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Town of Cheektowaga, New York Police Department

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Body Worn Cameras (BWCs): Generational Efficacy in Policing

Captain Jeffrey M Schmidt, M.S.

Town of Cheektowaga, New York Police Department

Abstract

BWCs are a recent technology lacking enough research on efficacy. Use-of-force rates are a key measure to gauge successful BWC deployment. More studies are needed on officer use-of-force and BWC use. Consideration is given to the external pressures for transparency and accountability that push agencies to develop BWC programs. Police departments have several different generational groups in the workforce, and now employ the newest generation of officers in Generation Z. The study collected use-of-force data from the Cheektowaga Police Department to examine how use-of-force rates for different generations are influenced by a BWC program. The analysis showed no statistically significant differences in the use-of-force rates between officers of different generations. The analysis found a statistically significant rise in use-of-force rates after the implementation of a BWC program.

Keywords: Body Worn Cameras (BWCs), Use-of-Force, generational policing, Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z.

BWC Generational Efficacy in Policing

Police agencies are under increased public scrutiny and external pressure to maintain transparency and accountability (Ariel et al., 2015; Pelfrey Jr & Keener, 2016; Hedberg et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2018; White et al., 2018; Lum et al., 2019; Braga et al., 2020). The use of body-worn cameras (BWC) carries the implication of a reduction in negative interactions between police officers and the public. BWCs are a tool presented to enhance police legitimacy (Saulnier et al., 2020). The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommends continued research, funding, and implementation of BWC technology (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

The implementation of BWC programs requires balancing community service with fiscal responsibility. Estimates for agencies with fewer than 250 officers have equipment costs up to \$97,000 and annual storage costs of \$50,000, while larger agencies incur equipment costs of \$1,334,717 and storage costs of \$4 million (Police Executive Research Forum, 2018).

Statement of Purpose/Problem

BWCs are a relatively new technology, lacking an abundance of research from which to draw conclusions about efficacy. Early studies suggest a reduction in police use-of-force, which is a key measure commonly used to gauge effectiveness. Existing studies do not measure variables related to the age of the officer or the relative period of policework performed, both with and without utilizing a BWC.

Significance

This study examines relationships between BWC efficacy and any reduction of police officer use-of-force with a focus on how an officer's generational cohort may impact use-of-

force rates. A strong correlation between the age of officers and a BWC program's effectiveness could show the need for training for specific generational groups within police departments.

Review of the Literature

Generational Policing

The American criminal justice system adjusts operating strategies over time. A significant cause for a shift in operating practices for police agencies is the next generation entering the workforce (Batts et al., 2014). Four generational groups are present in contemporary police departments: Baby Boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z (Turner, 2015). When each generation enters the labor market, it brings new strengths and challenges that differ from their predecessors. To qualify as a member of a specific generational group requires shared adolescent experiences through a common source (Parry & Urwin, 2011).

As Generation Z enters the labor force, they are the first group with no personal knowledge of life before smartphones and have grown up with Google to provide instant access to information and entertainment around the clock (Turner, 2015; Marty, 2022). Police organizations have a varying degree of baby boomers, Generation X, and millennial workers who have blended and work together within traditional police organizations (Batts et al., 2014). Each generation has special training needs, a different work-life balance, and responds to feedback in different ways (Williams, 2008).

Agency Desire For BWC

A strong belief exists that new technology enhances policing (Koper et al., 2014). Innovations over the last 100 years include communicating instantly with officers via a portable radio system, officers using computer information systems inside of police cars to check

warrants, write reports, and perform a slew of other police-related functions (White & Escobar, 2008). As technologies were introduced, training was necessary (White & Escobar, 2008).

Media coverage of the police use of BWCs has been ubiquitous (Ariel et al., 2015). Cases that gained national attention, such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray, brought police reform to agencies involved and have been a catalyst for wider institutional change (Ariel et al., 2015; Pelfrey Jr. & Keener, 2016; Hedberg et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2018; White et al., 2018; Lum et al., 2019; Braga et al., 2020). BWC footage is expected to be shared after critical incidents (Ramirez, 2018). BWCs have been viewed to enhance police legitimacy, reduce negative interactions, and increase accountability (Koper et al., 2014). Supporters claim that implementing a BWC program will reduce the amount of force officers use (Ariel et al., 2015; Hedberg et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2018; Braga et al., 2020).

Police departments find the reduction of the use of force from BWCs desirable because it implies that the use of inappropriate or excessive force is lessened (Ariel et al., 2015). BWCs are lauded as a device that adds transparency and accountability while restoring public trust. Also, force reduction lowers liability for injury and avoids negative police-public relations and lawsuits (Ariel et al., 2015; Braga et al., 2020). Officers may avoid engaging in misconduct because they know their actions are recorded (Ariel et al., 2015; Hedberg et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2018). A supplementary advantage of a BWC program is the collection and preservation of evidence (Pelfrey Jr. & Keener, 2016; Braga et al., 2018; Lum et al., 2019). Besides being used as an evidentiary tool, police administrators have attempted to use video footage as a productive training tool (Pelfrey Jr. & Keener, 2016; Braga et al., 2018). Trainers can analyze incidents to learn and adjust philosophy and techniques appropriately (Willis, 2022).

BWC Research

The body of research is growing with mixed results. Researchers have tried to measure officer behavior before and after BWC implementation (Braga et al., 2023). Early studies on BWC implementation programs from 2012 show results in a reduction of use-of-force of over 50% (Hedberg et al., 2017). Ariel, Farrar, & Sutherland (2015) showed a reduction of 60% in use-of-force incidents annually for three years. As BWC use became more widespread, studies were performed, but not all results were positive (White et al., 2018). Studies from 2015, 2016, and 2018 indicated no statistically significant change in police use-of-force post implementation (White et al., 2018; Braga et al., 2018). Some limiting factors that could change the results of a BWC study include perceptions of the public about the police, officer perceptions of the cameras, and the location and size of the police department (Choi et al., 2023). When measuring efficacy, it is difficult to control for factors outside of a causal relationship to the BWC (Ariel et al., 2015). Another barrier is that use-of-force incidents are statistically rare occurrences. Studies on BWCs can be difficult to interpret if use-of-force incidents rarely occur in a department (Braga et al., 2018; Lum et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2023).

Studies also use different metrics and collection methods. A study conducted as a randomized-controlled field trial of 54 police officers in a mid-sized police department in Rialto, California, divided shifts as a control measure (Ariel et al., 2015). A different study included 78 campus police officers from the Virginia Commonwealth University with data collected using surveys and two semi-structured focus groups (Pelfrey Jr. & Keener, 2016). The studies had vastly different results due to the difference between department and community type, or the methodologies used to conduct each study.

A meta-analysis of five major BWC research summaries compiled from 2016-2019 noted that although each study used similar search and inclusion strategies, the studies failed to reach a consensus (Gaub & White, 2020). Three explanations were suggested for the difference in opinions. The individual department (sample) characteristics leading up to deployment, cooperation from all stakeholders during the entire implementation process, and unequal definition of terms across studies (Gaub & White, 2020). Agencies that already apply the use-of-force to a consistent and fair standard within the color of law may not have room for improvement, thus making the BWC program appear ineffective or lacking statistical significance (Gaub & White, 2020). An agency that has BWCs because of reform efforts may have more room for improvement and will show higher efficacy than an agency that proactively uses the new technology (Gaub & White, 2020).

The belief persists that BWCs have positive effects for a police agency, but little has been studied on the duration of effects or long-term implications. Lum et al. (2019) reviewed over 70 studies published on BWCs from as early as 2012 up until 2018. The meta-analysis did not find a clear consensus that BWCs lower officer use-of-force (Lum et al., 2019). Earlier studies showed a clear reduction in use-of-force, but later studies did not support that correlation (Lum et al., 2019). For example, analysis of two experimental studies from 2015 showed officers wearing cameras used less force than officers not wearing cameras, while two experimental studies from 2017 and 2018 found no statistically significant differences between officers wearing cameras versus not (Lum et al., 2019). This could be an important finding for the role of generational policing and their relationship to technology. The studies could reflect that as younger officers enter the workforce, the efficacy of BWCs is lessened because the cameras do not influence the younger officers' behavior the same way as older officers.

Generational Policing with BWC

Police departments that have a BWC program in place have two distinct groups using the technology. The first group includes police officers and administrators who were working prior to the implementation of BWCs. Previous BWC studies have focused on this type of officer. This group has experienced policing without BWCs and transitioned to utilizing the new technology. The second group of officers includes those hired after the implementation of a program and, therefore, only know policing with BWC use. The group may coincide with officers either near the end of the millennial generation or the beginning of Generation Z. This is the same group that was not alive or had no personal memory of life before the internet (Turner, 2015; Marty, 2022). Theoretically, the newest generation in police departments should be able to leverage their experience and reliance on technology to bolster an organization (Batts et al., 2014). Research has not been conducted to evaluate if there is a difference between the efficacy of BWCs for these pre-deployment versus post-deployment groups. Technological differences have the potential to divide generational groups unless the technology is embraced at all levels of a police organization (Mehra & Nickerson, 2019).

Generation Z is thought to take technology for granted (Marty, 2022). The newest generation has grown up in a world where cell phone cameras and filming are ubiquitous. The alternate result is technological effects being magnified with their insight and ability. Generation Z has a heightened ability to multitask from a lifetime of simultaneously engaging in multiple multimedia platforms (Turner, 2015). The question exists whether there is a difference in the efficacy of BWCs for officers who were policing before initial implementation and officers who have always worn BWCs, and if the difference is attributed to generational grouping. Generation Z will become the predominant generation comprising labor in police organizations. If BWCs show a rise in use-of-force for Generation Z compared to older generations, it could signal the requirement to shift training or to use the capital that would be invested in BWC into different

technology. Conversely, a reduction as compared to older generations would suggest that the money invested in a BWC program would continue to have returns in the future.

Methodology

Research Hypothesis

Police adopt a BWC program for various reasons, but the most important one is reducing officer use-of-force. Generational grouping may influence to what degree the BWCs reduce or increase use-of-force. Two distinct groups are identified for this study. The first group is comprised of officers who were policing before a BWC program existed. The second group is primarily made up of the newest generation in policing, Generation Z. These officers have entered the workforce with an existing BWC program.

This research attempted to study the influence a BWC program has on each group in a suburban police department. It was expected that the younger group of officers would be less affected by BWCs and would have use-of-force rates that were statistically different from the older officers. The younger officers' use-of-force rates were expected to be either significantly higher because of their abundant technological existence or lower due to their technical adaptability and understanding. It was theorized that because of the amount of technology in their lives BWCs would not change the younger officers' behavior. An equal possibility was their heightened ability to adapt and understand technology would allow for greater success at reducing unnecessary use-of-force as compared to the older officers. The null hypothesis is that there is no difference between the two groups, meaning each group identified has use-of-force rates that are equal or hold no statistically significant difference from one another.

Definition of Terms

BWC - “Officer BWCs (BWCs) are relatively small devices that record interactions between community members (e.g., the public, suspects, and victims) and law enforcement officers. The video and audio recordings from BWCs can be used by law enforcement to demonstrate transparency to their communities; to document statements, observations, behaviors, and other evidence; and to deter unprofessional, illegal, and inappropriate behaviors by both law enforcement and the public.” (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015, p. 1).

Use-of-force – For this study's purpose, use-of-force is defined in accordance with Cheektowaga Police Department policy 300. “The application of physical techniques or tactics, chemical agents, or weapons to another person. It is not a use-of-force when a person allows him/herself to be searched, escorted, handcuffed, or restrained.” (Cheektowaga Police Department, 2024).

Generational Group - Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1965, Generation X were born between 1965 and 1977, millennials were born between 1977 and 1993, and Generation Z were born between 1993 and 2005 (Turner, 2015).

Limitations

There is no ability to separate an officer's use-of-force that was potentially avoidable versus a use-of-force that is an inherent and acceptable risk of policework. For example, the difference between an officer tackling a suspect without a warning could be considered an avoidable use-of-force. If the same suspect was given a verbal warning and ran away, the officer may use force to effect an arrest. In other cases, officers use force to subdue someone having a mental health crisis to send them for treatment as opposed to making an arrest. There is no framework for measuring variables like use-of-force that could have been de-escalated, nor is there a means to separate any citizen-initiated use-of-force.

The ways that use-of-force incidents are recorded have evolved at the Cheektowaga Police Department. Certain types of activity that are now recorded were not documented in the years preceding the implementation of the BWC program. As the police department has adapted with time to record more accurate data there have been new categories added to have a more complete account of the force used by officers. For example, in 2017, if an officer displayed a taser or handgun and gained compliance without using the device, it would not be documented as a use-of-force by the officer. The department adopted a policy since that time that any implied or threatened force is counted as a use-of-force and is documented. Measuring 2017 data against 2023 would show a rise in use-of-force incidents even if officers had displayed tasers an equal amount or even more times in 2017. Any use-of-force calculations requiring a measurement against the previous period will show a rise in the documented use-of-force absent the ability to go back in time and collect data the same way.

To overcome this limitation, any use-of-force data that was not reported similarly in both observed periods was removed. Specifically, data in the post BWC period where an officer only displayed a weapon and gained compliance was removed from analysis. Another area that was similarly removed because it is now documented as a use-of-force is a chase either on foot or by vehicle, resulting in a voluntary surrender at the conclusion of the chase. The police department now counts any type of a chase as a use-of-force regardless of if a physical apprehension is required to terminate the pursuit.

The rate of use-of-force was generated by using the total number of calls for which an officer reported as being responsible for the disposition of the call. There could be calls that either went unreported or personal stats were over-inflated. There was no mechanism that could separate a call that involved people or not. If an officer went to an accidental alarm, that counts as one call for service. A use-of-force is very unlikely in police calls that do not involve people.

Likewise, an officer may have responded to a call involving fifteen people fighting with each other. This incident is more likely to involve the use-of-force because of the increased number of citizen encounters, but the incident will count as a single call for service.

A key external factor that was considered during the research is the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the period after the BWC program was implemented in 2020 is not representative of routine police work at the Cheektowaga Police Department. The department started BWC use in February 2020, at the same time as COVID-19. On March 19, 2020, the Cheektowaga Police Department closed the facility to the public except for extreme emergencies, stopped making car stops, eliminated briefings and two-officer car patrols, and began answering calls via phone. Courts were closed, and all warrants were delayed until June. The department would not resume regular operations until June 22, 2020. Only the most serious emergencies were dispatched, with much of the town's population restricted to their homes, which directly resulted in the number of calls to which officers responded. The shift in operating procedure could either overly inflate use-of-force ratios with the reduction of calls or decrease the total amount of force used because of the elimination of public encounters. To overcome this limitation, the researcher placed a gap in the collection period for use-of-force data most affected by the pandemic. No data was collected or analyzed between February 2020 through July 2020, the period the Cheektowaga Police Department did not observe routine operations.

Population and Sample

Study participants are a sample representative of the population of the Cheektowaga Police Department, a midsized police department located in New York State. The analysis was drawn using a repeated cross-sectional design covering the span of years between 2017 and 2023, consisting of patrol officers working only at the Cheektowaga Police Department.

Methods/Procedures

The data collected was the number of calls answered and officer use-of-force. The researcher used six years of use-of-force reports generated by the Cheektowaga Police Department from 2017 to 2023. The researcher had access to the internal affairs database, use-of-force report database, the police department and Erie County's police report system, and the Cheektowaga Police personnel management database. All the information was accessed through a secure and password-protected computer owned and operated by the Cheektowaga Police Department. The researcher reviewed six years of use-of-force reports by reading every report generated during that time. The researcher verified accurate reporting by checking incidents against arrest records and the internal affairs database. The periods were broken down yearly, per officer.

Each time any officer reported a use-of-force, it was recorded. At the completion of collecting use-of-force data, the researcher accessed the personnel database and added the number of calls that each officer was responsible for handling during the same period. The use-of-force number was divided by the number of calls handled by each officer to provide each officer with a separate use-of-force rate as a percentage. Each officer was assigned to the generational group they belonged to, and any identifying information was removed. Three groups were formed. The baseline group shows data before the BWC program was implemented. The post-BWC group illustrates the reduction or potential increase of use-of-force rates from police officers who were working before and after the BWCs were implemented. The final data set is the BWC only group and includes officers who have never worked without using a BWC and includes all the Generation Z officers ever hired by the Cheektowaga Police Department through 2023.

Human Subjects Protection

The researcher received approval from the Hilbert College Institutional Review Board on February 19, 2024, with an approval period of one year (Appendix A). All human subjects had all personal and non-demographic information stripped from all data during the collection process. All data is stored on a password-protected and encrypted computer owned by the Cheektowaga Police Department. Every patrol officer, active or retired, who worked during the period that use-of-force data was collected could remove their participation in the study prior to analysis. Officers received a data removal link via email and a QR code was displayed in the department's briefing room from March 5 through March 14, 2024. Each officer was assigned a random identifier prior to the researcher's analysis by a third party. During that process, any officer who chose to withdraw from the analysis was removed. The random identifier is the only identifying record, and the researcher has no knowledge of which data pairs with any officer. It is not possible to associate any data results with a specific officer, since the researcher does not have any identifying information saved in any data set.

Use-of-force Data

Demographics

The sample group is majority male with eighteen female officers represented in total across the study. This data has four generational groups indicated, only includes patrol officers, and is divided into one-year periods. The first three years of the study focused on patrol officers before a BWC program was started, designated as the baseline group. Period one of the baseline group started on February 1, 2017, and ended on January 31, 2018. Period two of the baseline group started on February 1, 2018, and ended on January 31, 2019. Period three of the baseline group started on February 1, 2019, and ended on January 31, 2020.

The second set of data comprises patrol officers who, after implementing a BWC program, had previously worked for at least one year without them and were designated as the post-BWC group. Period one of the post-BWC group started July 1, 2020, and ended June 30, 2021. Period two of the post-BWC group started July 1, 2021, and ended June 30, 2022. Period three of the post-BWC group started July 1, 2022, and ended June 30, 2023.

Baseline Group	period 1	period 2	period 3	Post-BWC Group	period 1	period 2	period 3
Number of Officers	63	66	64	Number of Officers	55	51	44
Baby Boomers	7	5	3	Baby Boomers	2	2	0
Generation X	18	17	16	Generation X	15	14	11
Millennial	38	44	45	Millennial	38	35	33
Generation Z	0	0	0	Generation Z	0	0	0

BWC-only Group	period 1	period 2	period 3
Number of Officers	14	17	37
Baby Boomers	0	0	0
Generation X	0	0	0
Millennial	5	6	11
Generation Z	9	11	26

The third data set comprises patrol officers who have only worked for the Cheektowaga Police Department after the implementation of a BWC program, designated as the BWC-only group. Period one of the BWC-only group started July 1, 2020, and ended June 30, 2021. Period

two of the BWC-only group started July 1, 2021, and ended June 30, 2022. Period three of the BWC-only group started July 1, 2022, and ended June 30, 2023.

Findings

The number of calls answered by patrol officers decreased in the years following BWC deployment, while reported use-of-force rose overall (Appendix B). The total number of calls for all officers reduced over the six-year period while at the same time the number of times officers reported using force increased. Use-of-force rates were calculated to compare the three groups of officers. The use-of-force rate was calculated for every officer yearly by dividing their reported use-of-force incidents by the number of calls to which they responded. For example, baseline group 1 officer number 6 used force 6 times during the first measurement period and responded to 1,306 calls. The use-of-force rate for that officer is $6/1,306 = 0.004594181$. The officer in this example used force at a rate of 0.46% of all calls to which they responded and were responsible for handling. Use-of-force rates were calculated for every officer in the study. Then, three years' worth of data was combined in each group to produce a mean, median, mode, and standard deviation (Appendix C).

The average use-of-force rate for the Cheektowaga Police Department for the three years before BWCs were implemented is 0.30% of all responded calls. The post-BWC group has an average use-of-force rate of 0.45% of calls responded, while the BWC only group has an average use-of-force rate of 0.41% of calls responded. The hypothesis of this study is that police officers who are part of the newest generation of policing and have entered the workforce after the establishment of a BWC program will have use-of-force rates that are significantly higher or lower to the rates for the older generation's BWC statistics. $H_1: \bar{x} \neq \bar{y}$.

Comparing the mean of the BWC only group to the post-BWC group gives the best measure if the hypothesis is true. The mean, standard deviation, and sample size were used to calculate a two-tailed hypothesis test at a 95% confidence interval (Appendix D). The p-value result is greater than 0.05. Therefore, there is not enough evidence to reject $H_0: \bar{x} = \bar{y}$ at the significance level 0.05. The study does not show a statistically significant difference in use-of-force rates between the older officers and those in the younger generation as measured during the post-BWC study period.

Use-of-force rates are higher in both groups when compared to the baseline group, showing an increase in overall reported use-of-force compared to before a BWC program was in place. Because there is an increase in both groups reported use-of-force compared to the baseline group, one-tailed tests were used to determine if either group has a statistically significant increase in reported use-of-force when compared to the baseline group. Both groups were analyzed against the baseline group independently using the mean, standard deviation, and sample size to calculate a one-tailed hypothesis test at a 95% confidence interval. The p-value associated with comparing the baseline group to the post-BWC group has a significant p-value, indicating an increase in the post-BWC group's reported use-of-force compared to the BWC-only group (Appendix D). A statistically significant difference was also observed when comparing the baseline group to the BWC-only group, with the post-BWC group reporting higher rates of force as compared to the BWC-only group.

Conclusion

The generational groups in this study held no statistically significant difference in use-of-force rates since BWCs have been implemented in the department. The BWC-only group and the post-BWC group showed no statistical difference in reported use-of-force. Use-of-force rates

were higher in both generational groups when compared to the department's reported use-of-force before the BWCs went into use. Even though use-of-force rates did rise after program implementation, it is not an indication that the devices hold no value nor is it necessarily an indication that force is being used more readily. The failure to note a reduction in use-of-force rates may correlate to the department's proactivity to engage in the program before any use-of-force issue was discovered. Previously, differences have been shown between departments that voluntarily adopted BWCs versus departments which adopted programs out of necessity (Koslicki et al., 2020). Departments that voluntarily adopt a program who have little issue with inappropriate use-of-force are known to see little to no reduction in the use-of-force (Koslicki et al., 2020). Even though a reduction of force is not noted BWCs still provide other benefits to the voluntary departments (Koslicki et al., 2020).

Another reason for the statistically significant rise in reported use-of-force may be more accurate reporting. A study of the Denver Police Department indicated more than a 15% increase in use-of-force reporting by officers who were given BWCs as compared to control groups (Ariel, 2016). Although the amount of force appeared to rise it was more likely that accountability and transparency increased (Ariel, 2016). In policing, the phrase accountability has widespread use but requires specific definition (Petersen, 2022). The type of accountability that likely drove up reported use-of-force is that with a BWC program officers are required to report every time they use force, no matter how small or inconsequential they interpret the action. Observable differences may be the result of changing the policies and evaluation protocols of the department, rather than actual changes in behaviors. Additionally, there is a demand for increased police accountability. As departments use the devices, officers can more accurately report every officer involved in an incident as opposed to only listing the primary or arresting officers.

Use-of-force rates were found to be extraordinarily low for the entire police department. The six-year average use-of-force rate was 0.0037. Police officers at the Cheektowaga Police Department used force on average 0.37% of the time that they responded to and were responsible for handling calls. The data collected supports that the newest generation of officers behave in a statistically equivalent way in terms of use-of-force. The findings do not support that BWC efficacy is linked to generational grouping when measuring use-of-force rates.

The BWC program had a statistically equivalent result on use-of-force for both older officers who had worked without the devices and newer officers who have always used BWCs. Investment in a BWC program is beneficial given the results of this study. The BWC program corresponded with what could appear as a rise in force use but gives a more complete picture of how often the police department uses force. The training and implementation of the devices could be left the same without regard to the generational placing of an officer. More study is needed to determine if a BWC program increases reported use-of-force at police departments when they voluntarily enter into a program absent reported use-of-force issues or being under a consent decree. However, even if the BWCs were positively linked with an increase in the overall use-of-force the transparency and accountability that the devices provide cannot be overlooked.

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Appendix A



Institutional Review Board

2/19/2024

To: Jeffrey Schmidt

Re: Body Worn Camera Generational Efficacy in Policing

Dear Jeffrey:

On 02/08/2024, the Hilbert College Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the research proposal entitled, "Body Worn Camera Generational Efficacy in Policing ." The IRB approves your application. Work on this project may begin. This approval is for a period of one year from the date of this letter and will require continuation approval if the research project extends beyond February 19, 2025.

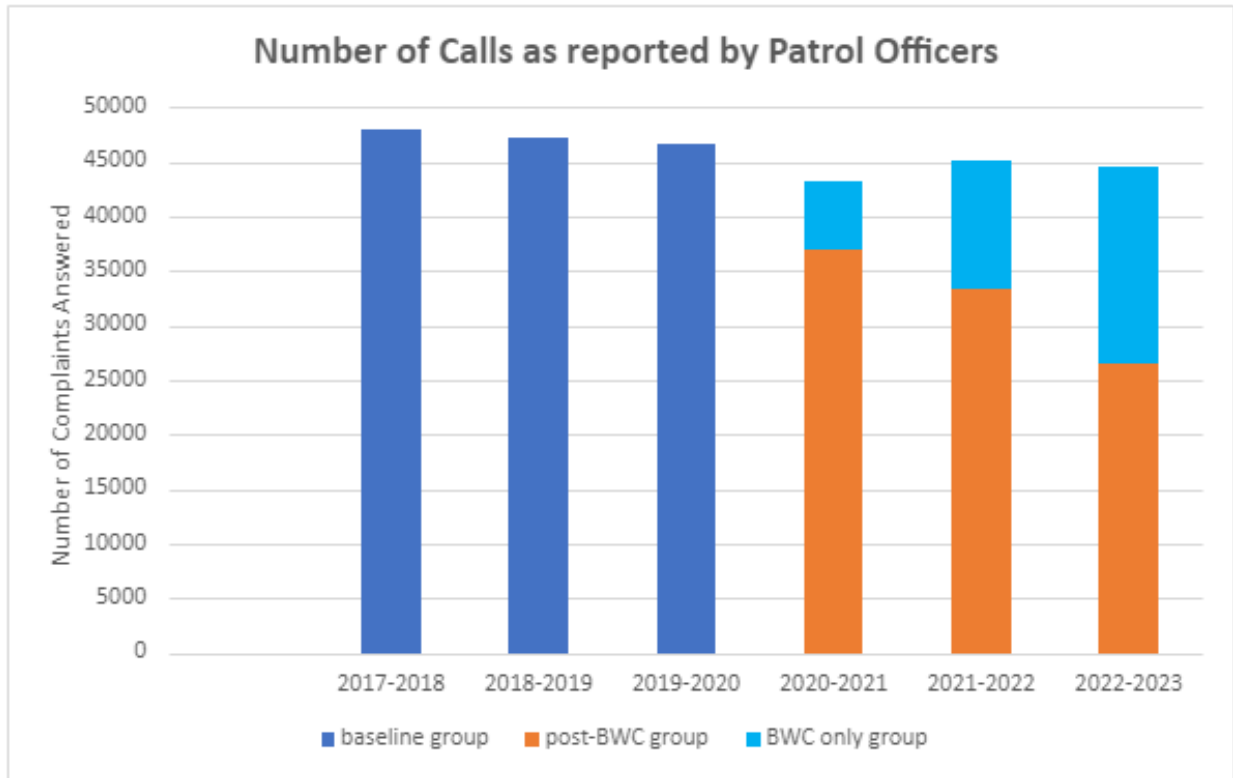
If you make any changes to the protocol during the period of this approval, you must submit a revised protocol to the IRB for approval before implementing the changes.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB's decision, please contact me at 716-926-8871.

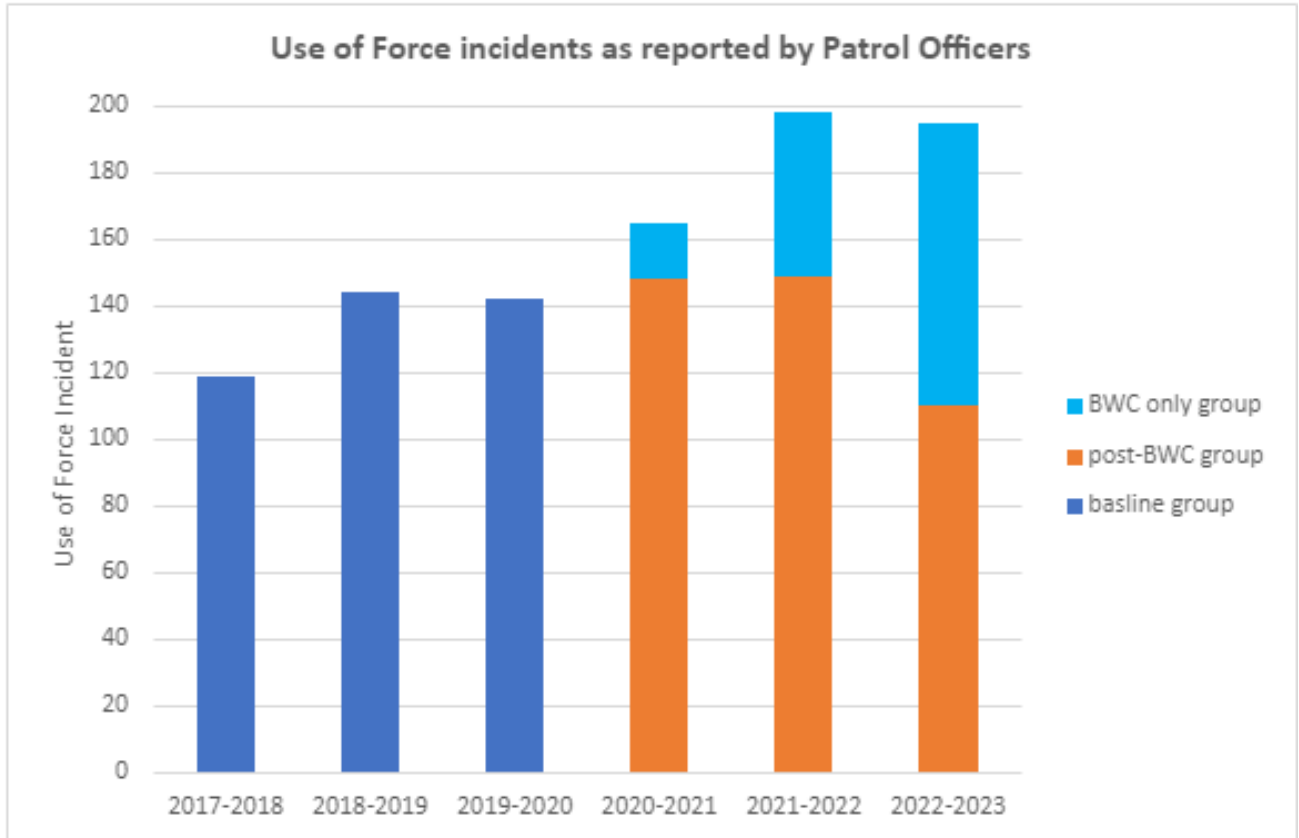
Sincerely,

Donald Vincent PhD, Chair
Hilbert College IRB

Appendix B



	Number of Calls as reported by Patrol Officers					
	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
baseline group	47928	47318	46662			
post-BWC group				36948	33424	26524
BWC only group				6228	11751	17968
TOTAL	47928	47318	46662	43176	45175	44492



	Use of Force incidents as reported by Patrol Officers					
	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
baseline group	119	144	142			
post-BWC group				148	149	110
BWC only group				17	49	85
TOTAL	119	144	142	165	198	195

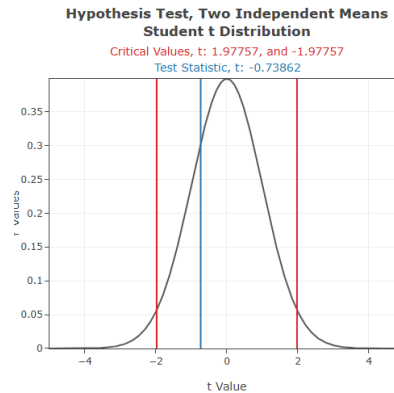
Appendix C

	baseline group	post-BWC group	BWC only group
Mean	0.003009349	0.004512919	0.004096131
Median	0.002375297	0.003704161	0.003459325
Mode	0	0	0
Standard Deviation	0.0029465	0.003998939	0.003795071
N	193	150	68

Appendix D

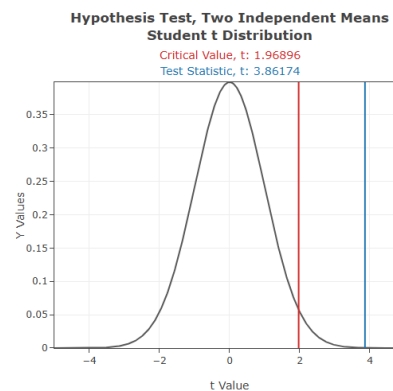
Post BWC Group compared to BWC Only Group:

Alternative Hypothesis:
 μ_1 not equal μ_2
 Test statistic, t: -0.73862
 Critical t: ± 1.97757
 P-value: 0.46141
 Degrees of Freedom: 135.93673
 95% Confidence Interval:
 $-0.00153 < \mu_1 - \mu_2 < 0.00070$



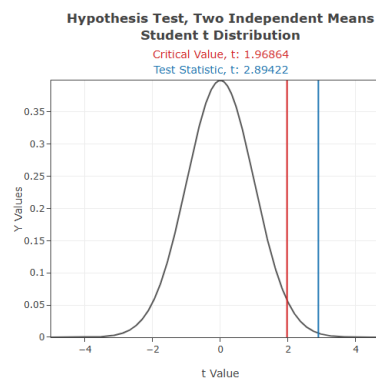
Post BWC Group compared to Baseline Group:

Alternative Hypothesis:
 $\mu_1 > \mu_2$
 Test statistic, t: 3.86174
 Critical t: 1.96896
 P-value: 0.00007
 Degrees of Freedom: 264.69595
 95% Confidence Interval:
 $0.00074 < \mu_1 - \mu_2 < 0.00227$



BWC Only Group compared to Baseline Group:

Alternative Hypothesis:
 $\mu_1 > \mu_2$
 Test Statistic, t: 2.89422
 Critical t: 1.96864
 P-value: 0.00205
 Degrees of Freedom: 274.55101
 95% Confidence Interval:
 $0.00035 < \mu_1 - \mu_2 < 0.00183$



**Reimagining School Safety: A Phenomenological Study on School Leaders' Perceptions
Following the Removal of Safety Personnel**

Tyron Pope¹ and Kishon C. Hickman, Sr.²

¹ Iona University

² Seton Hall University

Author Note

This study was made possible through the collaborative efforts of the research team, with special acknowledgment to the school leaders who shared their insights and experiences. Their perspectives were instrumental in shaping a deeper understanding of the evolving challenges surrounding school safety and leadership. The authors bring a unique blend of scholarship and practical expertise to this work, collectively drawing on nearly half a century of experience in law enforcement before transitioning into academia. This dual perspective allows for a research approach that is both theoretically grounded and informed by real-world policing and leadership experience. The authors extend their sincere gratitude to Iona University and Seton Hall University for their continued support in fostering academic research that bridges the gap between theory and practice in public safety and education. Portions of this work have been presented at academic conferences focused on educational leadership, public safety, and law enforcement policy reform. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on the role of law enforcement in schools and inform evidence-based policy decisions. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.

Abstract

This qualitative, phenomenological study investigated the responses of 12 school leaders from a suburban district in the Northeast Region of New York State to the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan, with a particular focus on its mandate to potentially phase out school resource officers. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, the research explored the administrative and emotional impact of this policy shift on school safety strategies and the overall school environment. Participants, consisting of both principals and assistant principals, provided insight into how the removal of school resource officers might affect school climate, student behavior, and resource management.

Key findings from this study reveal deep concerns about maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment in the absence of traditional school policing models. The study identifies critical themes such as the necessity for enhanced mental health support, effective crisis management strategies, and fostering a community culture that values cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. The leaders emphasized the importance of developing new safety protocols that do not rely solely on a police presence but instead, focus on holistic approaches involving professional development, collaboration, and proactive policy development.

These insights suggest a shift toward a more integrated approach to school safety—one that balances physical security with emotional and social support to create a nurturing educational atmosphere. The findings advocate strategic planning and thoughtful implementation of reforms to address the diverse needs of the student population while ensuring everyone's safety and well-being.

Keywords: mental health support, police reform, restorative justice, school climate, school resource officer (SRO), school safety

Introduction

Many believe that expanding police presence in schools could restore public trust in law enforcement, which is at an all-time low (Gass, 2015). However, the deaths of Breonna Taylor (KY), Ahmad Aubrey (GA), and George Floyd (MN) raise doubts about police in society and calls to remove them from public schools (Goldstein, 2021). Police brutality and malfeasance spur calls for reform and defunding and dismantling police departments nationwide (New York State, 2021). The summer 2020 racial justice protests addressed several institutions, including public education, creating a discourse about law enforcement's role in schools (Nazaryan, 2021). Students, educators, leaders, and lawmakers investigated strategies to alter police agencies and remove police officers because of a hostile climate (Goldstein, 2021). The school-community social compact is violated by school violence (Friedman, 1982). Nazaryan (2021) stated that “violence in schools present a complex challenge which symbolized several problems brought by the Covid-19 pandemic” (para. 32). Social justice proponents prioritize trust and respect above discipline and policing, while Goldstein (2021) stated that “school officers are seen as a threat rather than a deterrent to violence” (p. 1).

Several New York State school districts were affected by COVID-19 (Bacon, 2020).

Superintendent Dr. Lesli Myers-Small wrote to Rochester City School District parents regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, student conduct, social-emotional and mental health, violence, and staffing shortages (Battaglia, 2021). Riser-Kositsky and Sawchuck (2021) found that 47 U.S. school districts had removed, lowered funds, implemented alternate plans, made no decision, or discussed removing their school policing programs. Of the 47 school districts, 70% of the police-reformed school districts removed school policing (Riser-Kositsky & Sawchuck, 2021). There were plans to transfer school safety responsibilities from the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to the Department of Education in June 2022—except in New York County—where the

New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan recently passed (New York State, 2021; NYPD, 2021).

Riser-Kositsky and Sawchuck (2021) reported that Monroe County police programs were discontinued by the Rochester City School District (RCSD) and four Chautauqua County school districts. New York State also adjusted academic programs to minimize charging citizens, given state-aid budget constraints and pandemic-related costs (Bacon, 2020). Thus, New York State school administrators worried that fiscal constraints would make school safety issues difficult to resolve (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2019). In many school districts, school safety has eclipsed academic achievement as the main priority for change and intervention (Noguera, 2008). The surge in possible events has spurred the quest for new school safety solutions. According to Noguera (2008), “efforts to combat potential school safety issues may have resulted in the weakening of the moral authority schools once possessed” (p. 83). However, “the focus of social control influences on the design and operation of schools with the use of police officers and school safety agents to patrol and monitor student behavior” (Noguera, 2008, p. 83).

Noguera (2008) posited that school violence can be addressed by defunding the police, reallocating resources, and removing law enforcement from schools. While schools remain regulated public spaces where students sacrifice some freedom to learn (Friedman, 1982; Noguera, 2008), violence has broken the school-community social pact and threatened attendees’ physical safety (Noguera, 2008). School administrators need to investigate why schools are so prone to violence, according to Avolio (2011). Noguera questioned how to address school violence, allowing educators to find innovative solutions.

This study engaged in a comprehensive exploration of various strategies and responses to issues surrounding school safety and the integration of police in educational settings, as catalyzed by recent societal shifts and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It delves into the evolving policies, community reactions, and administrative strategies that schools are employing to navigate the challenges of maintaining safety while addressing students' educational and social needs. Instead of analyzing survey data, this study critically examined the broader changes in school safety priorities, as influenced by social justice movements, fiscal constraints, and legislative reforms (Noguera, 2008; Riser-Kositsky & Sawchuk, 2021). Through a review of policy adaptations and stakeholder responses, this discussion highlights the ongoing efforts to rethink law enforcement's role in schools and seeks innovative solutions to ensure a balanced educational environment that supports both safety and learning.

Purpose of this Study

In 2020, the murders of Breonna Taylor (KY), Ahmad Aubrey (GA), and George Floyd (MN) raised questions about the role of police in society and called for them to be taken out of the public schools. Reports of police brutality and wrongdoing called for change and ideas to cut police funding and eliminate police departments nationwide. In 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed Executive Order 203, the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan (New York State, 2021), which declared local governments to restructure and rethink their police forces. It also gave the State Director of the Division of the Budget the power to withhold future state or federal funding from municipalities that did not adopt a reform plan.

Methods

This study examined the leadership experiences of 12 principals and assistant principals within a school system located in a suburban area of New York State. This study focused on the perspectives of educational administrators regarding the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan (New York State, 2021), specifically in relation to the elimination of school safety staff. The thoughts of the school leaders were elicited through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and examined to enhance the comprehensiveness of participant information and to uncover novel perspectives on school safety staff.

This study determined the criteria of physical safety, school climate, and student conduct, drawing from the theoretical approach of the National Institute of Justice's (2020) comprehensive school safety framework. The study participants were able to identify a total of 15 themes. These themes include relationships/mentoring, school-based enforcement, physical security, school safety planning, partnerships/roles & responsibilities, location/demographics, support/opposition, community culture/cultural responsiveness, mental health/trauma, connections/rapport, training, budget/finance, parental involvement, crisis management, and empathetic leadership. The need to allocate resources toward mental health, provide parental support, implement cultural sensitivity training, and foster diversity training was emphasized by the school administrators.

This research aims to provide valuable insight to school leaders and districts regarding the potential risks associated with defunding, reforming, and abolishing school safety personnel. This study additionally demonstrates the response of the school administrators in situations where safety personnel were eliminated. The research aims to enhance the comprehension of school leaders, improve their access to knowledge, and bolster organizations' capacity to

effectively handle situations characterized by high-risk scenarios and vulnerabilities. Providing districts and administrators with a strategic planning model and effective methodologies is of utmost significance.

Literature Review

The exact timeline for the introduction of sworn police officers into U.S. schools has not been definitively established. However, evidence suggests that as early as the 1990s, several school districts had begun to implement security measures that included the presence of law enforcement personnel. This initiative aimed to enhance safety and address concerns about school violence, which were increasingly prominent during that decade. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the practice had become more formalized, leading to the widespread establishment of school resource officer (SRO) programs across the nation (Brown, 2018).

Brown (2018) stated that, “The Indianapolis Public School Police Department and the Los Angeles School Police Department both have histories that date back to the 1940s when their respective school systems began adopting school security programs” (p. 327). One of the nation’s first school policing initiatives began in 1948 when the Los Angeles School Police Department (LAPD) established a unit to police and secure schools in newly desegregated communities (The Center for Public Integrity, 2021). Over the decades, Charlotte (NC), Flint (MI), Fresno (CA), and Miami (FL) have implemented school law enforcement (Brown, 2018). SROs were assigned to Flint, MI schools in the 1950s to combat segregation as part of a community policing initiative. In 1966, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) launched the Officer Friendly program to reduce adolescent violence. In the 1980s and 1990s, police-led Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) and Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T., n.d.) programs followed. President Donald Trump’s administration repealed former

President Barack Obama's hiring guidelines in 2017, claiming that schools would face federal discrimination investigations if they hired more law enforcement officers to discipline non-White students for disruptive or violent behavior (The Center for Public Integrity, 2021). Based on data from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2018) data, The Center for Public Integrity (2021) found that schools disproportionately referred African American and disabled children to law enforcement in 2017–18. Thus, calls for police reform and school resource officer removal have increased, casting doubt on their role (USDOE, 2018).

The Police Foundation's 2015 report offers a comprehensive examination of U.S. school-police partnerships, highlighting the evolution from reactive security measures to more integrative approaches that position law enforcement as a key component within educational environments. The collaborations often start with Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), which delineate the roles and responsibilities of schools and police departments, ensuring clarity and mutual goals (Police Foundation, 2015). Training for officers, provided by organizations such as the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), is crucial, emphasizing skills relevant to educational settings and the importance of cultural and social awareness to cater to diverse student bodies (Policing Institute, 2015).

Effective school-police partnerships require an understanding of broader social issues and incorporate practices responsive to cultural and community dynamics, including the development of officers' skills in areas such as child development and trauma-informed approaches. These comprehensive strategies are aimed at creating safer educational environments that respect and address the community's diversity and complexities (Policing Foundation, 2015).

Law enforcement, like many other fields, benefits from prior experience due to community links and the range of jobs (Kelling & Moore, 1988). Given the status quo's entrenched interests in

public and school safety, Muschert (2019) advised schools to reconsider their reliance upon law enforcement. Muschert stated that school-based law enforcement strengthens commitment. School resource officers, administrators, and concerned locals provided scenarios in which schools would no longer need or be able to eliminate law enforcement. It showed how schools and law enforcement are related, which is useful.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a significant number of school districts across the United States reevaluated and, in many cases, ended their partnerships with the police, leading to the removal of SROs from their premises. Notable among these were large urban districts like Minneapolis and St. Paul, in Minnesota, which terminated their contracts with local police departments to remove SROs from their schools. Similarly, other districts like Denver, CO and Rochester, NY also made moves to cut ties with a police presence in schools.

However, the decision to remove SROs was not permanent or uniform across all districts. For instance, following a series of incidents that raised safety concerns, some districts that initially removed officers began to reconsider, and, in some cases, reinstated these programs. Notably, Montgomery County and Alexandria, VA reintroduced police officers into schools after initially removing them, citing increases in school incidents as the primary reason for their return (VOA Learning English, 2021).

The Chicago Public Schools, one of the largest school districts in the United States, significantly cut their SRO program's funding, and it has been moving toward a model that does not include SROs—focusing, instead, on holistic safety measures and mental health support (University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2024).

The renewed scrutiny and critique of school-based policing in 2020 were significantly influenced by broader discussions about systemic racism within law enforcement and the expanding role of

police in nontraditional law enforcement duties, such as working within educational settings. This scrutiny was largely sparked by the high-profile incidents of police violence, particularly the murder of George Floyd, which highlighted issues of racial bias and the use of excessive force in policing. These events catalyzed a nationwide reflection on the role of police in society, including schools where the presence of police had been controversial (National Education Association, 2022). The fluctuation in the presence of SROs in schools highlights the ongoing debate and reassessment of the role of police in educational settings, reflecting broader national conversations about policing and community safety after 2020.

While the presence of SROs is often justified on the grounds of enhancing school safety, their effectiveness in preventing violence and ensuring safety has been debated. Research indicates that while SROs may provide a perceived sense of security for students, parents, and school administrators, empirical evidence supporting their role in actually improving school safety is limited. Critics argue that the presence of SROs can lead to the criminalization of minor disciplinary issues, particularly among minority students, and that it does not necessarily correlate with a reduction in school violence (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2023).

Despite these concerns, the calls to remove police from schools are not a new phenomenon. These calls have been part of educational discussions for years, often relating to concerns about the “school-to-prison pipeline,” where school discipline strategies may disproportionately affect minority students, leading to higher rates of detention, suspension, and expulsion among these populations (Education Week, 2022).

The ongoing debate highlights the complex balance between maintaining school safety and ensuring that educational environments remain conducive to learning and development for all students—without undue penalization or bias. Thus, while SROs are viewed by some as

necessary for ensuring safety, the broader discussions urge a reconsideration of their roles and the impact of their presence in educational settings.

Leadership for Educational Equity (2017) examined school-police relations, police reform, and school resource officers. The organization researched how increased youth criminality, high-profile school shootings, and school resource officers affect schools. The group examined the ACLU, the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Office of Community-Oriented Policing, and the National Juvenile Justice Network's school-based policing statistics. New change models were inspired by school disciplinary reform and community law enforcement concerns. Leadership for Educational Equity raised concerns about racial and ethnic inequities in school arrests, criminalizing school misconduct, and the school-to-prison pipeline consequences of SROs.

Society struggles with school violence and criminality (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Based on how school violence and crime are characterized, schools might be safe or hazardous.

Children suffer school violence on school grounds or on their way to or from their schools.

School violence can include acts that traumatize students, or employees, physically or emotionally (Cuellar, 2018; Henry, 2000; Robers et al., 2014; Small & Tetrick, 2001). According to the National Research Council of and Institute of Medicine, National Academies of Sciences, (2000), school crime can range from any threat or theft to the reporting of violent attacks.

The differentiation in how crimes against children are classified, particularly those occurring while on route to school, on school playgrounds, or within school buildings, hinges on the specific circumstances and location of the offense (National Research Council of and Institute of Medicine, National Academies of Sciences, 2000). Crimes committed within school premises during school hours, referred to as in-school offenses, are generally subject to immediate disciplinary action by the school administration alongside any legal repercussions. In contrast,

out-of-school offenses, which occur outside school hours or off the school property but still affect the school community, might initially fall under the authority of external law enforcement before any school-based disciplinary review.

These classifications affect the administrative and legal handling of incidents, influencing how schools devise safety measures and guide students and parents regarding security within and around school environments. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for developing effective policies that ensure the safety of students in various school-related settings.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024) points out that “School is the location where . . . violence occurs, [it is] not a type of violence (para. 1) defined school violence as “school-based violence” (para. 1). The CDC investigates violent occurrences that disrupt learning and harms students, schools, and society.

Small and Tetrick (2001) posited that school violence and criminality were overstated because schools had reduced student and staff harm—24 years ago. Small and Tetrick did, though, state that all schools face challenges and must be aware of them to reduce violence and improve school safety. The American educational system still struggles with school violence and crime.

To evaluate the impact of SROs on school safety, Gottfredson et al. (2020) conducted a comparative analysis involving 33 public schools that increased SRO staffing with 72 schools that did not make such changes. Utilizing monthly administrative data to gauge school discipline, the study aimed to build upon the findings of previous research by Jennings et al. (2011), Crawford and Burns (2015), and Pigott et al. (2017). These earlier studies, which used the School Survey on Crime and Safety datasets, compared the reports of school administrators on crimes in schools that did and did not employ SROs, taking into account various variables that might influence the relationship between SROs presence and school crime rates.

The collective findings from these studies present a mixed view. While some studies indicated that the presence of SROs did not significantly impact overall crime rates in schools, other studies suggested that SROs might increase the reporting of specific offenses, such as drug and weapon violations. Notably, Gottfredson et al. (2020) found that an increase in SRO staffing led to higher reported incidents of drug and weapon offenses, which could suggest either an increase in actual incidents or a higher rate of reporting due to the presence of law enforcement.

Additionally, these studies explored the impact of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, which were found not to affect students without pre-existing behavioral issues. This finding raises concerns about the potential for SROs to criminalize behavior that might otherwise be handled within educational frameworks, thus not improving school safety as intended.

Given these complex and varied findings, researchers (González, 2012; Rios, 2011) recommended that education policymakers consider alternative approaches to school policing. Zahn (2023) suggested that instead of merely increasing the number of SROs, a more refined strategy, focusing on enhancing safety without criminalizing school discipline, might be more effective.

The review of literature within this study highlights significant concerns and nuanced perspectives on the role of SROs in educational settings. The deployment of SROs has historically been justified on the grounds of enhancing school safety, but empirical evidence suggests a complex interplay between perceived security benefits and potential negative consequences—particularly regarding the criminalization of minor disciplinary issues among minority students. Studies such as Gottfredson et al. (2020) have shown that while the presence of SROs can increase the reporting of specific offenses, like drug and weapon violations, their

presence may not effectively decrease overall crime rates within schools. Furthermore, the reliance on exclusionary discipline practices can exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately affecting minority students.

The literature calls for a reevaluation of the traditional approaches to school safety. It suggests that educational policymakers should consider alternative strategies that prioritize mental health and preventative measures over punitive ones. This reimagining of roles could potentially lead to more inclusive and supportive educational environments that better align with the developmental needs of all students, while still maintaining necessary levels of safety and security.

Data and Methods

A phenomenological narrative was used to examine how defunding, police reform, and law enforcement removal affect school leaders' safety perceptions. This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to advance school safety research. Semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with 12 school leaders (principals and assistant principals) were used to understand their perspectives and commonalities. This study was conducted in Northeastern New York State. A school leader participant was required to be a current principal or assistant principal, have at least 2 years of experience in the role, work in a K–12 school with an SRO, and agree to participate in the study. This study may also show how lowering police funds, reforming the police, and removing law enforcement from schools affect school safety. The researchers interviewed the school officials about safety and violence.

Participants and Participant Characteristics

This study adhered to all confidentiality norms for conducting data collection. Twelve principals and assistant principals from a suburban school system in Northeastern New York State were part of this study. A purposeful sampling method was used to choose each participant. The 12

participants participated in semi-structured interviews, via Zoom video conferencing or by telephone, during which the researcher gathered demographic information. For privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms SL 1 (School Leader 1) through SL 12 (School Leader 12) were assigned to the participants. The age range of the school officials who participated in this study was between 30 and 55 years old. All participants were of varied ages, genders, and races. Seven women and five men comprised the group of participants. There were five principals and seven assistant principals. There were nine African American participants and three Caucasian participants. African American women comprised the majority of study participants. The average tenure in a school leadership role was 11 years. Table 1 shows the demographic information for each participant in this study.

Table 1*Demographics for All Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Title	Years in Leadership
SL 1	40–45	Female	Black	Asst. Principal	6
SL 2	50–55	Male	Black	AP/Dean	21
SL 3	50–55	Male	White	Asst. Principal	16
SL 4	45–50	Female	Black	Principal	7
SL 5	30–35	Female	Black	Asst. Principal	3
SL 6	50–55	Male	Black	Principal	25
SL 7	30–35	Female	Black	Asst. Principal	3
SL 8	45–50	Female	White	Principal	17
SL 9	30–35	Female	Black	Principal	10
SL 10	45–50	Male	White	Asst. Principal	8
SL 11	50–55	Male	Black	Principal	10
SL 12	45–50	Female	Black	AP/Director	7

The objective of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school leaders within a specific school district in Northeastern New York State. The study specifically targeted school leaders—principals and assistant principals—who had held their positions for a minimum of 3 years and who had direct interactions with SROs. This criterion was chosen to ensure that the participants had sufficient experience and involvement in school

leadership and safety in order to provide informed and significant insights into the operational dynamics and challenges of school safety management.

The definition of a school leader for this study encompasses those in administrative roles at both the elementary and secondary levels, as recognized by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2021). These leaders are typically responsible for, or play a significant role in, managing an educational facility, and their responsibilities include collaboration with local law enforcement to enhance school safety.

This study also included school leaders who had established working relationships or formal agreements (MOUs) with local police departments. This inclusion criterion was essential to gain a deeper understanding of the collaborative efforts between schools and law enforcement agencies and how these relationships influence school safety policies and practices.

The participants in this study varied in age from 30 to 55 years and had an average of 11 years of experience in their roles, providing a broad perspective on school leadership across different career stages and educational contexts. The primary data collection method was through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences and views. These interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing or by telephone, accommodating the geographical distribution and busy schedules of the participants while ensuring that comprehensive demographic information was collected for qualitative analysis.

This selection of participants and methods was strategically chosen to enrich the study's findings by focusing on those who are not only experienced but also directly engaged in the intersection of education administration and school safety, thus providing valuable insights into the phenomenon under study.

The application of the National Institute of Justice (2020) comprehensive framework for school safety was used for this study to provide a unique approach. The framework is useful in helping to guide researchers and policymakers in developing practices that foster understanding and sharing knowledge to improve school, student, and community safety. Physical safety, the climate of the school, and student behavior are the three fundamental components that make up the framework. The National Institute of Justice (2020) outlined a few guiding principles that underpin the framework:

- (a) the significance of concentrating on preventing and responding to school violence, (b) there is no one-size-fits-all approach to preventing school violence,
- (c) implementing a comprehensive framework will require active participation from all stakeholders, and
- (d) each of the framework's three components (physical safety, school climate, and student behavior) is evaluated. They must maintain an appropriate level of vigilance and discipline to minimize the risk of serious harm while also fostering an equitable and interpersonally supportive climate in the school. (p. 3)

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of school leaders regarding the physical safety of their schools, one of the three National Institute of Justice framework components. According to the National Institute of Justice, school safety entails protecting children's physical safety in school, which necessitates a variety of techniques, interventions, and effective threat-assessment protocols. The objective of schools is to build an integrated approach that encompasses the spectrum of potential threats, ranging from small misbehavior to life-threatening crises, while ensuring safety and order. The perceptions of school leaders regarding the role of school safety personnel, the school-police relationship, the influence of authoritative

figures in schools, and the perception of maintaining safety and order were among this study's concern. Given the dearth of research in this area, the findings of this study may assist policymakers in developing policies and programs that address the maintenance and growth of school safety in their particular institutions. The following research questions were answered by the interview data gathered.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions and concerns of the school leaders as to the benefits and downsides of the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaboration Plan (New York State, 2021) when considering the elimination of school resource officers?

Research Question 1 was designed to determine whether the school leaders were familiar with the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan in light of the proposed withdrawal of school safety personnel, the positive and negative effects of having a law enforcement presence in schools, and the participants' views on the legislation.

When asked, the interview questions aligned to this research question, and the participants shared their experiences and feelings were connected to the following two categories: (a) physical safety and (b) school climate. From those two categories, themes were identified regarding the school leaders' perceptions and concerns as to the benefits and downsides of the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan when considering the elimination of SROs: (a) partnerships/role and responsibility, (b) school-based enforcement, (c) crisis management, (d) relationships and mentorships, and (e) location and demographics. Table 2 shows the codes, categories, and themes uncovered from the participants' feedback.

Table 2

Research Questions 1 – Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
Making sure that students are physically safe in school		Partnership/role & responsibility
Effective threat assessment policies to ensure physical safety	Physical Safety	School-based enforcement
Focuses on maintaining safety & order		Crisis management
Creates an atmosphere where students are willing to report		Relationships & mentorships
Maintain student safety & encourage other positive student and school outcomes	School Climate	Location & demographics
Authority figures in school		

Table 3 illustrates the themes and the frequency of themes that emerged from the participant responses to Research Question 1. A number of the participants' comments and responses are included in this section.

Table 3

Themes and Frequency of Participant Responses – Research Question 1

Theme	SL 1	SL 2	SL 3	SL 4	SL 5	SL 6	SL 7	SL 8	SL 9	SL1 0	SL1 1	SL1 2	Total
Partnerships/ Role & Responsibility	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
School-Based Enforcement					X	X	X	X	X			X	6
Crisis Management		X						X		X			3
Relationships/ Mentorships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Location/ Demographics		X		X		X				X		X	5

Research Question 2

What are the concerns of school leaders regarding the removal of police officers from their schools based on the recent legislation?

Research Question 2 explored the role of school safety personnel, the school-police relationship, and the variables considered when evaluating the influence of law enforcement in schools. When asked, the interview questions aligned to this research question, and the participants shared their experiences and feelings connected to three categories: (a) school climate, (b) school behavior, and (c) resources. From those three categories, four themes were identified, highlighting the concerns of the school leaders regarding the removal of police officers from their schools based on the recent legislation: (a) support/opposition, (b) mental health/trauma, (c) training, and (d) parental involvement. Table 4 shows the codes, categories, and themes uncovered from the participants' feedback.

Table 4

Research Question 2 – Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
Disruptions to the overall atmosphere of the school are one of the bad consequences that can occur	School Climate	Support/Opposition
Negative results are linked to unresolved issues		

Socio-emotional impact, social impact, self-control, nurture, counseling	School Behavior	Mental Health/Trauma
Lack of training, professional development, budget and finance, new techniques		Training
School management, reform, rules and regulations, political system	Resources	
Parental input, collaboration		Parental Involvement

Table 5 illustrates the themes and the frequency of themes that emerged from the participants' responses to Research Question 2. A number of the participants' comments and responses are included in this section.

Table 5

Themes and Frequency of Participant Responses – Research Question 2

Theme	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL1	SL1	SL1	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2		
Support/ Opposition	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Mental Health/Trauma	X			X	X	X					X	X	X	6
Training		X			X		X	X				X	X	6

Parental Involvement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
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Research Question 3

How have school leaders' perceptions been shaped by their experiences with the emerging safety concerns in their schools? When asked, the interview questions aligned with this research question, and the participants shared their experiences and feelings connected to three categories: (a) school climate, (b) school behavior, and (c) resources. From those three categories, three themes were identified regarding the concerns of the school leaders regarding the removal of police officers from their schools based on the recent legislation: (a) connections/rapport, (b) community culture/cultural responsiveness, and (c) school safety planning. Table 6 shows the codes, categories, and themes uncovered from the participants' feedback, and Table 7 illustrates the themes and the frequency of themes that emerged from the participants' responses to Research Question 3. A number of the participants' comments and responses are included in this section.

Table 6

Research Question 3 – Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
Keeping students safe & promoting positive student outcomes & environment	School Climate	Connections/rapport

Policial, social, socio-emotional, technical, environmental, legalistic impact, self-control, nurture, counseling	School Behavior	Community culture/ cultural responsiveness
Budget/finance, manpower, personnel deployment, school management	Resources	School safety planning

Table 7*Themes and Frequency of Participant Responses – Research Question 3*

Theme	SL 1	SL 2	SL 3	SL 4	SL 5	SL 6	SL 7	SL 8	SL 9	SL1 0	SL1 1	SL1 2	Total
Connections/ Rapport	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Community Culture/ Cultural Responsiveness	X	X	X				X		X		X	X	7
School Safety Planning	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12

Research Question 4

Do school leaders feel that school safety personnel play an essential role in school security?

When asked, the interview questions aligned with Research Question 4, and the participants shared their experiences and feelings connected to one category: school behavior. From school behavior, the theme of empathetic leadership was identified regarding the concerns of the school leaders' perceptions were shaped by their experiences. Table 8 shows the code, category, and theme uncovered from the participants' feedback.

Table 8

Research Question 4 – Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
Maintaining safety and order	Physical safety	Empathetic leadership

Table 9 illustrates the theme and the frequency of the theme that emerged from the participant responses to Research Question 4. Participants' comments are included.

Table 9

Themes and Frequency of Participant Responses – Research Question 4

Theme	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL	SL1	SL1	SL1	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2		
Empathetic Leadership	X	X	X		X	X	X	X				X	X	9

The research indicates that school leaders hold varied perspectives on the role of SROs within schools. While some leaders value the additional security and mentorship opportunities that

SROs provide, concerns were raised about the potential negative impacts on the school climate and student behavior. Specifically, there was apprehension that the presence of SROs may lead to the criminalization of minor behavioral issues, particularly affecting minority students (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2021). The themes emerging from the interviews, such as "Partnerships/Role & Responsibility" and "Crisis Management," reveal that while the school leaders appreciated the support SROs offer in managing critical incidents and maintaining order, they were also wary of the broader implications of the SROs' permanent presence. This suggests a refined understanding of where the benefits of employing SROs are acknowledged alongside the potential drawbacks of their presence, highlighting a need for careful consideration of SRO roles in schools. The responses to the potential removal of SROs were mixed among the school leaders, reflecting a divided opinion within the educational community. Some leaders advocated for the continuation of SRO programs, citing safety benefits; however, others favored alternative approaches that emphasized mental health support and preventive strategies over punitive measures. This division underscores the ongoing debate regarding the most effective and equitable approaches to school safety. Although this study does not explicitly discuss the participants' reactions to specific legislative actions, such as the governor's mandate, the varied responses imply that any policy change concerning SROs would likely elicit a range of opinions from school leaders—mirroring the complexity and contentious nature of this issue.

Discussion

This qualitative study provides valuable insight into the perceptions of school leaders regarding SROs, suggesting that education policymakers and school administrators need to engage in ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders to develop balanced and effective school safety policies. The findings advocate for a comprehensive approach that not only considers the security benefits of SROs but also addresses the potential for negative consequences, ensuring that school safety measures foster a supportive and inclusive school environment.

In this in-depth qualitative study, school administrators shared their experiences and emotional responses regarding the New York State Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Plan, which potentially impacts the role of SROs in schools. This study meticulously examined how these leaders were navigating the changes proposed by the plan, particularly the suggestions to eliminate SROs, which could significantly alter their existing physical safety initiatives, interventions, and policies within schools. This exploration was aimed at understanding not just the administrative adjustments required but also the emotional and psychological impacts on the school communities involved.

The administrators engaged in comprehensive discussions about the broader implications of these reforms on school climate, behavior management, and resource allocation. A focal point of these discussions was on professional development and training opportunities for school staff, emphasizing the need for enhanced collaboration and effective information-sharing between educational institutions and law enforcement agencies. Critical thinking and proactive policy development were highlighted as essential skills in adapting to and effectively implementing the new safety protocols.

The interviews revealed that the participants placed a strong emphasis on the importance of communication strategies that foster positive connections between students and safety personnel. The school leaders advocated for a shift in the perspective among SROs, urging them to see students as individuals with unique needs rather than as potential disciplinary problems. This approach aligns with the broader educational goals of fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment.

Furthermore, the necessity of integrating cultural sensitivity into school-police partnerships was underscored, reflecting a deep understanding of how demographics, location, race, and historical contexts influence the dynamics of school safety. This study highlights that such sensitivity could lead to more effective collaboration and mutual respect between schools and law enforcement, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of safety measures.

From the data gathered, it is clear that school safety planning is considered a critical, daily management task by all the participants, who recognize the ongoing need to balance security with educational priorities. The findings from this study can serve as a valuable resource for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to navigate the complex landscape of school safety reform, suggesting that a refined and empathetic approach may lead to more positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved. Scholars, public officials, policymakers, school administrators, law enforcement officers, and the educational community can use these suggestions to learn about the experiences of school leaders and use their experiences to help eliminate their concern about school safety staff.

Results

The research findings reveal that educational administrators placed significant importance on the need for enhanced resource allocation in mental health, cultural sensitivity, and community involvement. The findings also suggest that administrators should place considerable importance on communication, prioritizing student safety, and cultivating positive relationships. It was contended that law enforcement authorities ought to regard children as individuals rather than as offenders. All the participants unanimously recognized that the development and execution of school safety strategies is a continuous administrative obligation. The importance of community culture and cultural awareness was apparent, likewise, within the framework of interactions between the schools and law enforcement agencies. The participants engaged in discussions that covered various dimensions, including demographics, geographical location, racial makeup, historical background, and the roles of educators and police officers.

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**What's learning got to do with it? Student attitudes toward learning criminal justice at a
community college**

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Abstract

This study examined the pervasiveness of grade-focused attitudes among criminal justice students at a community college and the impact of those attitudes on their learning experiences and future professional preparedness where life-and-death decisions are commonplace. The research was driven by the observation that many students perceive their educational journey as a means to secure desirable grades rather than an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and the knowledge essential for their future careers in law enforcement and related fields. Utilizing qualitative data from a survey of 254 students enrolled in criminal justice classes, the findings indicate that while students retain course content when it is contextually applied to real-world scenarios, a substantial number still prioritize grades over learning. This dichotomy raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches in fostering the necessary skills for future law enforcement professionals. Insights from this research have implications for curriculum design and instructional practices, aiming to cultivate a growth mindset that values active learning beyond grade acquisition and a deeper sense of institutional belonging.

Keywords: attitudes, active learning, criminal justice students, contextual, growth mindset

Introduction

“Professor, I’m not here to learn. I’m just here for the grade.” This candid declaration, made by a student at the end of a class where I had employed several examples from case law, personal experiences, and contemporary news stories to elucidate the criminal justice system, sparked a profound reflection on my pedagogical approach. Despite my efforts to contextualize the material to enhance comprehension and foster active participation, the remark revealed a stark disjunction between the intended educational outcomes and the student’s perception of the institution’s role. This encounter was the foreground for a critical inquiry into attitudes toward learning within the community college setting, particularly among criminal justice students who often seek careers that demand analytical and decision-making skills.

The perception of grades as the primary learning objective, rather than the development of critical thinking and contextual understanding, highlights a significant challenge in educational praxis at community colleges. This attitude not only undermines the educational mission of these institutions but also poses a threat to the preparation of criminal justice professionals whose future roles entail high-stakes interactions often involving life-and-death decisions. Effective public engagement and the ability to make rapid, informed decisions are skills that should be nurtured at the outset of a criminal justice education.

Community colleges serve as pivotal educational institutions that provide access to higher education to a diverse student body, often including traditionally disadvantaged and marginalized populations who may not have the academic credentials or financial resources to attend 4-year institutions (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024; Dougherty et al., 2017). Data suggest that community college students are likely to be adults, between the ages of 23 and 27 years, non-White females, who attend college at least part-time to attain a degree, certificate, job training, or transfer to another institution (AACC, 2024; Strada Education Foundation, 2023). Positioned between institutions offering post-secondary and 4-year

degree programs, community colleges provide learning opportunities to all—particularly to those challenged by work and family responsibilities, low income, under preparation, and other learning barriers. This unique position necessitates a pedagogical approach that not only meets the academic needs of students but also prepares them for the practical demands of their chosen professions. In the context of a criminal justice education, this preparation is crucial as it involves training individuals who will eventually make decisions that can significantly impact public safety.

This study, therefore, delved into the following key areas to achieve an understanding of student attitudes toward learning in a criminal justice program at a community college: examination of student motivations, assessment of perceptions on learning versus grades, impact of educational strategies on learning outcomes, correlation between attitudes and academic success, implications for curriculum design and instruction, and evaluation of institutional impact.

Purpose of the Study

This research is relevant because it seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on educational practices in community colleges, particularly within the context of criminal justice programs. While studies have examined learning and faculty experiences at community colleges (Kisker et al., 2023; Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019; Perin, 2018; Schudde, 2019), there is limited knowledge of students' perception and engagement with their criminal justice education at these institutions. Understanding the divide between learning and grade acquisition is imperative for addressing the broader implications on educational equity and the efficacy of community colleges in preparing students for the demands of law enforcement careers.

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of criminal justice students toward learning at a community college, and how do these attitudes impact their engagement and academic performance?
 - Specifically, how do students' perceptions of grade attainment versus knowledge acquisition influence their learning behaviors and outcomes?
2. How do contextualized learning approaches, which integrate real-world examples and active participation, affect the understanding and retention of course material among criminal justice students at a community college?
 - Are these approaches more effective than traditional teaching methods in fostering deep learning and practical application of knowledge?
3. What factors influence the perceived value of a community college education among criminal justice students, and how do these perceptions compare to those of students at 4-year institutions?
 - How do these perceptions affect students' overall satisfaction, enrollment decisions, and retention rates?

Significance of Study

At the micro level, the research provides valuable insight into students' attitudes toward learning criminal justice at a community college, offering a nuanced understanding of how different teaching methods influence engagement and academic performance. In a recent article, Eren et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of studying criminal justice, stating that the paucity of research on criminal justice students can negatively affect the quality of a criminal justice education. In addition, providing balance in higher education is a crucial component of community colleges and one upon which many students rely to increase their education and employment competitiveness. This research, therefore, provides a unique opportunity to combine both factors—criminal justice students and community college education—in one study.

On a macro level, this study is important because it addresses the broader goal of improving educational equity. By examining the attitudes and motivations of criminal justice students at community colleges, the research contributes to ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education that equips them for successful careers (Strada Education Foundation, 2023). Knowledge of students' attitudes toward learning, particularly at community colleges, is a crucial determinant of a quality criminal justice education that is both meaningful and relevant specifically to practices in and out of the classroom (Gu & Crawford, 2022). The findings will be significant to students who pursue law enforcement careers, where attitudes can impact the outcome of interactions between officers and the public. Finally, this study's insights can inform policy decisions at both the institutional and state levels. By emphasizing the importance of fostering a growth mindset and promoting deep learning, policymakers can advocate for resources and initiatives that support innovative teaching practices and improve the overall quality of education at community colleges (Dweck, 2006).

Literature Review

Extensive research has examined student learning in higher education, focusing on various pedagogical strategies and their effectiveness in enhancing learning outcomes. Traditional learning models often emphasize passive knowledge acquisition, where students memorize and regurgitate information. However, recent studies advocate for more interactive and student-centered approaches that foster deep learning and critical thinking skills (Freeman et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2021).

Active Learning and Engagement

Active learning involves engaging students in activities that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content and linking it to real-world situations (Bustami et al., 2018). Research by Freeman et al. (2014) highlights the superiority of active learning over traditional lectures by increasing student retention and understanding of material. Theobald et al. (2020) further emphasized that active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning and project-based learning, encourage students to apply knowledge in practical, real-world contexts, thereby enhancing their learning experiences. Additionally, studies have shown that active learning environments contribute to the development of analytical reasoning skills, which are essential for students in fields such as criminal justice (Lombardi et al., 2021; Parrotta et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

Contextualized Learning

Contextualized learning, which links theoretical concepts to practical applications, has been shown to significantly improve student understanding and retention of material. Perin (2011) advocated for the integration of real-world examples and active participation in the curriculum to make learning more relevant and engaging for students. This approach is particularly beneficial for criminal justice students who need to develop practical skills for their future careers. Studies by Snyder (2019) and Murray et al. (2022) support the effectiveness of contextualized learning by enhancing student motivation and engagement, particularly in applied fields such as criminal justice and marketing. Additionally, the use of case studies and real-world scenarios in teaching has been shown to improve critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Davidson, 2017). Contextualized learning is also supported by other researchers, including Bustami et al. (2018), who concluded that contextualized learning better enhanced Biology students' critical thinking skills in learning environment pollution, as well as Dewi and Primayana (2019), who found that students' understanding of physics concepts when facilitated

by learning modules containing contextual teaching and learning were higher than those with direct learning models.

Criminal Justice Students and Learning Environments

Criminal justice students are individuals registered in criminal justice courses, pursuing studies offered in a criminal justice program. They include, but are not limited to, criminal justice majors. Comprising a heterogeneous group, many pursue studies in the program for reasons ranging from a desire to work in law enforcement to an interest in social justice reform. As such, their attitudes toward issues such as racism, marginalization of certain groups, and perceptions of law and order differ widely (Jackson & Henderson, 2022). The complexities of the job in fields such as policing and corrections warrant academic programs to consider perceptions of learning in their education design to prepare students to handle the rigors of the job. If students' attitude toward learning criminal justice at community colleges is entirely grade-focused, they may find little benefit in an educational design that emphasizes active learning and contextualization. Yet this design type is critical for students who intend to transition to law enforcement careers. Classroom exposure to sensitive or controversial topics, such as domestic violence, mass incarceration, and police use of force, provides a safe space for students to learn and practice appropriate responses to traumatic situations that can occur in the workplace. Among the benefits of such exposure, Parrotta et al. (2021) included greater empathy and preparedness when interacting with victims and their families. Moreover, Bedera (2021) posited that when teaching, sexual violence instructors should adopt "survivor-centered approaches" that provide contextualization rather than mere trigger warnings. This would boost an active learning environment involving greater engagement with course content rather than mere knowledge consumption, which reduces the rigor of the learning process (Tomlinson, 2017).

Attitudes

Mazana et al. 2019 defined attitude as a learned tendency, which can be either positive or negative, toward an object, situation, concept, or person. Others refer to it as people's belief in their opinions and feelings, which can be illustrated by their behavior. Together, these definitions posit that attitudes, behavior, and feelings are connected and that attitudes determine people's behavior toward objects, situations, and people (Bechler et al., 2021; Mazana et al., 2019). Considering the interrelatedness of these factors, students' attitude toward learning criminal justice can influence their behavior in and out of the classroom and their feelings toward assigned tasks. To combat these attitudes, educators must provide practical applications of theoretical knowledge to significantly enhance student engagement, satisfaction, and academic performance. Ultimately, this will contribute to the improvement of criminal justice education and the development of well-prepared and motivated criminal justice professionals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the conceptual frameworks of mindset theory and contextual learning, both of which provide a comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes toward learning and their impact on educational outcomes in community college settings.

Mindset Theory

Mindset theory, articulated by Dweck (2006), distinguishes between two types of mindsets: fixed and growth. A fixed mindset is characterized by the belief that intelligence and abilities are static traits that cannot be significantly developed. Students with a fixed mindset tend to avoid challenges, give up easily when faced with obstacles, and view effort as fruitless if they do not immediately succeed. In contrast, a growth mindset is based on the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, see effort as a path to mastery, and learn from criticism.

Dweck's (2006) research shows that students with a growth mindset perform better academically and are more resilient when confronted with academic challenges. This theory is particularly relevant for understanding the learning attitudes of criminal justice students who must develop critical thinking and practical skills for their future careers. The growth mindset fosters an educational environment where students are encouraged to engage deeply with the material, thereby enhancing their logical reasoning abilities and preparing them for real-world scenarios (Dweck et al., 2014; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Contextual Learning Theory

Contextual learning theory posits that learning is most effective when it is connected to real-world experiences and applications. According to Perin (2011), contextualized learning involves teaching methods that integrate academic content with real-life situations, making learning more relevant and engaging for students. This approach helps students understand the practical implications of their studies and motivates them to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways.

Contextual learning is particularly important in the field of criminal justice, where students must be able to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations that they will encounter in their professional lives. Research by Perin (2011) and Snyder (2019) supports the effectiveness of contextual learning in enhancing student motivation and engagement. By providing real-world examples and encouraging active participation, educators can make learning more relevant and impactful for students.

Integrating Mindset and Contextual Learning Theories

The integration of mindset theory and contextual learning theory provides a robust framework for understanding and addressing the attitudes of criminal justice students toward learning. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to benefit from contextualized learning environments because they view challenges as opportunities to grow and develop their skills. Conversely, contextual learning environments can help foster a growth mindset by showing students the practical value of their efforts and encouraging them to persist through difficulties.

This integrated framework also highlights the role of educators in shaping students' attitudes toward learning. By adopting teaching strategies that promote both a growth mindset and contextual learning, educators can create a supportive and stimulating educational environment that encourages students to engage deeply with the material and develop the skills necessary for success in their future careers. Research by Blackwell et al. (2007) showed that interventions designed to promote a growth mindset can significantly improve students' academic performance and resilience. Similarly, studies by Perin (2011) and Snyder (2019) demonstrate the positive impact of contextual learning on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Implications for Criminal Justice Education

In the context of criminal justice education at community colleges, this theoretical framework underscores the importance of adopting pedagogical strategies that foster a growth mindset and contextualized learning. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes toward learning and how those attitudes impact their educational outcomes. This framework offers valuable insights for educators seeking to improve student engagement and performance in criminal justice programs at community colleges.

Methodology

Sampling Procedure

The study included 254 students enrolled in criminal justice classes during the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters at one of the seven community colleges of a public university system. The sample comprised 12% American Indian or Native, 15% Asian or Pacific Islander, 25% Black non-Hispanic, 20% Hispanic, and 28% White non-Hispanic students. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years. However, most respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30, with a balanced representation of genders. The inclusion of a heterogeneous sample enhances the generalizability of the study's findings to similar populations (Degtiar & Rose, 2023).

The participants were recruited from various criminal justice classes using convenience sampling, as they were readily available in courses offered during the specified semesters. Students were informed about the study's purpose and procedures, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and they were invited to participate voluntarily. Those who agreed to participate provided informed consent electronically before completing the survey. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol, ensuring that all ethical standards for the protection of participants' rights and welfare were met (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized a quantitative-qualitative, mixed-methodology design, which was particularly suited for capturing the experiences of the participants, effectively providing rich insights into their perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data were collected using an electronic survey administered via Qualtrics, a reliable and widely used online survey platform (Qualtrics, 2024). The survey consisted of 23 questions divided into four sections: demographic/general questions (eight items), pre-enrollment questions (four items), questions regarding attitudes toward learning (six items), and questions relating to student performance and

excitement about learning (five items). The survey was available for completion over a two-semester period, with bi-weekly reminder emails sent to encourage participation. Data were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the organization and interpretation of complex datasets (Lumivero, 2024).

Findings

Preenrollment Intentions and Demographics

The survey results indicate that a significant majority of the students agreed to participate in the survey, with 97.79% expressing their consent. Most respondents were full-time students (89.77%) and predominantly first-year students, either entering (25.58%) or in their second semester (27.44%) (Figure 1). The criminal justice major was the most common, chosen by 97.84% of the respondents (Figure 2). These demographics suggest a focus on early college experiences and a strong interest in criminal justice among the surveyed students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020).

Enrollment Motivation and Concerns

When asked about their primary reasons for enrolling at the college, 28.84% cited that it was their first choice, and 16.28% mentioned career requirements (Figure 3). The most significant concerns before enrollment included affording their education (34.42%) and balancing academic and personal life (30.70%) (Figure 4). These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that financial considerations and work-life balance are critical factors influencing community college students' decisions (Bailey et al., 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Attitudes Toward Learning

The survey explored students' attitudes toward learning, revealing that 74.65% agreed or strongly agreed that they learned more when professors included diverse cultural perspectives (Figure 5). This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of inclusive teaching practices in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes (Gay, 2018). Additionally,

93.93% of the students felt more confident learning in college compared to before they attended a higher education institution, highlighting the positive impact of the college environment on their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Academic Preparation and Perceptions

The majority of respondents (70.09%) disagreed that community colleges are less academically challenging than 4-year institutions, reflecting a recognition of the rigorous academic standards maintained by community colleges (Figure 6). Furthermore, 93.93% believed that their community college education was preparing them well for senior colleges, and 78.37% felt prepared for immediate employment (Figures 7 and 8). These perceptions underscore the critical role of community colleges in providing quality education and career readiness (Bailey et al., 2015; Belfield & Bailey, 2017).

Student Performance and Engagement

A substantial number of students, 92.52%, agreed or strongly agreed that they got better grades when they were excited about a topic, and 85.98% reported better grades at their community college compared to a 4-year college (Figures 9 and 10). Participation in class discussions and the application of course content to real-world scenarios were also highlighted as crucial factors for learning retention, with 89.72% and 94.86% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing, respectively (Figures 11 and 12). These findings support the effectiveness of active and contextualized learning strategies in improving academic performance and retention (Freeman et al., 2014; Kuh, 2009).

Recommendations for Educational Support

The survey also identified key areas where the students felt they needed more support to achieve their educational goals. Course mapping (32.39%), career advising (22.97%), and mentoring (14.55%) were the most requested forms of assistance (Figure 13). These insights align with previous studies, highlighting the importance of structured academic guidance and support services in fostering student success (Karp, 2011; Tinto, 2012).

Discussion

The data indicate a clear preference among the students for active learning. A substantial majority of the students reported they learned more effectively when instructors incorporated real-world examples and encouraged active participation in class discussions. This finding is consistent with much of the literature highlighting the benefits of active learning in higher education (Cavanagh et al., 2018; Freeman et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2021; Misseyanni et al., 2018; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2022; Roberts, 2019; Robertson, 2018; Sewagegn & Diale, 2019; Theobald et al., 2020). Moreover, when measuring student engagement across behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004), the findings revealed elevated levels of cognitive and affective engagement when contextualized learning strategies were employed. This aligns with research indicating that students are more likely to be deeply engaged and emotionally invested in their learning when they perceive the material to be relevant and applicable to real-world scenarios (Perin, 2011; Snyder, 2019). The emphasis on real-world applications not only enhances understanding but also fosters a greater sense of belonging and motivation among students (Fredricks et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of active and contextualized learning strategies on the attitudes and engagement of criminal justice students at a community college. The preference for active learning approaches aligns with extensive research indicating

that these methods enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and academic performance (Freeman et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2021; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Theobald et al., 2020). This supports the view that educators should consider incorporating diverse cultural perspectives and a variety of active learning strategies into their teaching practices to accommodate different learning preferences and needs (Sims, 2006). Active teaching methods utilizing tools like think-aloud problem-solving, jigsaw activities, games, group work, pair work, brainstorming, interactive teaching, and gallery walks can foster collaboration and critical thinking among students (Aronson, 2000; Barkley et al., 2014; Millis & Cottell, 1998). Recognizing the diverse needs of students, these methods encourage knowledge acquisition through the development of creative, problem-solving, experience and culturally based learning approaches promoted during independent and collaborative interactions. Additionally, institutions should consider expanding support services, such as mentoring, career advising, and course mapping, to help students navigate their academic and career paths more effectively. Implementing these strategies can lead to improved student satisfaction, retention, and academic performance by increasing learning equity and affirming students' sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2014; Gay, 2018; Kuh, 2009).

Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations that may affect the generalizability and interpretation of the findings and data. First, the availability of some criminal justice courses to all students means that although a significant number of students in criminal justice classes were criminal justice majors, some were not. This highlights a difference between the total number of participants and the number of participants of criminal justice majors. So, although this study's focus is on the learning attitudes of students in a criminal justice program, the findings reflect the attitudes of criminal justice majors more significantly than those of non-criminal justice majors. A wider sample of students across disciplines in general or criminal justice-specific majors would have provided greater generalizability of the findings and interpretation of the data.

Second, the study utilized a convenience sampling method, selecting participants who were readily available in criminal justice courses during the specified semesters. This nonrandom sampling approach may introduce selection bias, as the sample may not be fully representative of the broader population of community college students. As a result, the attitudes and experiences of the participants may differ from those of students in other programs or institutions, limiting the external validity of the results.

Third, this study relied on self-reported data collected through an electronic survey. While this method allows for efficient data collection, it is subject to several potential biases, including social desirability bias, where participants may respond in ways they perceive as favorable to the researchers. Additionally, recall bias may have affected the accuracy of the participants' responses, especially concerning their motivations, attitudes, and experiences. These biases could impact the reliability and validity of the data, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions.

Future Research Directions

Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of active learning strategies on student outcomes among a larger sample of community college students and in various educational settings. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of different digital tools and platforms in maintaining student engagement in online learning environments will be crucial as educational institutions continue to adapt to new teaching modalities (Agasisti & Soncin, 2020; Misseyanni et al., 2018). This is particularly important to community college students who might find online learning more suitable to attain their higher education goals as they regularly juggle professional, personal, and family obligations (AACCC, 2024; Strada Education Foundation, 2023). Finally, the impact of difficult dialogues, such as calls to defund the police or police use of excessive force on marginalized populations, on students' interest in criminal justice and preparedness for related careers should also be explored.

In conclusion, active and contextualized learning strategies are crucial for enhancing student engagement, satisfaction, and academic performance by creating a more interactive and relevant learning environment for criminal justice students at community colleges. Active learning strategies encourage students to apply theoretical knowledge within practical contexts, thereby deepening their understanding and retention of course material (Fredricks et al., 2004; Freeman et al., 2014;). Contextualized learning, on the other hand, helps students connect academic concepts to their personal and professional lives, fostering a sense of relevance and motivation (Perin, 2018).

Moreover, the importance of fostering a growth mindset cannot be overstated. A growth mindset plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning and their resilience in the face of challenges. Students who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, and view effort as a path to mastery (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). This mindset not only enhances their academic success but also prepares them for lifelong learning and professional growth.

The combination of these pedagogical strategies and mindset principles provides a comprehensive framework for improving educational outcomes in both traditional and online settings. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, particularly with the increasing integration of online learning, it is essential for educators and policymakers to consider these factors in curriculum design and instructional practices. By implementing active, contextualized learning strategies and promoting a growth mindset, institutions can create a supportive and dynamic learning environment that equips students with the skills and attitudes necessary for success in their academic and professional careers. These insights are not only applicable to criminal justice programs, but they also have broader implications for various disciplines within higher education.

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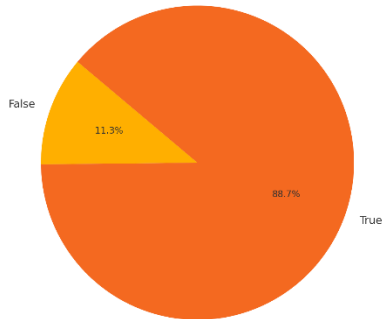
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Figure 1

Consent Agreement

Figure 1: Consent Agreement Among Participants

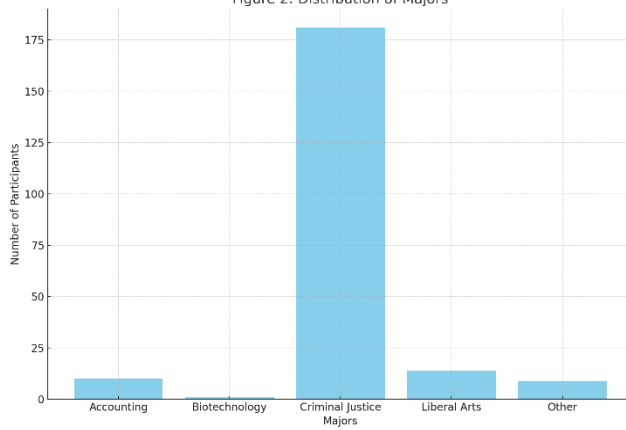


High Willingness to Participate	
Willingness	Participants
False	23
True	181

Figure 2

Distribution of Majors

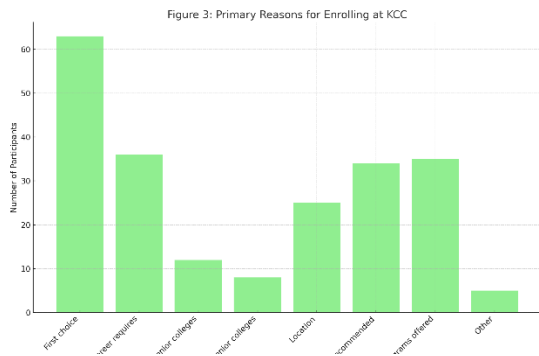
Figure 2: Distribution of Majors



Significant Focus on Criminal Justice	
Field of Study	Participants
Accounting	10
Biotechnology	1
Criminal Justice	181
Liberal Arts	14
Other	9

Figure 3

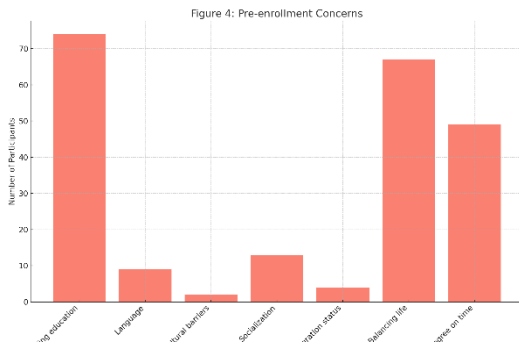
Primary Reasons for Enrolling at Institution A



Primary Reasons for Enrolling	Participants
First choice	63
Career requires	36
Cost of senior colleges	12
Rejection from senior colleges	8
Location	25
Recommended	34
Programs offered	35
Other	5

Figure 4

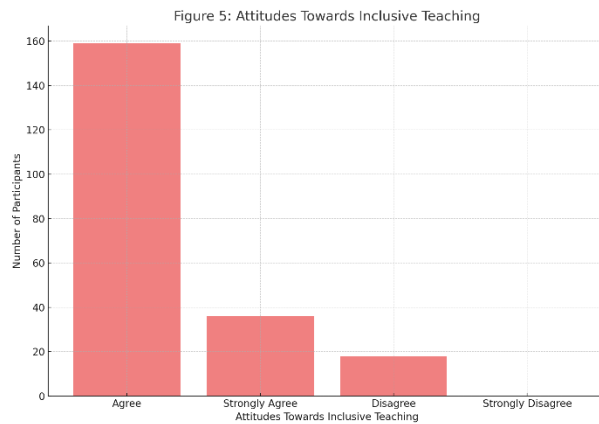
Preenrollment Concerns



Major Concerns Before Enrolling	Participants
Affording education	74
Language	9
Cultural barriers	2
Socialization	13
Immigration status	4
Balancing life	67
Completing degree on time	49

Figure 5

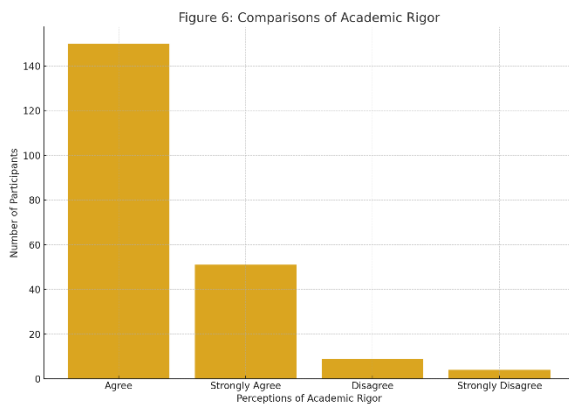
Attitudes Toward Inclusive Teaching



Attitudes Toward Inclusive Teaching	Participants
Agree	159
Strongly Agree	36
Disagree	18
Strongly Disagree	0

Figure 6

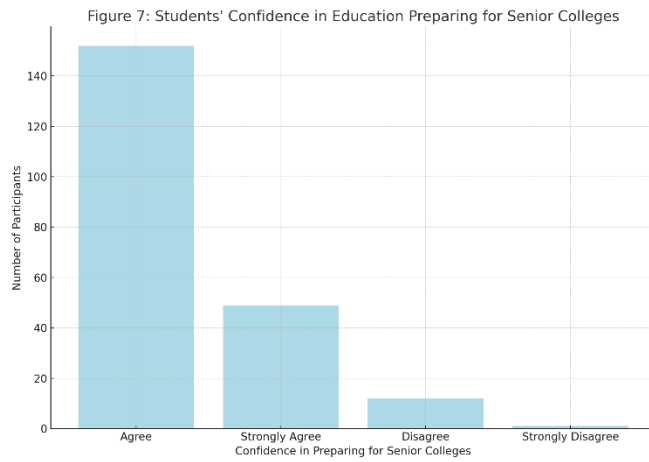
Comparisons of Academic Rigor



Perceptions of Academic Rigor	Participants
Agree	150
Strongly Agree	51
Disagree	9
Strongly Disagree	4

Figure 7

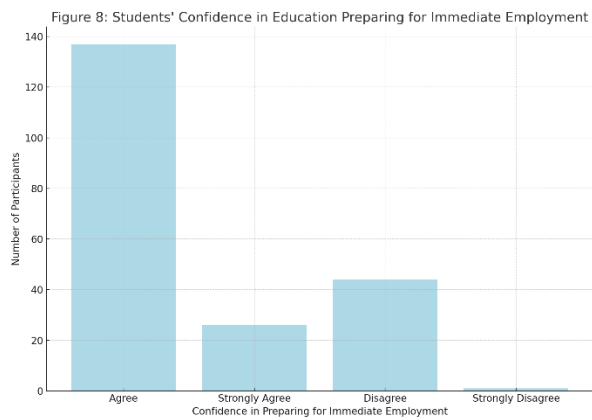
Students' Confidence in Education Preparing for Senior Colleges



Confidence Level	Participants
Agree	152
Strongly Agree	49
Disagree	12
Strongly Disagree	1

Figure 8

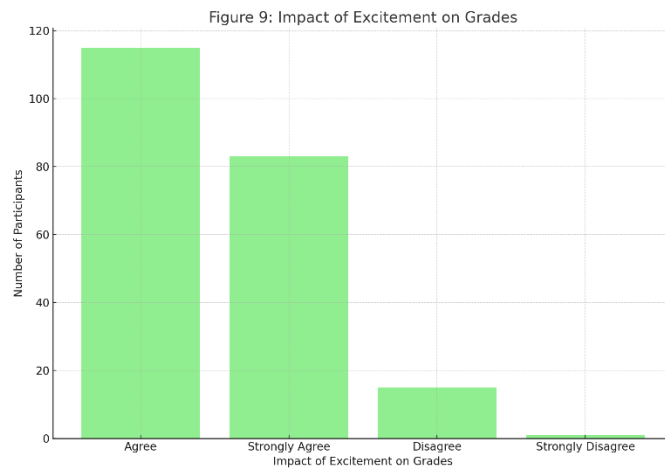
Students' Confidence in Education Preparing for Immediate Employment



Confidence Level	Participants
Agree	137
Strongly Agree	26
Disagree	44
Strongly Disagree	1

Figure 9

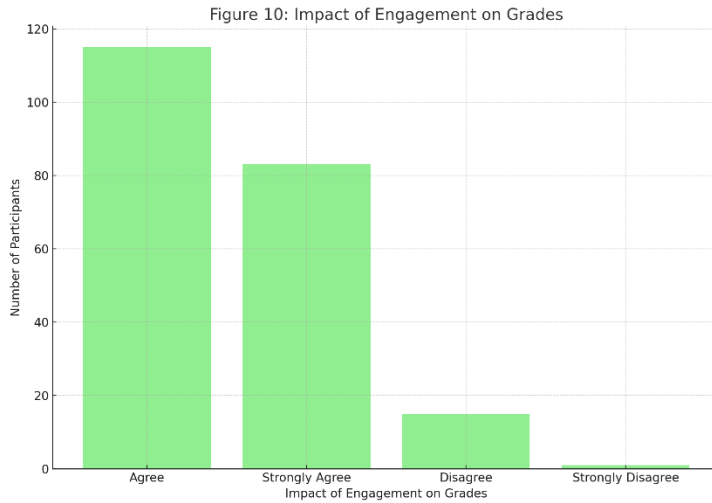
Impact of Excitement on Grades



Impact of Excitement on Grades	Participants
Agree	115
Strongly Agree	83
Disagree	15
Strongly Disagree	1

Figure 10

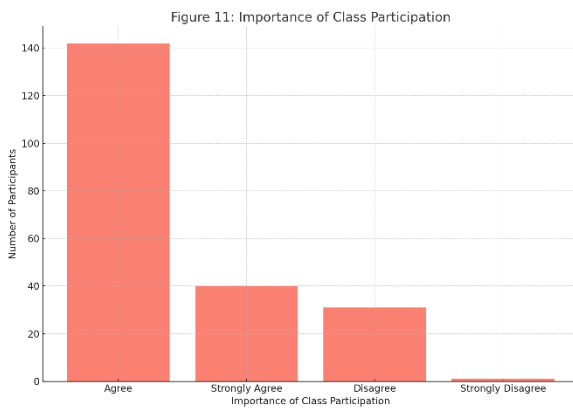
Impact of Engagement on Grades



Impact of Engagement on Grades	Participants
Agree	115
Strongly Agree	83
Disagree	15
Strongly Disagree	1

Figure 11

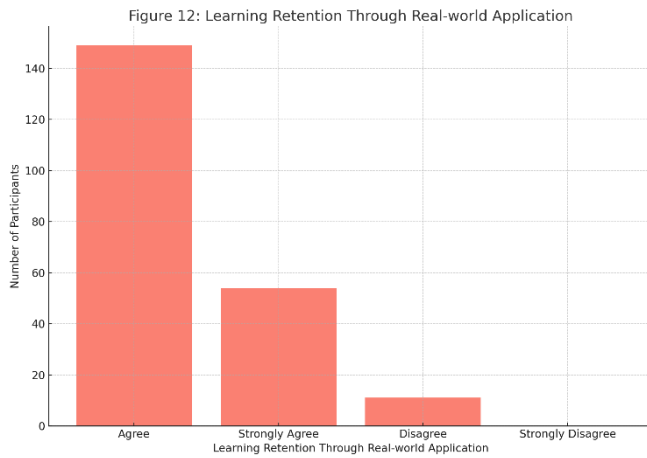
Importance of Class Participation



Importance of Class Participation	Participants
Agree	142
Strongly Agree	40
Disagree	31
Strongly Disagree	1

Figure 12

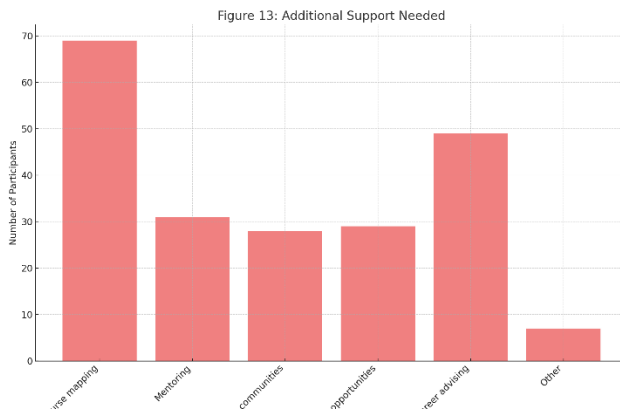
Learning Retention Through Real-World Application



Learning Retention Through Real-World Application	Participants
Agree	149
Strongly Agree	54
Disagree	11
Strongly Disagree	0

Figure 13

Additional Support Needed



Additional Support Needed	Participants
Course mapping:	69
Mentoring:	31
Learning communities:	28
More internship opportunities:	29
Career advising:	49
Other:	7