

Abstract

Title of Thesis: ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS REGARDING PERCEPTION OF SAFETY AND OPINIONS

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Due to the multiple cases of police brutality, racism, and protests in recent years, many people have called for defunding and abolishing police. For instance, this idea has spread to police in Virginia schools, where they have been debating whether to remove and replace school resource officers or keep them as a permanent solution to violence in schools. Many of the opinions come from concerned parents and community members, but what about the children who spend much of their time with school resource officers? Students have a right to be heard, as they are the ones spending their time with SROs and are mainly affected by their actions, like receiving a referral to the criminal justice system. This study aims to ask students how safe they feel alongside police officers and their opinions of the officers in order to improve relations among the officers and the community, students, in which they serve. Possible implications to this proposed study include changing policing types, more training for SROs, and possible alternatives to police such as security or mental health counselors.

ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS REGARDING PERCEPTION
OF SAFETY AND OPINIONS

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the last few years many movements have picked up momentum demanding solutions to issues regarding the criminal justice system like Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police. There has been growing support for police reform (Russonello 2020) and is shown by the growing debate that has been occurring in Virginia regarding whether or not school resource officers should be employed and utilized.

Many concerned parents and other individuals are pushing for police reform by asking for the removal of school resource officers and replacing them with more counselors because officers contribute to the school to prison pipeline (Defusco 2021). Schools like the ones in Alexandria City, decided to bring school resource officers back temporarily after Covid. Many teachers and school staff explain that police are necessary to combat the violence that occurs, describing an event where a student brought a loaded gun into school (Armus and Natanson 2021). For them school resource officers are seen as a method of safety and trusted adults. Schools are receiving some backlash from individuals who were looking forward to the \$800,000 school resource officer budget that was supposed to be reallocated for mentoring and mental health programs (Armus and Natanson 2021).

Additionally, the school to prison pipeline disproportionately affects minorities. For example, in the 2015 to 2016 school year, 290,000 students were either arrested or referred to a law enforcement agency with 31% of the students identifying as black (American University, 2022). There has been a history of tension between minorities and police and has created some mistrust between officers and people of color and results in many minorities not feeling safe around them (Armus and Natanson 2021).

It is apparent that many people have strong opinions about the topic of school resource officers, but what about the students? Do they believe school resource officers are good? Do they make them feel safer? Students spend around six hours in school daily for 180 days (Craw 2021). That is around 1,080 hours where students must learn and interact with school resource officers. This study aims to ask students in Virginia how they feel about school resource officers, as they are the ones that must interact with them on a regular basis and feel safe in school to flourish academically. Virginia was chosen because it is one of the centers of debate regarding the use of SROs and due to its convenient location near Maryland. More specifically, students are asked about how safe they feel and their opinions of school resource officers. The insight into students' thoughts allow for serious policy implications regarding police in school.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Definition of a School Resource Officer

According to Coon and Travis (2012), a school resource officer is a sworn officer who works at school under the school administration, and they reflect the intersect of law enforcement and schools. A more specific definition is given by the National Center on Education Statistics (2015): an officer with sworn authority, utilizes community-oriented policing, and that the officer works with the school as well as local organizations in the community. The National Association of School Resource Officers, NASRO, defines a school resource officer as a “carefully selected, specifically trained, and properly equipped full time law enforcement officer with sworn law enforcement authority, trained in school-based law enforcement and crisis response, assigned by employing law agency to work in school using community oriented policing” (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2022).

Girouard (2001) explains that the definition is dependent on jurisdiction of the officer due to a lack of strict standards regarding the roles and responsibilities of a school resource officer. School resource officers have many roles and responsibilities that differ from a regular police officer. While specific roles vary by jurisdiction, it is generally agreed upon that SROs have the responsibility to mentor, educate, and act as law enforcement officer (Counts et al. 2018). Some of these include being a first responder, first line of defense, interacting with the students and other school community, and being a sworn officer (South Glens Falls Central Schools 2020).

The Start and Growth of SROs

Some say that the first ever school resource officer was hired and put into a school in Flint, Michigan in the 50s to combat an increase in gun violence (Counts, et al. 2018) School resource officers began in the 1950s but did not become prevalent until much later. In 1968 the

Omnibus Crime control and Safe Streets Act was put into place to help facilitate collaboration between law enforcement and schools and is the first legislative act supporting the use of police in schools (Counts, et al. 2018). The boom in employed school resource officers began in the 1990s after high prevalence of school shootings like the Columbine shooting in 1999. Schools began to put these school resource officers in place to protect the children and prevent these shootings from happening (Weiler and Cray 2011). In 1994 the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was created and funded the employment of school resource officers (Wolf 2014). Furthermore, in 1998, the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act added a new amendment providing the funds through the COPS in School program ran by the Department of Justice (Girouard 2001). The new federal legislation allowed more school resource officers and was put in place to “protect the children”. In recent years, there has been another boom of school resource officers, particularly in urban areas (James and McCallion 2013).

Over the years school resource officers have been hired at a faster rate. In 1975 only 1% of schools had police, but in the 2005 to 2006 school year 32% of schools had an officer (Jones 2020) (Sawchuck 2021). The presence of school resource officers has grown even more. In 2018 58% of schools had police, 45% being school resource officers and 13% were police, but did not consider themselves SROs (Jones 2020). These officers are more common in high schools than primary schools.

Challenges with School Resource Officers

School resource officers are more likely to interact with students of color more than white students. In one study researchers found school resource officers were at 32% of mostly white schools but were at 54.1% of mostly black schools (Jones 2020). The rise in school resource officers has caused concerns for certain populations, especially minorities.

The school to prison pipeline is a process that systematically sends children into the criminal justice system. It characterizes the process where certain students are chosen and labeled as problematic or criminal by peers, parents, school staff, police, and others. In return the student is more likely to be punished due to heightened attention on them (the label). These labeled individuals are punished in many ways like in school and out of school suspension, expulsion, arrests, referrals, etc. and lead to very negative consequences. School resource officers accelerate the pipeline specifically by arresting children or referring them to the criminal justice system. Schools that have resource offices had an arrest rate 3.5 time higher than schools without police, meaning they are sending more children into the criminal justice system (Jones 2020). Students are at risk for academic decline, difficulty finding work, family strains, humiliation, and further criminalization (Theriot 2009).

The negative consequences disproportionately affect Black and Latino more than white students (Theriot 2009). With the increase in school resource officers, came an increase in referrals and arrests to juvenile courts. These referrals and arrests are mainly affecting people of color and children with disabilities. Even though only 12% of the population is disabled, 28% of all referrals and arrests were of people with disabilities (Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights 2018). This was deemed a concern during the Obama administration who wanted schools to favor the needs of the student over disciplining them to stop targeting people of color and people with disabilities (Jones 2020).

School administration and police departments agree that training is important for school resource officers to be prepared to work in a school environment (James and Crew, 2009). Overall, there is a lack of training due to loose legislation and recommendations for training a school resource officer. In one review, they found that only 32 states had legislation mentioning school resource officers. Some of the legislation had recommendations for school resource

training while others specifically mentioned training. (Counts et al., 2018). In research done by Jones 2020, they found that some individuals did not believe that school resource officers were prepared and trained to work with students, a different population than what they are used to.

Contemporary Literature on School Resource Officers

Roles

Grant (1993) outlined two different types of roles for police in school. The first role is the officer friendly role where they support prosocial behaviors of students, educate students about drug and drug safety, encouraging safe driving, and support gang avoidance. The campus cop role on the other hand, primarily focuses on enforcing the law, seizing ant drugs found, and monitoring gang activity. The roles that the officer choses result in different frequencies of interaction, the independent variable in this study. For example, a cop with roles aligned with campus react to misbehavior, crime, or anything else they may be called for. These police officers are not seen as much as officers who adopt roles associated with officer friendly because they take a more proactive approach. Officer friendly officers are patrolling around, hosting educational events, etc. and in return offering students more opportunities to interact with them. According to Pogutas (2008) officers that are frequently present and interacting with students are liked more than officers who tend to just react to situations. Furthermore, officers being present decreases violence and makes students feel safer in general (Johnson1999) (Finn and McDevitt 2005). On the other hand, Jones (2020) also explains a reason why some individuals may not feel safe at school: hypervigilance. Hypervigilance, or a high frequency of interactions can lead certain students to feel targeted and unsafe by police presence (Jones, 2020).

Feelings of Safety

In many studies interactions with school resource officers was unrelated to feelings of safety (Theriot and Orme 2016). Bosworth (2011) conducted a survey to eleven schools where

nine of them had students with no overwhelming concerns regarding safety issues about school resource officers. Instead, their research suggests that feelings of safety of students were affected by the climate and staff at the school (Bosworth 2011). When students were asked about safety features, they primarily discussed physical features (Bosworth 2011). In another survey done by McDevitt and Panniello (2005) they found 87% of students felt safe but it was dependent on the location in the school. Many students who did not feel safe were black or victimized in their past (Theriot and Orme 2016). Jones explained that minority students deal with institutional and physical violence that causes an increase in stress, fear, anxiety, etc. (Jones 2020).

Opinions of School Resource Officers

In general, students tend to be favorable towards school resource officers but had lower support for them when compared to adults (Brown and Benedict 2005). The lower support can be explained when looking at specific questions in the survey done by Brown and Benedict 2005 . One in particular was regarding if school resource officers controlled drugs and gangs in schools. Students were seen to be less favorable of school resource officers when asked these questions (Brown and Benedict 2005).

More importantly, positive opinion of school resource officers has been studied and had many positive outcomes. Positive opinions are formed after good interactions between the SRO and the student (McDevitt and Panniello 2005). An example of a good interaction would be a friendly conversation or an officer who helped a child personally. Once a student had thus positive view, they are more likely to report crime and feel safer in school (McDevitt and Panniello 2005). In a study done by Jackson (2002) he did not find that school resource officer programs had no effect on student's perception of them.

Proposed Research

This study intends to measure perceptions of school resource officers and feelings of safety of students and will offer implications to better improve school resource officer programs. Despite the vague definition of school resource officers and overall lack of research about school resource officers, there are some agreed factors that do affect feelings of students and the perceptions of officers like positive opinion of a SRO and presence of an officer in school. This study is limited to high school students in Virginia, but will provide insight on what factors are important in keeping a good and healthy relationship between students and school resource officers. More specifically, this study focuses on how the frequency of interactions/ policing style affects students' perception of safety at school and opinions of school resource officers. This adds to past literature by adding current students' perceptions of SROs from a state that has been debating the use of SROs and has made numerous reforms within the past few years regarding them.

Chapter 3: Method

Research Question

Does the frequency of interactions between school resource officers and students affect feelings of safety and opinions of officers?

Sample

This study intends to focus on the perceptions from past high school students from Virginia from grades 9 through 12. Virginian high school students were chosen due to the controversy occurring in the state over whether to keep school resource officers or find an alternative. Another benefit to this is these students are attending high school in a time where school resource officers were more prevalent in schools than the early 2000s (Weiler and Cray 2011).

There are some limitations to this sample that must be addressed. Due to the sample being strictly high school students, populations are excluded like anyone who has graduated high school or dropped out. This study is also only focuses on the state of Virginia. These factors should be considered when thinking of the generalizability of this study.

Collection Method: Survey

School districts with school resource officers in Virginia are chosen like the school district in Alexandria City. The schools will be found through the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Service's School Safety Audit from 2018. In this audit they report that Virginia has 794 officers within 1,079 schools. The goal is to have at least two schools in each district that have school resource officers employed participate in the study. Schools will be contacted, the study will be explained, and questions will be answered. Once the school districts approve to be part of the study consent forms will be sent home to parents, as many of the students are underage and need parental consent. The next step is to work with the schools and decide when

and where they can survey students depending on the school's preference. An example of a good time to have a survey filled out would be during a study period. Members of the research team will visit the different schools to hand out hard copies of the survey for students to fill out. The team members are expected to give a synopsis of the study and specific instructions on how to complete the survey. After the survey is done the member will collect them, keep them secured, and bring them back to the research team.

Measures

The survey adopts questions from two past surveys capturing perceptions of school resource officers including "Understanding School Safety and the Use of School Resource Officers in Understudied Settings" by Curran and Fisher (2017) and "National Assessment of School Resource Officer Programs: Survey of Students in Three Large New SRO Programs" by McDevitt and Panniello (2005). The survey includes two dependent variables, feelings of safety and perception of school resource officers. Each variable has five to seven questions that measure the perceptions of past students and their experiences with school resource officers. The independent variable is the frequency of interactions between school resource officers and students and is captured by five questions. The rest of the questions are focused on the demographics of the sample including age, race, gender, etc.

Dependent Variables

Feelings of Safety: Feelings of safety is measured by asking students about how safe they felt in certain areas of the school, how fearful they were if being picked on or harmed by certain members of school, if school resource officers kept students from unsafe environments, and explicitly asking them if their school resource officer made the students feel safe. The first question lists areas within a high school and asks how safe students feel in these places (1= very safe, 2= somewhat safe, 3= somewhat unsafe, 4= very unsafe, 5= I don't know, 6= I never went

there) (McDevitt and Panniello, 2005). Next the survey asks how fearful students were of being picked on or harmed at school by certain members including students, intruders, parents, gangs, and this study added school resource officers to the list. Answers were coded (1= not at all, 2= a little, 3= somewhat, 4= very) (McDevitt and Panniello, 2005). The survey then focuses more on school resource officers and their efforts to keeping the students and school safe, asking students a group of questions: school resource officers keep weapons out of school, keep students from being bullied, keeps students from fighting, keeps away drugs and alcohol. Answers are 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree (Curran and Fisher, 2020). Lastly the survey finished this variable by this statement: having a school resource officer made me feel safe with answers 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree (Curran and Fisher, 2020).

Student's Opinions of School Resource Officers: Opinions of school resource officers is measured through questions describing what a school resource officer is, if the school resource officer has respect and treats everyone equally and if school resource officers make a more punitive or nurturing environment. This section starts with the perception of school resource officers and students have a wide range of answers to describe them including 1= thoughtful, 2= fair, 3= smart, 4= solve problems, 5= disciplinarian, 6= useless, 7= unapproachable, 8= unavailable, 9= hostile/mistrustful, 10= other which is fill in the blank. People taking the survey will be able to choose multiple answers for this question to get a better perception of school resource officers. The following statements are students can better solve their problems when a school resource officer is involved, students receive a more severe consequence when a school resource officer is involved, students have respect for school resource officers, school resource officers care about the students, and the school resource officer treats everyone equally. The

answer to these statements are 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree (Curran and Fisher, 2020).

Independent Variable

Frequency of School Resource Officer(s): Presence is measured with five questions, starting with a chart that lists things school resource officers may participate in during school that makes them present. These include security and patrol, maintaining discipline, coordinating with local police and emergency services, identifying problems in the school and proactively seeking solutions to these problems, mentoring students, and teaching law related education or training students like D.A.R.E. programs. Answers are coded as 1= All of the time, 2= most of the time, 3= sometimes, 4= never, 5= I don't know (Curran and Fisher, 2020). This question gets a sense about how involved school resource officers were in the students' schools. The next statement is: I often saw the school resource officer in public areas of our school with answers 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree (Curran and Fisher, 2020). The following questions are more specific including, have you ever had a conversation with a school resource officer and if so how many time (answers are 1= never, 2= sometimes, 3= most of the time, 4= all the time) and have you ever had experiences with school resource officer other than conversation like presentations, reporting crime, need help with a problem, etc. and if so how many times (answers are 1= never, 2= sometimes, 3= most of the time, 4= all the time) (Mcdevitt and Panniello, 2005).

Demographics

There are five demographic questions including age (fill in the blank), race (options are 1= Caucasian/White, 2= African American/Black, 3= Latino/Hispanic, 4= Asian, 5= Native American, 6= Pacific Islander, 7= Multiethnic, 8= other), gender (1= male, 2= female, 3= non-binary, 4= prefer not to say), whether their school is in an urban (1), suburban (2), or rural (3)

area and the state where the student attended high school (fill in the blank). These demographics were chosen because in many criminological studies they are used and capture important details about the sample focused in this study.

Analytic Strategy

After the data is collected a series of frequency distributions as well as spearman's rank-order correlations should be run. Since the variables are ordinaly represented in thus study, frequency distributions tables to present the percentage of students who see school resource officers in a more positive and more negative light, as well as the percentage of students who feel safe with school resource officers versus students who do not will be provided. These percentages will be further analyzed by looking at differences in perceptions and opinions by demographics. More specifically, the study will look to see if there is a difference in the perception of safety or opinions of an officer when looking at race and location of their school (suburban, urban, rural). The study will do a series of spearman's rank order correlations. There are two relationships that will be the focus: 1) frequency of interactions and perceptions of safety and 2) frequency of interactions and opinions of school resource officers. These relationships will be tested for significance.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This study was proposed to give a voice to current students in Virginia regarding school resource officers. There are factors that affect how safety in school and school resource officers are perceived. In the past, many studies have not focused on students and instead adults (Brown and Benedict 2005). Listening to these students is very important because they offer serious implications.

Implications

The first implication of this proposal is training of school resource officers. Currently there are no federal laws or policies regarding what SRO training should be. They differ by state and school system (Jones 2020). Training should include behavior management, communication, child development, and disability awareness because many do not usually work with students daily (Ryan et al. 2018). The training is important especially because school resource officers are more likely to refer or arrest students of color and students with disabilities (Jones 2020). This is a time where officers must educate themselves to better serve the children that they are supposed to protect. The survey offers some insight to what type of interactions and how many interactions are deemed as positive and will help construct what an ideal school resource officer consists of.

Another implication is alternatives to police such as defunding or abolition if students are found to feel unsafe by officers and/or do not see them in a positive light. Many of the schools in Virginia that are debating the issue of SROs have mentioned replacing them with mental health counselors or other individuals not attached to the police. Many adults in favor of defunding explain that students of color feel targeted by officers and creates a more hostile environment for them (Defusco 2021) (Armus and Natanson 2021). Furthermore, school resource officers to

accelerate the school to prison pipeline that negatively affects people of color more (Pigott et al. 2018). The survey will allow individuals to share opinions about these officers and how they perceive them whether it be good or negative.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study that must be addressed because they affect the generalizability. First off, this research is just a start to verifying public thoughts with actual data from current students. The survey collects ordinal level data to verify if students feel more or less safe and if they see an SRO in a more positive or negative light. Using current students may also cause complications due to some schools' disinterest to collaborate with people outside the school administration and the need for parental consent. This may lead to a smaller response rate. The proposed study is focused on a specific geographic region, Virginia, due to many debates in the news over the employment of school resource officers. Future data may not represent the feelings of safety and opinions of SROs in other states or the overall population of the United States. Lastly, the survey is short and was made that way to be work with the school and the time constraints of class.

As our school resource officer population increases more research must be done. There are a few common factors that affect feelings of safety and perceptions of school resource officers but must be validated with more research. This research should focus on students since they are the individuals who must spend much of their time together. Past studies have shown that most people favor police officers in general, but students get more critical when asked about specific roles like controlling drugs and gangs (Brown and Benedict 2005). Many students also tend to feel safe with school resource officers except students that are black or have been

victimized before (Finn and McDevitt 2005), but this research is outdated, being almost twenty years old.

Conclusion

The proposed study aims to listen to Virginian students and how school resource officers affect their feelings of safety and the perception of school resource officers. If this study shows a negative reaction, meaning many students do not feel safe and do not like SROs, then new solutions like police alternatives should be considered. On the other hand if the study has a positive reaction, meaning many students feel safe at school and like SROs, school resource officers can feel welcomed and continue to work. However, based on past research there is a mix of reactions towards school resource officers. In many surveys students admitted to feeling safe in schools with SROs as well as favoring them (Brown and Benedict 2005). In other research school resource officers are seen as disrupting safety and seen as bad because they send more children to the criminal justice system that disproportionately affects people of color (Pigott et al. 2018).

This proposed research is to verify feelings of safety and opinions of officers portrayed in Virginian news with actual data. To help resolve the issue of school resource officers more research must be done. School resource officers were originally put in place to “protect the children” but are they really when they send children into the system. It is important to conduct more recent research to fill in this gap and come up with viable solutions to create happy and healthier relations between students and school resource officers.

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Appendix

Assessment of School resource officers regarding feelings of safety and opinions by students

Instructions

There are both multiple choice and fill in the blank questions in this survey. Please read each sentence carefully and answer each question. Do not submit any personal information like your name, phone number, address, etc.

Demographic Questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What race/ethnicity do you identify with
 - a. Caucasian or White
 - b. African American or Black
 - c. Latino or Hispanic
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native American
 - f. Pacific Islander
 - g. multiethnic
 - h. Other
3. What gender do you identify with?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
4. Choose the best option that describes the location of your school.
 - a. Urban
 - b. Suburban
 - c. Rural
5. Name the state where you went to high school.

Interactions with School Resource Officers:

1. Check the box that most accurately represents what activities school resource officers participated in.

School Resource participated in the following

Activities	Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	All the time	I do not remember
Security and Patrol					

Maintain discipline					
Collaborating with local police					
Identifying problems and proactively seek solutions to problems					
Mentoring students					
Teaching law related education courses or training students (things like the D.A.R.E. program)					

2. I often saw my SRO in public areas of my school.
 - a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
3. Have you ever had a conversation with a school resource officer
 - a. Never b. Sometimes c. Most of the time d. All the time
4. Have you ever reported an incident to a school resource officer?
 - a. Never b. Sometimes c. Most of the time d. All the time
5. Have you ever reported a crime to a school resource officer?
 - a. Never b. Sometimes c. Most of the time d. All the time

Perceptions of Safety:

6. How safe did you feel in places at school?

Places	Very safe	Somewhat safe	Neutral	Somewhat unsafe	Very unsafe	I never went there
Entrances into school						

Bathrooms						
Hallways/ stairwells						
Library						
Cafeteria						
Gym						
Auditorium						
Other						

6. How fearful were you of being picked/harmed at school by a member of the following groups?

Groups	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very
Students				
Parents				
Gangs				
School resource officers				
Faculty				

7. School resource officers kept weapons out of my school.
a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
8. School resource officers kept children from being bullied.
a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
9. School resource officers kept students from fighting.
a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
10. School resource officers kept drugs and alcohol away from school.
a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
11. Having a school resource officer made me feel safe in school.
a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

Opinions of school resource officers:

12. Choose the answers that best describe a school resource officer.
- a. Thoughtful
 - b. Fair
 - c. Smart
 - d. Solves problems
 - e. Disciplinarian
 - f. Useless
 - g. Unapproachable
 - h. Unavailable
 - i. Hostile/mistrustful
 - j. Other (fill in the blank)
13. Students solved their problems better when a school resource officer was involved
- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
14. Students receive a more severe punishment when a school resource officer was involved
- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
15. School resource officers treat everybody equally.
- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree
16. School resource officers cared about the students.
- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Neutral d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree