Which “Broken Windows” Matter? School, Neighborhood, and Family Characteristics Associated With Youths’ Feelings of Unsafety

Tod Mijanovich and Beth C. Weitzman

ABSTRACT *Young people’s fears of victimization and feelings of unsafety constitute a serious and pervasive public health problem and appear to be associated with different factors than actual victimization. Our analysis of a population-based telephone survey of youths aged 10–18 years in five economically distressed cities and their suburbs reveals that a substantial minority of youths feel unsafe on any given day, and that an even greater number feel unsafe in school. While some traditional predictors of victimization (such as low socioeconomic status) were associated with feeling unsafe, perceived school disorder was the major factor associated with such feelings. Disorderliness may thus be the school’s version of “broken windows,” which serve to signal to students a lack of consistent adult concern and oversight that can leave them feeling unsafe. We suggest that fixing the broken windows of school disorderliness may have a significant, positive impact on adolescents’ feelings of safety.*

KEYWORDS *School climate, School disorder, Violence, Youth safety.*

INTRODUCTION

Victimization by violence and street crime has long been recognized as a legitimate and serious public health issue.¹ The issue is of special concern in the lives of adolescents, since younger people are more likely to witness or be the victims of violence² and because adolescents are especially vulnerable to the deleterious effects of violence experienced either first or second hand.³ About one third of junior high and high school students report that they have been threatened physically,⁴ and an even larger proportion of adolescents has witnessed violence.⁵ The problem is especially prevalent among youths who live in large cities: Several studies^{6,7} have shown that 80% or more of inner-city adolescents have seen someone assaulted, and about one third have witnessed a shooting or stabbing. Research continues apace on the prevalence,^{8–11} causes,^{12–17} and consequences^{18,19} of violent victimization among adolescents.

There is, however, a related public health problem for adolescents that is even more widespread than the problem of violence victimization: the *fear* of that victimization, that is, the feelings of unsafety engendered by physical threat. The *likelihood* of victimization is but one determinant of such fear, and it is probably not

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This study was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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the most important. Initially, social scientists assumed that fear and actual victimization would be closely linked.²⁰ Fear, however, is much more widespread than actual victimization, and the demographic groups most likely to report fear are those least likely to be victimized. For example, although women are less likely to be victimized by physical assault, they report greater feelings of unsafety than men.^{21,22}

This is not to suggest that fear of victimization is necessarily irrational. It may reflect the greater physical vulnerability of some groups. More important for the purposes of this study, fear is also associated with broader conditions of environmental disorder.²¹⁻²³ This linkage between environmental disorder and feelings of unsafety is a two-way street: Disorder can signal that no one cares about a particular environment, thus making people fearful and causing them to withdraw, thereby accelerating the disorder and deterioration.

At the neighborhood level, this self-reinforcing and escalating process has been termed the phenomenon of *broken windows*.²⁴ Empirical work has indicated that signs of disorder, such as graffiti, are associated with a decreased sense of safety and may ultimately result in increased crime. This work has profoundly influenced police practice over the last decade.²⁴

While not previously explored at the school building level, signs of school disorder (graffiti, smoking, class cutting, broken lockers) might also result in a feeling that the environment is unsafe. While such feelings may have less immediate consequences for well-being than actual threats to safety, feelings of unsafety are more pervasive, can do significant damage to young people's sense of competence and locus of control, and can result in lower academic achievement, depressive symptoms, somatization, and other forms of psychological distress.³ From a public health perspective, then, it is important to understand as much as possible about both the risk and protective factors associated with adolescents' feelings of unsafety.

In this article, we explore feelings of unsafety among youths and consider the degree to which perceived disorder in the school environment may contribute to these feelings. We consider the extent to which feelings of unsafety vary between urban and suburban youths and identify family, neighborhood, and school characteristics associated with feeling unsafe.

METHODS

Data

We used data from the Survey of Adults and Youth (SAY), which was fielded as part of the evaluation of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Urban Health Initiative (UHI). UHI is a multiyear effort that began with planning in 1996, was implemented in 1998, and will end in 2005; it aims to improve the health and safety of children and youths in economically distressed cities by changing public policies and systems. Toward that end, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded planning, collaborative, and other nonprogrammatic activities in five of the most economically distressed cities in the United States: Baltimore, Maryland; Detroit, Michigan; Oakland, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Richmond, Virginia.

SAY is a random digit dialed telephone survey fielded every 3 years, with oversamples in the five UHI cities and their surrounding suburbs. (Of note, the suburbs of these economically distressed cities are among the nation's more affluent.) The SAY

protocol was constructed from pretested questions used in surveys such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and the National Health Interview Survey.

SAY's sampling strategy generated approximately 1,500 adult interviews in each UHI city; two thirds of the sample were parents of at least one child under age 19 years in the household. Up to eight callbacks were made to each household. SAY was offered in English, Spanish, and Chinese (Oakland only). Among contacted households, 89% of adults agreed to participate. Among participating parents of youths aged 10–18 years, 74% agreed to have their child interviewed; virtually all of these children participated.*

This analysis used data from the SAY 1998–1999 baseline fielding. Across the five UHI cities, 7,716 adults and 2,768 youths were interviewed. Parents were asked questions regarding parent-child relationships and activities, school performance, and other child-related issues. Young people aged 10–18 years were also interviewed in these households regarding school, after-school, and family activities and their perceptions of their neighborhoods and schools. The analysis presented here is restricted to households with a youth respondent (aged 10–18 years) and located in one of the five UHI cities or their suburbs.†

Analysis

We performed chi-square tests and bivariate and multivariate logistic regressions of two safety-related outcomes on a variety of youth, family, neighborhood, and school characteristics. For our school-related outcomes, we also present separate multivariate models for urban and suburban samples.

Variables

Outcome 1: Unsafe Yesterday Youths were asked about the extent they agreed with the sentence “Yesterday, I felt safe everywhere I was.” Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement were coded 1. Those who agreed, strongly agreed, or had no opinion were coded 0.

Outcome 2: Unsafe at School Youths were asked about the extent of their agreement with the sentence “I feel safe at my school.” Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement were coded 1. Those who agreed, strongly agreed, or had no opinion were coded 0.

Youth Characteristics Dummy variables were included for respondents aged 15–16 and 17–18 years to test whether the transition to high school and later teen years was associated with feelings of safety. Gender and race dummy variables were

*Households were weighted to reflect the number of households in the city that the sample household represented. In addition, data were weighted for the number of phone lines in the household and, within the youth sample, for the number of children aged 10–18 years in the household. The weighted sample was representative of the census-reported residential population in terms of race and income.

†For full-sample regressions, sample weights were adjusted so that the sum of urban weights equaled the sum of suburban weights. Extremely large weights (comprising about 1% of the total sample) were trimmed and redistributed within geographic area cells using the weight-trimming procedure developed for the National Assessment of Educational Progress survey data.²⁵ Neither weighting nor weight trimming substantially affected the findings reported in any of our models.

also included since research has suggested significant differences in risk behaviors and exposure to violence across these dimensions.^{26,27}

Family Characteristics We included two dummy variables for parent respondent's education as a measure of the family's socioeconomic status (SES). One variable indicated lack of a high school diploma; the other indicated attainment of a 4-year college diploma. Dummy variables were also included for currently married or living with a partner and suburban residence. Another dummy variable indicated whether the youth reported that his or her parents would be "not upset" if "they found out that you were getting into fights."

Neighborhood Characteristics An index of neighborhood conditions was constructed from parent reports of the following neighborhood conditions: crime and violence, abandoned or run-down buildings, not enough police protection, not enough public transportation, unsupervised children, and lots of people who cannot find jobs. Households were given 1 point for each condition reported to be somewhat of a problem, and 2 points for each condition reported to be a big problem. Neighborhood conditions were considered good for households with total scores of 0 or 1, average for those with scores of 2–5, and distressed for those with scores of 6 or above. Dummy variables indicated either good or distressed neighborhood conditions.

School Characteristics Dummy variables indicated whether the youth was attending a private school, had attended school the day before the interview, and agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Kids can get away with almost anything at my school."

RESULTS

Demographics

There were dramatic differences between the urban and suburban residents of these five distressed metropolitan areas (Table 1). Parents living in the city had lower levels of education than suburban residents, were more likely to be unmarried, were predominantly African American, and were more likely to live in a distressed neighborhood. Nevertheless, urban and suburban respondents used private schools with similar frequency (19% urban, 14% suburban), and youths in cities and suburbs reported virtually the same level of perceived school disorder as measured by their report that their classmates could get away with anything. The gender and age of youth respondents were uniformly distributed across cities and suburbs. About 40% of youths had not attended school the day before the interview; typically, these were youths who were interviewed on Sunday or Monday.

Feelings of Safety the Day Before the Interview

Urban and suburban youths differed significantly in their feelings of safety on the day before the interview (Table 2, Panel 1). Urban youths were almost twice as likely to have felt unsafe as suburban respondents (10% vs. 6%). Overall, girls were slightly more likely than boys to have felt unsafe the day before the interview (9% vs. 7%). This gender difference was driven mostly by suburban responses: Girls living in the suburbs were almost twice as likely as suburban boys to have felt unsafe (7% vs. 4%), whereas urban girls and boys were almost equally likely to have reported feeling unsafe (11% vs. 10%).

TABLE 1. Youth sample characteristics

	Full Sample	Urban	Suburban
N	3,290	2,197	1,093
Age, %			
10–12 years	32	34	29
13–14 years	26	27	26
15–16 years	23	23	25
17–18 years	18	16	21
Gender, %			
Female	51	51	49
Male	49	49	51
Race, %			
White	39	22	74
African American	51	68	18
Other	10	11	8
Education of parent respondent, %			
No high school diploma	11	15	4
High school diploma but no 4-year college diploma	59	62	53
4-year college diploma	30	23	42
Parent respondent's marital status, %			
Married or living with partner	59	50	77
Not married or living with partner	41	50	23
Parents' tolerance of fighting (youth report), %			
Do not tolerate fighting	53	49	59
Tolerate fighting	47	51	41
Neighborhood conditions (parent report), %			
Distressed	24	33	6
Average	36	38	33
Good	40	29	61
School type, %			
Public	83	81	86
Private	17	19	14
School disorder (youth report), %			
Schoolmates get away with anything	30	30	30
Schoolmates do not get away with anything	70	70	70
Attended school yesterday, %			
Attended	61	61	60
Did not attend	39	39	40

Sum of percentages may vary from 100% due to rounding errors.

Respondents' feelings of safety were directly related to their family's socioeconomic status: 11% of youth respondents in households in which the parent respondent did not complete high school felt unsafe the day before the interview vs. 6% of those in households in which the parent graduated from college. This relationship was more pronounced in the suburbs, where 15% of youths in low SES households reported feeling unsafe the day before the interview vs. only 4% of youths in

high SES households. In the city, differences between SES categories in feelings of safety were statistically insignificant.

School characteristics mattered significantly to a young person's feeling of safety on the day before the interview. In both urban and suburban settings, youths who attended highly disordered schools, as indicated by their agreement with the statement that their schoolmates can get away with anything, were significantly more likely to feel unsafe (11%) than those who attended less-disordered schools (7%). Similarly, urban youths in public school felt significantly less safe the day before the interview than those in private schools (11% vs. 7%); the public/private school difference was not statistically significant in the suburbs. Attending school yesterday was significantly associated with feelings of unsafety in these economically distressed cities (12% vs. 8%), but not in their suburbs. These cross-tabular relationships are also presented as odds ratios from bivariate logistic regressions (Table 2, Panel 2).

Many of these bivariate relationships were attenuated when all variables were included in the model (Table 2, Panel 3). Controlling for other influences on feelings of safety the day before the interview, boys had 28% lower odds of feeling unsafe than girls, and high family SES remained protective of children's feelings of safety relative to medium socioeconomic status. There was no statistically significant difference between the effects of low and medium SES on safety, and the high SES effect was reduced by the inclusion of other variables in the model.

Of greater significance than family SES to children's feelings of safety was residential location. Controlling for other factors, suburban youths had 36% lower odds of feeling unsafe yesterday than urban youths. Of about equal influence on feelings of safety was parents' tolerance of fighting. Children whose parents tolerated fighting had 39% higher odds of feeling unsafe the day before the interview. Single parenthood was not significantly associated with feelings of safety the day before the interview.

When considered apart from other factors, distressed neighborhood conditions were negatively associated with feelings of safety on the day before the interview, although neighborhood conditions were not significantly associated with feelings of safety in the multivariate model. Similarly, children in distressed neighborhoods had 57% higher odds of feeling unsafe the day before the interview than children in average neighborhoods, but this association did not remain statistically significant in the multivariate analysis.

Two school-related variables were significantly associated with feeling unsafe the day before the interview. Youths who reported their schoolmates get away with anything had 55% higher odds of feeling unsafe than children who disagreed with the statement, controlling for other factors. Children who attended school the day before the interview had 46% higher odds of feeling unsafe on that day than children who did not attend school.

Feelings of Safety in School

Youths' feelings of safety in school were more strongly associated with other variables than were feelings of safety on the day before the interview (Table 3). This may be a function of instrumentation differences between these two measures. Feelings of safety on the day before the interview was a point-in-time measure and therefore subject to random occurrences in the lives of youth respondents. Feelings of safety at school, on the other hand, was a measure of experience over a period of time and would less likely be affected by random events.

TABLE 2. Youth respondents who felt unsafe the day before the interview

	Panel 1 Percentage who felt unsafe			Panel 2 Bivariate regressions			Panel 3 Multivariate regression		
	Full sample	Urban	Suburban	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
Age, years		*							
10–12	8	8	7	—	—	—	—	—	—
13–14	8	11	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
15–16	9	13	5	1.182	0.897	1.557	1.077	0.794	1.449
17–18	7	9	5	0.801	0.569	1.127	0.791	0.535	1.142
Gender			*						
Female	9	11	7	—	—	—	—	—	—
Male	7	10	4	0.760*	0.594	0.972	0.721†	0.556	0.934
Race									
White	6	11	5	0.660†	0.515	0.847	0.920	0.663	1.274
African American	11	10	10	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other	7	10	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Residential location									
Urban	10	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Suburban	6	—	—	0.533‡	0.413	0.687	0.641†	0.456	0.896
Education of parent respondent			†						
No high school diploma	11	10	15	1.527*	1.058	2.152	1.089	0.727	1.595
High school diploma but no 4-year college diploma	9	11	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
4-year college diploma	6	8	4	0.585‡	0.429	0.785	0.722*	0.515	0.998
Parents' marital status									
Married or living with partner	8	11	6	0.875	0.680	1.125	1.143	0.864	1.517
Not married or living with partner	9	10	6	—	—	—	—	—	—

Parents' tolerance of fighting (youth report)	†								
Do not tolerate fighting	7	9	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tolerate fighting	10	11	8	1.485†	1.160	1.900	1.390*	1.071	1.808
Neighborhood conditions (parent report)	‡								
Distressed	11	12	4	1.574‡	1.216	2.028	1.137	0.817	1.583
Average	9	9	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Good	6	9	6	0.768	0.572	1.017	0.934	0.657	1.317
School type		*							
Public	8	11	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Private	7	7	5	0.769	0.543	1.108	0.897	0.598	1.313
School disorder (youth report)	‡	†	*						
Schoolmates get away with anything	11	13	8	1.506†	1.168	1.941	1.553†	1.186	2.027
Schoolmates do not get away with anything	7	9	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
Attended school yesterday	†	‡							
Attended	9	12	6	1.403*	1.083	1.819	1.464†	1.118	1.932
Did not attend	6	8	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
N	3,290	2,197	1,093	3,290			3,290		

Sum of percentages may vary from 100% due to rounding errors.

Omitted categories are: Youth age 10–14, female youth, nonwhite youth, parent has high school but no 4-year college diploma, parent is neither married nor living with a partner, youth reports that parent(s) would be “not upset” if “they found out that you were getting into fights,” neighborhood condition index had a value of 2–5, youth respondent attends public school, youth disagreed with the statement that his/her “schoolmates get away with anything.” Statistical significance levels are by Pearson chi-square (Panel 1) and Wald chi-square (Panels 2 and 3) tests. CI, confidence interval.

* $P < .05$.

† $P < .01$.

‡ $P < .001$.

TABLE 3. Youth respondents who feel unsafe in school

	Panel 1 Percentage who feel unsafe			Panel 2 Bivariate regressions			Panel 3 Multivariate regression		
	Full sample	Urban	Suburban	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
Age, years	*	*	*						
10–12	10	14	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
13–14	15	17	12	—	—	—	—	—	—
15–16	20	24	15	1.716*	1.398	2.107	1.780*	1.401	2.259
17–18	15	20	11	0.992	0.773	1.273	1.177	0.881	1.562
Gender									
Female	14	19	9	—	—	—	—	—	—
Male	15	18	11	1.048	0.866	1.267	1.043	0.846	1.285
Race	*	*							
White	10	12	10	0.514*	0.422	0.625	0.874	0.670	1.141
African American	18	20	12	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other	18	24	11	—	—	—	—	—	—
Residential location	*								
Urban	18	—	—	—	—	—			
Suburban	11	—	—	0.515*	0.423	0.627	0.751†	0.571	0.986
Education of parent respondent	*	*	*						
No high school diploma	25	26	23	2.252*	1.727	2.913	1.384†	1.023	1.858
High school diploma but no 4-year college diploma	16	18	13	—	—	—	—	—	—
4-year college diploma	8	12	6	0.411*	0.318	0.526	0.558*	0.418	0.736
Parents' marital status	*	‡							
Married or living with partner	12	16	9	0.585*	0.483	0.709	0.834	0.668	1.042
Not married or living with partner	19	21	14	—	—	—	—	—	—

Parents' tolerance of fighting (youth report)	*	*							
Do not tolerate fighting	11	14	9	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tolerate fighting	18	22	12	1.670*	1.377	2.025	1.506*	1.219	1.861
Neighborhood conditions (parent report)	*	*	*						
Distressed	21	22	9	1.789*	1.466	2.180	0.952	0.733	1.234
Average	16	16	15	—	—	—	—	—	—
Good	10	13	5	0.396*	0.303	0.510	0.497*	0.365	0.669
School type	*	*	‡						
Public	16	21	11	—	—	—	—	—	—
Private	4	5	3	0.219*	0.142	0.338	0.255*	0.154	0.398
School disorder (youth report)	*	*	*						
Schoolmates get away with anything	23	29	16	2.451*	2.017	2.978	2.193*	1.775	2.709
Schoolmates do not get away with anything	11	13	8	—	—	—	—	—	—
N	3,290	2,197	1,093	3,290			3,290		

Sum of percentages may vary from 100% due to rounding errors.

Omitted categories are youth age 10–14, female youth, non-white youth, parent has high school but no 4-year college diploma, parent is neither married nor living with a partner, youth reports that parent(s) would be “not upset” if “they found out that you were getting into fights,” neighborhood condition index had a value of 2–5, youth respondent attends public school, youth disagreed with the statement that his/her “schoolmates get away with anything.” Statistical significance levels are by Pearson chi-square (panel 1) and Wald chi-square (panels 2 and 3) tests. CI, confidence interval.

* $P < .001$.

† $P < .05$.

‡ $P < .01$.

Except for gender, which was not associated with school safety, all other tested variables had statistically significant bivariate associations with feelings of safety at school in the full sample, and many retained strong associations in the urban and suburban subsamples (Table 3, Panels 1 and 2). Urban students were significantly more likely to feel unsafe at school than their suburban counterparts (18% vs. 11%), as were the children of single versus married parents (19% vs. 12%), youths whose parents tolerated fighting versus those whose parents did not (18% vs. 11%), students in public versus private schools (16% vs. 4%), and students whose schoolmates get away with anything versus students whose schoolmates did not (23% vs. 11%). Parents' SES and neighborhood conditions were also significantly associated with feelings of safety at school, in expected directions, in both cities and suburbs.

When other factors were controlled, race and parents' marital status ceased to be associated with feelings of safety at school, although child's age remained significantly associated (Table 3, Panel 3). In the multivariate model, those 15–16 years old had 78% higher odds of feeling unsafe at school than those 10–14 years old, although 17–18-year-olds did not have significantly higher odds of feeling unsafe than 10–14-year-olds. Family SES was directly related to feelings of safety at school, with youths at each level of SES feeling safer than those in lower SES families. Suburban youths had 25% lower odds of feeling unsafe at school than urban students. Youths whose parents tolerated fighting had two thirds higher odds of feeling unsafe at school than those whose parents did not.

School characteristics mattered to feelings of safety in school, while neighborhood conditions mattered less so. Youths who attended private school had 74% lower odds of feeling unsafe at school than public school students, controlling for other factors. Youths in highly disordered school environments had 120% higher odds of feeling unsafe than those in more orderly school environments. Young people who lived in the most problem-free neighborhoods had 50% lower odds of feeling unsafe at school than those in average neighborhoods, although youths in average neighborhoods were not statistically distinguishable in their feelings of safety at school from those in more distressed neighborhoods.

To test whether multivariate results were driven by urban or suburban residents or both, we estimated multivariate models by residential location (Table 4). Although not definitive, because the threshold of statistical significance is in part a function of sample size, our location-specific results give some indication of the geographic specificity of the observed associations.

Many of the observed associations were independent of residential location. The effects of child age, family SES, and school characteristics (private vs. public, school disorder) were consistent across geographic location. Living in a good neighborhood appears to have been more protective in the suburbs than in the city, and the deleterious effect of parents' tolerance of fighting was statistically significant in the cities, but not in the suburbs. (The urban/suburban difference in the effect of a good neighborhood is probably robust with respect to sample size since there were roughly equal cell sizes in both urban and suburban settings. The urban/suburban difference in the effect of parents' tolerance of fighting is less likely to be robust, given the unequal cell sizes; Table 1).

The Prevalence of Perceived School Disorder

The strongest risk factor for adolescents' feelings of unsafety at school, in both bivariate and multivariate models, was students' perception that schoolmates could

TABLE 4. Youth respondents who feel unsafe in school by residential location

	Urban			Suburban		
	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
Age 15–16 years	1.627*	1.244	2.121	2.011†	1.242	3.250
Age 17–18 years	1.262	0.902	1.747	1.153	0.657	1.974
Male youth	0.955	0.756	1.206	1.160	0.761	1.774
White youth	0.841	0.601	1.164	0.845	0.525	1.385
Parent has no high school diploma	1.274	0.941	1.715	2.075	0.964	4.237
Parent has 4-year college diploma	0.671‡	0.469	0.944	0.467†	0.279	0.757
Parent is married or living with partner	0.896	0.707	1.136	0.727	0.453	1.187
Parent tolerates fighting (youth report)	1.701*	1.342	2.161	1.190	0.779	1.814
Parent report distressed neighborhood conditions	1.213	0.926	1.593	0.538	0.242	1.088
Parent reports good neighborhood conditions	0.749	0.500	1.107	0.350*	0.207	0.573
Youth attends private school	0.255*	0.151	0.408	0.293‡	0.085	0.742
Youth reports schoolmates get away with anything	2.241*	1.770	2.837	2.146*	1.408	3.269
N						

Omitted categories are youth age 10–14, female youth, non-white youth, parent has high school but no 4-year college diploma, parent is neither married nor living with a partner, youth reports that parent(s) would be “not upset” if “they found out that you were getting into fights,” neighborhood condition index had a value of 2–5, youth respondent attends public school, youth disagreed with the statement that his/her “schoolmates get away with anything.” Statistical significance levels are by Wald chi-square tests. CI, confidence interval.

* $P < .001$.

† $P < .01$.

‡ $P < .05$.

get away with anything. The prevalence of this measure of school disorder was consistent across different types of families, neighborhoods, residential locations, and schools (Table 5). About 31% of both urban and suburban youths reported that their schoolmates get away with anything. Similarly, the proportion of students reporting school disorder was uniform across different neighborhood conditions, races, and levels of family SES. School disorder increased with increasing student age and was almost twice as prevalent in public as in private schools (33% vs. 18%). Students whose parents tolerate fighting were about 7 percentage points more likely to report that their schoolmates get away with anything than students whose parents did not (34% vs. 27%). This could reflect different levels of parental tolerance of more chaotic schools or the post hoc adaptation of some parents to more disordered schools.

DISCUSSION

School activities dominate the lives of adolescents, so it is not surprising to find that what goes on at school is of primary importance to adolescents' feelings of safety. Our findings also suggest that factors associated with adolescents' feelings of safety differ somewhat from those associated with adolescents' exposure to violence. Violence exposure has been more strongly linked to psychosocial, demographic, and neighborhood factors than to school-level variables.²⁸ We found, however, that what goes on at school matters more to a young person's feelings of

TABLE 5. Percent of youth respondents who reported that schoolmates "get away with anything"

	Full sample	Urban	Suburban
Age, years	*	*	*
10–12	20	23	18
13–14	30	29	31
15–16	37	36	37
17–18	39	38	41
Gender	†		
Female	29	29	29
Male	32	31	32
Race		†	
White	29	25	30
African American	31	31	32
Other	32	30	32
Residential location			
Urban	31	—	—
Suburban	31	—	—
Education of parent respondent	†		
No high school diploma	36	34	42
High school diploma but no 4-year college diploma	30	30	30
4-year college diploma	29	27	30
Parents' marital status		†	
Married or living with partner	30	28	31
Not married or living with partner	32	32	31
Parents' tolerance of fighting (youth report)	*	*	†
Do not tolerate fighting	27	26	28
Tolerate fighting	34	33	35
Neighborhood conditions (parent report)			
Distressed	31	32	29
Average	32	27	31
Good	29	29	31
School type	*	*	‡
Public	33	33	32
Private	18	18	19
N	3,290	2,197	1,093

Sum of percentages may vary from 100% due to rounding errors.

Statistical significance levels are by Pearson chi-square tests.

* $P < .001$.

† $P < .05$.

‡ $P < .01$.

safety than do neighborhood and family characteristics. Feelings of safety the day before the interview were significantly associated with whether the respondent had attended school on that day. While at school, the major determinants of feelings of safety were characteristics of that school, especially a student-reported indicator of school disorder, but also the public/private status of the school.

One limitation of the study is that we do not have more direct measures of physical or social disorder in the school. We relied on self-reported perceptions of an uncontrolled school environment as a proxy for more objective measures of disorder. This raises the possibility of a spurious correlation between this measure and our major outcome measure, the respondent's reported feelings of safety.

It may be, for example, that certain young people are predisposed both to perceiving their schools as disordered and to experiencing general feelings of unsafety. If this were true, however, we would expect to see that young people felt unsafe wherever they were on the day before the interview rather than feeling so much more unsafe at school. We would also expect feeling unsafe to be more strongly associated with demographic characteristics and less strongly associated with school characteristics. Finally, we would expect to see that the perception of school disorder was unevenly distributed and associated less with school and more with demographic characteristics (such as gender). None of these was the case.

In the general model (of feelings of safety the day before the interview), there was a significant association between school attendance on the prior school day and feelings of unsafety. In the multivariate school safety model, most demographic variables were less strongly associated with feelings of safety than were school characteristics. The public/private status of the school was more strongly associated with the perception of school disorder than were demographic characteristics in a bivariate context (Table 5). Although this pattern of findings is not definitive, it constitutes strong *prima facie* evidence that our outcome and school disorder variables were measuring different dimensions.

Our findings extend recent work on the effects of "school climate." School climate measures such as student perception of the fairness of rules, teachers' respect for students, and the like are more predictive of serious offenses than minor misconduct.²⁹ Yet, a vicious cycle of school disorder and misconduct produces a culture of "low-level violence"³⁰ that represents a continuous threat to adolescents' sense of safety. In this sense, disorderliness is the secondary school's version of broken windows,²⁴ which serves to signal to students a lack of consistent adult concern and oversight that can leave them feeling unsafe.

Our findings also show that adolescents in families with sufficient material resources are protected to some extent from feelings of unsafety. Youths who live in suburbs, attend private school, or reside in better suburban neighborhoods are least at risk of feeling unsafe, especially at school. But, although privileged families can lessen the risk of their children's feeling unsafe either by moving to well-off suburbs or by using private schools, few families can fully escape the major risk factor for children's feeling unsafe at school: a disorderly school environment.

Overall, 8% of our youth respondents reported feeling unsafe on the day prior to the interview, and 15% reported feeling unsafe at school. Are these percentages a lot or a little? We believe these numbers represent a significant public health problem. As noted, adolescent feelings of unsafety have been linked to significant depressive and other psychiatric symptoms, poor academic performance, and other deleterious behavioral sequelae. It is plausible, then, that feelings of unsafety could be an important contributing factor to adolescent adjustment problems, high dropout rates, delinquency, and other problems that afflict preadult years. Some subpopulations are especially at risk of feeling unsafe, such as youths in urban settings, distressed neighborhoods, public schools in the city, and disordered schools anywhere.

This sounds like bad news, but it is not. As hard as it is to control school environments, it may be easier to promote a healthy school climate that serves to

protect children's feelings of safety during the school day than it is to address the multiple sources of objective threats to children's safety both in and out of school. Fixing the school climate will become even more important if the current trend of increased reliance on school-based after-school activities gains momentum. If children feel unsafe at school, they may be reticent to spend even more time there. While policymakers and program staff may argue that after-school programs offer a safe haven from the streets and unsupervised homes, our data suggest that many youths feel otherwise.

We do not advocate punitive approaches to the reform of school discipline. In fact, evidence suggests it is more effective to promote teacher-student communication and trust and to enforce rules fairly and consistently than it is to institute more punitive measures.³¹ It should be noted that the most powerful predictor of adolescent well-being discovered to date is having a feeling of connectedness to one's school, and students who perceive themselves to be fairly treated and who are invested in their school life are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.³² We suggest that fixing the broken windows of school disorderliness may also have a significant positive impact on adolescent's feelings of safety.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The survey was conducted by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc., New York.

We wish to thank two anonymous reviewers and Carolyn Berry, Adria Gallup-Black, and Diana Silver of the Center for Health and Public Service Research, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

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