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Hanging in the Balance: Assessing Goal Prioritization Among Street-Level Bureaucrats

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ABSTRACT

Research on the ordering and updating of goals in bureaucratic settings focuses on individuals in managerial roles despite recognition that street-level bureaucrats shape organizations in meaningful ways. In coupling survey data with interviews of school-based law-enforcement officers, we explore the factors that are associated with the ways in which street-level bureaucrats prioritize rule enforcement and whether more focus on this goal comes at the cost of other goals. Our results indicate that professional training and experience are not associated with the prioritization of rule enforcement. Instead, characteristics of an officer's environment, including the composition of clientele and degree of task complexity, appear to shape street-level bureaucrats' focus on rule enforcement in substantive ways.

KEYWORDS

goal prioritization; law enforcement; schools; street-level bureaucrats

Modern theories of the firm assume that organizations are goal-seeking enterprises (Bryson et al., 2024; Rainey & Jung, 2015) and the people working within them aim to meet or exceed performance-related goals for which they will be held accountable (Van der Hoek et al., 2018). A long strain of research in public administration has pointed to the complexity and ambiguity of goals as characteristics that differentiate public- and private-sector enterprise, particularly where bureaucratic actors answer to multiple political principals (e.g., Whitford, 2005), and research from neighboring fields emphasizes that performance is shaped by the clarity, specificity, and difficulty of a goal (Latham & Locke, 2013). Additional scholarship on performance accountability reforms (Heinrich, 2007; Wichowsky & Moynihan, 2008) as well as choice behavior in response to internal and external reference points (Greve, 2008; Hong, 2019) further emphasizes how individual-level perceptions and goals can be updated over time as new information becomes available.

In testing the expectations that stem from theories of goal setting and decision making in public administration and management, scholars have focused on bureaucratic actors who occupy the upper echelons of public

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agencies (Holm, 2018; Hong, 2019; Rutherford & Meier, 2015), as these individuals often determine the strategic direction of their organizations and are ultimately held responsible for their organization's performance. Alternatively, literature on street-level bureaucracy highlights considerable discretion that exists at the bottom of organizational hierarchies. This perspective also points to the bias embedded in decisions of front-line employees who regularly affect policy implementation with little immediate managerial input or oversight (e.g., Brodkin, 2008). Coupled with cognitive research showing that people are generally constrained to serial processing such that they focus on one issue at a time (Workman et al., 2009), the observation that front-line bureaucrats balance multiple goals with finite resources (Weatherley and Lipsky 1977; Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2006) raises questions related to goal prioritization among employees who complete the day-to-day work of public organizations.

The purpose of this study is to advance knowledge of goal setting and decision-making in the public sector by offering a mixed-methods analysis of the individual and environmental factors that shape the ways in which street-level bureaucrats prioritize the goals they are expected to pursue. Such an effort can renew attention to explicating the factors that shape the goals of street-level bureaucrats and encourage scholarship on factors that shape the ordering of goals among those who regularly interact with citizens. Additionally, this study can initiate theoretical consideration of how the factors that mold goal prioritization on the front lines of public agencies compare to those identified as important in shaping managerial goal setting and goal adaptation.

To examine goal prioritization among street-level bureaucrats, we consider prior work regarding discretion, bias, and representation at the front lines of education and law enforcement, where teachers and sworn police officers interact with a wide range of citizen-clients (e.g., Denhardt & Crothers, 1998; Meier et al., 1991). These actors have significant influence over, for example, whether and when a student will have access to gifted and talented educational programs or when to make a traffic stop and whether such a stop warrants further investigation. In this study, we focus on the empirical context of school-based law enforcement officers (SBLEOs) in the United States. Consisting of an estimated 25,000 sworn officers spread across 5,500 law enforcement agencies, school-based law enforcement is prevalent throughout the American public education system. Individuals serving as SBLEOs often have experience in law enforcement that includes police academy training and assignment as a street patrol officer. Once selected or assigned to work in schools, these individuals are expected to balance goals of mentorship, education, and law enforcement (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012) in spaces that are at the center of salient political debates. SBLEOs, once considered

necessary for ensuring school safety, are now at the center of debates regarding whether the presence of sworn officers in schools meaningfully bolsters student safety or worsens racial disparities in school-based disciplinary outcomes and school-to-prison pipelines (Owens, 2017; Weisburst, 2019).

In this study, we examine factors likely to influence the weighting of rule enforcement by street-level bureaucrats through an online survey of members of a statewide school resource officer association and in-depth interviews with 16 survey respondents. Our analysis suggests that neither the extent of formal training nor professional experience has a clear association with how goals are approached and ordered. On the other hand, characteristics of an individual's environment more consistently appear to affect the ordering of goals. Both primary assignment to an organization with greater task complexity (e.g., a high school) and higher shares of Hispanic students in a school district are associated with stronger proclivities toward rule enforcement, and the latter suggests a trade-off in which greater focus on rule enforcement comes at the cost of focus on the client (measured through mentoring).

Goal setting and prioritization in the public sector

The effects of goal setting are well established among those studying human resources management in the private sector. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002) argues that the performance benefits of goal setting are maximized when goals are specific and high, as such goals affect individual-level choice, effort, and persistence (Latham et al., 2008). In applying goal-setting theory to the public sector, many point to the contextual importance of goal ambiguity and complexity (Andrews & Mostafa, 2019; Latham et al., 2008), characteristics that are generally expected to hinder agency processes and performance. Chun and Rainey (2005), for example, find that lack of clarity in the goals of public agencies dampens perceptions of managerial effectiveness, customer service orientation, productivity, and work quality among U.S. federal employees. Jung (2011) similarly finds a negative association between goal ambiguity and organizational performance in using Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) reports to measure goal attainment and ambiguity. Separately, research finds that outputs measured within performance management systems often induce goal displacement, gaming, effort substitution, and additional disfunctions (Bohte & Meier, 2000; Chen 2025; Kolstad, 2023; Wang 2023).

The challenges of setting and prioritizing goals in public agencies are further compounded by scholarship emphasizing that while organizations as a whole are capable of parallel processing, the attention of individuals

is serial, such that tasks are ordered and addressed in a sequential manner (Cyert & March, 1963; Greve, 2008). Such ordering necessitates that bureaucrats prioritize some goals over others at specific points in time, and decisions of how to order goals are likely to have substantive implications for individual output as well as aggregate organizational performance.

The combination of serial processing and competing, ambiguous goals in the public sector raises important questions about the ways in which bureaucrats approach prioritization and ordering. Existing scholarship on goal sorting in public administration and management often stems from theoretical foundations of principal–agent interactions, the collection and use of performance information, and acknowledgment of isomorphic tendencies. For example, principal–agent frameworks that emphasize bureaucratic control frame the goals of public agencies and their managers as highly sensitive to the preferences and demands of elected officials (Ma, 2016; Rutherford & Meier, 2015). While principal–agent models regularly assume that elected officials and bureaucrats have divergent goals and preferences, it is also the case that principals work to mold the behavior of agents so that their decisions and priorities reflect those of the principal (e.g., Mitnick, 1975; Waterman & Meier, 1998). This line of research identifies multiple ways in which legislators may work to achieve goal alignment but also illustrates that such strategies are not always successful and can incur significant costs (Huber et al., 2001; Moe, 2012).

A separate line of literature on the nature of decision-making often assumes that decisions will be made according to managerial priorities and organizational goals as determined through (semi-)rational behavior (Cyert & March, 1963; Simon, 1947). More specifically, studies of decision-making focus on when and what type of information is used to inform goal prioritization, which, consequently, shapes how decisions are made (Jones, 2003). Scholarly examination of goal prioritization through a rational lens expanded significantly following the widespread adoption of values espoused by New Public Management and the proliferation of performance management policies. For example, the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) requires all U.S. federal agencies to regularly develop strategic plans that explicate agency goals and performance measures. Similar approaches were taken at the state and local level; prominent examples in the United States include CompStat (Computer Statistics) and similar programs used by various police departments (Smith, 2009). These performance management systems are often designed with the intent to hold managers accountable for their performance and offer information that can be used to update the content and ordering of goals (Halachmi, 2002), though in many cases, unintended and undesirable

consequences emerge (Chen, 2025; Jarl, 2025; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Evidence abounds regarding the ways in which indicators of performance that are measured receive greater attention such that activities and outputs that are not measured often suffer (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Moynihan, 2008; Smith, 1995).

Within public management, the efficacy of performance information policies is debated (e.g., Moynihan, 2008), but the pervasiveness of these systems has spurred interest in understanding when and how information collected to track performance and increase accountability might be used to update the aspirations of policymakers and public managers. Much of this research argues that information feedback loops regarding performance can shape managerial perceptions of the presence of performance gaps according to historical, within-agency trends or comparative, cross-agency comparisons (Greve, 2008; Hong, 2019), such that updated performance aspirations, or goals, are identified. For example, Nielsen (2014) illustrates that negative performance information pushes public managers to reorder their goals to focus on deficiencies in the context of Danish school principals. Chen and Jia (2023), using data on city-level governments in China, show that the prioritization of a particular goal is correlated with performance gaps, or differences between observed performance and aspirations, present in conflicting goals (see also Cheon, 2021).

Extending questions of goal prioritization to street-level bureaucrats

Existing literature on goal setting and prioritization in the public sector predominantly focuses on managerial priorities. For example, Selden and Brewer (2000), in examining the importance of work motivation in the ability of specific, high goals to improve performance in the public sector, focus on individuals in the senior executive service. Additional research considers those at the top of local or state governments (Ma, 2016), primary and secondary schools (Nielsen, 2014), institutions of postsecondary education (Rutherford & Meier, 2015), nursing homes (Cheon, 2021), and hospitals (Zhu & Rutherford, 2019). Much of this work highlights the ways in which managers update goals according to performance information (e.g., either the historical trajectory of the agency or how the agency's performance metrics compare to other agencies). This type of goal setting often involves the steering of the organization. However, the ways in which employees in lower level positions evaluate the relative importance of various goals in executing the day-to-day tasks of the organization can critically shape realized agency activities and outputs, particularly as it is front-line employees who directly interact with the public and make critical real-time decisions that move toward or away from broader agency goals.

Where scholarship in public management does not clearly explicate mechanisms that mold the goal prioritization processes of street-level bureaucrats, many studies consider the ability of these individuals to subvert policy objectives or depart from agency directives according to their own values and preferences (Brodkin, 2008; Lipsky, 1980). May and Winter (2009), for example, show that while most caseworkers adhere to national policy goals, variation is present and may be the result of caseworker knowledge, as well as whether their immediate political principals (municipal politicians) endorse divergence. Others focus on the potential for opportunistic behavior such as creaming, effort substitution, and output distortion, all of which lead to goal displacement (Moynihan, 2008; Nielsen, 2006) or highlight the ways in which the values and decisions of frontline bureaucrats are shaped by their prior lived experiences, as well as by the process of socialization to their profession or agency (Keiser et al., 2002; Oberfield, 2012).

In linking research on managerial goals in the public sector to scholarship highlighting the ways in which the discretion afforded to street-level bureaucrats introduces opportunities for policy subversion, we work from the notion that all street-level employees are "required to enforce rule compliance while promoting trust and cooperation in their relations with citizens" (Moyson et al., 2018, p. 610). Rule compliance, on one hand, emphasizes a more punitive approach to ensuring that the policy objectives set by the state are achieved (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Sabbe et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2024). Alternatively, bureaucrats may prioritize responsiveness to and relationships with clientele within the constraints imposed by the state (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000); this client-centric approach highlights the ways in which bureaucrats are influenced by subjective tendencies including but not limited to assessments of which clients appear motivated or most deserving of help (Tummers, 2017). Scholarship on the distinctions between state-agents (focused on rule enforcement) and citizen-agents (focused on responsiveness to individual citizen-clients) recognizes that the two narratives are not wholly inconsistent or incompatible (Gassner & Gofen, 2018), but they carry different implications regarding underlying priorities.

In considering the factors that are expected to shape street-level priorities regarding rule compliance or citizen relationships, we first consider the role of professional training. Existing research on socialization commonly assumes that, in addition to exposure to organizational culture and informal norms, formal training in an agency will work to homogenize bureaucratic responses or otherwise enhance the boundaries of the profession (Jung & Ronquillo, 2021); in some cases, such socialization and training may even hinder the linkages between passive and active

representation that would otherwise encourage bureaucrats to respond to or advocate for the needs of within-group citizen-clients (Selden et al., 2016; Wilkins and Williams, 2008). Significant training is likely to occur in the onboarding process for new employees, though continuing professional education is also commonly credited with influencing practitioner behavior (e.g., Farmer et al., 2003). We argue that formal training is likely to raise bureaucrats' awareness of the rules and constraints set by the state such that they are pushed toward a focus on rule enforcement and compliance.

H1: Street-level bureaucrats with higher levels of formalized training will be more likely to prioritize rule compliance.

However, it is also possible that the effects of formal training on individual decisions and behavior are short lived. Street-level bureaucracy research illustrates that bureaucrats with more experience can become disillusioned with their jobs and are more likely to bend or break organizational rules or professional norms. For example, Assadi and Lundin (2018) show that compliance with policy directives by street-level bureaucrats lessens as tenure increases in the context of Swedish caseworkers. Similar results are found by Keulemans and Van de Walle (2020) in the context of Dutch and Belgian tax auditors and by Oberfield (2014) in the context of police officers and welfare caseworkers in the United States.[1] Movement away from formal compliance creates additional room for discretion in assessing client deservingness and motivation, as well as, in some cases, intentional or unintentional bias.

H2: Street-level bureaucrats with greater professional experience will be less likely to prioritize rule compliance.

It is also the case that bureaucrats are influenced by the environment in which they work. Much literature on street-level discretion and decisions highlights pressures that extend from the mismatch between service demand and available resources (e.g., Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2006; Hill & Hupe, 2009); in many cases, insufficient resources are expected to negatively influence organizational outputs (e.g., Brodkin, 2008; Lipsky, 1980). For instance, Keiser (2001) shows that state-employed bureaucrats strategically reduce access to federal programs when state governments incur program costs, especially in times of fiscal stress. Andrews (2009) also finds that both objective and subjective measures of munificence boost organizational performance, though goals are not directly considered. We argue that where resources are greater, available capacity will allow bureaucrats to invest more time in relationship building and understanding clients. This, in turn, may lessen the weight placed on rule prioritization.

H3: Street-level bureaucrats with higher levels of organizational resources will be less likely to prioritize rule compliance.

Next, we consider the role of task complexity in shaping the priorities of street-level bureaucrats. The association between task complexity and goal setting has received significant attention in the broader management literature (see a review in Campbell, 1988). While the definition of task complexity varies (e.g., complexity as a psychological experience vs. complexity as a measure of task characteristics), many scholars concur that it constrains goal-setting processes (Wood et al., 1987). In the public sector, Andrews (2009) illustrates that task complexity is negatively related to performance in the context of local government service departments in Wales. Further, complexity in a broad sense may limit the capacity of political principals to control the bureaucracy (Krause, 2009), as well as the capacity of bureaucrats to foster and maintain relationships with citizens. We expect that, similar to high-level bureaucrats, task complexity will require street-level bureaucrats to be knowledgeable of and responsible for upholding a wider range of policies and procedures. Both the additional professional and mental loads can push these front-line workers to prioritize rule compliance.

H4: Street-level bureaucrats with higher levels of organizational task complexity will be more likely to prioritize rule compliance.

In coping with large caseloads and finite resources, bureaucrats often prioritize some clients over others (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; Tummers et al., 2015). In other words, bureaucrats may choose which clients to serve based on their values and perceptions regarding both the difficulty of a case and the deservingness of a client (Pfaff et al., 2021). Where caseloads are demanding, decisions must be made quickly; this increases the likelihood that heuristics and biases will be invoked. In many cases, these shortcuts may employ negative stereotypes or otherwise work against minority groups or out-groups. Indeed, a robust body of literature shows that the ways in which some clients are prioritized or sanctioned align with biases against those who come from minoritized groups (e.g., Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Olson, 2016; Wilkins & Williams, 2008). For example, Pedersen et al. (2018) show that agencies with larger shares of clientele who are non-Western immigrants or their descendants impose a greater number of sanctions and that caseworkers are more likely to recommend sanctions for ethnic minorities (see also Olsen et al., 2022). As related to goal prioritization, we argue that the presence of larger shares of minoritized clients may elicit implicit biases and cultural stereotypes such that rule compliance is emphasized.

H5: Street-level bureaucrats working in organizations with larger shares of minoritized clientele groups will be more likely to prioritize rule compliance.

Goal prioritization among school-based law enforcement officers

We examine our hypotheses in the context of school-based law enforcement officers (SBLEOs) who are assigned to work in one or more K–12 schools in the United States. Though the origins of SBLEO programs, including school resource officer programs, date to the 1950s, such positions were not widely used until the 1990s and 2000s, following the spread of zero-tolerance policies and the highly salient Columbine High School shooting. At the federal level, the Department of Justice has invested over $1 billion to increase police presence in schools and over $14 billion to support community policing efforts that include but are not limited to supporting sworn officers in public schools (Lindberg, 2015). Resources for SBLEOs were supported by both the Obama Administration and the Trump Administration in recent years (Connery, 2020). However, there is no official count or registry of SBLEOs across the United States. Recent surveys suggest that 70% of K–12 students have private security guards or police officers in their school (Musu et al., 2019); separate from private security guards, truancy officers, and safety coordinators, an estimated 15,000–20,000 sworn school resource officers are employed throughout the United States (NASRO, 2020).

Instead, the duties of SBLEOs are molded in three ways. First, some but not all states have codified definitions of and requirements for SBLEOs operating within state lines. For example, Alabama requires that SBLEOs complete the annual firearm requalification and active shooter training already mandated for all law enforcement officers. In Virginia, training standards include mediation and conflict resolution, disaster and emergency response, and student behavioral dynamics, among other types of training (Education Commission of the States, 2019). Second, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) offers a 40-hour specialized training course recommended or required by some states and local jurisdictions as well as multiple federal funding programs. NASRO emphasizes a triad model in which SBLEOs are expected to assume the roles of law enforcement officers, informal counselors, and teachers. Finally, the duties and expectations of SBLEOs are often detailed in memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between law enforcement agencies and schools or school districts at the local level. These MOUs vary in length and specificity, and awareness of such contracts differs across constituent groups.

The variation observed in the expectations and requirements for SBLEOs highlights the presence of competing and ambiguous goals for individuals in these positions; an officer must determine which goals to prioritize, as well as which strategies will most effectively meet those goals. This is particularly important given salient debate regarding the effect of SBLEOs in schools. While many policies and programs encourage the use of

SBLEOs to strengthen student and school safety, other groups raise concerns regarding equity and school-to-prison-pipelines (Owens, 2017). Letters jointly released by the Department of Education and Department of Justice in 2016 highlight the positive effect SBLEOs that include but extend beyond safety (Davis, 2016; King, 2016). However, research suggests that discipline rates increase in schools receiving federal grant dollars for community policing and SBLEOs (Weisburst, 2019) and that Black students are most likely to be affected by the presence of law enforcement in schools (Sorensen et al., 2021).

Data and methods

To gain a better understanding of the factors that shape how SBLEOs as front-line bureaucrats weight rule compliance, we implemented a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (e.g. Mele & Belardinelli, 2019). The first stage of the study was aimed at identifying the potential predictive ability of select quantitative variables on SBLEO perceptions of their primary role in schools. Second, a qualitative multiple-case-study approach of SBLEO programs from a nested subsample of survey participants was conducted. Examination of these cases can help consider how factors examined in the first stage of analysis are associated prioritizing rule enforcement. The second stage includes analysis of 16 semistructured interviews, interviewer reflection notes, and SBLEO training course materials.

The data for the first stage of this study were collected through a survey of SBLEOs in a Midwestern U.S. state; survey responses were then linked to school district and county-level data. The survey population was determined based on membership in a state's school resource officer association. Membership in the association is not required for school-based law enforcement personnel and can generate a sample that is biased in nonstochastic ways. For example, membership may be linked with higher levels of school resources, completion of the basic training offered by the NASRO, or loyalty to the SBLEO or law enforcement community. Still, many states do not maintain clear counts or contacts of SBLEOs, so using state association membership offers one of the best routes for recruiting respondents from the intended population.

We developed the survey instrument in the fall of 2020 and solicited feedback from scholars studying law enforcement, education, and public management, as well as the leadership of the state school resource officer (SRO) association. The survey was circulated by the state association to 400 members in April 2021. One reminder was sent by the association, and the survey was closed in May 2021. Of the 400 members invited to participate in the survey, 166 (41.5%) started the survey, and 93 (23.3%)

finished the survey. The sample composition provides a representative snapshot of the SBLEO landscape in the state and country (Mielke et al., 2021).[2] Additionally, the response rate achieved in this study is similar to those in other recent studies that surveyed bureaucrats or elected officials (for example, between 8% in the U.S. and 36% in Denmark in Blom-Hansen et al. [2021]; 25.3% across 21 countries in Suzuki & Hur [2020]; and 25.3% in China in Wang et al. [2024]). Finally, individuals in law enforcement roles are considered difficult to reach, given low levels of trust in individuals outside of the profession (Paoline 2003; Cohen and Cohen 2023).

After the survey was closed, semistructured interviews were conducted in July and August 2021 with respondents who indicated willingness to discuss the role of SBLEOs in additional detail at the end of the online survey. Of 24 individuals who were initially contacted, 16 participated in a recorded interview. Interviews ranged from 20 to 65 minutes in length (mean = 40 minutes) and included 15 standardized questions.

Quantitative data

Dependent variables

We measure two indicators of priorities from the survey data. First, respondents were asked to select their "primary role in school-based law enforcement." Answer options consisted of enforcing local, state, and federal laws; enforcing school or district policies; mentoring/counseling; responding to emergency or crisis events; and teaching/educating. These options were based on the goals formally defined by national and state professional associations for SROs, as well as on prior surveys of SBLEOs. We consider goals related to the enforcement of laws or policies as those prioritizing rule compliance, while goals related to mentoring and teaching are more likely to capture efforts to promote trust and cooperation among citizen-clients.[3]

The survey question forces respondents to select a single primary role. As such, it assumes that respondents have an observed preference or felt sense of duty toward one particular goal. We focus on a forced-choice question format here, as prior research suggests that these questions motivate deeper mental processing; they are often associated with a lower likelihood of error in scholarship on marketing and public opinion (e.g., Luce, 1998). Additionally, forced-choice questions are preferable to question formats that enable weak satisficing and less clarity in responses (Bartram, 2007; Smyth et al., 2006).[4]

Second, we asked respondents to report the percentage of time they spend on a variety of activities in a separate section of the survey; responses to this question were required to sum to 100. For this question, we

expanded categories to include community outreach; emergency management/crisis preparedness planning; enforcement of local, state, and federal laws, including citations or arrests; enforcing school or district policies, including disciplinary measures; general campus security, including patrolling school facilities; mentoring/counseling individual students; professional training and development; responding to emergency or crisis events; supervising extracurricular activities; teaching/educating school personnel, students, or families; and other activities. The number of categories and summative requirements mean that this question is more cognitively taxing than the first question. However, it provides a way to tap the ordering of goals without explicitly asking about goals. Empirical associations in models estimating these responses may be particularly interesting for future research on reported goals and realized time.

Across all respondents, patrolling was reported as the most time-intensive activity (mean = 28.3%); the second largest category, mentoring and counseling students, clearly trailed with an average of 18.3% of respondents' time. We also included enforcing laws, emergency planning, and teaching/educating in our analysis, as respondents reported spending, on average, 8–9% of their time on these activities. Largely similar to the forced-choice question, we consider the enforcement of laws and patrolling as rule enforcement; mentoring/counseling and teaching/educating, on the other hand, tap movement toward clients.

Independent variables

Regarding the first hypothesis, training can occur in a variety of forms. For example, law enforcement officers can participate in a professional 40-hour basic school resource officer training offered through NASRO. Separately, they may receive more specialized training such as in adolescent mental health or deescalation strategies, in addition to or in place of the NASRO training. Respondents in our sample are school resource officers who are required by state law to complete the minimum training requirements for law enforcement officers as well as the NASRO 40-hour basic training course or a similar state training (over 90% of respondents indicated they completed the NASRO course). As such, we asked respondents to report whether they had participated in 17 different types of training[5] and created an additive index from their dichotomous responses (mean = 11.5, SD = 3.8).

Outside of the NASRO training course, the most commonly completed training was in deescalation strategies and techniques (90.5%). Among multiple deescalation trainings, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance offers webinars on this topic, and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services regularly awards grants dollars to law enforcement agencies and

similar groups to offer these trainings (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). On the other hand, less than half of the respondents reported formal training in juvenile gangs; truancy intervention and drop-out prevention; or positive school discipline. Only positive school discipline is mentioned in recent NASRO recommendations (it has also received attention from the National Parent Teacher Association in reference to SROs; National PTA, 2016), and none of these is listed as essential training.

Next, we capture experience by asking, "How many total years of experience do you have in school-based law enforcement in your career?" (0–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, 16–20 years, over 20 years) and "How many total years of experience do you have as a sworn police officer (including but not limited to your time in school-based law enforcement)?" (0–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, 16–20 years, 21–30 years, 31–40 years, over 40 years). The two variables are moderately correlated at .38, signaling that they are related but discriminant measures that tap different facets of professional experience. While the former type of experience is most pertinent, we examine both measures in our empirical models.

For two of the three hypotheses regarding organizational factors that shape the ways in which street-level goals are prioritized, we use data external to the survey. While respondents could complete the survey anonymously, they were able to report the primary school to which they are assigned as well as their primary school or district's ZIP code (we lose only three observations in our analysis due to respondents who did not report a primary school name or ZIP code). This allows us to merge survey responses with data school districts are required to report to the state.

Connecting these datasets provides more information about a respondent's environment, but key limitations exist. First, data at the district level will generate more stochastic error than school-level data. On the other hand, the majority of respondents (64%) work across multiple schools, which makes district data the most appropriate level of measurement. Second, while the survey was fielded in 2021, the district data that are publicly available come from the 2018–2019 school year. This gap is due to a U.S. Department of Education waiver that allows the state in which respondents were located not to collect annual assessment data during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To examine hypothesis 3, we measure resources via expenditures per thousand students (in $1000s) in each SBLEO's school district. Where spending levels are greater, we expect higher levels of capacity that enable SBLEOs to move away from strict rule enforcement as agents of the state. For hypothesis 4, we rely on self-reported data regarding the primary type of school in which each SBLEO works. More specifically, we control for whether the primary school at which an SBLEO works is a high school;

the comparison group consists of those who primarily work in an elementary school, middle school/junior high school, or other type of school (e.g., a K–8 school). High schools are larger in size and offer a wider number of specializations for students to pursue. As related to law enforcement, most juvenile arrests involve individuals between the ages of 15 and 17 years (though minors or those below the age of 18 years account for a small proportion of overall crimes in the United States; Puzzanchera, 2022).

Finally, we account for the percentage of students who are Black and the percentage of students who are Hispanic in each respondent's school district. This measurement choice is particularly important in the contexts of law enforcement and education in the United States, given disparities observed across several outcomes. For example, police are more likely to search Black and Hispanic drivers relative to white drivers even though these groups use illicit drugs at similar rates (Lofstrom et al., 2021). In school settings, Black and Hispanic students are more likely than their white peers to be referred for disciplinary action including but not limited to in- and out-of-school suspension (for a review, see Welsh & Little, 2018).

Beyond our key explanatory variables, we control for individual- and school-level characteristics that may shape SBLEO priorities in meaningful ways. At the individual level, we focus on measures that are less likely to be based on perceptions or values to avoid issues of common source bias. Rather, we account for the total number of school-based law enforcement personnel who are assigned to the respondent's school(s), whether a respondent applied for their position (as opposed to being assigned to the position by their employer), and whether the respondent works for a private contractor.

We do not account for the race or gender of respondents in our analyses, given both the lack of variation and higher rates of missingness in these variables. Among those who completed the survey ($n = 93$), 76 identified as white, 5 reported a non-white race or ethnicity, and 12 did not answer the question. Similarly, 77 identified as male while 6 identified as female, and one selected "other." The remaining respondents selected "prefer not to answer" or skipped the question. While we expect race, ethnicity, and gender to shape the values of street-level bureaucrats, a limitation of our data is that we do not achieve sufficient variation to assess differences across these groups. Additional data (e.g., a higher response rate) would likely not solve this issue, given the predominantly male and white composition of SBLEOs in the state and in the larger law enforcement profession (see, e.g., Bureau of Justice, 2022). We also do not control for age, as it is strongly correlated (.76) with total experience in law enforcement.

Additional district-level controls include total student enrollment (logged), the percentage of teachers with over 10 years of experience, and

the number of disciplinary events per thousand students, as well as a survey item regarding whether a school in the respondent's district experienced an active shooter threat in the last five years.

Summary statistics for all variables included in the quantitative portion of the analysis are reported in the Online Appendix. Empirical models consist of logit regression for the identification of a single priority and ordinary least squares (OLS) for the percentage of time spent on various activities. In all models, errors are clustered at the county level.

Survey findings

Table 1 presents the result of logit models estimating the likelihood that a respondent will report enforcing laws as their primary role. Model 1 includes only our variables of interest; Model 2 includes additional control

Table 1. Primary Role as Law Enforcement.

	Model 1	Model 2
Professional training composite	−0.2659*	−0.2579*
	(0.0695)	(0.0714)
Total experience—school-based law enforcement	0.7003+	0.8163+
	(0.4233)	(0.4451)
Total experience—sworn police officer	0.2103	0.1170
	(0.2157)	(0.2355)
District expenditures per student ($1000s)	−0.4115	−0.4331
	(0.5077)	(0.4760)
Primary assignment—high school	1.3901*	1.3603+
	(0.6725)	(0.7734)
District percent Black students	−0.0290	−0.0143
	(0.0307)	(0.0323)
District percent Hispanic students	0.0502*	0.0453*
	(0.0151)	(0.0165)
Applied for position		−0.0282
		(0.6377)
Private contractor		−0.4171
		(0.7245)
Number of personnel assigned to school(s)		0.1506
		(0.2037)
Active shooter incident in district in last five years		−0.2584
		(0.6770)
District total enrollment (ln)		−0.2997
		(0.3332)
District percent teachers with 10+ years of experience		0.0282
		(0.0517)
District disciplinary events per thousand students		0.0040
		(0.0367)
Constant	2.1860	2.9489
	(4.7826)	(5.8432)
N	89	88
R^2	0.21	0.22

+$p < 0.10$.
*$p < 0.05$.

variables. Counter to our first hypothesis, the results suggest those with higher levels of professional training are less likely to prioritize rule enforcement. Particularly for individuals who become SBLEOs after gaining experience as sworn officers on the street and in the general community, it may be that additional formalized training better equips these street-level bureaucrats to view their clientele—students—in a way that diverges from police academy training that is designed for street patrol. Theoretically, self-determination theory highlights that those who self-select or are otherwise motivated to participate in trainings may have values and priorities that differ from those who choose not to participate. Here, those who pursue additional training may be more inclined to understand and relate to students.

While experience as a police officer has no association with the prioritization of rule enforcement, experience as an SBLEO is positively and significantly associated with a respondent's tendency to prioritize rule enforcement. This also runs counter to our expectations. Further, the strength of the association is sizeable. The effect of one additional year of experience is approximately three times the effect of one additional form of professional training. We expect this is, in part, explained by the time devoted to each activity; completing one training takes much less time than accumulating an additional year of experience.

Among characteristics of an SBLEO's environment, our results indicate that resource munificence has no association with goal prioritization. In part, this is related to the low level of power available in our sample. Additionally, those who were able to respond to the survey could work in districts that offer at least a sufficient baseline level of resources. Primary assignment to a high school, on the other hand, is associated with a higher likelihood of prioritizing law enforcement; this aligns with our expectations regarding task complexity (H4). Finally, the percentage of Black students in a district has no association with selecting law enforcement as the primary role; rather, this choice has a positive and statistically significant association with the share of Hispanic students in a district. This provides support for the notion that a larger share of minoritized clientele can incite tendencies that emphasize rule compliance; it also aligns with concerns regarding the equitable treatment of various clientele groups.

Among control variables reported in Model 2, none are meaningfully associated with the prioritization of rule enforcement. Further, the inclusion of these variables does not affect the associations between any of our key independent variables and the outcomes of interest.

Next, we estimate the likelihood that a respondent will select mentoring as their primary role in Table 2. These models help to shed light on whether tendencies toward rule enforcement come at the expense of the citizen-agent approach. Notably, half of the sample (53%) selected

Table 2. Primary Role as Mentoring.

	Model 1	Model 2
Professional training composite	0.0508	0.0795
	(0.0779)	(0.0953)
Total experience—school-based law enforcement	−0.2722	−0.2246
	(0.2914)	(0.2838)
Total experience—sworn police officer	−0.2540	−0.2980
	(0.1571)	(0.1863)
District expenditures per student ($1000s)	0.3990	0.1709
	(0.3601)	(0.3643)
Primary assignment—high school	−0.6233	−0.7817
	(0.4593)	(0.4897)
District percent Black students	0.0212	0.0376*
	(0.0160)	(0.0191)
District percent Hispanic students	−0.0603*	−0.0586*
	(0.0171)	(0.0191)
Applied for position		0.2218
		(0.5587)
Private contractor		−1.3284*
		(0.5042)
Number of personnel assigned to school(s)		−0.3504*
		(0.1616)
Active shooter incident in district in last five years		−1.1425*
		(0.5113)
District total enrollment (ln)		0.1263
		(0.3125)
District percent teachers with 10+ years of experience		0.0032
		(0.0362)
District disciplinary events per thousand students		−0.0245
		(0.0239)
Constant	−1.7015	0.5670
	(3.4085)	(4.4126)
N	89	88
R^2	.12	.19

$^{+}p < 0.10$.
$^{*}p < 0.05$.

mentoring as their primary role, which may dilute some linkages in a small sample. Indeed, unlike Table 1, neither training nor experience has a significant association with prioritizing mentoring. While experience as a police officer does not achieve standard levels of statistical significance, the coefficient has strong *p* values (.105 and .110) and a negative sign. Should this become significant in analyses with larger samples, it would indicate that more experience is negatively associated with prioritizing client trust and cooperation. In this context, this may be less surprising as socialization as a police officer is not analogous to socialization as an SBLEO.

Among environmental characteristics, neither expenditures per thousand students nor primary assignment to a high school is associated with the selection of mentoring as a respondent's primary goal. On the other hand, the presence of Black students as well as Hispanic students in an SBLEO's

district is associated with the prioritization of mentoring in different ways. The percentage of Black students in a district misses standard levels of significance in model 1 but is positive and significant in model 2. The lack of robustness in these results means interpretations should be made with caution. There is a persistent negative and significant association between the share of Hispanic students in a district and the likelihood that a respondent will select mentoring as their primary role. This indicates that there may be a direct trade-off between attention to rule enforcement and client trust in our sample and potentially among SBLEOs more broadly when it comes to client composition.

While control variables had no effect on identifying law enforcement as an SBLEO's primary role in Table 1, whether a respondent works as a private contractor rather than for a law enforcement agency, the total number of SBLEO personnel assigned to work in a respondent's school(s), and whether a school in a respondent's district experienced an active shooter threat or incident in the last five years are negatively associated with the likelihood of selecting mentoring as the primary role. These represent relevant characteristics and events that can shape the priorities of SBLEOs as well as of the schools and law enforcement agencies in which they work.

In addition to the forced-choice question regarding the identification of a single primary goal, we examine the ways in which respondents report how much time they spend on a range of activities. This question was introduced at a point in the survey much later than the role prioritization questions and included a larger number of response categories; responses across categories were required to total to 100%. While this question is cognitively taxing, it also has the potential to reveal information about respondents' priorities without explicitly priming them.

As should be expected, we observe some overlap in our outcomes of interest. Respondents who report their primary role as mentoring also report spending more time mentoring and counseling students (23.4%) compared to law enforcement (5.5%). Interestingly, those who consider law enforcement to be their primary role report a more even distribution of time among law enforcement (11.4%) and mentoring and counseling (13.4%), on average. As a final comparison, among the smaller number of respondents who view emergency management as their primary role, reported time is evenly split between law enforcement (6.5%) and emergency management (7.0%) activities, while mentoring and counseling students (11.5%) consumes relatively more time.

The results of OLS regression models estimating the reported percentage of time respondents spend on the enforcement of local, state, and federal laws, including citations or arrests, and mentoring/counseling individual students are reported in Table 3. Overall, results largely support the

Table 3. Time Spent on Law Enforcement and Mentoring/Counseling.

	Enforcing laws	Mentoring and counseling students
Professional training composite	−0.0931	0.4452
	(0.2203)	(0.5035)
Total experience—school-based law enforcement	−0.9803+	−0.3503
	(0.5613)	(1.3309)
Total experience—sworn police officer	−0.2479	−0.4563
	(0.5332)	(1.2151)
District expenditures per student ($1000s)	−1.1346	6.5784*
	(1.1379)	(2.6770)
Primary assignment—high school	4.8745*	−3.3704
	(1.2222)	(2.9623)
District percent Black students	−0.0287	−0.3140*
	(0.0608)	(0.1270)
District percent Hispanic students	0.0159	−0.1589
	(0.0680)	(0.0951)
Applied for position	2.3910*	1.2428
	(1.1204)	(3.5302)
Private contractor	1.8417	−5.8823
	(1.6344)	(4.1112)
Number of personnel assigned to school(s)	0.5700	−2.0523*
	(0.3727)	(0.9721)
Active shooter incident in district in last five years	2.1836	−3.0665
	(1.4626)	(3.0906)
District total enrollment (ln)	0.2706	2.7426
	(0.9215)	(1.8866)
District percent teachers with 10+ years of experience	−0.0941	0.1769
	(0.0997)	(0.4495)
District disciplinary events per thousand students	−0.0140	0.2508
	(0.0625)	(0.1598)
Constant	19.3216	−69.0765+
	(14.3122)	(38.4004)
N	83	83
R^2	0.28	0.29

$^{+}p < 0.10$.
$^{*}p < 0.05$.

findings in Tables 1 and 2. Counter to hypothesis 1, more training is not meaningfully associated with how respondents spend time on either role. Similarly, little support is provided for our second hypothesis regarding experience, though additional time as an SBLEO is marginally associated with less time spent on enforcing laws, which aligns with our expectations.

Among characteristics of a respondent's work environment, we observe support for our expectations regarding resource munificence and potential for a trade-off between goals. The coefficient for expenditures per thousand students is negative in Model 1 regarding law enforcement but is not significant. More importantly, greater resources are positively and significantly associated with additional time spent mentoring and counseling students, all else equal. Further, primary placement in a high school is associated with an increase of nearly five percentage points for time spent enforcing laws. While a negative coefficient is observed for this measure

of task complexity in Model 2, it is not significant. Finally, unlike the trends observed in Tables 1 and 2, the presence of minority students does not consistently shape time spent on law enforcement activities. However, higher shares of Black students are linked to less time on mentoring and counseling activities; a one standard deviation increase in Black students is associated with nearly a four percentage points drop in time spent mentoring and counseling. Notably, the negative coefficient for the share of Hispanic students is not significant in Model 2, but the *p* value (.103) is meaningfully strong, particularly when considered alongside the trends in Tables 1 and 2. Though not reported in the models here, more Hispanic students in a district is positively associated with time spent on general security and patrolling, which could be linked to how SBLEOs identify rule violations. The trends in our data raise concerns regarding equitable treatment and deserve more attention (see Sorensen et al., 2021, for example).

Among control variables, the number of school-based law enforcement personnel assigned to a respondent's school is negatively related to the time respondents report spending on mentoring and counseling activities. At the individual level, respondents who applied for an SBLEO position, compared to those who were assigned to the position, are associated with slightly more time spent on law enforcement activities. While we cannot make strong conclusions from this association, it points to the importance of the hiring and selection processes for SBLEOs.

Overall, our empirical analysis provides the strongest support for environmental factors that work to shape how street-level bureaucrats order multiple goals. In the context of SBLEOs, assignment to a high school, where the environment is more complex, is positively associated with rule enforcement. Our models also suggest that higher shares of Hispanic students encourage a focus on rule enforcement. For these environmental characteristics, there is tentative evidence of a trade-off between the perspective of a state agent (rule enforcement) and that of a client agent (through mentoring and prioritizing citizen trust). As our survey data do not have ideal statistical power, we turn to qualitative interviews to further consider factors that shape the weighting of rule enforcement among multiple goals.

Qualitative data and findings

We use qualitative data to further understand our key variables of interest and assess potential mechanisms regarding when and how the variables shape role prioritization for street-level bureaucrats in our context (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). In the absence of longitudinal data to quantitatively track average goal prioritization shift across time, our analysis of interview

data qualitatively helps to describe how and why priorities change. All interviewees participated in the larger survey and were actively employed as an SBLEO at one or more schools at the time of their interviews in August 2021. Details of interviewee characteristics are provided in the Online Appendix. All had at least one year of experience (the subsample average is 6.5 years) working in a public school on top of previous police experience. All interviewees were men; most were white (94%) and had a bachelor's degree (63%). Interviewees were split between conservative (44%) and moderate (50%) political orientations. Ten selected mentoring, five selected enforcing rules and laws, and one selected responding to crisis events as their primary goal in the online survey.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone; each was recorded and subsequently transcribed. A 15-question interview guide (see Online Appendix) was used to ensure each participant was asked a set of standard questions. Interview transcription was initially completed by a graduate research assistant and then reviewed by the authors. Analysis of the text was conducted with NVivo 14. The cases and quotes we report are motivated by the quantitative distributions in dependent variables.

Analysis consisted of multiple close readings of each interview, reflection notes, and two rounds of coding with the purpose of complementing the results of our quantitative models (Greene, 2007). For the first cycle of data analysis, we applied a topic coding method that filters responses by their substantive content (Saldaña, 2014). In the second cycle, we applied a hypothesis coding method that involved applying codes related to our five hypotheses regarding training, experience, organizational resources, task complexity, and shares of racial minorities to the topic-coded data.

Analysis for all hypotheses comes from comparing least similar cases (Przeworski, 1970). Narrative data are used here to understand why the quantitative analysis produced null results (e.g., given the inability to capture all process-based complexities). In this study, the narratives are post hoc rationalizations of how various factors shape goal prioritization. Findings from the interviews should not be understood as evidence of what the original, average cognitive shift is but as descriptions of retrospective coherence of how the influence is absorbed by officers.

Regarding training (hypothesis 1), we focus on officers' understandings of which trainings they perceived to be useful for decision on the job. Regarding experience, we consider responses related to how time spent in a given school environment informed their approach. For hypothesis 3, we compare narratives from SBLEOs in districts with lower and higher expenditures per student. Additionally, variation on the number of schools to which an SBLEO is assigned is considered. Task complexity (hypothesis 4) is indexed by the type of school the SBLEO serves. Additional analysis for

this hypothesis considers answers to interview questions prompting interviewees to describe a typical day at work and discuss what factors help achieve their mission. Finally, we did not directly ask about minority clients or deservingness, given, among multiple reasons, concerns regarding interviewee–interviewer rapport. Rather, this issue presented itself in 12 of the 16 interviews in response to questions about training and public opinion.

Professional training

Our quantitative results indicate a negative association between professional training and rule compliance. Among interviewees, the average number of training courses completed was 11.9; this mirrors the survey sample average of 11.5. Responses to interview questions revealed officers' perceived value of SBLEO training was based on improving their ability to gather information from students and strategically communicate with students in ways that deescalate conflict and increase awareness of the legal implications of their choices. Multiple officers mentioned a training module offered by the state association that addresses nonviolent crisis intervention techniques; the techniques recommended in the training include rapidly establishing rapport. This may shed light on quantitative trends regarding the relative importance of mentorship.

When asked which types of training are most helpful, 9 of the 16 officers discussed the NASRO basic training course. Officer Bentley shared an example of how the combination of "identifying signs of drug use" and the "tell-a-cop" sessions helped him address marijuana use at his school. In sharing a story about students consuming Delta 8 "candies" in classes, he highlighted that knowledge of the signs of smoking and digesting these substances combined with his ability to build rapport "makes you a better police officer and gives you more credibility with the students."

Explanations from seven officers of two popular trainings, verbal deescalation and policing of the teenage brain, underscore the importance of the ability to strategically communicate with students. Officer Chip explained, "A lot of times what I thought was just defiant … behavior turned out to be, that's the way teenagers think. And you have to accommodate the way you think in order to be a good [SBLEO] … that changes your involvement in how you come across." Deescalation with teenagers involves, as Officer Bentley explained, "giving people options, like don't back 'em in a corner … I've used that and most of the time it works."

Experience

The quantitative analysis suggests longer tenure is not associated with an increased likelihood of rule compliance. Narratives of officers' career

development chronicle a process where officers enter their assignment initially needing to prioritize building trust with students. If officers can do this successfully, then they are able to lean on established relationships to aid information search goals, more easily communicate expectations to students, and subsequently allocate more efforts toward goals the officers perceive as relevant to the school's population.[6] Officer Evan shared an example of what he said to a new officer he was mentoring.

> I pulled him aside and I trained him, and I said, "Listen," I said, "Go up there and interact with them, talk to them, ask them a question, open question, you know? If you can't do that, and uh, you wait too long, you're not going to be a good [SBLEO] because you can't, it doesn't matter where you come from, what you look like, you will make relationships, you will gain trust, and you'll get a lot of stuff done. They'll let you know, if there's trouble or someone's got a weapon … If you don't like kids and can't engage with them, well, … they're gonna see right through … you got to build the relationship, you gotta get to where they know they can come and trust you and talk to you with something."

This sentiment was echoed in many interviews. Examples interviewees shared of students approaching an SBLEO with timely information include an elementary-school student reporting a parent for sexual abuse (Officer Jackson), middle-school students reporting inappropriate photos shared via text without consent (Officer Chip), and high-school students reporting a fight planned for later in the day (Officer Evan).

As SBLEOs solidify relationships, their priorities can shift to other strategic objectives. For instance, Officer Barry discussed how he was not sure he would enjoy being an SBLEO after he was placed in the position. However, he reported that the relationships he formed with students in his first year helped him realize a set of objectives he wanted to pursue to improve student safety at his elementary schools. Another example of this process comes from Officer Joe, who faced persistent issues with vaping among high school students. He decided to collaborate with a local judge to routinize an educational justice procedure for first time vape offenses. These narratives are consistent with the quantitative findings that SBLEOs with more experience are less likely to select mentoring as their primary role, as their attention has shifted to broader priorities in later years based on grounded insights. Multiple officers refer to this shift in their goals at work as a move to being more "proactive" than "reactive."

Organizational resources

Our quantitative findings did not support the hypothesis that greater resources are associated with lower prioritization of rule enforcement. Our qualitative findings, however, lend support to the notion that resources are correlated with greater prioritization of client trust. Across all

interviewees, those who selected enforcing rules as their primary role, on average, worked at schools with resource levels below the sample average, while those who selected mentorship tended to be in schools above the sample average. When asked what makes performing their job easier, the SBLEOs from schools with resources at or above the mean shared a common narrative about how collaborative relationships between school districts and police departments facilitated mentorship-related goals. For instance, Officer David stated, "We take care of business right here in the school. We work with the parent in the school, we work with the kid in the school, we don't take them down and book 'em. We keep them here. And that way we have a full wraparound service right here. So I've got school counselors, I've got … administrators, I've got the SRO, we're all working together. Our goal is to get the kid back in school and get this kid an education."

SBLEOs from schools with below-average resource levels often noted limited capacities for collaborating with school personnel. For instance, Officer Neil called teachers "strapped for time" when sharing a narrative about school safety presentations as an efficient approach for mentoring and teaching multiple students at a time. Each of the five officers who work at multiple schools in their district discussed the demands placed on them to support multiple campuses across the school day; these include rushing between schools and keeping track of the needs of multiple sites. Additionally, narratives from officers in lower resourced schools highlight the challenges of multitasking. For example, Officer Bob shared, "If a kid's having a rough day and needs to be out of class, we'll walk around and check doors. Or he could sit, or she can sit with me at lunch duty, and they can just talk a little bit while they're having their, their Uncrustable or something like that."

Task complexity

The survey data indicate that primary assignment to a high school is associated with a higher likelihood of selecting law enforcement as the primary role. In the interviewee sample, six SBLEOs worked across all grade levels; four were at high schools only, four were at middle schools only, and one was at elementary schools only. Among SBLEOs who work at all grade levels, the officers are either supervisors for other SBLEOs or shoulder all schools in their district. Differences between school levels were salient in descriptions of ability to build rapport with students; this added validity to using high-school environments as a measure of task complexity. Officer Chip's reflection on working at multiple school levels distills this clearly. He stated, "You have to be able to communicate with

these kids, especially at the middle school and high school level. I worked, I worked elementary like fourth, fifth graders, they'll love cops. You hand out stickers, you're a hero, you're the best."

Descriptions of task complexity typically came in the form of examples of interactions with students; officers' accounts of interactions with middle- and high-school students reflected concerns about balancing rapport and law enforcement with the student more intensely compared to interactions with elementary-school students. For instance, Officer Dillon, in reflecting on the dual considerations of trust and rule compliance in interacting with middle school students, stated:

> It really just depends on the situation, but, um, those balances, I mean, whenever it's time to go and do a law enforcement action, you have to focus on the law enforcement action. It's, it's kinda hard, right? If you are building relationships with those kids and one of your kids gets in trouble, and you don't want them to get in trouble … but you have to remember that if it is a criminal action you're putting on that law enforcement cap, you still treat them with respect and dignity. You use, from the education and mentoring aspect of the job, you use those skills in order to essentially community police, being a police officer for the person in your community … You show them that even though it's a sucky situation, you're still going about for them, but you're going to do what you have to do as a police officer too.

Minoritized client groups

The quantitative analysis suggests bureaucratic goal prioritization is not independent from the demographic makeup of clientele. Qualitative trends indicate that prioritizing mentorship may be conditional on how SBLEOs understand students' lack of trust in police. This is important as the perceived presence of students who do not trust police officers is likely latently represented by the size of minority clientele groups (Sen & Wasow, 2016).

Some officers voiced more motivation than others to understand how the diversity of their clientele might impact their decisions and actions. While our regression models highlight potential concerns regarding how officers respond to larger Hispanic student populations, the officers interviewed either spoke about interactions with Black students specifically or race as a concept broadly. The approaches taken by Officers Nathan and Joe in interacting with racially minoritized students underscore differences in the ways in which SBLEOs understand the views of their students. Both identify as politically conservative and ranked mentorship first among competing priorities. Further, both indicated that they are aware of the challenges of distrust in police in communities of color. However, one aims to shift police distrust through a colorblind perspective, while the other considers how racialized experiences have warranted distrust. Officer Nathan stated:

> It's not our role as NASRO to go in and preach anti-racism. It's not our role to go in and preach how to go and be an activist in your community … our role is, how do we make sure that we understand our kids enough that … we can open up our own hearts and our own minds to learn about them, to know something better about them … We have an opportunity to do, that breaks down the barrier and bridges that gap between law enforcement and youth to the point where our kids don't see us as what we're wearing or the color of our skin, or whether or not I like dogs. They see us as humans and they want to develop, they want to be in a relationship with us because of how genuine we are.

Alternatively, Officer Joe commented:

> We are [a] primarily white school, and we're starting to diversify. And I love to see that. But that brings new challenges for me. And I like to reach out to our African-American students. The barrier is, you know, if you grow up not liking the cops because your parents don't like the cops, it's hard for you to trust the police officer. Actually, I welcome those challenges with open arms. If I know this student doesn't like the police, you know, I will slowly chip away at, you know, talking to them when they're out in the hall, "How are you doing?" you know, kind of being extremely nice so they understand that, hey, I am here to help … You can't be stuck to your ways, and you have to be open-minded about different things. And that was one of the harder parts for me, is I might not agree with the way this family is, but at the end of the day their kids, I got to help them.

These cases highlight important variation in approaches that cannot be observed in quantitative data. Officer Nathan hopes his outreach to students will make them more agreeable toward police, while Officer Joe's outreach acknowledges race and places the onus on himself to understand the relationship between police and minoritized communities. Unwillingness to acknowledge race and trouble understanding distrust from minoritized clients can be a barrier for addressing and reducing entrenched racial disparities (e.g., Riccucci, 2022).

Discussion

Street-level bureaucrats consistently face the challenge of achieving multiple goals. This study aimed to understand which factors shape goal prioritization on the front lines of public agencies using the case of U.S. school-based law enforcement officers. This study focused on the potential of professional training, experience, organizational resources, task complexity, and the composition of clientele to shape street-level priorities. In the context of SBLEOs, we did not find support for an expected positive association between training and rule enforcement. Rather, more training shifted focus away from rule compliance. Our quantitative analysis also provided some evidence for a positive association between experience and attention to rule compliance. Regarding both training and time on the

job, our interviews reveal that the associations detected in our data may be a result of shifting away from the need to quickly establish relationships with clientele. More specifically, the interviews revealed a strong initial emphasis on relationship building as part of implementing a community-based policing strategy that shifted over time.

At the organizational level, resource constraints do not have a clear statistical association with prioritizing rule compliance in our quantitative models. On the other hand, qualitative analysis highlights that those with fewer resources experience strained capacity. We find more support throughout our quantitative and qualitative analyses for the point that greater task complexity, particularly placement in a high school, can make the balancing of goals more difficult and ultimately shifts attention to rule compliance. Finally, the quantitative analysis highlights potential equity concerns for Hispanic students, while qualitative narratives highlight SBLEOs' awareness of distrust among Black students. Both point to important sources of variation in attitudes and associated behaviors in response to the composition of clientele.

Our analysis and associated findings should be considered alongside multiple limitations. We are not working with a large dataset that can offer strong statistical power or the ability to consider trends over time. On the other hand, we collected data from difficult-to-reach bureaucrats on the front lines, rather than from students or the general public. It is also the case that surveys and interviews cannot easily capture observed behavior such as direct SBLEO interactions with students. However, understanding perceived priorities is key to explaining the behaviors that ultimately unfold, despite the potential for reporting bias or social desirability. By coupling survey responses with in-depth interviews, our mixed-methods sequential explanatory design highlights potential linkages that can be explored with more data and in more contexts.

Our sample of SBLEOs is limited to one state and one type of street-level bureaucrat. This context may be generalizable to some but not all similar environments in which law enforcement officers are present or community-based police strategies are used. SBLEOs, like many law enforcement positions, have a strong organizational culture and ethos; they are predominantly white and male. Others such as social workers or teachers are likely to be similarly afflicted with role ambiguity, but more work is needed to consider trends in goal prioritization across professions. In all cases, the mechanisms that influence the ordering of goals is a question that will continue to be salient in contexts where bureaucrats regularly interact with citizens.

Theoretically, this study can encourage additional analysis of how priorities are determined by those on the front line of government. While

we focus on a specific context, additional types of law enforcement personnel (e.g., corrections officers, border patrol officers), as well as teachers, health care workers, social workers, and city planners, must all consider how to make sense of multiple goals and demands. For example, the field should consider how the priorities of those on the front lines are influenced by personal values relative to pressures from formal directives or informal pressures from immediate supervisors or clientele. This study also raises questions that intersect with research on how street-level bureaucrats select into agencies and what factors shape employee performance and quality.

Practically, our work can inform salient conversations regarding the values and practices of SBLEOs. Though questions regarding whether these individuals contribute to student safety or school-to-prison pipelines are beyond the confines of this survey, the goals SBLEOs seek to maximize are a necessary component of addressing such debates. This work can also inform formal and informal norms regarding the selection and training of SBLEOs for the needs and contexts of specific schools and districts.

Notes

1. Research is not unanimous on this point. Some suggest that longer tenure could work to build higher levels of investment in or commitment to a job, organization, or profession, which induce greater proclivities toward rule following (e.g., Carroll, 2017).
2. Additional details on how our survey compares to a 2020 NASRO survey is available in Table 1 of the Online Appendix. The NASRO study achieved a response rate of approximately 20% and included 1,724 SROs.
3. Fewer than 10 individuals selected enforcing school or district policies or teaching/educating as their primary goal; analyses regarding the prioritization of emergency or crisis events is provided in the Online Appendix.
4. Our survey also included a question that asked respondents to rank six items in order of importance; these items included the five options in the forced-choice question and space to report some "other" priority. Some argue that these questions are cognitively taxing (e.g., Smyth et al., 2018); others claim the order logit models commonly used with ranked choices are not ideal for identifying the latent traits associated with rankings (e.g., Hung & Huang, 2022). Our ordered logits of these measures (not shown here) dilute some associations but otherwise do not produce results that differ from those reported here.
5. Trainings included in the survey consisted of the NASRO Basic School Resource Officer course, conducting law enforcement activities in schools, responding to calls for service on a school campus, responding to incidents in the classroom, juvenile gangs, social media/technology-related investigations, use of deadly force, use of nonlethal force, deescalation strategies and techniques, mental health training for juvenile justice professionals, security audits of school campuses, truancy intervention and dropout prevention, bullying intervention and deterrence, substance abuse recognition among juveniles, positive school discipline, cultural sensitivity, and other.

6. Among the 11 SBLEOs interviewed who had less of 10 years of experience, 8 ranked mentoring first. Among the five who have more than 10 years of experience as SBLEOs, only one ranked mentoring first.

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