policies, laws, and practices that mostly affect African American students, male students, students with disabilities, and students from lower socioeconomic status. Zero-tolerance policies contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Maddox, 2016). Howard (2016) found that the school-to-prison pipeline expansion was due to the increased influences of law enforcement and SROs in public schools, particularly in low-income schools with significant populations of students of color. Flannery (2015) reported that a quarter-million students were referred to police officers under zero tolerance for legal action for infractions that would have originally just warranted minor disciplinary actions from the school (Ryan et al., 2018).

Zero-tolerance policies have led to students being punished and over-policed (Maddox, 2016). Police presence in schools has contributed to the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline as students are over-criminalized rather than treated like students (Maddox, 2016). When police officers are introduced into schools, educators may be more likely to construe behavioral issues as criminal problems (Ispa-Landa, 2017). The increased use of zero-tolerance policies and SROs has contributed to the increase in disciplinary referrals with exclusionary practices (Mallett, 2016). In one study, 61% of youth in juvenile detention centers reported

having been suspended or expelled during the year prior to their confinement (Sedlak & McPherson, 2010). Most of the youth involved in the harsh discipline systems of the schools pose little or no threat to their peers, schools, and communities but may face complicated problems and will have poor long-term outcomes (Mallett, 2016). Problems attributed to unfavorable behaviors that lead to involvement in the discipline system include poverty, trauma, and mental health issues (Mallett, 2016). Conducting a systematic literature review, Mallett (2016) focused on the history of school discipline and verifying the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline as well as identifying who it mainly impacts. Mallett (2016) found that despite attempts to create safer schools in response to school shootings and violence, student arrests have increased 300% to 500% annually, mostly from nonserious offenses, since the implementation of zero-tolerance policies (Theriot, 2009; Thurae & Wald, 2010). Furthermore, the harmful outcomes of the strict policies of discipline have a greater impact on inner-city and lower-income school districts than on higher-income school districts (Addington, 2014). Poverty is a risk factor for suspensions (Theriot et al., 2010), and while race has been considered as a factor in suspension rate, educators have neglected to also consider the effects of both race and poverty on suspensions (Gibson et al., 2014). Haight et al. (2016) examined out-of-school suspensions for 31 African American middle and high school-aged children in addition to the perspectives of their caregivers and educators involved with disciplinary actions. Interviews were conducted in a multicase study of low-income families who lacked the resources to challenge the legality of educators' decisions or to change schools (Haight et al., 2016). The researchers found that the educators were bound by the zero-tolerance policies and had to enforce zero-tolerance sanctions such as suspensions despite the underlying factors in behavioral issues such as fighting (Haight et al., 2016). Furthermore, in these cases social workers who could identify and assess the

underlying factors in student problem behaviors had little involvement in the disciplinary actions taken (Haight et al., 2016).

Nationwide, African American students attend schools where nearly two of every three classmates are low-income, double the rate of White students (Orfield et al., 2012). Scholars (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Shollenberger, 2015) have documented an overrepresentation of African American students, mainly African American males, in exclusionary discipline and have attributed the overrepresentation mainly to disparate uses of exclusionary discipline rather than to socioeconomic status or severity of the offense (Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). Pesta (2018) utilized data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), which contains nationally representative longitudinal data on respondents' social, economic, psychological, and physiological health, to examine how the experiences in early childhood are linked to behavioral outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood (Bruce, 2004; Harris et al., 2009). This data supports previous findings that African American and Hispanic students experienced a disproportionate amount of exclusionary discipline compared to White students (Pesta, 2018). Yet, only African American students experienced an increased risk of engaging in criminal activities after dropping out of school (Pesta, 2018). This could also be attributed to the negative bias of the label of "felon" when associated with African Americans in comparison to Whites or Hispanics (Pesta, 2018). The research also supported that exclusionary discipline did not show any impact on the future offenses of African American students but did show some impact on the future offenses of White students, which could be attributed to the perceived fairness of the disciplinary actions (Pesta, 2018).

To study whether SROs contribute to increased out-of-school arrests among students, May et al. (2018) obtained information from the Youth Information Delivery System (YIDS), which manages the activities of the state's court system through a web-based application. YIDS also allows those working in the juvenile justice system, such as intake officers and youth counselors, to track juveniles at various phases of the juvenile justice system (May et al., 2018). Categorizing youth offenses into four types (status, mild, moderate, and serious offenses), May et al. (2018) found that SROs were responsible for only 3% of referrals (1,776 out of 57,005 referrals), which were primarily disciplinary referrals for moderate and serious offenses, concluding that SROs did not increase the number of students in the school-to-prison pipeline.

School criminalization has been a topic of discussion and research as it relates to the harsh policies of zero tolerance and the school-to-prison pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies have caused a criminalization in education that disproportionately impacts certain students, mainly minorities and those living in lower economic standings (Mallett, 2016). While the research on the criminalization of students is limited, SROs may play an important role in referring students to the juvenile system (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). Theories have emerged regarding the meaning of school criminalization, the first describing school criminalization as a social and political response to the fears of school crime (Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011). The second approach describes school criminalization as an effort to accommodate emergent structural realities and realignments of power (Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011). Basile et al. (2019) refer to criminalization as "the collective process by which a criminal identity is prescribed to an individual or group of individuals through discourse, demeanor, and modes of punishment, monitoring, and control" (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011; Costelloe et al., 2009). Acts considered aspects of criminalization include forcing students to submit to warrantless and intrusive

searches by police officers in lockdown-type school environments (Hirschfield 2008; Lyons & Drew, 2006). In addition, schools' suspensions and zero-tolerance policies based on the logic of deterrence incorporate deterrence sentencing schemes (Hirschfield 2008). Students who are criminally charged in school are more likely to have future contact with the criminal justice system, in part because they are now marked for scrutiny by police, teachers, and administrators alike (McGrew, 2016). Yet, the criminalization of African American students and students of low socioeconomic status results not only from school disciplinary practices in response to student behaviors but also from the fact that these students are disproportionately disciplined and arrested for behaviors that are sometimes ignored among White and wealthier students (McGrew, 2016).

The increase of school suspensions and expulsions has resulted in a decline in academic achievement, school and student body cohesion, and satisfaction with school governance structures (Carter et al., 2014; Deal et al., 2014). When Skiba et al. (2014) focused on whether the actions taken at the school level of suspensions and expulsions increased the risks for future negative outcomes for students and the implications of these actions with the school-to-prison pipeline, the research showed that exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions are in themselves considered developmental risk factors for students in that they are prone not only prone to educational disengagement but also to incarceration.

Summary

Research has shown a relationship between juvenile crime and educational failure (Smith, 2015). Furthermore, the data also suggests that when the educational system fails public school students, juvenile crime rates increase (Smith, 2015). Zero-tolerance policies have been labeled as mishandling of school discipline policies (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017), and major

differences in the discipline have been found among the racial subgroups (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Zero-tolerance policies have created a cycle that exacerbates the school-to-prison pipeline (Counts et al., 2018), supported by major disciplinary actions for both minor (Huang & Cornell, 2017) and major offenses being disproportionately placed on African American and other minority student populations (Ruiz, 2017; Howard, 2016; Smith, 2015). Students disciplined through zero-tolerance policies are often first-time offenders, and most students who are punished for undesirable behaviors pose no serious risks to other students nor any safety concerns for the schools they attend (Mallett, 2016). The descent from zero-tolerance discipline to jailtime results from students being harshly disciplined for typical adolescent behaviors or low-level type misdemeanors because zero-tolerance policies criminalize these behaviors by allowing them to be prosecuted (Mallett, 2016). Once students are labeled as delinquent and come under formal supervision, they are required to perform certain duties or refrain from certain activities (Mallett, 2016). Yet, many students lack the resources to adhere to these standards due to other intervening or underlying problems, and therefore the student is now in violation of those standards that were set (Mallett, 2016).

Thompson (2016) stated that these “get tough” policies do support the school-to-prison pipeline and, as a result, the deployment of police officers and SROs in the school system has become a common characteristic. Zero-tolerance policies result in higher student dropout rates (Balfanz et al., 2013; Fowler & Lightsey, 2007; Carmichael et al., 2005) and loss of instruction time in schools (Fableo et al., 2011). The literature includes extensive research on the implementation of zero-tolerance discipline policies, but research is still inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of these policies (Berry, 2018).

It is estimated that 43% of public schools utilize the services of an SRO, and researchers have argued that the effect of SROs mirrors the expansion of sentencing for criminal offenders (Pigott et al., 2018). Schools with SROs have been shown to have higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions (Zhang, 2019; Na & Gottfredson, 2013) as well as a negative psychological effect on students due to increased police presence (Jackson, 2002). Furthermore, schools with increased police presence result in increased referrals for both serious and lower-level offenses (Sykes et al., 2017; Nance 2015; Owens 2016).

The roles of SROs vary among schools (Nolan, 2018) and lack clear definitions (Gottfredson et al., 2020). SROs mainly perceive their role as an extension of their law enforcement identity and have also stated that they are, at times, misused in their duties when it comes to discipline enforcement (Barnes, 2016). SROs believe that discipline should be handled by the school district (Mckenna et al., 2016; Barnes, 2016). Schools can classify their SROs as acting in one of two roles, either strictly as law enforcement officers or as a combination of law enforcement officers as well as counselors, mentors, and teachers (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). While SROs value their role as mentors and teachers to students, the misinterpretation of their standing when it comes to zero-tolerance and discipline remains open. Consequently, while research has also examined the perceived roles and responsibilities of SROs through the lenses of school administrators and teachers (Broll & Howells, 2021; Schollosser, 2014), the research is limited regarding the views of SROs as it relates to their responsibility under zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, the research fails to provide insight into the opinions of SRO officers as it relates to the disproportionate impact of zero-tolerance on the African American population and school criminalization. This study will contribute to the literature by assessing SROs' perceptions of their roles with zero-tolerance policies and student discipline. It will add to the

current body of knowledge on the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies by assessing the perceptions of SROs concerning zero tolerance as a approach to student discipline.

The school-to-prison pipeline remains a significant aspect of zero-tolerance policies (Thompson, 2016; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015), and school resource officers are considered a major influence in the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline (Howard, 2016). The disproportionate impact of zero-tolerance policies on African American students results in their being introduced to the criminal justice system at an early age (Turner & Beneke, 2020) and also makes them more susceptible to long-term effects such as higher rates of subsequent detention in juvenile or adult facilities (Thompson, 2016). African American students have higher rates of juvenile justice referrals (Marchbanks et al., 2018).

Research on zero-tolerance policies has shown the effects of juvenile justice referrals on specific populations such as African American students. SRO research has focused on the roles of SROs and their subsequent effectiveness within the schools. Yet, the research lacks focus as it relates to the direct link of SROs to zero tolerance. There is an absence of literature and research focused on the perceptions of SROs with their roles in zero tolerance and the further implications of student criminalization, particularly with African American and low socioeconomic students. The SRO is a significant figure in the school system, and this research is needed to understand the viewpoint of the SROs while also gaining better insight into how zero-tolerance policies may be disproportionately affecting these student populations.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers' perceptions of zero-tolerance policies' impact on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. This chapter presents the methodology for this qualitative study, which included four methods of data collection: a screening questionnaire to determine participants, interviews (Months 1 and 2), weekly journaling by participants (Months 2 through 4), and two focus groups (Month 4). The 10 schools withal have at least a 24% minority population, and the 10 SROs selected had at least one year of experience in that role. Multiple methods of data analysis were employed, including categorical aggregation, pattern matching, and concept mapping using computer software.

Design

The design for this qualitative research began with assumptions and the theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning of individuals or groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument of inquiry and brings his or her own background, experiences, skills, and sensitivities to the study (Patton, 2015). Qualitative inquiries, which study how groups and individuals construct meaning, involve interpreting data through interviews, observations, and documents to determine meaningful patterns and themes (Patton, 2015). Therefore, qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study in developing an interpretation of the data collected from the SROs in the semi-structured interviews, digital journaling, and focus groups. The case study may be described as a unit of inquiry in which the researcher examines a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in depth using multiple data collection procedures over a sustained period

(Patton, 2015). The case study investigated a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth and within its own real-world context (Yin, 2018). The case study is a detailed and rich story about a person, organization, or whatever is the focus of the study (Patton, 2015). Yin (2012) describes the case as a bounded entity such as a person, organization, behavioral condition, event, or other social phenomenon. The bounded entity for the purposes of this research was each school participating in the study. Stake (2006) stated that the prime referent in the case study is the case itself rather than the methods by which the case operates. The case study method of research was the best design for this study because the goal is to understand a real-world case and to assume that the understanding derived is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to that case (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, a case study was an appropriate design when incorporating multiple variables of interest with multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the data collected from each school had contextual data specific to that school, its students, and the particular SRO. Evidence from multiple cases is considered more compelling in comparison to the single-case study design in that implementing replication with similar participants and settings can strengthen the study's findings and interpretations (Yin, 2018). The findings from multiple cases in a study create a strong body of evidence by allowing for replication and a stronger analytic conclusion in comparison to a single case. Therefore, a multicase study of SROs from 10 middle, and high schools was used to generate a stronger analytic conclusion about SRO perceptions of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority students.

Research Questions

Central Question: How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers?

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies?

RQ2: How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies?

RQ3: How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies?

RQ4: What do school resource officers believe makes zero-tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline?

Setting

This study was conducted in North Carolina in six public schools in Hampton County, (pseudonym), three public schools in Freeman County (pseudonym), and one public school in Jefferson County (pseudonym), three of 100 counties in North Carolina (Public School Review, 2021). Hampton County and Freeman County both had a minority enrollment (67% and 69% respectively) that exceeded the statewide average (52%) (Public School Review, 2021 and 2022). Jefferson County had a minority enrollment of 36%, less than the state average (Public School Review, 2022). Most of the minority students were reported as African American students for Hampton, Freeman, and Jefferson County (Public School Review, 2022).

Hampton County schools (HCS) reported 134 public schools for the 2021–2022 school year with a total of 78,486 school students (Public School Review, 2022). Hampton County has

38 public high schools with 27,587 students, 36 public middle schools with 21,947 students (Public School Review, 2022). The 2019 census reported the median per capita income for Hampton County as \$31,043, with 16.4% of persons living below the poverty line (Census Reporter, 2019), and 49% of the students in Hampton County are economically disadvantaged (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2021). North Carolina School Report Cards (2019) reported African American student suspensions were the second highest among the student population for HCS with a reported 133.16 short-term suspensions per 1,000 students, with students with disabilities showing the highest at 149.73 short-term suspensions per 1,000 students. HCS reports 4,766 teachers and a student-to-teacher ratio of 16:1 (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2021). The structure for HCS includes one superintendent with nine cabinet members, as well as a fully staffed board of education with nine members.

Freeman County schools (FCS) reported 26 public schools for the 2021–2022 school year with a total of 11,577 school students (Public School Review, 2022). Freeman County has six public high schools with 3,765 students, seven public middle schools with 2,533 students, and 68% of those enrolled are minority students, the majority being African American (Public School Review, 2022). The 2019 census reported the median per capita income for Freeman County at \$24,790 with 21.5% of persons living below the poverty line (Census Reporter, 2019). North Carolina School Report Cards (2019) reported African American student suspensions were the third highest among the student population for FCS, with a reported 569.41 short-term suspensions per 1,000 students and economically disadvantaged students following at 421.86 short-term suspensions per 1,000 students. Students with disabilities had the highest short-term suspension rate with 602.18 per 1,000 students (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2019). FCS reports 219 teachers and a student-to-teacher ratio of 17:1. The structure for FCS includes

one superintendent with six staff members, as well as a fully staffed board of education with seven members.

Jefferson County schools (JCS) reported 39 public schools for the 2021–2022 school year with a total of 21,476 students in eight public middle schools with 4,554 students and nine public high schools with 7,085 students; 36% of those enrolled are minority students, the majority being African American (Public School Review 2021). The 2019 Census reported the median per capita income for Jefferson County as \$25,246 with 14.2% of persons living below the poverty line (Census Reporter, 2019). North Carolina School Report Cards (2019) reported African American student suspensions as the second highest among the student populations for JCS with a reported 27.26 per 1,000 students. Students with disabilities had the highest rate of short-term suspensions with 35.12 per 1,000 students (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2019). JCS reports 988 teachers and a student-to-teacher ratio of 15:1. The structure for JCS includes one superintendent with six staff members, as well as a fully staffed board of education with seven members.

The setting for the study was 10 North Carolina public middle and high schools with predominately African American students in Hampton, Freeman, and Jefferson Counties. The research focused on the perceptions of SROs as it relates to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, which show an over-representation with minorities and low economic students (Smith, 2015); therefore, middle, and high schools with a significant minority and economically disadvantaged student population were selected.

Participants

Yin (2018) suggests no more than four or five cases in a single study because including additional cases can create a higher degree of certainty in results. Creswell and Poth (2018) also

argue that more than five cases can dilute the level of detail that can be provided. Participants in the study included at least one SRO each of from 10 public schools in North Carolina. The 10 participants represented both middle and high school. Purposeful sampling using selection criteria provided by the researcher and allowed the researcher to select information-rich cases to study by their nature and substance (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling means selecting an information-rich case to study that is by nature representative of the inquiry in question (Patton, 2015). Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance on the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2015).

To obtain the best representations for the study a questionnaire was administered to the SROs (Appendix D) to gain an understanding of their experience and background. The Hampton County school district, with an African American population of 41.9% has 20 SROs in 16 middle and high schools. The Freeman County school district, with an African American population of 44.4%, currently has nine school resource officers in six middle and three high schools. The Jefferson County school district currently has an African American population of 6.9%. The contact information for the SROs was provided by the lieutenants for the SROs. School resource officers must hold general certification with the Sheriffs' Standards Commission and general certification with the Criminal Justice Standards Commission (North Carolina Department of Justice, 2019). SROs must have attended a mandatory five-day training required by the state in order to work in North Carolina schools and must have passed the mandatory assessment following the class (North Carolina Department of Justice, 2019). Recruitment letters were sent to potential participants via email requesting their participation in the study. The potential participants who responded via phone or email stating they would like to participate in the study were selected based off the number of African American students currently enrolled at the school

they were assigned to. Since the current research collected data on SROs' perceptions of school policies, the participants must have had at least one year of experience as an SRO to be included in the study. Ten school resource officers assigned to schools with at least a 24% minority population were selected to participate in the study.

Procedures

Permission was obtained from the superintendent of Freeman County Schools as well as from the county sheriff's office for the SROs to participate (See Appendix A). Permission was also obtained from the Hampton County (Appendix B) and Jefferson County (Appendix C) sheriffs' offices for their participants. Approval was obtained from the human subjects' review board, which involves submitting a proposal that details the procedures for the research (Creswell, 2015). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (Appendix D) before any research was conducted or any data was collected. Demographic information was attained for each middle and high school and utilized from School Digger to classify the school population by race. After analysis of the demographic information, 10 schools were selected including middle and high schools, each with at least a 24% minority student population. A questionnaire was provided during Month 1 to SROs through email at the chosen schools for participant screening (Appendix E).

Consent and permission forms were sent via email to the SROs selected to participate and had to be sent back within three days in order to remain a potential participant. Patton (2015) stated that age, education, occupation, and similar questions are standard background questions that identify characteristics of the person being interviewed. Therefore, the questionnaire I developed for screening included questions for demographic reporting as well as questions regarding job duties. The questionnaire addressed age, sex, ethnicity, race, and job questions

related to their role as school resource officers. I obtained participant consent and permissions through email from the selected individuals and informed them of the purpose and procedures of the research along with contact information for any further questions (Appendix F).

Following interview protocol (Appendix G), the semi-structured interviews were conducted during Months 1 and 2 (Appendix H). Participants began their digital journals the first week of Month 2. Participants responded to two journal prompts each week (Appendix I). Final journal entries were submitted to me following the focus groups in Month 4. Two focus groups were held during Month 4 with five participants in the first focus group and four participants in the final focus group (Appendix J). The focus groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom and did not last more than one hour.

The Researcher's Role

The paradigm for the current research focused on constructivism in that my focus was on the participant views and the interpretation of those viewpoints. The role I played in this study was strictly as observer and data collector in that I did not serve in any participatory or persuasive role. In my relationship with the participants, I served as the administrator of the questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, but I was not an active participant and did not try to influence any opinions from the participants. Furthermore, I had no authority over the participants.

My beliefs are that racial profiling is still evident in the educational system as stated by Rector-Aranda (2016) and that past practices and regulations in education continue to translate into discriminatory practices. I had biases as an African American female due to current and ongoing events in racial profiling within the community. I had biases about the disproportionate rates of African American students receiving suspensions and those in the juvenile system.

Consequently, I used bracketing to minimize my biases in the research. Utilizing this step, I was able to bracket out and set aside my own biases while allowing the participants to voice their own personal perspectives in order to gain a fresh perspective regarding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

The process of collecting data for a case study is not merely a matter of recording data mechanically but being able to interpret the information as it is being collected (Yin, 2018). Various sources of evidence in case studies are highly complementary and the more common sources include semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and documentation. This multicase study included interviews, document analysis through weekly journaling, and two focus groups for data collection. The questionnaires were used to select participants.

Interviews

Patton (2015) described the qualitative interview as a process aimed at understanding the participants' experiences of the clinical setting. Also, in qualitative interviewing, the interviewer's questioning is motivated by the aim of eliciting information useful to the study (Patton, 2015). When an interview is conducted correctly, the researcher is taken inside another person's life and worldview (Patton, 2015). Utilizing applicable protocols (Appendix G), semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants within the first two months of the research study. The interviews were semi-structured in that the questions were open-ended, allowing for discussion. I conducted the interviews via Zoom for precautions due to Covid-19. The interviews were 30–45 minutes and were recorded on Zoom. I also took personal notes during the interviews. Sub-question 1 (RQ1) was addressed through interview Question 4. Sub-question 2 (RQ2) was addressed through interview Question 6 along with interview Questions 8–10. Sub-question 3 (RQ3) was addressed

through interview Questions 2, 3, and 7. Finally, Sub-question 4 (RQ4) was addressed through interview Question 5.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Appendix H)

1. Please introduce yourself and your current school of assignment.
2. Describe the roles and duties of a school resource officer.
3. What are your feelings regarding the role of school resource officers with discipline?
4. How would you describe the implementation of zero-tolerance policies in the school system?
5. How would you describe the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in deterring problem behaviors or lack thereof?
6. How do you view zero-tolerance policies as they apply to the rate of suspensions and the expulsions of various subgroups?
7. What role do you believe that you play in zero-tolerance implementation if any?
8. How does zero tolerance affect the students differently (i.e., is there any difference among the student populations)?
9. Describe the role, if any, that zero-tolerance policies play in student criminalization?
10. What is your understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline?

Qualitative inquiry begins with descriptive questions (Patton, 2015). Questions 1 and 2 were meant to establish rapport and a basis for the understanding that SROs have of the purpose of zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies capitalized on the growing public discomfort following highly publicized school shootings (Zausch, 2018). A zero-tolerance policy is therefore a policy of having no tolerance for school violence (Kodelja, 2019).

The intention of Questions 3 and 4 was to obtain an understanding of what the SROs believed and understood their duties to be in their school. Theriot (2016) described the duties of the SRO as mentoring students about proper and respectful behavior as well as being extensively trained in topics related to school-based law enforcement and legal issues specific to schools and the development of adolescents. Yet, some districts have not clearly defined the roles of their SROs (Maddox, 2016).

Morris and Perry (2016) found that African American students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended and one out of six African American students has been suspended at least once. Fisher and Hennessey (2016) found that those schools with SROs had rates of school-based disciplinary incidents that were roughly 21% higher than they had before implementing SROs. Question 5 was developed to understand the participants' perceptions of the use of zero-tolerance policies with African American students and the rates of suspensions and expulsions with other student populations. Questions 6 and 7 were intended to understand SROs' perceptions of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies as well as how they perceive their role because of the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. While many school districts were given funding for SROs to support zero-tolerance policies, the unintended effect was increased arrest rates of students, mainly African American students (Moreno & Scaletta, 2018).

Questions 8 and 9 were developed to assess participant perceptions of the significance of racism in educational policymaking and procedures. The questions also attempted to understand the participants' feelings about racism as it relates to the juvenile justice system with the criminalization of students. It has been speculated that issues of racism and socioeconomic class

create an unsafe and violent school experience for African American students as do feelings of decreased safety in the schools (Theriot & Orme, 2016).

Police presence in schools has been shown to have disproportionately negative effects on minority students, possibly due to police viewing minority students as more of a threat than their White counterparts (Homer, 2019). The overall arrest rate is higher for African American students than for White students, and this is also true in the school setting (Homer, 2019). Question 10 addressed the perceptions of the contributions of zero tolerance to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Digital Journal

Client files are another rich source of data to supplement field observations and interviews (Patton, 2015). I utilized the provided documents to gather the information that cannot be observed or that concerns things that occurred before the start of the research (Patton, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated a form of document analysis includes having the participants keep a journal or diary throughout the study. Participants were asked to keep a digital journal to record their personal feelings regarding their daily duties and activities throughout their days at their schools. The participants journaled from the beginning of Month 2 and continued until the conclusion of the focus groups in Month 4. The SROs were encouraged to record weekly any feelings regarding their actions at their schools related to interactions with students, discipline, and their understandings of their roles with the school. Digital journals were utilized as a precaution for Covid-19 to minimize social contact. I emailed weekly journal prompts to participants to complete and email back to me by the end of the week.

Weekly Digital Journal Prompt (Appendix I)

1. Describe your interactions this week with the students in your role as SRO.

2. What were your experiences this week with the zero-tolerance policy?

Question 1 intended to engage the SROs with how they carried out their role as SRO with the students. SROs mainly perceive their role as an extension of their law enforcement identity (Barnes, 2016). Kelly and Swezey (2015) found that over 45% of SROs reported spending most of their time in their schools in the law enforcement role and 51% stated that advising was the most time-consuming part of their job and seemingly just as important.

Question 2 intended to engage the SROs on what they experienced with zero-tolerance policies during their week at school serving in their role. SROs have reported being used improperly, especially when enforcing school policies, procedures, and requests for help with student discipline issues (Barnes, 2016). Furthermore, SROs reported that school personnel expected them to handle school matters as it relates to school discipline (Barnes, 2016).

Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview with a small group (typically six to 10 people with similar backgrounds) on a specific topic (Patton, 2015). Focus groups highlight diverse perspectives and can even create a greater mutual understanding (Patton, 2015). In the final month of data collection for the study, a focus group was assembled for the SRO participants to discuss their final views of zero-tolerance policies and their feelings about overall school educational policies and their effects on students. The purpose of including two focus groups as a source of data collection was that in a focus group the participants can influence each other by responding to the ideas and comments they hear (Patton, 2015). The projected outcomes of the focus group were that the SROs will respond to each other in an open dialogue to generate more opinion and discussion regarding zero-tolerance policies and their roles within their schools. The focus group can be characterized as a research focus group in that it will be a small group of relatively similar

individuals discussing a specific topic of research interest (Patton, 2015). There were two focus groups in the last month of the study involving the participants from all the schools. The purpose of combining participants from different schools for the focus groups was to stimulate a discussion among the participants while deliberately trying to surface the views of each person in the group (Yin, 2018). The differing school environment of each SRO may or may not play a part in their perceptions of how school discipline policies are implemented and the effects on specific school populations. The focus groups were conducted via Zoom and were recorded. I also took personal notes during the focus groups.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (Appendix J)

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and your current school of assignment.
2. How would you describe the role of the school resource officer?
3. What makes school resource officers important or not important?
4. Describe the school resource officer's role in zero-tolerance implementation and discipline.
5. How do you think students view school resource officers?
6. What makes zero-tolerance policies effective as a behavior deterrent or are these policies effective at all in this regard?
7. What do you attribute to the school-to-prison pipeline if anything?

The standardized questions for the focus groups can be found in Appendix J. Questions 1–4 are noncontroversial questions sequenced at the beginning of the focus group to encourage the respondents to talk descriptively and should be fairly easy for the participants to answer (Patton, 2015). Question 5 also gauged their perception of how they are viewed by students.

These questions were used to create an open dialogue among the participants to encourage discussion and generate more thoughts and opinions (Patton, 2015).

Deterrence theory is based on the tenet that appropriate, possibly severe, punishment is essential in deterring criminal behavior (Tomlinson, 2016). Question 6 was generated to create a dialogue about SROs' perceptions of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in the way they are implemented with severe punishments for offenses (American Psychological Association, 2008)

Thompson (2016) stated that the school-to-prison pipeline is a collection of punitive policies, laws, and practices that mostly affect African American students, male students, students with disabilities, and students from lower socioeconomic status. Question 7 was generated to assess the perceptions of the SROs regarding their opinions on the school-to-prison pipeline, namely the factors they associate with the pipeline and whether they attribute the continued expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline to school policies such as zero tolerance.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the research data consisted of transcribing, coding, and cross-case synthesizing as described by Creswell and Poth (2018). The research analysis utilized Creswell and Poth's (2018) template for coding a case study using a multicase approach. After data collection was completed, the data was organized for long-term file storage in a secure location (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Digital files collected during the interviews, digital journals, and focus groups were organized with a file naming system in a searchable spreadsheet by data form, participant, and date of collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The raw data was secured on a USB drive as well as a backup USB drive, both of which were safely secured in a locked filing cabinet in my office.

During the interview, the protocol followed was the one suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) (Appendix G). The interview protocol enables the researcher to take notes during the interview about the participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom. The Zoom recordings of participant interviews were transcribed utilizing Trint, a computer program for analyzing, managing, and shaping qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the audio files were saved to the USB and backup USB drives, the audio files from the interviews were downloaded into Trint for transcription. The resulting transcriptions were edited and enriched utilizing the transcription editor in Trint to specify the specific speakers in the interviews. Audio in Trint was played back while reviewing the transcriptions in order to ensure accuracy and make any additional edits. Member checks took place following the transcription of the interviews so that participants could review the accuracy and credibility of the account of the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following member checks, the transcripts were reviewed and memoing was utilized to document emergent ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The memos contained segment memos to capture ideas that would be helpful for identifying initial codes, document memos as a way of capturing evolving ideas across the review of multiple journal submissions for the participant, and project memos to capture the integration of ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure that memos were easily retrievable and sortable, identifiable captions were implemented with the memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the initial reading of all the transcripts and completion of the first memos, I took a two-day break before reviewing the transcripts again and making additional notes. Transcripts should be read in their entirety several times (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest memoing should be done during the initial read of the data and continue all

the way to the writing of the conclusions, as well as returning to written memos early in the analysis as a way of tracking the evolution of the codes and theme development.

The digital journal entries were submitted weekly in a Word document via Google docs and saved to the USB drive and back-up USB drive. Memoing was utilized in the analysis of the digital journal content submitted weekly by writing notes and memos in the margins of the Word documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The memos included segment, document, and project memoing. Identifiable captions were included in the memos so that memos would be easily retrievable and sortable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Journal entries were initially reviewed within two days of submission (during which time I utilized memoing) and then reviewed again each week with the submission of the current week's journal entries. Each week both old and new journal entries were reviewed utilizing memoing to document ideas and themes.

The focus groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom. The first focus group included five participants, and the second focus group included four. After the audio files were saved to the USB and backup USB drives, the audio files were downloaded in Trint to be transcribed. Following the Trint transcription, the visual recording in Zoom was played back and the transcriptions were edited and enriched utilizing the transcription editor in Trint to specify specific speakers in the focus groups and to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions. Member checks took place following the review of transcriptions with the Zoom visual recording so that the participants could verify the accuracy of the accounts of the focus groups. Following member checks, each transcript from the focus groups was read. Segment, document, and project memoing was used to document emergent ideas along with identifiable captions for easy retrieval and sorting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Bracketing was implemented in order to control for biases. The first step to bracketing the data included locating within the personal experiences of the participants the key phrases and statements that spoke directly to the central phenomenon (Patton, 2015), the SROs in these cases. The next step included interpreting the meanings of the phrases and statements by an informed reader (Patton, 2015). Then it was necessary to obtain the subjects' interpretations of these statements and then inspect the meaning for what they revealed as essential and recurring features (Patton, 2015). Finally, a tentative statement or definition was offered in terms of the recurring and essential features (Patton, 2015).

Next, I described, classified, and interpreted the data from the transcriptions and digital journals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I began with lean coding and created a list of six categories of shorthand codes for data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial codes would expand as there was a review and re-review of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, after the first lean coding I took at least a one-day break and then reviewed the data again with lean coding to expand on the initial codes. A codebook was developed and updated by me throughout the analysis. The codebook contained the name for the code, description of the code, and examples of the code using data from the study to illustrate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then reviewed the transcripts for key codes and relevant phrases. Memoing continued to track the evolution of codes and themes as well as to record any emergent ideas or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the coding of the transcripts, I determined the themes of the analysis of the data that is coded.

After I determined the themes of the analysis, I conducted a within-case analysis to analyze the themes in each of the two cases. A detailed description of each case and the themes within the case was developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then I conducted a cross-case analysis

to examine the themes across the cases to determine which themes were common to all the cases and which were different (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Next, I interpreted and represented the data by creating a comparison table that compares the themes between the two cases as well as a joint table for the themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A word table was created to display the data corresponding to the most uniform words from the interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used diagramming to represent the relationships among the concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A review of the data interpretations was completed with the dissertation committee also (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Naturalistic generalizations were developed from the analysis of the data that can apply to a population of cases or can be transferred to another case of similar context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study must be established for credibility as well as to ensure that the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied (Creswell, 2015). The most critical technique for credibility has been described as member checks and the researcher implemented member checks by soliciting the participants' views of findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2015).

Credibility

There are four distinct inquire elements to create credibility: (1) in-depth fieldwork that yields high-quality data, (2) systematic and conscientious analysis of data, (3) the credibility of the inquirer, and (4) the readers' and users' philosophical beliefs in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). Utilizing systematic in-depth fieldwork with personal interviews, document analysis through journaling and two focus groups, high-quality data was gathered from multiple participants within each case of the school. The interviews were in-depth with open-

ended questions that are descriptive to gather information-rich data from the participants in their perceptions.

Dependability and Confirmability

Triangulation makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, and theories to provide corroborating evidence to shed light on the theme or perspective (Creswell, 2015). Data triangulation involves collecting information from multiple sources that can corroborate the same findings (Yin, 2018). A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). By using multiple sources of data, the researcher can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach (Patton, 2015).

Member checks were used to ensure the credibility of the research and the conclusions drawn from the data. The transcripts for the research were not provided; instead, the participants were provided the preliminary analysis with the descriptions and themes. This allowed the participants to verify the credibility of the findings and interpretations and to supply any missing information.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the ability of the findings from one study to be applied to other settings or groups of people (Daniel, 2019). The transferability is subject to the reliability of the method in the research and does not suggest generalizability but offers evidence to support the integrity of the research so that it can offer insight into similar settings (Daniel, 2019). To establish the findings as transferable, a thick description is necessary as it provides a description to take the reader into the setting and describe the participants. A thick description with contextual details captures and communicates someone else's experience of the

world in his or her own words (Patton, 2015). The research shows reliability in documenting all procedures followed in the case study so that the work can be repeated (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

I followed appropriate procedures for ethical considerations. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before any research was done or data was collected. Consent was obtained from the site before any data was collected. Consent was obtained from the schools, SROs, and any other departments that required approval for research. The digital interview transcriptions and documents were password protected and secured on USB, while physical copies were secured in a locked filing cabinet. I locked the USB in a filing cabinet when not in use. There were backup copies of computer files as well as a master list of the information gathered for easy retrieval. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and the middle and high schools in the study. Pseudonyms used the same beginning letter for the site and those participants of that site to make association easier. Any documents no longer in use were shredded and disposed of. The site was respected in adhering to school policies with as little disruption as possible to the regular administration of the school.

Summary

It is estimated that 43% of public schools utilize the services of an SRO, and researchers have argued that the effect of SROs mirrors the expansion of sentencing for criminal offenders (Pigott et al., 2018). Utilizing the procedures of data collection interviews, document analysis through journaling, and focus groups, this research intends to provide data to add to the knowledge of the implications of zero-tolerance policies for schools and for students who inadvertently experience negative effects. The research adds to the body of knowledge by

addressing the perceptions of SROs who play an important role in the implementation of zero-tolerance policies.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers' perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. The study adds to the current body of literature focused on the understanding of zero-tolerance policies and their implications as perceived by SROs. This chapter contains the results of the data analysis developed from individual interviews, digital journals, and focus groups. The data analysis resulted in the development of five themes. The study examined the perceptions of 10 SROs from three different counties in North Carolina. A brief description of each SRO is included in this chapter.

The following research questions guided the study:

CQ: How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers?

RQ1: How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies?

RQ2: How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies?

RQ3: How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies?

RQ4: What do school resource officers believe makes zero-tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline?

Participants

The study examined the perceptions of 10 school resource officers from 10 public middle and high schools regarding the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students. Among the SROs participating, the number of years as a police officer ranged from 5 years to 15 years, and the number of years as an SRO ranged from 1 year to 11 years. Although gender had no bearing on the research, the participants for the study included seven males and three females. Four participants were Caucasian, and six were African American. Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of the participants in the study, pseudonyms, years as a police officer, years as an SRO, and years at their current school. The school names are not listed to protect the identities of all participants involved in this study. The pseudonyms were randomly assigned and were not connected to participants' real names, genders, or ethnicities. The county names are pseudonyms as well.

Table 1

SRO participants

SRO participant	County	Years as a police officer	Years as an SRO	Years at current school	Race
Hannah	Hampton	6	2	2	African American
Hank	Hampton	10	3	3	Caucasian
Harold	Hampton	9	1	1	Caucasian
Hazel	Hampton	13	7.5	7.5	African American
Haley	Hampton	6	2	2	Caucasian
Heidi	Hampton	8	1.5	1.5	African American
Frederick	Franklin	13	11	11	African American

Floyd	Franklin	5	1	1	African American
Franklin	Franklin	5	5	3	African American
Joy	Jefferson	15	4	4	Caucasian

Hannah

Hannah has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for six years. She has worked in an SRO position for two years and has been assigned to her current high school for the entirety of those two years. Hannah's school has a minority enrollment of 92%, majority African American. Hannah is not familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes her job duties as providing campus safety, law enforcement when necessary, and student and parent intervention. Hannah has served in the Air Force Reserves for 19 years.

Hank

Hank has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for 10 years. He has worked in an SRO position for three years and has been assigned to the same two schools, a middle and high school, for those three years. Hank's school has a minority enrollment of 74%, majority African American. Hank is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes his job duties as protection of the staff and students. Hank started a community program called Lunch Buddies, in which local churches bring adult volunteers in to help mentor the students.

Harold

Harold has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for nine years. He has worked in an SRO position for one year and has been assigned to his current high school for that one year. Harold's school has a minority enrollment of 72%, majority African American. Harold is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes his duties as security for the school and

students and as a liaison between the school administration and the Hampton County police department. Harold worked as a patrol officer previously for one year.

Hazel

Hazel has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for 13 years. She has worked in an SRO position for seven and half years and has been assigned to her current middle school for the entirety of that time. Hazel's school has a minority enrollment of 81%, majority African American. Hazel is not familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes her job duties as a partnership between Hampton County schools' administration and staff to ensure safety in the schools. She also describes her job duties as building positive relationships with the students.

Haley

Haley has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for six years. She has worked in an SRO position for two years and has been assigned to her current middle school for the entirety of those two years. Haley's school has a minority enrollment of 61%, majority African American. Haley is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes her job duties as handling criminal activity on school grounds as well as being a mentor to the students within the school.

Heidi

Heidi has worked as a police officer with Hampton County for 15 years. She has worked in an SRO position for four years and has been assigned to her current middle school for the entirety of that time. Heidi's school has a minority enrollment of 92%, majority African American. Heidi is not familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes her job duties as maintaining safety for the students and staff. Heidi worked in the county jail for five years.

Frederick

Frederick has worked as a police officer with Freeman County for 16 years. He has worked in an SRO position for 13 years and has been assigned to his current high school for 11 years. Frederick's school has a minority enrollment of 66%, majority African American. Frederick is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes his job duties as being in charge of safety for the staff and students, collaborating with the school administration, teaching laws to the students, and assisting with all day-to-day activities at the school. Frederick has previous experience working in the county jail.

Floyd

Floyd has worked as a police officer with Freeman County for five years. He has worked in an SRO position for one year and has been assigned to his current middle school for that entire year. Floyd's school has a minority enrollment of 80%, majority African American. Floyd is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes his job duties as ensuring the building is secure, enforcing safety for the staff and students, enforcing the laws that govern the state of North Carolina, and building relationships with the staff and students.

Franklin

Franklin has worked as a police officer with Freeman County for five years. He has worked in an SRO position for five years and has been assigned to his current middle school for three years. Franklin's school has a minority enrollment of 80%, majority African American. Franklin is familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes his job duties as ensuring the safety of the students at his school while also maintaining his original job duties as a police officer.

Joy

Joy has worked as a police officer with Jefferson County for 15 years. She has worked in an SRO position for four years and has been assigned to her current high school for the entirety of that time. Joy's school has a minority enrollment of 24%, majority Hispanic. Joy is not familiar with zero-tolerance policies and describes her job duties as maintaining safety for the students and staff.

Results

The data collected from interviews, digital journals, and two focus groups was analyzed and coded to identify themes. As the researcher, I organized the data into tables, read the data, and analyzed the data by hand. A description of the thematic development is presented as along with a discussion of each of the five themes.

Theme Development

In qualitative research, themes consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea developed from broad ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted utilizing Zoom and scheduled at the participants' convenience. During the interviews, participants were engaged and eager to share their perceptions regarding SROs and their roles in the school. I recorded the interviews with permission from the participants. The computer program Trint was used to transcribe the individual interviews from Zoom. I also reviewed the recordings and transcripts from Trint for accuracy. I shared the transcriptions with each of the SRO participants for member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of their interviews and focus group information. Nine participants completed 12 weeks of journaling in the digital journals. Digital journals were completed via Google docs so that the privacy of the participants' responses was protected and recorded accurately. I examined the participants; responses to the weekly journal

prompts and utilized memoing by writing notes and memos in the margins of the digital journals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two focus groups were conducted in the last month of the study. The first focus group included five SRO participants, and the second focus group included four. Each focus group was conducted utilizing Zoom and scheduled at the participants' convenience. I recorded the focus groups with permission from the participants. During the focus groups, the participants were responsive and engaged with each other in discussion regarding the open-ended focus group questions. The recording device allowed me to collect data. The computer program Trint was used to transcribe the focus groups from Zoom. I also reviewed the recordings and transcripts from Trint for accuracy. I shared the transcriptions with each of the SRO participants for member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the focus group information. I reviewed the transcripts for the focus groups and utilized memoing to document emergent ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I utilized bracketing in order to set aside my own biases toward the research while allowing the participants to voice their personal perspectives in order to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the research process, I bracketed out my bias by keeping a reflective journal in Google docs to record my feelings and remain objective.

After a careful review of the data, I decided to organize the data into tables. The data was organized into a table reflecting codes of the combined data as well as the separate cases for middle and high schools. The data was analyzed for connections and interrelationships. Throughout the analysis, data was continuously highlighted and annotated. The research provided essential answers to the research questions. Each transcribed individual interview and transcriptions from the focus groups were analyzed to identify codes defined from the analysis of

the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes were determined based on the number of occurrences of the word or phrase in the data. Then the data was color-coded according to the determined themes created from coding. Codes were compared to ensure they aligned with the themes and were not repetitive. Then the themes were used to answer the research questions guiding the study.

The data revealed five major themes: Primary Role of Safety (Theme 1), Diverting the Students (Theme 2), Zero-tolerance Implementation (Theme 3), Student Life Factors (Theme 4), and Charging the Students (Theme 5). The sub-themes that emerged included Building Relationships and Collaboration (Sub-theme 1) and the School Policy (Sub-theme 2). Table 2 represents the frequency of the themes found by data analysis of the structured interviews, digital journals, and focus groups.

Table 2

Codes Leading to Themes: Middle & High School

Themes	Sub-themes	Theme frequency in interviews	Theme frequency in digital journals	Theme frequency in focus groups	Totals
Primary Role of Safety	Building Relationships and Collaboration	68	73	61	202
Diverting the Students	School Policy	85	52	36	173
Zero-tolerance Implementation		57	37	17	111
Student Life Factors		42	6	18	66
Charging the Students		16	16	10	42

Theme 1: Primary Role of Safety

The most frequently occurring theme found from the data collection was the role of the SRO, which was multifaceted. The role of the SRO can be misunderstood if not given a proper definition because it encompasses many levels when described by the SROs. SROs were originally implemented to improve school safety, and that role has evolved to include building relationships with the students. The theme of Primary Role of Safety was revealed in the analysis of the data from the individual interviews, digital journals, and focus groups. This data analysis supported the misconceptions given about the roles of SROs and what the SROs state as their actual roles in the schools related to students and discipline.

All 10 of the SRO participants stated that their primary role in the school is the safety of the students and staff. Safety is not limited to the students and teachers but also includes administrators, janitors, and anyone associated with the school. Hannah stated, “As a school resource officer, my first duty is safety. I am here to report, to ensure that all students and staff . . . all the way down to the custodial and lunch ladies, to make sure that they all are safe within this building and outside as well.” Hannah also emphasized that she is an “extension of the admin team” and that she helps out with disciplinary issues. Floyd described his roles similarly: “One of the most important roles or duties is the safety of the students and staff. . . . they like to hear ‘build a relationship between law enforcement and the students’ here.” He further explained that he has time to build relationships with the students in his role with his school. Hank also reiterated that “the number one thing we do is keep the school safe.” Harold added to the description of the primary roles of SROs: “My job is basically to act like a first contact with the students, let them know that police officers aren’t big people that are out to get

them or anything like that. . . . I'm also there for any personal issues that start at home and end up at school . . . and also on the serious end for school safety and security." The SROs explained how their role in safety extends to all parties within the school. Haley explained, "We just keep the campus safe from any criminal matters that happen, whether that's students, staff, or anything that comes from off campus on the campus, civilians included."

The SROs explained part of ensuring the safety of the school is being visible to the students and others in the building. Hazel stated, "The main focus is the safety and security for the students and staff. I'm here in the building day to day, just me being visible to the students and the staff, being available to everybody in the building." Hazel referenced being visible to the students daily in her digital journals:

As the day progresses, I am in the hallways for class change, ensuring students are getting to class safely. I spend time in the lunchroom. . . . During this time it is more of being visible to the students and making sure they are where they are supposed to be.

Frederick also detailed in his digital journal his roles in being visible to keep the students and staff safe:

During the time frame of 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. is when I'm usually in the cafeteria for lunch duty. After lunch, we pushed all the kids to their last period until 2:30 pm. I got all the kids on the buses, and I held all the traffic until the buses were gone.

Frederick explained in his digital journal how he remains visible to the students, even when there are few or no issues on campus:

The kids were coming back off their Christmas break. . . . It was pretty quiet this week, and the main thing I did this week was help kids find their classes. We didn't see any discipline. . . . My main focus was to stay visible for the kids throughout the day.

Joy explained in her digital journal how her duties to the safety of the student extend to all avenues:

One incident occurred that involved a male student sending an inappropriate picture to what he believed to be a female he met on Snapchat and Instagram. . . . The individual then told the male student that if the student did not send the individual three hundred dollars, they would send the pictures to everyone that was following the student on Instagram. This SRO filed a report concerning the incident and forwarded the report to the internet crimes against children detectives.

The SROs discussed their efforts to ensure the students understand their roles within the schools. Harold detailed his attempts to explain to the students of a business management class the role of the SRO in his digital journal:

I was given the opportunity to speak with a business management class Wednesday afternoon about security needs and specifically how SROs attempt to maintain safety at our schools. I explained my role and concerns to the students and answered the normal police related questions; then a couple of students took the time to ask questions about general policing nationwide and what they perceived as massive missteps taken by police.

Harold also explained in his digital journal the training for the SROs to aid in their current job roles:

I was not at school because I attended Crisis Intervention Team Training. This 40-hour class teaches officers how to interact with persons who have mental health issues, disabilities, or other cognitive impairments that would otherwise make police interactions more difficult or cause the subject to be treated as hostile when that may not be the case.

The SROs explained how their roles typically do not relate to direct discipline and their focus is primarily criminal acts. Haley explained during her interview the role of SROs with discipline:

There's a big difference. Discipline as in legal issues, because I'm not going to talk to a kid because he won't take his hood down. That's school policy; that's not a criminal matter. But if there's something like bringing illegal substances onto school campus, that's whenever I deal with those disciplinary actions, sometimes fighting.

Haley further explained that although she may be included when it comes to students fighting, there are still factors to consider: "It honestly depends. If my administration brings me into said fights because there's assaults. It's kind of hard to determine, is it a mutual fight? Is it somebody assaulting somebody? It's just kind of hard to determine." Heidi and Harold stated during their interview that the school resource officers are "there for criminal stuff" and not the "discipline stuff."

The SROs explained an array of roles they must exhibit for the students. Franklin described during his interview how his role is expanded with the students, "I also find myself being the counselor, a teacher, the nurse, everything." Floyd also mentioned a balance of roles with the "law side" and doing things to help the students while neutralizing problem situations. Hannah explained during her interview, "The title 'resource' is just that. . . I wear many hats here. I can be a shoulder to cry on, a cheerleader. . . . I kind of serve; I'm at the service of most of the students and staff in any capacity that they need." Franklin went on to say during the interview, "It's really a position that a lot goes into without you really even knowing. You find yourself in the middle of almost everything."

Sub-theme: Building Relationships

Hank stated that the most essential function of his role as an SRO is building relationships inside the school—an important sub-theme of safety. The SROs explained that building relationships with the students involves not only being visible to the students but engaging the students in all avenues of conversation—from how their day is going to their specific interest. Hank explained, “We are a school resource officer, so we have resources available that not everyone else has in the law enforcement community. . . . The most important resource we have is called time.” In his interview Harold added regarding the relationships SROs build with students that the SROs are a “friendly face” to help the students with whatever they may need. Hazel stated during her interview, “The main focus is the safety and security for the students and staff, building those relationships with the staff and also with the students as well.” During her interview Joy stated that while safety is the first role, the “biggest” thing that she does is try to make connections with the students. Franklin also spoke of safety and building relationships during his interview: “My role is basically to keep, number one, the school, the staff, and students here safe, also to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the students.” Hazel mentioned in her journal entries:

This week like every other week started with morning greetings for bus students and they walked into the building. I spend time in the lunchroom as students grab their lunch. During this time, it is more visible to the students and making sure they are where they are supposed to be with their teachers as no admin typically comes down to the lunchroom with students. During this time some students take the time to ask different questions.

Hazel explained in her interview how she takes the time to ensure the students understand her role:

The younger students at my school are getting used to my presence as they did not have an SRO in elementary. So usually [during] our time together, I am explaining that I am a police officer, my role inside the school, and why I carry a gun.

Hazel continues building relationships with the students and ensuring safety during other periods of the day: “As the day progressed, I am in the hallways for class change ensuring students are getting to class safely. . . . [I] observed students at dismissal ensuring students exited the building and campus safely.”

Heidi spoke of her relationships with the students during her interview: “I talk to the kids and let them know you can make mistakes.” Heidi detailed one of her favorite days with the students in her digital journal entry:

The highlight of my week was picture day. This was the first time I have seen a large portion of my students without a mask on. Of course, during the time their taking pictures I’m acting silly causing most of the students to smile a lot, more than they normally would.

Heidi also mentioned many instances of talking unruly students down from escalating situations during her journals:

One student who continues to find himself in trouble in the bathroom found himself in trouble again. . . . The teacher called for a school administrator to respond, so I did. . . . I found the student just standing in the bathroom. I asked why was he not coming out and responding to the teacher.

Heidi explained in her digital journal that she encourages the students to learn from their mistakes and make sure that they are not “long-term mistakes.” Heidi stated in her digital journal:

For whatever reason this was the week for students to skip class. . . . So I’m spending time catching them skipping class, and afterwards having a talk with them about what they are doing. I like having these conversations before they talk to the school administration just so they can understand the issues of what they are doing.

Floyd expressed relationship building with the students weekly in his journals and mentioned “connections” and “rapport” in his interactions with the students: “This week I made connections with the kids that now see me as a friend that they can come to and talk about any issues or good news they may have to share.” Floyd also shared more personal connections he made with the students:

Today I counseled a student who was dealing with the passing of their grandmother and uncle due to Covid related conditions. Being someone who also lost their grandmother not too long ago I could really relate to the emotional mind state they were in and was able to help a great deal.

In his journal Harold also referenced the students’ desires to be open with him and interact with him daily: “I have noticed that the students are more open with me and speak with me more in the mornings upon arrival and throughout the day when they see me.” Harold detailed the importance of his role with the students and administration in the passing of a student:

I was contacted by guidance counselors who were concerned about a student who had not been to school in approximately two weeks and the counselors along with the girl’s

friends were not able to make contact. I was contacted by detectives requesting assistance in identifying a found body of a female. . . . This was the same student.

Harold went on to explain in his digital journal the repercussions of the unfortunate event during this week:

I spent my time consoling teachers, students, and friends who knew the child, while still working to maintain safety and security. Understanding that most of the people who I dealt with today had never experienced loss in this way . . . I felt that my role shifted from liaison to confidant or a person with whom the students could commiserate.

Haley described building relationships with the students during her interview:

I think it's important to not be in this office for long, I go around and talk, I know a lot of my students by name. . . . I try to be the first one as they come into the school and that they see and greet and say good morning to them, try to go to lunch.

Haley explained during her interview about trying to show students the positive aspect to police officers:

I'm trying to be a mentor. And then if it comes to a situation where I have to give consequences, they understand [that] Officer (Haley) isn't playing at this point. But I do want them to see all officers aren't bad. We're here for you.

The evidence of relationship building was prevalent in the digital journals of the other SROs.

Hank detailed his experiences with building relationships with the students in his digital journal:

This was a slow week where I was able to concentrate on cultivating relationships throughout the school. I made a deal with a student that had two As, one B and one D. . . . I advised her that I would get her a Starbucks coffee if she could bring her grades up to all As. This student in particular never has the chance to get something like that. Last

week we were able to see that her grades will most likely be all As by the end of the quarter. Money well spent.

Hank also spoke of building relationships at after school events in his digital journal:

I worked three basketball games. It helps to have the students communicate with me during sporting events. I always enjoy seeing either current students or former students playing sports and excelling in something they enjoy. This relationship building always helps when it comes to later investigations.

Hannah explained in her digital journal her positive relationships with the students:

I had a great week with the students this week. Lots of positive interactions with the students with very little enforcement on my side [including] with one student who had been a problem for several years but has made a great change. . . . Over the last 18 months, he has been a model student. . . . I asked him a couple of months ago what changed for him. He said he hated to see the look of sadness from his grandmother and father when he got arrested. Sitting in juvenile detention was also something that he hated and knew he did not want that life.

Hannah also jokingly explained in her digital journal the students' expectations of her: "I keep a jar of candy on my desk. I'm hardly in my office but when I am, I have a number of kids stop by for candy. They often get upset (jokingly) if I'm not in my office." In building relationships with the students, the connections are shown to be beneficial for the students as well as the SROs.

Hannah explained, "One of the cool things about loving being in the school is having a constant connection with the kids. I'm a staple in their life and vice versa. When we have breaks, I miss them although the breaks are sorely needed. Many of the kids were happy to see me, and I was

glad to see them as well.” Franklin explained in his interview the importance of having a relationship with the students:

I had a student [who] put a rolled-up joint in her [shirt]. . . . We can smell it. But when the principal initially was looking for it, he couldn’t find it. So that’s where my relationship that I have with my students, every single one of them. . . . And I looked at her and I say, “Baby, it’s clearly something on you. . . . I would hate to send [the principal] out of here and have you strip.” So, she dove down in there and took it out. I didn’t even have to touch her.

Building relationships with the students is essential not only for the students to have positive experiences at school with their SROs but also to ease the need for strong disciplinary measures and consequences for the students.

Sub-theme: Collaboration

The SROs spoke of the importance of working with the school administration in effectively performing their role in the school. The SROs explained that their role is a collaborative effort with the teachers and administration as part of safety. The collaboration involves an understanding of the duties and roles of the SRO, along with the policies guiding the overseeing of the school. Frederick explained during his interview the relationship with the school administration as being one of the most important relationships for the role of SRO: “The biggest part starts with your communication with your administrators and your relationship.” Frederick documented his daily meetings with the school administration in his digital journals: “My role this week as an SRO was pretty normal. I started out this week with meetings with the admin, going over the calendar for this week followed by issues that happened over the weekend that we received calls about.” Frederick and Hazel explained during the focus group that when

the administration understands the role of the SRO, it also influences the teachers and staff.

Frederick stated:

So the main thing [is] that . . . it starts with the admin. When the admin fully understands your role, it trickles down. So, me and my admin are locked in. . . . They fully understand my role. So part of that is [to] let me know about everything, regardless if it was dealing with law enforcement . . . because some things can start off without you, but eventually it can involve you.

Hazel stated in her interview how her current administration is still unclear about her role in the school due to the number of changes within the administration. Hazel explained that even though it is a collaboration, a lack of understanding of the SRO's role can cause misunderstandings: "We had a situation like that . . . where they were calling for me directly, and unfortunately, I couldn't just respond because if it's not a true criminal matter and I had to take some type of action, it would be questioned."

Harold stated in week 1 of his journal his dual roles in also serving as a source of information to the school administration regarding students, their families, and the community: "I feel that a portion of my job is to be a liaison between my administration and faculty and the Hampton County police department, which I think is also improving." The collaboration with school administration includes accountability with charges being issued to students. Harold explained (in Week 6 of his journal) a meeting with school administration including him and his partner regarding fights and the number of charges issued to students:

This week we dealt with the fallout from me breaking up a fight between two female students at the end of the week prior. My school has a higher-than-average number of fights this semester. . . . As such my partner and I were asked about the number of

charges on campus this year. These numbers caused an uproar with our admin as they claimed that they did not know of all of the charges.

Harold went on to explain how every student is not charged in all situations, but there will be zero-tolerance for students continually creating an unsafe environment.

The SROs mentioned many instances of assisting the administration. Joy explained her role with assisting the administration in her journal: “Administratively, I just assist with anything that they wish to be done.” Joy described a situation in which she assisted school administration: “The chorus teacher . . . contacted school administration regarding three students being high in class. School administration went to the chorus classroom to speak with the students about the matter. . . . Administration then contacted this SRO, who then spoke with the student that was in possession of the cartridge [a THC cartridge].” Hazel described her role in assisting administration with an upset student in Week 2 of her journal, “Assisted administration with an upset student, [who] refused to stop and speak with the administration, I was able to get her to stop with me to find a solution to her problem.” Hazel stated in Week 5 of her journal, “Assisted a teacher with classroom behaviors along with another student while administration was in a meeting.” As recorded in Week 6 of her journal, Hazel further collaborated with her administration when dealing with student issues: “Assisted the assistant principal with speaking with a student in hopes of finding a stolen phone.” Hannah explained more collaborative efforts with the staff at the school, “On Wednesday evening, the athletic director made the admin team and [me] aware of a possible threat of violence at the school.” Hannah also explained the positive collaborative efforts with the school administration: “The admin team and I have begun to focus and celebrate the kids who do the right thing.”

Theme 2: Diverting the Students

The participants discussed several factors that impacted their perceptions as SROs with zero-tolerance policies. The second most prevalent theme found during the data analysis was Diverting the Students. The SROs referred to diversion in terms of referring the students to alternate programs within the school system instead of writing up charges on the student or suspension in some cases. The SROs spoke more of diverting the students as it relates to their duties in the school than discipline. Hannah described during her interview the most commonly used diversion programs for North Carolina:

So here in North Carolina we have One Step Further. . . . They have Teen Court, and Teen Court is a diversion program where in lieu of being criminally charged, [the students] are submitted to a program within that organization and have to commit a certain amount of hours. . . . [The student] is judged by a jury of their peers.

Hannah explained that with the completion of Teen Court and the required community service hours or whatever is decided by the court, the student is not charged for the offense. Hannah also stated, “Then in North Carolina, we have Tarheel Academy. Now that’s very hard to get into because that’s your rougher kids who have actually had a hard time. . . . It’s like a military boot camp.” Harold explained the deferment program First Step, “It is diversion program that is outside of court. They do juvenile therapy. They do occupational therapy. . . . They make them go be a part of the community and introduce them to other stuff instead and try to show them there are different choices that could have been made.” Hank explained the deferment program Life Skills in his interview: “We have a life skills class that teaches kids how to . . . make better decisions, deal with peer pressure, what to do with drugs, those kind of things.”

Hank explained, “We don’t really hand out discipline as SROs in the sense of like . . . they’re getting suspended or whatever.” He went on to say:

I think it’s just when we use the word *discipline*, it might not entail what people think of like the police, like arresting the kid and all that. That’s actually pretty rare. We have a lot of tools at our fingertips like diversion programs.

All 10 of the SROs spoke of diversion when it comes to students and while SROs have the ability to refer students to juvenile detention for their actions, the SROs were adamant about there being an understanding of how this actually works within the school system.

The SROs mentioned the term *divert* on several occasions throughout the data collection. Hank explained that there were “divertible and nondivertible offenses,” and with diversion he is able to “send them to a program rather than just sending them to juvenile detention center.” Hank also explained that when it comes to these offenses, as SROs are “offered that discretion as officers to decide.” Harold stated in regard to Hampton County, “They want us to divert as much as possible; they prefer not to charge kids.” Harold explained a deferment to Teen Court in one of his digital journal entries:

This week I scheduled a meeting with our county’s Teen Court advisor to gain more information about deferring prosecution or diverting children away from the juvenile court system. As a result of this meeting, when we had five children fight in the hallway when lunch period ended, they were [sent] to Teen Court, a program that has children address their own issues in front of an actual judge while a jury of previous Teen Court juveniles delivers punishments if required. These consequences usually involve restitution, cleaning, or community service as recompense for the child’s actions.

Harold went on to say, “A child shouldn’t leave high school with a diploma and a charge.” Hank stated during the focus group, “One of the big things we do in Hampton County is we divert kids. I would say at least 90% of what occurs in schools in Hampton County are deferred.” Hank briefly explained an instance of diverting a student in one of his digital journal entries: “Friday, I had an assault that occurred. The student was deferred to a Life Skills class.” Joy spoke of diversion during the focus group: “We bend over backwards for the kids. We try our best and hardest not to be that person who sends them to prison.”

During the interviews, all the SROs spoke of diversion and the role of the student when it comes to disciplinary measures with diversion programs. Harold spoke of the “crossroads” the students come to when receiving diversion: “I’ve seen where kids have worked through all the progression of all the resources, all of the attention and help they can give them, and the student rejects it.” The SROs spoke of how they utilize the deferment programs for the students, but the students have to be willing to accept the help.

The SROs also mentioned diverting students on many occasions in their digital journals. Hazel spoke of a student with drugs in her digital journal and “in lieu of charging the student was referred to Teen Court.” Hank recalled an incident in his digital journal involving social media use against a teacher. That situation required an emergency order from the social media provider and stated that “the offender was found and diverted to a life skills class.” During one of the focus groups, Hannah explained about charging the students: “We actually try to avoid it if we can . . . and do something different other than putting them in the system.” Franklin stated during his interview, “I try to keep most of the kids out of the system.” Instead, he will utilize diversion such as Teen Court as much as possible. Franklin reiterated, “I try to keep it at the lowest level possible.” Haley emphasized during her interview that the strong implementation of

diversion programs in order to give the students the chance for correction and to learn from their mistakes is “so frustrating because we give them out for themselves, even in middle school.”

The SROs explained the use of their discretion when diverting or charging a student. Joy mentioned in her interview that she did not believe that every student that breaks the law needs to be charged or go through the criminal justice system. Joy stated during her interview, “But if I have kids that are in constant trouble [and] I feel like they need some extra structure, I’ll refer them to juvenile services or step program.” Hank recalled in his journal, “I had an assault that occurred. The student was deferred to Life Skills class.” Hank mentioned another incident involving drug possession by a student: “I pulled over a vehicle during patrol and found marijuana edibles in the car. This is normally a felony, but [I] was able to divert to a Teen Court program.” Harold emphasized during the focus group, “We try our best not to [charge], we try and divert. We try and go through Teen Court or other programs, so we can do other things than put the charge on a kid.” Hannah stated during the interview, “I don’t want to charge a kid. I really try, and I know that’s the case for most of our SROs.” Concerning her role in discipline, Hannah stated that it depends on is the situation:

I think it all depends on what it is. . . . There are times there will be a fight, and the administrators will handle the discipline side. I had a kid who fought with some brass knuckles. Well, that is a pretty big deal because the kid was pretty injured. He’s going to get charged with that, [but] some discipline doesn’t require any charge whatsoever . . . just like skipping. . . . There’s nothing criminal for that. It’s all discipline.

Hannah also stated during the focus group:

It really depends on the scenario in the situation and what we’re able to do outside of it. We had issues with the TikTok challenges with vandalism; those kids, we diverted them

to different program. . . . There was property damage and restitution to pay through that program too.

Harold explained during his interview, “I think actually having the SRO in the school limits the charges because we know how to defer, we know how to fix problems before they start or even after they’re done.” Harold went on to explain how SROs use deferment as a means to discipline that will not be a detriment to the student: “We can find other means of discipline or punishment that are outside the wall that won’t permanently affect the child.” While there are state deferment programs, Harold also explained how he tries other means of discipline to limit those referrals as well: “But my goal is to limit my amount of referrals to Teen Court and Next Step. We have people get in a fight here at school. So my option was [when] we have a home football game and somebody has to clean the stadium, ‘Come to the game, [and] clean the stadium.’” Hannah also spoke of using discretion during her interview. Regarding deferring students, she said, “I charge way less than I should, I use some other resource.” In his interview, Floyd spoke of deferment as his first resource with students: “Teen Court is my first go-to option as far as if I have a kid in trouble in the school and we have a chargeable offense. I like to go to Teen Court first.”

Frederick also stated his enthusiasm for deferment programs such as Teen Court during the focus group, “Teen Court for us, it’s your go-to. It’s one of the best things we probably have to help kids out.” Frederick went on to explain Teen Court, “We can pretty much send you to Teen Court for anything that isn’t a felony, which is good.” He also explained, “You know the kicks to Teen Court is [that] you have to admit your guilt.”

The SROs described many instances of deferment with the students rather than utilizing other extreme measures. In his Week 7 journal entry, Harold explained his efforts to use Teen Court to keep students out of the juvenile justice system: “This week I scheduled a meeting with

our county's Teen Court advisor to gain more information about deferring prosecution or diverting children away from the juvenile court system." Yet, during that same week 7 Harold also had to implement more deferment for students: "We had five children fight in the hallway when lunch periods ended. They were referred to Teen Court." Hank stated in his journal, "[In] another issue with an elementary student who ran away from the school, [the student] was diverted to program." Hank recalled a surprising issue with an elementary student in his journal: "I did have a 'first' for me that included an elementary student being in possession of marijuana at the school; [that] student was diverted to a program." Hank responded to an incident in an elementary school, as stated in his journal during Week 2: "I responded to a local elementary school in reference to a fight that was occurring. As I arrived, the two elementary school students were actively fighting. Both students were diverted to a Life Skills class." Hank also recalled a similar incident in Week 5: "There was also [a] relatively small fight [for which] the two subjects were diverted to a Life Skills class." Hannah utilized Teen Court for deferment as described in Week 7 of her journal: "I had one student that had an edible this week. I will be referring this student to Teen Court, which is a deferment program."

Sub-theme: School Policy

The SROs also referred to the sub-theme of School Policy when discussing diverting the students. Floyd explained during his interview that the school has discretion regarding discipline for students, or they can take it a step further by calling in the SROs. Floyd's journal recalled a criminal act committed by a student in which the school used discretion:

We had a student communicate a threat against the school, staff, and other students. This student was given days home by the administration with the possibility of not returning to

school. This was done under zero-tolerance policy with the student's reason having no effect on the decision.

Floyd also wrote about a situation in which a student brought a weapon to school:

I had a student get found with a weapon in their possession, and under normal policies this have been days home, but due to the entire situation the school administration decided otherwise, and the student was given little to no punishment.

Hank spoke of the schools' role in suspensions during his interview: "We don't have anything to do with suspensions. That is strictly an administrative function of the school administration. . . . Hampton County school district says there's a set of 21, 22, 23, something like that, reportable offenses. So if something happens . . . by their policy, they have to report [it] to the police department." Hank went on to explain that just as suspensions are a school administration function, charging is strictly an SRO function: "They have zero effect on whether or not I charge somebody. We keep that pretty separate, and it's a balancing act." Hazel explained school policy: "They have a book that they follow as far as what type of school consequences it could be. From two days to 10 days to long-term. It all just depends. . . . Each situation is different." Hazel also stated, "The way we work is [this:]school discipline is basically on the school administration. We don't give out school consequences when it comes to us." Hazel showed the separation between school policy and the SROs during Weeks 1, 3, and 5 of her journals, "We did not have any activities where law enforcement action was involved. While there were suspensions given, none were on a criminal level where my involvement was needed."

Haley also reiterated in her interview that she has nothing to do with school suspensions: "I don't suspend. I leave that up to the administration." Heidi explained in her interview that

discipline depends on the administration: “They handle most stuff, and then it refers back to the SRO if need be.” Frederick wrote about several suspensions for vaping. School policy implemented suspensions for these students. Frederick stated, “Toward the middle of the week, we caught a few people vaping and had two fights. The kids that were caught vaping were sent home for three days. and all those that were fighting were suspended and charged for fighting.” Harold also supported the use of school policy when it comes to discipline, “We stop the fight, and then how the school wants to handle, that’s up to them.” Heidi recalled a situation of a student being involved with drugs in school and advising the school administration, “This time someone was smoking weed in the bathroom. . . . A teacher noticed the smell as she walked down the hallway. After reviewing the school’s cameras, I came up with a possible suspect, I advised the principle of my findings. . . . The student was advised to report to the principal’s office.” Joy stated in her interview, “When they are caught with drugs, they’re out 10 days. That’s just school policy.” Diversion remains an important tool for the SROs. Hank stated, “We have a lot of tools at our fingertips. . . . Obviously we can’t do anything [like] suspend them or anything like that, but sometimes just talking to them or diverting them to a program that teaches them how to make life decisions.”

Theme 3: Zero-tolerance Implementation

The SROs revealed a differing perception of zero-tolerance policies and the implementation. Hannah expressed during her interview, “There is no such thing as zero tolerance as far as how I operate at all.” Hannah explained that she gives the students plenty of opportunities for correction and works with the administration on discipline. Hannah stated:

And so there is no such thing for me, from a department standpoint, the sense you have to act on this every single time. Now for me personally, I operate here on a zero-tolerance

[basis] when it comes to the detection of marijuana. I have zero tolerance for anyone who comes in smelling like weed. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to charge them.

During the interview Hannah also stated in regard to breaking school rules and discipline, "That's usually outside of my purview. But when it comes to criminal action, that's when I step in. I've broken up many fights, and I have charged kids with, weed on campus, being disruptive, those types of small offenses. . . . And so I step in when necessary." Hannah described an incidence of zero tolerance in her digital journal "I had another student that made comments about guns and gun violence. This is an area of little to zero tolerance if possible. The student stated he was talking about a rap song he was listening to, but this is the second time he has done this. He was charged with communicating threats." Hannah described another incident that week in her digital journal:

Two other students left campus and ran to the nearby middle school in order to help their sister. They entered a classroom and met with resistance from the teacher, who would not allow them to fight. . . . Those students then assaulted the teacher by shoving him. I would say this is another incident where we could not use a diversion program to help them. . . . The two students will be charged with trespassing, assault on two school teachers, and disorderly conduct.

Hank concurred with the statements made by Hannah, adding during his interview: "We don't really hand out discipline . . . as SROs in the sense of they're getting suspended or whatever."

Hank also expressed in his interview that when it comes to his county, zero tolerance is not a factor: "The way I understand zero tolerance, at least our national level is a lot of times the school district. . . . They don't want to suspend the kid or whatever, so they try to give it over to the SROs so that the juvenile justice system takes over. I don't see that happening here. . . . At

least in Hampton County, we don't have those kind of issues. Each and every one of us kind of have our own thing." Hank went on to explain his individual preferences when it comes to implementing zero tolerance: "My zero tolerance is you can't hit a teacher, [or else] you will get consequences from me." Hank described in his journal many instances of diversion for the students, even when responding to criminal acts: "I pulled over a vehicle during patrol (extra duty) and found grams of marijuana edibles in the car. . . . I was able to use my training as an SRO to talk about making better decisions and was able to divert to Teen Court program. This is normally a felony and because of my in-depth knowledge of the diversion programs, we were able to keep a juvenile out of the system." The SROs commonly spoke of their ability to use discretion when responding to issues with the students. Hazel explained during her interview the use of discretion on the side of the SROs when it comes to these zero-tolerance policies: "There is a gray area to where, as law enforcement, we can make the determination on if a charge is warranted for some of those zero-tolerance policies." Harold described in his digital journal an incident in which he exercised discretion:

A student threatened a teacher by saying, "You best not let me catch you on the street," which the teacher took as a threat. The student was brought to the head principal's office and had the severity of her words explained to her. The student was upset because she thought that she and the teacher were exchanging witty banter. . . . The teacher was consulted on this, and the teacher confirmed that they were verbally joking with each other. . . . My partner and I chose not to charge the child, given the circumstances, However, the school has a zero-tolerance policy for threatening teachers. . . . The student is suspended for three days.

The SROs were divided on the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies. Hazel explained during her interview her perception of zero-tolerance policies:

I know little about zero-tolerance policy. . . . If implemented correctly, I believe that it could be a good thing. And when I say implemented appropriately, I think everyone has their own definition of zero tolerance . . . what they are expecting and what they will allow. . . . If it was clear, then obviously there won't be any questions.

Frederick expressed in his interview a need for zero-tolerance policies due to the pandemic and the students being out of school so long without proper structure: "It's very necessary nowadays, considering those coming back from Covid. Things [are] a little shaky because some of them haven't been disciplined or in a structure for two years." Franklin stated a belief in the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies during his interview: "I have seen it work out pretty well. I feel as though zero tolerance applies when it's beneficial to the situation." Franklin referenced the need for consistency with students regarding zero-tolerance policies, "If it's zero tolerance, I believe it needs to be zero tolerance. I feel like it's situation based, I've seen in the schools, and I do not believe that it's fair." Franklin described an incident of disproportionate zero tolerance: "I have been in a situation before where I've seen a Caucasian student disrespect a teacher, and I mean blatant disrespect. Then ten minutes later here's the little Black boy that gives blatant disrespect. He gets suspended like right away. I'm like the other little boy just did the exact same thing. . . . That should apply to the other student as well." Harold stated in his interview his belief that zero-tolerance policies do not deter problem behaviors: "I don't think that it is effective on either end of the spectrum. The people who are going to do wrong or make bad decisions, they're going to be wrong regardless."

Floyd expressed during his interview a positive and negative side to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. The positive is that the consequence is “clear-cut:”

I can understand because when certain rules happen, you want to be able to have things in place so that those kids who continuously are making it harder for other kids to be in a learning environment or safe environment. You want to get those kids out so that the rest of the kids can be in a learning environment that is, one safe, and not disruptive.

The negative Floyd sees is that those predetermined consequences can cast students out and disregard the situation. Floyd admits that knowing the consequences can deter the students from engaging in problem behaviors, assuming that students care about the consequences: “You have those kids who grow numb to the fact that ‘if I have a fight, then I’ll get 10 days.’ . . . That doesn’t really mean much.” Floyd continued, “I think it is very effective because, you know if you do this, what’s going to happen—no if, ands, or buts about it. So it does deter a lot of kids from doing those activities at school.” Conversely, Haley explained that she does not believe that the students under zero-tolerance policies understand fully the consequences of their actions. She thinks students need to be educated on zero tolerance: “I think sometimes students do things and don’t understand the consequences for it and don’t understand ‘Hey, if I do this, this happens,’ , but they can have some type of unbeknownst reason for them doing said action. . . . That could be legit.” Heidi explained during her interview that her role in zero tolerance mainly comes from students not understanding consequences and learning from their mistakes the first time. Joy and Heidi shared concerns over the students not understanding the consequences of their actions. Heidi stated, “Everything has to be a learning lesson. They don’t really understand consequences, and that’s a major problem that we have with young adults.” Heidi explained that during her time working inside the jail, she encountered students faced with long-term sentences

in prison for making bad decisions. Heidi expressed during her interview how people make mistakes and a student should not necessarily be subjected to zero tolerance just for one mistake.

Hannah and Harold pointed out faults in zero-tolerance policies. Hannah stated during her interview:

I don't think they're effective, not every situation is black and white. . . . Every kid, he might have had a bad night. . . . Maybe he didn't get enough food or enough sleep, and he's coming in and he's upset, and he knocks the soap dispenser off the wall. That's vandalism by the book. But I have the opportunity to pull that student aside.

Harold also mentioned during his interview that strict, by-the-book zero tolerance" is insufficient to address discipline issues. Harold stated:

I don't think the black-and-white zero tolerance is the way to go. . . . It's not that special people need special treatment, but we can understand this is your first mistake versus this is your 50th mistake. Sometimes the punishment needs to take into [account] the fact of the history of the student.

Harold explained that with zero-tolerance policies students get punished regardless of the situation or the student. Hannah explained the snowball effect of zero-tolerance policies from a student being severely disciplined for an incident when there may be underlying reasons for the behavior. Hannah explained during her interview, "If you slap him with a charge, the student is frustrated. Now his mom, who had to work, has to take him to court. She might not have a car. Funds are low, so she doesn't have bus fare. And so that one instance of me saying, 'No, this is black and white, and I have charged.' There is a snowball effect of other things that happen that I don't even get to see."

It was not surprising that the consensus favored zero tolerance when students commit criminal acts. That is when SROs must be law enforcement officers. Hazel explained her role in zero tolerance, “I’m way towards the drugs and the weapons. Obviously with those things, the school system has to get us involved.” Joy explained during her interview how criminal actions relate to zero tolerance:

There really aren’t many circumstances that really apply to zero tolerance as far as my job is concerned. The only thing that I would be 100% zero tolerance on is a weapon. . . . We’ve had to permanently suspend one student this year, and that’s because he had a weapon on campus and drugs, and he made some threats that involve doing harm at school.

Franklin explained his role in zero-tolerance a little differently during his interview: “You don’t come in here as law enforcement. We are school resource officers. You shouldn’t come into a school and want to throw your badge around.” Floyd explained his role in zero-tolerance policies as a combination of three roles that include prevention, mentor, and the criminal aspect.

Frederick explained his role in zero-tolerance policies as the end: “[After] we do the steps the teacher tells you, we do the steps that the administration is telling you.” Then he steps in as the final resolution.

The SROs has differing opinions about the effects of zero-tolerance policies on minority and economically disadvantaged students. Hazel stated during her interview, “Because I’m in a predominantly minority school, the minority are the majority. So I’m going to see more of the Hispanics and African-American students being suspended for some of these zero-tolerance policies.” Hank expressed the same explanation during his interview, “That’s who I served. That’s the population I serve. So it can look off balance at times.” Hazel went on to explain:

Suspending kid after kid in a school like mine isn't going to affect them. They don't want to be in school. Whereas if it was in a predominantly White school, and someone in that school got suspended, they may have more resources for them to allow them to learn from it, and it truly [has] some type of effect on [them] for the good.

Heidi, whose school is majority African American, argued that zero tolerance affects different sub-groups differently and stated, "It would be hard to base off of, my school compared to another school because of the demographics." Franklin stated during his interview, "I feel sometimes minorities, they tend to get in a little bit more trouble than others." When discussing the school-to-prison pipeline during his interview, Franklin stated, "I am not oblivious to what goes on with law enforcement, nor am I oblivious to the fact of how the system is set up, especially towards African-Americans." Floyd offered a different opinion in his interview, stating that the uniformity of zero-tolerance policies does not allow for the differentiation among the subgroups: "It's already clear-cut, so I think that kind of cuts down as far as it targeting or being used as a target for one specific group because the rules don't change," meaning that the same rules apply to everyone regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Frederick also believed that zero-tolerance policies were applied evenly among the subgroups. He stated that since incidents of fighting mainly occur among the African American population, zero-tolerance will be applied to that population because they are the ones committing the offense. Yet, he sees other offenses such as vaping as "the most diverse" in that it is seen in all populations. Harold stated that while he did not see a divide among subgroups for zero-tolerance policies, he did notice a difference related to the special needs group due to state mandates. Harold also said that it affects the different classes of students as well such as international baccalaureate students, who Harold "don't even know it exists because it doesn't affect them. They clock in, they clock out." While

Hannah mentioned no differentiation among the subgroups at her school, she did state, “I think it falls more along your socioeconomic status more than you realize.” Joy stated during her interview that she believes everything is “fair across the board” as it relates to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies among the different subgroups.

All 10 of the SROs indicated that they personally have zero tolerance for certain behaviors that would warrant disciplinary action from them. Franklin stated in his interview, “Bullying, that is my number one. So I try to nip that in the bud right away.” Hannah explained her zero tolerance for marijuana during her interview: “That doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m going to charge them, but it’s a disruption to class.” Hannah explained, “It’s at my discretion on how I operate within my school.” Floyd and Frederick follow a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to fighting in their schools. Due to the number of fights in Freeman County schools, the county has adopted a zero-tolerance policy; students who fight will be charged. Frederick explained during one of the focus groups, “We have zero tolerance for fighting. So we charge for every single fight. . . . Things got bad because we’ve been out of school for the most part of two years. . . . And we expected a lot of stuff when we came back.”

Discussing the impact of zero-tolerance policies on criminalization yielded different responses from the SROs. Hannah stated that regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, zero-tolerance policies certainly are a cause: If you have a zero-tolerance policy and you have to charge every kid, no matter the circumstance, that puts them in a system that’s very difficult to get out of.” Hazel responded in her interview:

I don’t think zero-tolerance policies criminalize students. I think that, in its entirety, it takes a village, and sometimes they don’t have the proper environment to understand that this is not what you do. We have kids whose parents tell them that you handle it the way

you need to handle. . . . You deal with it yourself, and with middle school [students], they're not at that age to where they can fully handle that situation.

Frederick also stated that he does not believe that zero-tolerance policies play a role in student criminalization.

Hazel explained that she did not know much about the school-to-prison pipeline but explained in her interview: "It's perceived that all we do is if a child gets into our grasp, we're arresting them and [that] we are the cause for the criminalization of juveniles, when we try to everything that we can possibly do to avoid it." Frederick believes the school-to-prison pipeline is more associated with the choices of the student: "When you decide school is not going to be your thing, more than likely, that's when you're going to find yourself in jail." Harold explained that while he does not know much about student criminalization, he believes the community has more of an impact on the school and the students. He is aware of children doing things outside of the school and "little echoes" of that come into the school. Furthermore, Harold stated that he does not believe that SRO presence is the cause of students going to prison. Harold explained during his interview: "I don't see the correlation right now between me being here and sending kids to prison." Harold stated that due to SROs knowing how to divert the students, it actually limits the number of possible charges for the students.

Theme 4: Student Life Factors

The participants were asked their perceptions of their roles with zero-tolerance policies and discipline. While the participants discussed their roles primarily being related to safety while also building relationships with the students, a common topic for discussion focused on factors in the students' lives. The SROs discussed the impact of student life factors on behaviors and the way the SROs are perceived by the students. Parental influence was discussed as a major

influence that could be positive or negative for the students. Yet, the SROs also explained how they try to be a positive force in all the students' lives.

The SROs explained the importance of parent contributions to diversion and discipline with the students. Heidi explained during her interview: "It's good to be your child's friend, but there are roles too. You need to have discipline for your kids." She emphasized the need for structure with the students at home as well as at school: "You still need to have that structure for your kid." In the focus group Hazel also explained her perception of the parents' role: "There is some disconnect between parents and how effective their parenting is. It's a whole lot of 'I'm trying to be friends with my child' instead of actually being their parents, and that is hurting this generation." Frederick from Freeman County also expressed the big role that parents play in the students' lives and the need to understand how things operate within the school: "They play a big role. They have to understand [that] we have to do things differently here inside of the school building than maybe what you're doing outside on the street."

Haley from Hampton County offered her opinion when discussing the school-to-prison pipeline: "When a student gets charged here, they don't go to jail. They don't go in my car. They get released back to the parent. And to be honest, that's the majority of the problem—the parents and how they handle the situations with these children." Haley stated during her interview, "Too many people put responsibility on the school and not enough responsibility on the parents." Concerning her efforts to divert students without receiving parental support for the student to attend the program in order to avoid being charged, Haley stated, "I have a student that's finishing up her Teen Court [who] is excited to be done with it but this other student [whose] parents did not take him to court. I feel like I set him up to not get charged and his parents are setting him up to get charged." The SROs explained how the parents can have a positive or

detrimental effect on a student's behavior. Heidi described a situation with a parent who got involved in a student fight:

The mom comes to pick them up, [and] 45 minutes later there's video of [the students] on Snapchat fighting. I don't think that's a great parent. That's putting your child in a situation where you really don't know. You go to somebody else's house, [and] that can really turn bad because that parent may think you're coming to do something to their child.

Hank explained to the focus group his perceptions of parental involvement with student discipline:

Oftentimes you'll have parents that basically they want something at no cost to them. When I say no cost, that either means time or money or ability. They want it given to them. . . . So sometimes you have to rein them in and say, "This is going to cost you time. . . . You're going to have to take your kid to 10 weeks, two hours at a time every Wednesday night to Life Skills class so they can better learn how to deal with these emotions.

Hank further explained that the goal of diversion programs is not only to help the students but also to assist the parents in raising their students: "To raise a kid takes a lot of people. . . . I think a lot of times what's overlooked is as we try to help the kids, we try to help the parents. . . . The parents aren't willing to meet us in the middle."

The SROs indicated that at times the whole picture of how students fall into the juvenile justice is not taken into account when only the statistics are considered. Hank explained during his interview:

What I do see is I think there is an overarching narrative sometimes that because a child gets in trouble with the SRO, that they are now in the system or that there's all these other things. . . . I would contend based on anecdotal evidence and doing this job 10 years, three years as a SRO, that a lot of times those children have already met police outside of school . . . and/or their parents have, and I see that kind of trend continuing.

Hank believes the student does have the power to change the trajectory:

It doesn't mean they can't break that trend, but I do see it anecdotally. . . . I have mothers who come to my school to fight other kids because those kids are picking on their kids...If that's the kind of example that's being set where these mothers are coming to school and/or attacking...that's what I say, the nuances.

Hank also mentioned the other end of that spectrum, "And then I've had the exact opposite . . . where the parent is a great parent, but the kid is just in that rebellious stage." Joy from Jefferson County explained her experiences with students and their families: "Most of the time, the families are very receptive." Joy also observes different dynamics in families: "Some other family members, these kids have moms and dads that are in prison, and they're being raised by grandparents. I don't think there's a lot of connection there."

During the focus groups, the SROs shared their perception of the influences of students' views of SROs. Heidi stated that the student's perceptions are strongly based on the opinions of their parents: "A kid will tell you, 'My mom, my dad told me don't talk to the police or don't trust the police.'" Haley also agreed that students learn from their parents:

I think it's definitely their home life and who they're hanging around and who their parents are hanging around and the influences. . . . They're seeing what their parents are doing, and they're going to do it whenever they grow up. So if there's negative things

going on at home, that's what they're going to go to. . . . I also think it's a generational issue with how the parents view the police because they might not have a lot of people that did have SROs in schools, and the police did come whenever something bad happened."

Heidi further explained that in those situations it may take an extra effort from the SRO:

"It may take you talking to them a time or two, but eventually most of them come around."

Haley explained that the students are only at school a portion of their day:

These kids come here, eight hours of the day but they go home to that every day. And so that's the agenda . . . that's pushed in their mind every day, and you try to change their mind and show them. . . . Actions speak louder than words, the words that you parents are saying.

Hank also brought up the strong influence of the media on the students and how it can mislead the students' opinions: "I do think home is the biggest influence, then secondly the media." In the focus group Hannah also pointed out the strong role of the media, more specifically social media, in how students view police officers: "Social media and the news play a huge role in how they see the police." Hank explained that often the media will present only part of a story due to trying to be the first to report, thus resulting in raw perceptions without true understanding. Hank went on to say, "So they see this headline, but there's no detail, and there's no fleshing out exactly what happened, no writing in it about any kind of legal precedents or anything like that." Hank also explained how adults aren't very different from the students when these media stories are shared, "we'll talk about ourselves, like what were they thinking."

Haley added to Hanks' statement: "I think Hampton County [has] a good way of integrating our community into our policing. I noticed if you built a relationship with kids, they

would talk to you.” The SROs discussed the importance of relationships with the students so that open communication is always available for them. Frederick from Freeman County stated, “A lot of these kids’ base stuff on if you can understand them. . . . The only way to understand them is to go into their world.” The SROs agreed that positive interactions can have just as much an influence on the students as the opposing life factors they are surrounded by daily. In the focus group Frederick described his interactions with the students:

When they’re doing a TikTok, I go up to them. . . . I try to get in them and see what they’re doing. . . . I’m all in their business. I’m learning what they’re doing. They’re singing a song, I come right beside them, I’m singing the same song. . . . Once you get on that side of them, they look for you every single day.

Theme 5: Charging the Students

The last theme developed through the data analysis was Charging the Students. When the majority of the SROs spoke about diverting students, they also spoke about the alternative of charging students. The SROs agreed that charging students was not the intention of the SROs, but in regard to their duties as not only as school resource officers but also as police officers, they are expected to adhere to criminal law. Hannah explained in her interview, “When it comes to discipline with breaking a school rule, that’s outside of my purview, but when it comes to criminal law, that’s when I take action.” Haley stated during her interview, “I’m on the criminal aspect of it and not as much the school aspect.” She further explained: “I work for the police department, not the Hampton County school system.” The SROs explained that charging students is the result of students violating criminal law. In her digital journal, Hannah detailed a situation that required charges:

The first fight started [an] as argument in the school. All of the female students were sent home for the day in hopes that cooler heads would prevail. That was not the case. Shortly after they left the building, the students texted each other to meet at a mutual location.

The fight was recorded, and the administration and I all gained access to it. . . . Typically in fights, I do not charge because it was mutually agreed upon to fight. Due to the weapon being used and EMS needing to flush out the eyes, all parties in this fight will be charged.

Hannah explained another situation in which a student had to be charged that same week: “On Friday, a student made a threat about ‘shoot up the school.’ This student has had all types of issues this school year. . . . A threat of this nature will not and cannot be tolerated. He will be charged with communicating threats toward the school.”

In her interview Hazel explained, “Our discipline comes when it’s a criminal matter, if it’s at the level of where law enforcement needs to step in to reinforce something.” Hazel describes how it was necessary to charge a student in week 2 of her journal:

Female student in possession of Exacto knife. Exacto knives are not allowed on campus even though it could be considered an art supply. This student decided to turn the Exacto knife into a weapon, cutting another student. This student was suspended and charged with possession of a weapon on school campus and assault with a deadly weapon.

Harold recalled an incident in week 3 of his journal of students fighting, which also included an adult parent fighting: “I was informed that a group of girls had fought in the cafeteria and that during the fight a parent was let into the cafeteria to join the [brawl]. These children, along with the adult, were charged with assaults and affray.” Hannah explained charging a student due to possession of a weapon:

I had one student attempt to smoke weed on campus this week. Any time something like that happens, the student is searched automatically. During the search a seven-inch fixed blade knife is located in his bookbag. I can and have overlooked a pocket-knife after confiscating it. A blade this large is outside of my capabilities to divert to another program. This student will be charged with carrying a dangerous weapon on campus and faces a possible expulsion from the school.

Franklin concurred that when considering criminal activity, “drugs are zero tolerance.” Joy explained a situation involving drugs with a student in her digital journal, “This SRO was involved with an incident in which a teacher reported suspicious activity involving a student while the student was outside performing a project. The teacher reported the activity to an assistant principal, which then called the student to their office. The assistant principle then contacted this SRO to report the activity. A search of the student was initiated, in which several alprazolam pills were found. . . . Alprazolam is commonly referred to as Xanax, which is a schedule four narcotic. The student received school discipline, and this SRO sought a juvenile petition on the student.” In Week 4 of her journal, Joy also explained a similar situation during when she was contacted by a school administrator about students being high in class:

Administration searched the students in question and located a cartridge for a “dab pen” in one of the students’ book bags. . . . The student [had] purchased the cartridge along with an electronic smoking device that did not work from another student. . . . This SRO will be seeking a juvenile petition on the student who sold cartridge of THC for PWISD (possession with intent to sell or distribute) schedule six controlled substance.

Joy explained that a “dab pen” is “an electronic smoking device containing THC,” which is the main compound in cannabis that produces the high sensation.

Frederick and Floyd also stated a zero tolerance regarding drugs and weapons. Frederick describes in his journals during Weeks 2, 5, and 6 charging students for fighting and possessing drugs on school grounds: “We also had a very big fight that took about three days for us to figure out who each kid was. Eventually I had to charge seven different guys and set up an appointment with juvenile services.” Heidi stated that when it comes to threats to the school, she takes it very personally because she is a parent herself:

These kids making these threats about shooting schools or shooting staff, I take that very personal because like I said I have a child that’s in school. So small gestures should not be left unpunished. . . . You should get some type of consequences. So this year I’ve had two of them. One I actually charged the kid with communicating threats of mass violence on the educational property.

Research Question Responses

The themes that emerged from the data analysis sources were used to answer the central and sub-questions that guided this multicase study. The first theme that emerged from the data was Primary Role of Safety, and the sub-themes were Building Relationships and Collaboration. The second theme that emerged was Diverting the Students and the sub-theme was School Policy. The third theme that emerged was Zero-tolerance Implementation. The fourth theme that emerged was Student Life Factors. The fifth theme that emerged was Charging the Students. This section outlines the results of the participants’ perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority students.

Central Research Question

The study’s central research question was, How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically

disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers? Participant responses indicated that zero-tolerance policies are not a major factor in the role of SROs. SROs themselves indicated that race and the socioeconomic status of students do not play a part in the role they play in their schools. The data revealed the five major themes that shaped the understanding of the perceptions of SROs regarding zero-tolerance policies: Primary Role of Safety (Theme 1), Diverting the Students (Theme 2), Zero-tolerance Implementation (Theme 3), Student Life Factors (Theme 4), and Charging the Students (Theme 5). Most of the participants did not acknowledge the implementation of zero-tolerance policies in their schools. All the participants reported the use of deferment programs in diverting students as the main source of discipline for all students, including even the minority population (Theme 1). As Harold stated, “They want us to divert as much as possible, they prefer not to charge kids.” Participant responses during the interviews and focus groups were consistent with the use of diversion programs as the major source of discipline for students and the digital journal entries provided many examples of the school resource officers utilizing diversion programs in lieu of charging students and of students being disciplined under school policy. The interviews and focus groups provided data that contributes to understanding the role of SROs related to safety and relationship building with the students and staff (Theme 2).

SROs in Hampton County were adamant that zero-tolerance policies did not factor into how they operated in their schools (Theme 3). Furthermore, many of the SROs observed no differences among subgroups when it comes to zero-tolerance implementation. Hazel stated, “Because I’m in a predominantly minority school, the minority are the majority.” Most of the other SROs in the study are assigned to similar schools and see no hierarchy when it comes to punishment among the students related to race or socioeconomic status. However, some SROs

who spoke of possible differences among subgroups as mentioned by Franklin, “I feel sometimes minorities, they tend to get in a little bit more trouble than others.”

Research Sub-question 1

The first sub-question of the study was, How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies? Theme 3 addressed this question, indicating that SROs have different views of zero-tolerance policies. SROs in Hampton County concurred that their county does not operate with a zero-tolerance mindset. A common theme among the SROs’ statements emerges in a statement by Hannah: “There is no such thing as zero tolerance as far as how I operate at all.” Conversely, while the SROs said they did not use zero-tolerance policies in their roles, they did see a need to deal with acts such as assaulting a teacher or using drugs. The zero-tolerance situations mentioned by the SROs can be considered criminal actions, requiring the SROs to take legal steps. Joy in Jefferson County also supported not utilizing zero-tolerance policies as part of the SRO role, stating that her school does not have consistent behavior issues that would require a zero-tolerance mandate. Yet, Joy supported the opinion that criminal actions that are subject to zero tolerance would require action from an SRO. Joy said that, for her, causing harm to another person would entail criminal charges, which coincides with necessary repercussions from SROs for criminal actions.

Freeman County showed a variation in zero-tolerance policy implementation because there is a strict enforcement for charges when fighting occurs. That district does implement a zero-tolerance policy for fighting among students because of the increased frequency. Consequently, students have to be charged. As stated by Frederick, “We have zero tolerance for fighting; we have to charge for every single fight.” Even though a student is charged, he or she may ultimately still be diverted to a program by juvenile justice.

The SROs showed an overall understanding of zero-tolerance policies, with only a few indicating some lack of understanding of the implications. The guidelines of a severe, swift punishment in zero-tolerance policies regardless of the student or situation was met with some opposition by the SROs, as plainly stated by Heidi: “You can make a mistake; it can be a bad mistake that can really change your life.” While the SROs in Hampton and Jefferson Counties showed a disregard for the need for zero-tolerance policies and their effectiveness, Freeman County SROs supported the need for and outcomes of zero-tolerance policies. The need for structure amidst returning to school after the Covid-19 pandemic was cited as a plausible justification for zero-tolerance policies.

Essentially, the differences among the understandings and implementation of zero-tolerance were more related to which county the school was in than to what level the school was (middle school versus high school). The consensus concerning zero-tolerance policies was that they are strict policies eliciting immediate severe consequences for the students, but rather than having specific zero-tolerance policies consistently throughout each county, the implications of zero-tolerance differ by location. Furthermore, the SROs themselves show personal intolerance to certain behaviors that will elicit an immediate action from them, especially criminal actions. The Hampton County SROs were adamant about having no use of zero tolerance in their schools and operating more by their own discretion in instances of criminal actions requiring law enforcement. It was clear that the schools do have policies regarding discipline, but there are no definitive zero-tolerance policies. Jefferson County was similar in that it also does not operate with zero-tolerance policies but will act when faced with criminal actions. Freeman County differed in that there are zero-tolerance policies for their schools regarding fighting. In that

situation students will be charged, and they are required to enforce those policies. Yet, the student can still be deferred to a program by juvenile justice..

Research Sub-question 2

The second sub-question of the study was, How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies? Participant responses to theme 3 show that there were differences in the perceptions of the effect of zero-tolerance policies on student criminalization. Hampton County SROs did not articulate a consensus on the relationship between student criminalization and zero-tolerance policies. Some of the perceived zero-tolerance policies as having a role in student criminalization due to the punishments potentially leading to charging the student and in turn establishing the link to the criminal justice system. Other opinions of the SROs did not directly link the implementation of zero-tolerance policies to the criminalization of the students and supported the need for such policies. The SROs also believed that many students do not understand the consequences of their actions and will continue to repeat those actions due to that lack of understanding.

Freeman County SROs offered a different perception on zero-tolerance policies and student criminalization. One SRO maintained that student criminalization is more related to the choices of the student than to the policies put in place by the school. Another SRO indicated he believed that zero-tolerance policies do play a role in student criminalization, stating that the negative of zero tolerance is there is no room for compromise. SROs from Jefferson County agreed that the students share some responsibility regarding the escalation in disciplinary repercussions. One SRO believes that the student has some control over how the situation is resolved.

Middle school and high school SROs shared the same consensus about student criminalization and zero-tolerance policies, believing that they are not related. The majority of both the middle and high school SROs said that zero-tolerance policies do not result in student criminalization. Furthermore, the SROs argued that when considering the cycle into juvenile detention, some responsibility must be placed on the student and the outside influences such as the community. When questioned about the role of zero-tolerance policies in student criminalization among the different subgroups or ethnicities, the SROs from both middle and high schools mostly shared the same opinion that the subgroups were treated equally regarding discipline. Jefferson County SROs stated no difference among subgroups when it came to zero-tolerance policies and punishment, and Hampton County SROs shared the idea that, based on the demographics of their schools, the numbers could possibly look skewed. Since they work in mostly minority schools, those are the students they are encountering the most. Hazel did add an additional opinion that a predominately White school may have better resources for students when they are disciplined to aid the student when compared to a predominately minority school. Yet, regarding diversion the SROs treat all the students the same when referring them to programs. As stated by Hank, “There’s not a single form that the police fill out that asks how much money they make [or] how much their mortgages are.” While Freeman County SROs mostly shared the same belief about fair treatment among the subgroups, one individual did reference possible disparities among the students.

Research Sub-question 3

The third sub-question of the study was, How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies? Participant responses to Theme 1 represent a strong belief that the primary role of SROs is the safety of the students and school.

SROs from all three counties were consistent in how they perceive their roles in the schools and discipline. Middle and high school SROs communicated that safety was the main role of the SRO and that discipline falls mostly onto the school administration, including school policy for zero tolerance. Participant responses to Theme 1 represent a strong emphasis on the importance of building relationships with the students. As plainly stated by Hank, “That’s kind of the biggest thing we do is we just create relationships with the kids.” Freeman County SROs emphasized “bridging the gap between law enforcement and the students” and added that, while their main role was the safety of the students and school, they are also in place to assist the school administration when necessary.

The SROs did not describe their role in terms of discipline but were consistent in the perception of their roles as strongly related to criminal activity, with a preference for deferring students as opposed to referring students to juvenile justice. All the SROs from Hampton County stated that discipline falls on the school administration and the school policy, but they will get involved with any criminal aspects. However, regarding criminal activity, the SROs explained that they are bound by the law. As police officers, they must—when called in for nondivertible offenses—refer student offenders to juvenile justice. The SROs explained that school policy takes precedence with discipline, but when school policy is not enough or the students need more structure, they will step in to assist. Floyd explained, regarding the criminal aspect of discipline, that their role is defined by the law but that a balance does need to be established when dealing with other disciplinary issues. Communication with the school administration was regarded as essential when it comes to having balance and understanding in regard to discipline.

Research Sub-question 4

The fourth sub-question of the study was, What do school resource officers believe makes zero tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline? Participant responses to Theme 3 indicate that SROs have different views on how effective zero-tolerance policies are with student discipline. The SROs explained the nuances of strict punishments in zero-tolerance policies with no regard for the student or the situation. Hampton County SROs mostly shared the belief that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective, asserting that what makes zero-tolerance policies ineffective is that “not every situation is black and white.” Furthermore, punishing every offender under zero tolerance can cause the opposite of deterrence by instead creating feelings of resentment among first-time offenders who are normally not rule-breakers. Furthermore, Jefferson County SROs added that students may not even understand the implications of zero-tolerance policies. The SROs indicated a strong desire to build positive relationships with the students and believe that implementing such zero-tolerance policies would prove detrimental.

Freeman County SROs cited a consistent belief that proper implementation can make zero-tolerance policies effective in student discipline particularly when the punishment is clearly stated and understood by the students. These same SROs, however, did discuss the high number of fighting incidents occurring in their schools despite of the implementation of zero-tolerance policies and charges being filed for those actions. One SRO stated that students can become numb to the consequences, and eventually the policy will lack any deterrence ability so that students will still choose to act out.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies were not differentiated between middle school SROs and high school SROs. Instead, there were differences between the counties. Freeman County SROs were the only participants to state a specific zero-tolerance

policy not necessarily related to a criminal action, and those SROs actively enforce that policy. The SROs did not associate zero-tolerance policies with safety, and all the SROs from the middle and high schools only mentioned safety in terms of their specific jobs roles and duties. Yet, zero-tolerance policies were established in an effort to combat school violence, and in Freeman County's taking an active role in establishing a zero-tolerance policy for fighting can be regarded as a tool to create a safer environment for the school and the students.

Summary

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand SROs' perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. The study generated five themes that corresponded to the research questions guiding the study. The five themes found are Primary Role of Safety, Diverting the Students, Zero-tolerance Implementation, Student Life Factors, and Charging the Students. The differences among the perceptions of zero-tolerance policies were found to be more related to the locale (county) as opposed to the level (middle versus high school).

The responses to Sub-question 1 showed a difference among SROs' perceptions of zero-tolerance policies. Participant responses for Hampton County indicated a lack of zero-tolerance policy implementation, and the SROs were adamant that zero-tolerance policies did not play a role in the way they perceived their role or in how they interacted with the students. One Jefferson County SRO shared that feeling since her county did not implement zero-tolerance policies. In contrast, Freeman County SROs expressed that their county does recognize zero-tolerance for acts such as fighting and that the SROs do have to charge students in those instances. School policy was regarded as the guiding force for student discipline, but in cases of nondivertible offenses, the SROs must charge the students. The use of deferment programs was

regarded by the SROs as the primary means of discipline for the students, but the SROs explained that they do act on criminal matters as part of their job role and responsibilities as police officers. Consequently, although the student may be charged, the juvenile justice system has the final say, and the student may still be diverted.

The responses to Sub-question 2 showed a variation among the SROs regarding their perceptions of the effects of zero-tolerance policies on student criminalization. One SRO in Hampton County believed that zero-tolerance policies dictating specific punishments push students into the juvenile justice system, while other SROs believed that the students really do not understand the implications of zero-tolerance policies and the possible consequences. SROs also believed that the students are more affected by the community they are a part of than by the policies of the school. Freeman County SROs varied in their perceptions of student criminalization, stating that student criminalization is more related to the choices of the student. One SRO also believed that zero-tolerance policies do not contribute to student criminalization because the policies are clear-cut. Altogether, among the middle and high school SROs the majority believed that zero-tolerance policies do not result in student criminalization and that consideration should be given to other factors, such as the role of the student.

SRO responses to the third sub-question were consistent among all the participants and revealed that SROs regard their role as primarily one of ensuring safety for the students and school. The SROs did not relate their role and responsibilities to discipline or enforcing zero-tolerance policies but believed in a collaborative role with the administration. The SROs were adamant about the importance of also building relationships and bonds with the students. Yet, when criminal acts are committed, the SROs are required to act as part of their role as police officers to ensure the safety of the school.

SRO responses to Sub-question 4 showed a divide among the counties on the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies. Freeman County SROs insisted that proper implementation would show zero-tolerance policies to be effective, but Hampton County SROs consistently considered zero-tolerance policies ineffective, citing the fact that not every situation is “black and white.” Hampton County SROs also believed that imposing zero-tolerance punishments on first-time offenders can create division among those students and their school. While the SROs did not associate zero-tolerance policies with safety, the intent of zero-tolerance policies is to maintain the safety of the school and to deter possible threats of violence. Freeman County applied this idea by implementing a specific zero-tolerance policy for fighting in an effort to reduce school violence and keep the school environment safe.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand school resource officers’ perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance impact on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in North Carolina public schools. Ten school resource officers from 10 middle and high schools in three North Carolina counties participated in the study. This study was designed to answer one central question and four sub-questions to understand the perceptions of SROs and their roles in zero-tolerance policies and student criminalization. This chapter presents the findings and implications of the study. The study shows some correlations with Beccaria’s (1963) and Bentham’s (1948) theory of deterrence. This chapter discusses the study’s delimitations and limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Analysis of the data from the interviews, digital journals, and focus groups, revealed five themes and provided answers to the central question and four sub-questions. The five major themes revealed by the data analysis were (a) Primary Role of Safety, (b) Diverting the Students, (c) Zero-tolerance Implementation, (d) Student Life Factors, and (e) Charging the Students. The central question for the study was, How does the implementation of zero-tolerance policies promote or deter the disciplinary referrals of minority and economically disadvantaged students through policy and the role of school resource officers? There were four sub-questions for the study: How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies? How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies? How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies? What do school resource officers believe makes zero-tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline? No outliers emerged from the data analysis.

The study included 10 middle and high school SROs, each of whom had at least one year of experience as an SRO. Each school had at least a 24% minority population. Participant responses revealed more differences in SRO perceptions among the three counties than differences between the middle school SROs and the high school SROs.

The first sub-question in the study was, How do school resource officers describe zero-tolerance policies? The SROs explained how zero-tolerance policies inhibit the consideration of the student or the situation and immediately implement punishment, which can include charges for the student. Variations among SRO perceptions also revealed the belief that zero-tolerance policies do not support student criminalization due to the policies being specifically stated. Yet, some SROs stated that students may not understand the implications of zero-tolerance policies or

the consequences and therefore may become repeat offenders. The second sub-question of the study was, How do school resource officers view the criminalization of students using zero-tolerance policies? There was a difference among SRO perception on the role of zero-tolerance policies in student criminalization. Few SROs believed that zero-tolerance policies contribute to student criminalization but cited the use of strict punishments for initiating students into the juvenile justice system.

The third sub-question of the study was, How do school resource officers view their role as it relates to school discipline and zero-tolerance policies? All the SROs described their role as primarily related to the safety of the students and school with an emphasis on building relationships with the students. The SROs place a high value on building positive relationships with the students. Although the SRO may be confronted with negative opinions of law enforcement from influences in the student's life such as their parents and even the portrayal of police on social media, the SROs took a strong stance that building relationships with the students is worth the time and effort. The SROs also supported the need for collaboration with the school administration and the importance of the administration understanding the role of the SRO as well.

Discipline was described by the SROs as a responsibility that falls more under the duties of the school. Furthermore, school policy was regarded as the guiding foundation for student discipline. Regarding the discipline of the students, the SROs were consistent in stating that their intentions focus more on diverting the students rather than referring them to the juvenile justice and charging the students. The SROs mentioned several programs used for diverting students when working on disciplinary issues, including Teen Court and Life Skills. The SROs clarified that they are required to step in for nondivertible offenses and instances of criminal activity. Yet,

even in those instances, the SROs still attempt to keep the student out of the criminal justice system.

The fourth sub-question of the study was, What do school resource officers believe makes zero tolerance an effective policy or ineffective policy for school safety and discipline? There was a disagreement regarding the overall effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies among the SROs from Hampton and Jefferson Counties compared with those from Franklin County. The Hampton County SROs argued that the strictness of zero-tolerance policies generalizes students and the situation is not effective for deterring behavioral issues. The statement that the students may not understand zero-tolerance policies supported the opinion that zero-tolerance policies are not an effective measure. The lack of consideration for the situation and the student in implementing zero-tolerance policies was a strong concern about the practicality of the policies as an effective method of student discipline. Only the Franklin County SROs believed that proper implementation would make zero-tolerance policies an effective measure for student discipline.

The SROs were in agreement in their perception that students' socioeconomic status has little to no effect on the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, when charging students, socioeconomic status has no effect or influence; all students are treated the same. Regarding disparities in treatment for the different races, the SROs explained that when they're working in a school where the majority of students are of a minority group, differentiations between the subgroups are not a factor in implementing their duties. There were situations described in the data analysis that revealed possible disparities in the implementation of discipline for African American versus White students. Yet, those instances were limited, and the

SROs regarded themselves as very fair in the way they treated the different races and socioeconomic classes of students.

Discussion

The following is a discussion of the research findings related to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The empirical evidence explains the perceptions of SROs regarding the impact of zero-tolerance policies and student criminalization among economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students. This section will also compare the related literature to the findings of this study and explain how this study adds to the limited body of research on SROs' perceptions. The theoretical framework is discussed in relation to the related literature and the findings. The theoretical framework of Beccaria (1963) and Bentham (1948) is applied to the study to provide insights and explain the findings related to zero-tolerance policy implementation.

Empirical Literature

The findings of this study suggest that SROs view their role to be mostly focused on ensuring the safety of the school and building relationships with students, than on enforcing zero-tolerance policies or increasing referrals to the juvenile justice system. Many studies of zero-tolerance policies (Counts et al., 2018; Kodelja, 2019; Mallett, 2016; Marchbanks et al., 2018) lack the inclusion of the perspective of SROs as it relates to their role in zero-tolerance implementation. Current research focuses on the relationship between the presence of SROs and the frequency of reporting serious offenses (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2019; Swartz et al., 2016) as well as its impact on discipline referrals (Zhang, 2019).

The results of this study contradict some of the findings of Marchbanks et al. (2018). They found that African American and Latino American students were subject to higher rates of

juvenile justice referrals. Losen and Skiba (2010) also found a significant difference among subgroups, with African American males experiencing a higher suspension rate than their Caucasian counterparts. The Marchbanks et al. (2018) study was conducted in an urban school setting where the minority population was in the majority; similarly, the setting for this study was schools where minorities made up the majority of the student body. The SROs from Hampton County in this study stated that their decision to charge a student is not based on the race of the student. Because the school they are assigned is primarily minority students, that is the population they interact with more frequently. The current study found that most SROs saw no difference in the discipline rates among the subgroups related to zero-tolerance policies. Research has characterized the presence of cameras, SROs, and zero-tolerance policies as contributing to the criminalizing of student misbehaviors in a way that reflects the juvenile justice system (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik, 2010; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Morris & Perry, 2016; Wacquant, 2001; Welch & Payne, 2010). Yet, the results of this study showed that the SROs never really want to charge the students or refer them to juvenile justice. Rather, the SROs are more likely to divert the students to programs than impose harsh discipline when possible.

Berlowitz et al. (2015) found that lower-income schools with higher proportions of African American students were more likely to implement and adhere to the strict enforcement of zero-tolerance policies. The findings of the current study aligned with those of Berlowitz et al. (2015). Of the three counties studied, Freeman County, which had the largest number of minority students, the lowest per capita income for families, and the largest number of persons living below the poverty line, showed greater adherence to zero-tolerance policies and stricter enforcement as found in the data analysis. The Freeman County SROs supported zero-tolerance policies and expressed the belief that zero-tolerance policies can be effective.

The current study does not support previous research by Banes (2016) and Travis and Coon (2005) reporting that SROs perceive their role as primarily an extension of their law enforcement role. Based on the data from SRO's interviews and digital journals, they make an effort to not solely be a representation of law enforcement but to build positive relationships with students. The SROs in this study believe that their primary role is to ensure the safety of the students and all school personnel. However they were adamant about the importance of building relationships with students and bridging the gap between law enforcement and students. The SROs also added the duties of counselor, advisor, and confidant to their current roles. They reported a separation between their role as SROs and the enforcement of discipline measures, such as with zero-tolerance policies. The SROs saw the responsibility of discipline as primarily associated with the mandates of the school's policy rather than a primary function in their own roles. This study does not concur with the findings of Mckenna et al. (2016), who reported that the role of SROs should mainly be that of law enforcement officers. The perceptions of the SROs in this study were consistent with a finding from Mckenna et al. (2016) that stated SROs should not have a role in student discipline. Conversely, the SROs also explained they are required to fulfill their duties as police officers and must act on criminal activity that is not divertible under school policy or within their own discretions considering the offense.

Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) described some SROs as having a mixed approach to their duties when they assumed the role of teacher and counselor along with their law enforcement duties. This study does concur Devlin and Gottfredson's (2018) mixed approach role explaining that SROs take a mixed approach to their roles acting as law enforcement officer as well as counselor, mentor, and teacher. Participants in this study stated that they may have the role of counselors and mentors in addition to their role as SROs. However, this study does not

support the additional conclusions of Devlin and Gottfredson (2018) that SROs in the mixed approach reported less serious crimes more often. This study does not concur with the findings of Na and Gottfredson (2013), who stated that SROs report more frequently, regardless of the offense. SROs in this study explained their efforts to divert the students, if possible, when the behavior does not include a nondivertible offense, rather than reporting and charging. Furthermore, the SROs in this study stated that they are required to charge students for nondivertible criminal acts but make a strong effort to divert students to other programs such as Teen Court and Life Skills. While the SROs report a high level of diversion on their part, they must also adhere to reporting or charging nondivertible offenses, mainly criminal actions. Additionally, this study supports Kelly and Swezey (2015), who reported that SROs spend less time in their law enforcement role and more in an advising role with the students. SROs in this study shared multiple instances of bonding with the students in their daily activities.

This study concurs with research by Swartz et al. (2016), who found the presence of SROs to be associated with higher rates of reported serious violence and a larger detection of more violent incidents. The SROs in this study explained that their positions in the school allows for convenient reporting due to being physical present in the school and available. Yet, the SROs also explained that there are mandatory reportable offenses for which they cannot divert, which explains the higher number of reported incidents and the SROs' duty to respond to criminal acts. Nevertheless, the SROs aim to reduce the number of reported offenses through diversion programs. Dohy and Banks (2018) reported that school police presence was related to an increase in violence by the students. The data from this study does not support a relationship between SROs and increased violence, but the SROs did explain how the perceptions of the students and parents can affect their relationships with them. The SROs expressed a desire to

have positive relationships with the students, but sometimes the students are influenced by other factors in their lives such as the perceptions of their parents or community.

This study does not support research conducted by Barnes and Motz (2018) reporting that African American students receive more suspensions and expulsions than White students. This study also contradicts the conclusion that economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be punished (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2002). Rather, SROs in the current study reported no differentiation among subgroups for the implementation of zero-tolerance policies with the rate of suspension and expulsions. Furthermore, SROs in this study reported that when they refer students, they have no knowledge of their socioeconomic status nor do they require that information. Bleakley and Bleakley (2018) reported a connection between the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies and the employment of SRO programs. Yet, the current study found that SROs do not acknowledge the implementation of zero-tolerance policies as part of their role. Hampton County and Jefferson County SROs confirmed no implementation of zero-tolerance policies within their schools. While Freeman County SROs did acknowledge enforcing zero-tolerance policies for fighting, all the SROs were adamant about their role being primarily for the safety of the school and confronting criminal actions, such as assault and drug possession.

This study does not confirm or contradict the research of Theriot and Orme (2016), who found that African American students reported more feelings of being unsafe, but the study supports the idea of African American students' feelings are more related to the experiences of the students. SROs in this study reported that the students' perceptions of the SROs are largely affected by their families and experiences outside of school. The SROs reported conversations with students voicing their parents' perceptions and concerns about police officers and reported the influence of the media on student perceptions. While the SROs make an effort to debunk the

negativity associated with police officers, essentially the students spend more time with the influences outside of school.

The current study did reveal some perceptions of the SROs that zero-tolerance policies are related to student criminalization in support of research by McGrew (2016). Yet, some SROs did believe student criminalization to be more related to factors such as the actions of the students rather than the policies themselves. Howard (2016) reported the emergence of the school-to-prison pipeline to be related to the influences of law enforcement and SROs in public schools, but the SROs in this study believe that other factors, such as the number of deferments, are rarely mentioned. Previous research regarding the school-to-prison pipeline focuses on the number of students being referred to the juvenile justice system without accounting for the number of times a student has been diverted and whether the offense was required to be reported (Flannery, 2015; Losinkski et. al., 2014; May et. al., 2018; Merkwae, 2015). The SROs explained that there are divertible and nondivertible offenses and that they must uphold the law when there are criminal acts.

Theoretical Literature

Beccaria's (1963) and Bentham's (1948) framework of deterrence theory guided the theoretical framework for the current study. The premise of deterrence theory is that if the consequences are appropriately swift, severe, and certain, then individuals are deterred and dissuaded from engaging in delinquent or criminal behavior (Nagin, 2003; Nagin, 1998; Pratt et al., 2006). Chalfin and McCrary (2017) suggested that there are three core concepts in the deterrence theory: (1) individuals respond to change in certainty, (2) individuals respond to changes in severity, and (3) individuals respond to change in immediacy. Therefore, in order to create a response of deterrence, the punishment must be certain, severe, and immediate. Chalfin

and McCrary (2017) supported both general deterrence, the idea that individuals respond to the threat of punishment, and specific deterrence, which states that individuals are responsive to the experience of punishment. In schools, exclusionary disciplinary policies and the threat of suspensions and expulsions are the basis of deterrence theory (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

Previous studies have applied deterrence theory to military operations for deterring opposing behaviors of the enemy (Bendiek & Metzger, 2015) as well as for the enforcement of road safety measures (Bates et al., 2012; Fleiter et al., 2013; Watling & Leal, 2012). Hansen (2015) concluded that the harsh punishments for driving offenses, such as loss of driving privileges or worse, did deter future offenses.

The implications of deterrence theory serving as the basis the of zero-tolerance policies would support the premise that certain, severe, and immediate punishments should deter the misbehavior of students. Yet, the SROs' perceptions in this study do not support the concepts of deterrence theory and zero-tolerance policies as being a successful method tor deter inappropriate behaviors of students. Theme 3 (Zero-tolerance Implementation) provides a perspective from the SROs of different views about the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies. Additionally, although there were some perceptions of zero-tolerance policies being effective with proper implementation, as stated by Freeman County SROs, the SROs also added that students may not understand zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, the students may not even care about the consequences.

Deterrence theory was not supported by this study since the SROs believed that the strict, severe, and immediate punishment of zero-tolerance policies does not deter behavior. Instead, such policies have the potential to create negative feelings among the students toward SROs and increase the likelihood of students offending more. One SRO from Freeman County argued that

zero-tolerance policies allow a student to become unreactive to consequences, so that the student eventually would not be deterred but will offend more. The concepts behind deterrence theory are not viable for this study because zero-tolerance policies have been shown to be ineffective in deterring behavior. Furthermore, the lack of consideration for the situation and the student is not an appropriate way to create changes in behavior among the students. Deterrence theory presumes that upon learning of the consequences of an offense, a potential offender will refrain from committing the offense (Lee, 2017). Yet, as explained by the SROs in the current study, if students are unaware of those consequences or are unconcerned about the punishment, the concept of deterrence utilizing zero-tolerance policies is baseless. Furthermore, those students who lack a concern about the consequences will choose to violate those policies regardless of the outcome. Harold explained, “I don’t think [zero-tolerance policy] actually deters the problem behaviors. . . . It hammers the once or twice offenders harder and makes them more resentful. . . . The people who are going to do wrong or make bad decisions [are] going to do wrong regardless.”

Based on the responses of the participants, establishing a positive and open relationship with the students is valued and proves to be beneficial in promoting positive behaviors from the students. Furthermore, the SROs explained that having good relationships with the students increases good behavior while deterring them from engaging in negative behaviors. This study supports the importance of supportive, engaging relationships with the students in promoting good behaviors, along with the use of deferment programs such as Teen Court and Life Skills to assist students who need more guidance and structure in changing their behaviors.

Implications

Deterrence theory originates from Beccaria (1963) and Bentham (1948) and is based on the premise that individuals are deterred from engaging in delinquent or criminal behavior if the consequences are severe enough (Nagin, 2003; Nagin, 1998; Pratt et al., 2006). The effectiveness of deterrence theory is based on the core concepts that individuals will respond to certainty, severity, and immediacy. The application to zero-tolerance policies means that students will respond to punishment that is certain, severe, and immediate. The implication of this study is that deterrence theory lacks viability as applied in zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, the use of zero-tolerance policies to deter student misbehavior is ineffective and inefficient. The SROs contributed to the practicality of the concepts of deterrence and added to the understanding that certain, severe, and immediate consequences will not motivate positive behavior change in students. A further implication is that the concepts behind deterrence theory may have the opposite effect since zero-tolerance policies may motivate the students to continue to engage in delinquent behaviors. Conversely, the ability to establish positive relationships with the students and share a bond with them proves more effective for their well-being and motivates them to pursue a positive future.

The empirical implication is that the findings from this study contribute to the database of research about zero-tolerance policies and the role of SROs. A gap in the literature exists since those previous studies focus on the presence of SROs and the frequency of reporting serious offenses as well as the impact of SROs on discipline referrals (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2019; Zhang, 2019; Swartz et al., 2016). Previous research failed to address the perceptions of SROs concerning the factors related to student criminalization and the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2018; McGrew, 2016; Theriot &

Cuellar, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Furthermore, the role of SROs in school discipline and zero-tolerance policies had not been thoroughly explored. This study contributes to filling the gap in the literature regarding the understanding of the duties and roles of SROs in the schools. This study explores the perceptions of SROs regarding their role as it relates to the students and discipline. Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of the SRO role in zero-tolerance policies and the implications of zero-tolerance policies in student criminalization. It contradicts previous studies on the duties of the SRO and student criminalization among minority and economically disadvantaged students (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Howard, 2016; McGrew, 2016; Pigott, Stears, & Key, 2018).

The findings in the study have important practical implications for schools that utilize zero-tolerance policies to deter behavior. The current study aids in clarifying the roles of SROs with discipline and the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. It also adds to the clarification of student criminalization among student subgroups. Originally, this study had practical implications to contribute to the development of further training for SROs to establish the boundary between schooling and policing. Yet, this study has found that SROs are not typically policing the schools but simply acting when nondivertible criminal offenses occur. The SROs support maintaining a division between school discipline and their roles as SROs; they make an effort to keep students out of the juvenile justice system through diversion programs. Therefore, programs should be developed to educate administrators, school staff, and parents on the roles of SROs and the process of student discipline for the students.

Such programs for administrators, school staff, and parents can be presented in the form of educational forums to discuss the role of SROs in the school, including the procedure they follow when diverting and charging students. This type of education would also provide the

opportunity for parents to engage with the SROs to establish relationships and dispel some of the negative views associated with law enforcement. It would also be beneficial for the SROs to include their own statistics as it relates to their rates of diverting students and charging them. The development should also include feedback from the school as to the discipline policies and procedures of the school. Opening such dialogue and discussion among the SROs, the school, and parents can achieve a better understanding of the role of SROs, the use of zero-tolerance policies, and school policies. Furthermore, that understanding can be further passed down to the students, establishing better relationships and increasing their understanding.

Consequently, this study can be used to assess the practicality of zero-tolerance policies and the benefits versus the costs. There should be more discussion of the benefits of zero-tolerance policies and the consequences to students. The discussion should also include the need for more emphasis on establishing positive relationships with the students and the aftereffects that will have not only on deterring problem behaviors but also on establishing a positive school environment. This study can also be utilized by SROs, school administration, and parents to understand student criminalization among student subgroups and economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the practical implications should also include clear policies formulated by the administration for the SROs. Developing these clear policies will assist with creating a clearer understanding of the tasks of the SRO among staff and administrators.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are factors that can restrict the questions or inferences that can be drawn from the findings and are intentional (PhD Student, 2022). Conversely, limitations are not intentional and lie outside the researcher's control (PhD Student, 2022). The delimitations to this study were applied in order to ensure that the parameters of the study achieved their intended

purpose of understanding SROs' perceptions of the impact zero-tolerance policies have on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students. Due to the focus on the perceptions of SROs, it was necessary that participants have at least one year of experience as an SRO. This ensured the SROs were accustomed to their job roles and duties and were able to provide a knowledge-based contribution to the study. It was also necessary that participants be currently assigned to a school with a significant minority population. The purposeful sampling of the participants did serve as a delimitation and limits the generalizability of this study. The setting of this study was North Carolina due to ease of access, but this created another delimitation to this study. It is possible that other states have different statutes related to divertible and nondivertible offenses in student discipline, which could generate varying results related to SROs' role in zero-tolerance policies. This study was also focused on middle and high school SROs as SROs are not assigned to North Carolina elementary schools. This is also a limitation of the study as this is a state measure, but there could be differences in other states.

This study was limited to 10 participants due to lack of response, hesitation on the part of commanding officers, and continued transitions among positions. The small sample size was a limitation on the generalizability of the study because the lack of response from potential participants was outside my control. Data collection efforts for the interview and focus groups were limited to Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020–2021. Furthermore, data collection efforts were focused on noncontact methods due to the lack of access to visit the schools due to Covid-19. Because of the noncontact method of gathering data, I was limited in reading the physical reactions of the participants. The study also included data collection during the winter season during some weeks of school being closed due to snow. The data analysis methods for this research created a limitation to the study as my interpretations are limited and

influenced by my personal experiences and knowledge. Consequently, qualitative research is mostly open-ended since there is no result verification for qualitative analysis, and I am unable to verify the objectivity of the results against the information provided by the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study analyzed SROs' perceptions of the effect of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority students, but there are other areas to be considered when trying to understand not only the role of SROs in discipline but also the impact of zero-tolerance policies. I understood the perception of SROs through collecting data collection from individual interviews, digital journaling, and focus groups. This study is beneficial for tightening and defining the roles of SROs in the schools, and future research should focus on understanding of specific roles of SROs as stipulated NASRO in relation to school policy and expectations of the county. Future research should also include the perspectives of parents and their understandings of SROs and zero-tolerance policies. It would be beneficial to explore the role of parents in school discipline and their impact on student discipline from their perspective. The study also encourages a more in-depth look at the causes of the criminalization of students and the steps taken before the ultimate referral to juvenile justice.

Future research should include more studies on other forms of deterrence that could be implemented in the school system, such as the diversion programs utilized by the SROs in this study. In addition, future studies can further explore the effectiveness of deterrence as well as the overall effectiveness of the diversion programs being utilized. Although such programs are heavily used by the SROs, future research can determine whether the students actually benefit from the programs and whether they are less likely to offend again. Additionally, future research should focus on the relationships among the students, SROs, and personnel. The SROs in this

research placed a strong emphasis on the relationships established with the students and stated that the students respond well to the positive interactions they have with their SROs. Establishing positive relationships with the students can support positive behaviors from the students and lessen the occurrence of disciplinary infractions. It would be beneficial to understand alternate perspectives of building relationships and the benefits.

Future studies can be conducted utilizing more than 10 participants with different saturations of student populations. Additionally, more studies conducted in different states will offer a better perspective on zero-tolerance policy implementation among school systems. Future research could explore the impact of the race of the SRO on their job roles as well as the influence of their backgrounds. Future studies may also use a quantitative approach to measure student perceptions of zero-tolerance policies and the role of SROs. Furthermore, future studies should include research on the perception students and parents have of SROs.

Summary

The purpose of this multicase study was to understand SROs' perceptions of the impact of zero-tolerance policies on economically disadvantaged minority middle and high school students in 10 North Carolina public schools. Previous studies focused on the relationship of the presence of SROs to the frequency of reporting serious offenses (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2019; Swartz et al., 2016). This study found no justification to support previous research that concluded that African American and Latino American students were associated with higher rates of juvenile justice referrals (Marchbanks et al., 2018) or that the placement of SROs in the school supports a system that harms and criminalizes youth of color, particularly African American youth (Turner & Beneke, 2020). The SROs in the study voiced the view that race plays no part in how they perform their job duties. In fact, the SROs in the study work primarily

in schools with minority populations, and therefore that is the population they have the most contact with.

This study suggests that many SROs do not support zero-tolerance policies but instead focus on diversion programs for discipline infractions. The SROs' primary focus is on the safety of the students and school personnel, but a strong emphasis is placed on building valuable, positive relationships with the students. Furthermore, the study does not support zero-tolerance policies as an effective means of discipline from the SRO perspective. While the SROs comments revealed a division among the counties regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance, the main opinion viewed zero tolerance as ineffective. Additionally, one concern about the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies was whether the students understand the implications of zero tolerance and the consequences. The study also added to understanding of the effects of zero tolerance since the SROs believed that zero-tolerance policies do play a role in student exposure to the juvenile justice system.

The current study suggests a minimal relationship between zero-tolerance policy implementation and the role of SROs. SROs mainly reported no association with the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, the use of zero-tolerance policies in the school seemed to differ based on the area. The current study shows that SROs do not perceive their role as one that relates to imposing discipline on the students, and the SROs prefer to be a positive force in students' lives as they develop positive relationships with them. While the SROs must react to non-divertible criminal acts, such as assault and drug possession, this study shows that it is not the goal of the SROs that the students leave high school with a "diploma and a charge" as one of the participants put it. While past research (Fabelo et al., 2011; Maddox, 2016; Turner & Beneke, 2020) found a higher incidence of suspensions and expulsions among

minority populations, the current study does not support a link between the role of the SROs and this racial disparity. SROs reported having no regard for the race of the students or their socioeconomic status when diverting or charging them. Ultimately, it is not the goal of the SRO to charge the student. As explained by Hannah, “I don’t want to charge a kid. . . . It ties me up from doing other things that I really want to do. . . . I want to be in the hallways with these kids interacting. . . . I want to be able to go and do the duties that I have to do around here, going to the football game, going to the basketball game. . . . I try to avoid [charging] so that kid gets an opportunity to get it right . . . because they’re kids.”

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APPENDIX A

PHONE (336) 887-7970

J. TRAVIS STROUD FAX (336) 887-7949

Chief of Police TDD (336) 883-8517

██████████ Police Department

Ms. Proctor,

Thank you for reaching out to the ██████████. We would be honored to assist you with your study on School Resource Officers and zero-tolerance offenses. Please get in touch with ██████████ as the point of contact for this study. At the conclusion of your research, please feel free to utilize any information provided by our School Resource Officers as part of your dissertation.

If I can be of further assistance, please let me know.

Sincerely,

████████████████████

1009 Leonard Avenue • High Point, North Carolina 27260
www.highpointnc.gov/police

**APPENDIX B**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

March 4, 2021

[REDACTED]

Superintendent

[REDACTED]

Dear Ms. Proctor:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled A collective case study to describe school resource officers' perceptions of zero-tolerance policies and the criminalization of minority and economically disadvantaged high school students, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED] Schools.

The School Resource Officers for [REDACTED] are under the supervision of the [REDACTED] Sheriff's Office. The [REDACTED] Sheriff has given permission for the School Resource Officers to participate in the survey if they so choose.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Superintendent

APPENDIX C

November 18, 2021

Ashley Proctor
Re: Research Study
Approval Letter

Ms. Proctor,

I have received your request for an SRO to participate in your research study. With the approval of [REDACTED] has been approved to voluntarily participate in this research study.

It is our understanding that this research study is voluntary and [REDACTED] may terminate his participation at any time without penalty.

It is furthermore noted, that all opinions and beliefs expressed during this research study, both verbal and written, are solely that of [REDACTED] and may or may not reflect the opinions and beliefs of the [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 7, 2021

Ashley Proctor
Susan Quindag

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-9 Elementary, Middle, and High School Resource Officers' Perceptions of Zero-Tolerance Policies' Impact on Economically Disadvantaged Minority Students: A Multi-Case Study

Dear Ashley Proctor, Susan Quindag,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX E

Participant Questionnaire

Name

Age

Gender

Ethnicity/Race

Title

Number of years as police officer

Attended SRO five-day training course yes no

Passed mandatory SRO assessment yes no

Number of years as school resource officer

Current school

Number of years at current assigned school

Job duties

Are you familiar with “zero-tolerance policies”? yes no

*All responses from individuals who do not meet the inclusion criteria will be discarded

APPENDIX F

Participant Recruitment Letter

April 12, 2020

Participant
School "A"
Dear Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my study is to understand the perceptions of school resource officers with zero-tolerance policies, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must have attended the mandatory SRO training required by North Carolina and must have passed the mandatory assessment. Participants also must have worked in their position for at least a year. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a questionnaire, schedule personal interviews with me, and join in a focus group with other school resource officers. It should take approximately 4 months to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please complete the attached survey and return it via email.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it via email. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Participants will receive a \$25 gift card for their assistance once the research has concluded.

Sincerely,

Ashley Proctor
Lead Researcher
AProctor8@liberty.edu

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Interview Questions:

1. Please introduce yourself and your current school of assignment.
2. Describe the roles and duties of a school resource officer.
3. What are your feelings regarding the role of school resource officers with discipline?
4. How would you describe the implementation zero-tolerance policies in the school system?
5. How would you describe the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in deterring problem behaviors, or lack thereof?
6. How do you view zero-tolerance policies as they apply to the rate of suspensions and the expulsions of various subgroups?
7. What role do you believe that you play in zero-tolerance implementation, if any?
8. How does zero tolerance affect the students differently; is there any difference among the student populations?
9. Describe the role, if any, that zero-tolerance policies play in student criminalization.
10. What is your understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline?

Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews.

APPENDIX H

Standardized Open-ended Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and your current school of assignment.
2. Describe the roles and duties of a school resource officer.
3. What are your feelings regarding the role of school resource officers with discipline?
4. How would you describe the implementation zero-tolerance policies in the school system?
5. How would you describe the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in deterring problem behaviors or lack thereof?
6. How do you view zero-tolerance policies as they apply to the rate of suspensions and the expulsions of various subgroups?
7. What role do you believe that you play in zero-tolerance implementation, if any?
8. How does zero tolerance affect the students differently (i.e., is there any difference among the student populations)?
9. Describe the role, if any, that zero-tolerance policies play in student criminalization.
10. What is your understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline?

APPENDIX I

Weekly Digital Journal Prompt

1. Describe your interactions this week with the students in your role as SRO.
2. What were your experiences this week with zero-tolerance policy?

APPENDIX J

Standardized Open-ended Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and your current school of assignment.
2. How would you describe the role of the school resource officer?
3. What makes school resource officers important or not important?
4. Describe the school resource officer's role in zero-tolerance implementation and discipline.
5. How do you think students view school resource officers?
6. What makes zero-tolerance policies effective as a behavior deterrent, or are these policies effective at all in this regard?
7. What do you attribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, if anything?