

## EXAMINING THE NEXUS OF CARRYING A HANDGUN TO SCHOOL: VICTIMIZATION/ NOT FEELING SAFE OR DELINQUENT LIFESTYLE

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*This paper uses student data from the 2018 Caring Communities Youth Survey (CCYS) to examine why students carry handguns to school. Eight independent variables are examined to determine their relationship and effect on the dependent variable. These variables fit into one of two categories: victimization/feeling safe or delinquent lifestyle. Independent variables examined were assaulting others; being bullied at school; carried a handgun in the community; got arrested; feeling safe at school; feeling safe in their community; feeling safe in their home; and not going to school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to school. Results indicate that students who carry guns to school do so as part of a delinquent lifestyle. Students do not carry guns to school because have been victims or because they do not feel safe.*

Since the 1990s acts of mass school violence with guns have attracted an extraordinarily high level of media and research focus. This has initiated widespread debates about the best practices for detecting these youth before tragic events unfold. Some researchers have identified and studied adolescent perpetrators and adolescent victims as separate groups. Other research has indicated that these groups may actually be the same (Brockenbrough, Cornell & Loper, 2002; Esselmont, 2014). Given the perception that weapons provide something of a safety net, feeling unsafe at school is likely to increase weapon carrying at school (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008). As

a result, adolescent in school weapon carrying has revealed inconsistent findings (May, 1999, 2001). These paper focuses on two explanations for adolescent weapon carrying at school: the most accepted hypothesis, victimization and/or fear and an alternative hypothesis delinquent lifestyle (Esselmont, 2014; Nodeland, Saber, & DeBoer, 2019; Rapp-Paglicci & Wodarski, 2000; Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014; Vossekuil et al., 2002; Wilcox, May, & Roberts, 2006).

### **Review of Literature**

The role of being a victim of bullying and/or having high levels of fear has been central to these arguments. A student has been bullied when she or he is exposed to negative actions on the part of one or more other students (Olweus, 1995, 1996; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001; Wilcox, May, & Roberts, 2006). These actions usually occur over a long period of time and can include words, gestures, social exclusion, threats, and physical contact. An additional criterion of bullying is an imbalance in power or strength; the victim has difficulty defending her or his self. School violence has gained the attention of both the media and academics primarily because the perpetrators of this violence have been identified as victims. Researchers have verified that 71% of school shooters had been victims of bullying. Bullying victimization is a common outcome in school or in relationships that originate in school and carry into neighborhoods and/or other areas outside of school (Bakken & Gunter, 2012). There is a large body of literature that suggests that youth who are victimized by bullies are more likely to carry weapons outside school and to school; depending if the threat is seen beyond the school yard (Anderson et al., 2001; Brockenbrough, Cornell, & Loper, 2002; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Esselmont, 2014; Rapp-Paglicci & Wodarski, 2000;). Research has connected victimization to carrying a weapon (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; Esselmont, 2014; Nansel et al., 2001, 2003), but there is a cache of research ideas on why these variables are related and what factor(s) mold this connection (Dijkstra et al., 2011; Esselmont, 2014; Hendrix, 2016). Scholars have generally focused on four connecting factors: aggression, peer influence, a deviant lifestyle, and for protection against threats (Arria, Borges, & Anthony, 1997; Brennan & Moore, 2009; Dijkstra

et al., 2011; Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993). While researchers have implied students' perceptions of safety at school are a vital link and perhaps alter the outcomes of victimization, only a few scholars have directly focused on this link. Research examines the idea that being a victim of bullying is related to fear and loss of status for failing to stand up to bullies. Anger is certainly the most common response to victimization. Victims wish to get back at the perpetrator; retaliation (Astor et al., 2002; Bender & Lösel, 2011; Bradshaw Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Espelage & Swearer 2003; Espelage & Holt, 2007; Esselmont, 2014). The relationship between bullying and violence may be the perception of safety. Feeling safe eliminates the need for violence; which also makes a weapon unnecessary. Victimization increases the likelihood of a student carrying a weapon (Esselmont, 2014; Rapp-Paglicci & Wodarski, 2000; Schreck & Muler, 2003; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewar, 2006). A negative view of school safety has the same effects as victimization. Previous research has generated the idea (Espelage & Holt, 2007; Esselmont, 2014) that those who bully and are victims of bullying are more likely to carry a gun; although not necessarily in a school setting. Explaining the complicated relationship between bullying victimization, perceptions of not being safe at school, and the reaction to feeling unsafe-fear are critical pieces of solving the cause and effect of the bullying problem; including carrying a gun to school (Astor et al., 2002; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Esselmont, 2014; Forsyth, Biggar, & Chen, 2020; and Bradshaw et.al, 2009; Glew et al., 2008; Wilson, 2004).

Another suggested relationship in this equation is that carrying a gun to school is just part of a delinquent lifestyle including getting arrested, assaulting others and carrying a gun in the community (Dijkstra et al, 2011; May, 2001; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001; Wilcox, May, & Roberts, 2006). In this vein experience with crime is thought to precipitate weapon carrying. From this perspective it can also be assumed that those who carry weapons reduce their own victimization risk. But this idea is not without its critics as evidence exists to suggest that weapon carrying can serve to both enhance and diminish the likelihood of subsequent violence, either as a victim or as an offender (Dijkstra et al, 2011; Malek, Chang, & Davis, 1998).

## Methods

This paper uses data from the 2018 Louisiana Communities that Care Youth Survey (CCYS), to examine the behaviors of students. This biennial survey is administered on even years, to sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade private and public school students. A report is completed by late March of the following year. The survey is designed to assess students' involvement in a specific set of indicators, as well as, their exposure to a scientifically valid risk and protective factors identified in the Risk and Protective Factor Model of adolescent problem behaviors. Each student completes the survey via pencil during a designated class period/time. The survey is administered in scantron format. Students are given approximately 60 minutes to complete 131 questions. Passive consent was used to secure parental permission for participation. Teachers were provided with a short script to read to students just prior to administration. The script served as informed assent and included references to the voluntary nature of the survey and privacy. No identifiable data is collected from the survey. The data was analyzed using optical mark recognition imaging scanners and populated into reports. All school level reports are password protected and require consent to access. [1]

## Variables

This section names and describes our dependent and independent variables and how they were coded. SPSS was used to do the analysis

The dependent variable for this project was taken a handgun to school. The eight independent variables were: assaulting other students; got arrested; carried a handgun in the community; being bullied at school; feeling safe at school; feeling safe in their community; feeling safe in their home; and not going to school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to school.

## Dependent Variable.

*Taken a handgun to school* was measured with the responses to the question: How many times in the past twelve months have you taken a handgun to school? There were 8 levels of response (never=1; 1-2=2; 3-5=3; 6-9=4; 10-19=5; 20-29= 6; 30-39=7; 40 or more=8).

***Independent Variables Delinquent Lifestyle.***

***Carried a handgun in the community*** was measured with the responses to the question: How many times in the past twelve months have you carried a handgun? There were 8 levels of response (never=1; 1-2=2; 3-5=3; 6-9=4; 10-19=5; 20-29= 6; 30-39=7; 40 or more=8).

***Assaulting others*** was measured with the responses to the question: How many times in the past twelve months have you attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting them? There were 8 levels of response (never=1; 1-2=2; 3-5=3; 6-9=4; 10-19=5; 20-29= 6; 30-39=7; 40 or more=8).

***Got arrested*** was measured with the responses to the question: How many times in the past twelve months have you been arrested? There were 8 levels of response (never=1; 1-2=2; 3-5=3; 6-9=4; 10-19=5; 20-29= 6; 30-39=7; 40 or more=8).

***Independent Variables: Victimization/fear safety***

***Bullied*** was measured with the responses to the question: During the past 12 months, how often have you been picked on or bullied by a student ON SCHOOL PROPERTY (including school buses)? There were 5 levels of response (never=1; 1 day=2; 2/3 days =3; 4 or 5 days =4; 6 or more days=5).

***Not going to school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to school*** (including school buses) was measured with the responses to the question: During the past 30 days, on how many days did you NOT go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school? There were 5 levels of response (never=1; 1 day=2; 2/3 days =3; 4 or 5 days =4; 6 or more days=5).

***Feeling safe at school*** was measured with the responses to the question: I feel safe at my school? There were 4 levels of response (NO!=1; no=2; yes=3; YES!=4).

***Feeling safe in their neighborhood*** was measured with the responses to the question: I feel safe in my neighborhood? (NO!=1; no=2; yes=3; YES!=4).

***Feeling safe in their home*** was measured with the responses to the question: I feel safe at home where I live? (NO!=1; no=2; yes=3; YES!=4).

## Findings

The sample for this research was over 80,000 students; although there were missing data on some variables that put the sample at slightly below 70,000. Tables 1 and 2 have the results using the entire sample. The problems with a sample this large are that many relationships are significant with low associations or little explanatory value. But they are not practically significant because the chief component in the significance statistical formula is sample size. Nonetheless, these findings have value, and statistical significance is reported.

Table 1 is a correlation matrix between all eight variables. There were all low associations between carrying a handgun to school and the five measures of being bullied/feeling safe: being bullied at school ( $r = .006$ , ns); feeling safe at school ( $r = -.049$ ,  $\text{sign} = .01$ ); feeling safe in their community ( $r = -.047$ ,  $\text{sign} = .01$ ); feeling safe in their home ( $r = -.058$ ,  $\text{sign} = .01$ ); and not going to school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to school ( $r = .062$ ,  $\text{sign} = .01$ ). As can be seen four of the five associations were low, in the expected direction, and significant. Feeling safe in their home, community, and school were all negative associations indicating not feeling safe in these settings had a positive relationship with carrying a gun to school. Not going to school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to school had the highest relative associations of bullied/feeling safe variable, again supporting the research that feeling safe is not associated with carrying a gun to school. Interestingly feeling safe at school and this latter variable measure the same emotion except more extreme. The latter adds not going to school and on the way to school which increases the association (albeit slightly) with carrying a gun to school. This makes sense because this circumstance is less supervised. It would be valid to compare the level of supervision on school buses, other modes of travel and responses to this question. Surprisingly being bullied had virtually no association with the dependent variable. Perhaps indicating that carrying a handgun to school is a deterrent to being bullied. There was a moderate association between being bullied and not going to school... ( $r = .215$ ;  $\text{sign} = .01$ ) which supports the literature and is logical. Several other variables in the feeling safe /bullied group had moderate associations in the expected

direction; indicating the validity of the measures. Bullied had low negative associations with all three feeling safe variables.

Interestingly, all four delinquent lifestyle variables are negatively related to the three feeling safe variables, indicating they do not feel safe in school, neighborhood, or home. All four delinquent lifestyle variables are positively related to not going to school because of not feeling safe. All of these associations were statistically significant with low associations. But the direction of these associations should generate further thought and research.

The three variables expressing a delinquent lifestyle: carrying a handgun in the community ( $r=.304$ ,  $\text{sign.}=.01$ ), got arrested ( $r=.524$ ,  $\text{sign.}=.01$ ) and assaulted others ( $r=.264$ ,  $\text{sign.}=.01$ ) had moderate to high associations with carried a handgun to school. Got arrested had the highest association with carrying a handgun to school; all three associations were significant. The correlations support the idea of a delinquent lifestyle being a better explanation for carrying a handgun to school.

Table 2 has the results of a regression equation with carrying a handgun to school as the dependent variable and the other eight variables being independent variables. The three independent variables expressing a delinquent lifestyle have the highest R squares: got arrested ( $R\text{square}=.275$ ), carried a handgun in the community ( $R\text{square}=.092$ ) and assaulted others ( $R\text{square}=.070$ ). All the bullied/feeling safe variables had a below .00 R square.

Table 3. The number of students who had carried a handgun to school is only 688 (0.8% of entire sample). In table 3 only those who carried a gun to school were used. Because less than one percent of students carried a gun to school; statistical significance is indeed more relevant with the smaller sample. Table 3 has the results of a regression equation with carrying a handgun to school as the dependent variable and the other eight variables being independent variables. The three independent variables expressing a delinquent lifestyle have the highest R squares: got arrested ( $R\text{square}=.226$ ); carried a handgun in the community ( $R\text{square}=.159$ ) and assaulted others ( $R\text{square}=.156$ ). These 3 variables were the only ones which were statistically significant.

### **Discussion: Implications for further research**

This research has found that carrying a gun to school is related to

other delinquent acts and not feeling safe or bullied. Carrying a gun to school seems to be another component of a delinquent lifestyle. It is difficult to compare findings from research on who carried a gun to school. Most samples have problematic differences: including ages to 24; only include middle grade students; only males; a small sample; and referring to a weapon (any). The idea of a weapon used in research is not always a gun, but can be any sort of item that can stab or bludgeon (all states have a list of prohibited objects). School shootings, the initial trigger for this type of research is a low probability high consequence event. Most of the perpetrators were described as bullied. Research began with this association and the focus on bullying was off and running. But it was not just bullying; it was the idea of what would make a bullied student bring a gun to school and shoot their school mates (May, 2001; Wilcox, May, & Roberts, 2006).

NOTES.

### *Self-report studies*

A self-report study is a type of survey, questionnaire, or poll in which respondents read the question and select a response by themselves without researcher interference. Self-report surveys enable researchers to explore the attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and personality characteristics of offender's self-report measures has been considered valid data sources for general demographic data and domains of behavior (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2006; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979; Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi's (1969) support for self-report as an ideal methodology is that official records are a weaker measure of the commission of delinquent acts than honest self-reports. His rationale is basically that every delinquent act is witnessed and motivated by that young person; only he can explain it, not the police.

The study is limited to one year of students in a single state and those schools that allowed the survey. The large sample constitutes a census of the specific population but there is no reason to believe that the one year is significantly different from other years.



**Table 1: association between all eight variables in a correlation matrix;**

		Taken a handgun to school	Bullied	Got arrested	Carried a handgun in the community	Assaulted others	Not going to school	Feeling safe at school	Feeling safe in their community	Feeling safe in their home
<b>Taken a handgun to school</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	0.006	.524**	.304**	.264**	.062**	-.049**	-.047**	-.058**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.141	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
<b>Bullied</b>	Pearson Correlation	81303	1	80875	81014	80989	66790	80295	74276	71419
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.006	0.141	0.002	.017**	.073**	.215**	-.126**	-.079**	-.066**
<b>Got arrested</b>	Pearson Correlation	66729	67642	1	66893	66841	67205	66718	66485	66442
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.524**	0.002	0.587	.310**	.328**	.072**	-.069**	-.055**	-.064**
<b>Carried a handgun in the community</b>	Pearson Correlation	80875	66742	81449	1	81058	66811	80441	74304	71459
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.304**	.017**	.310**	0.000	.236**	.056**	-.071**	-.033**	-.038**
<b>Assaulted others</b>	Pearson Correlation	81014	66893	81165	81686	1	66964	80664	74470	71610
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.264**	.073**	.328**	.236**	0.000	.114**	-.132**	-.081**	-.082**
<b>Not going to school</b>	Pearson Correlation	80989	66841	81058	81191	81478	1	80478	74415	71561
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.062**	.215**	.072**	.056**	.114**	0.000	-.181**	-.100**	-.093**
<b>Feeling safe at school</b>	Pearson Correlation	66790	67205	66811	66964	66909	67696	1	66550	66521
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.049**	-.126**	-.069**	-.071**	-.132**	-.181**	0.000	.282**	.274**
<b>Feeling safe in their community</b>	Pearson Correlation	80295	66718	80441	80664	80478	66786	83362	74219	71361
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.047**	-.079**	-.055**	-.033**	-.081**	-.100**	.282**	1	.613**
<b>Feeling safe in their home</b>	Pearson Correlation	74276	66485	74304	74470	74415	66550	74219	75185	71602
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.058**	-.066**	-.064**	-.038**	-.082**	-.093**	.274**	.613**	1
		81419	66442	71459	71610	71561	66521	71361	71602	72284

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2: a regression equation with carried a handgun to school as dependent variable and 8 other variables as independent variables (entire sample)**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
<b>Bullied</b>	0.006	0.000	0.000	0.307	2.166	0.141
<b>Got arrested</b>	0.524	0.275	0.275	0.298	30685.2	0.000
<b>Carried a handgun in the community</b>	0.304	0.092	0.092	0.329	8243.828	0.000
<b>Assaulted others</b>	0.264	0.070	0.070	0.339	6054.015	0.000
<b>Not going to school</b>	0.062	0.004	0.004	0.303	258.087	0.000
<b>Feeling safe at school</b>	0.049	0.002	0.002	0.175	194.023	0.000
<b>Feeling safe in their community</b>	0.047	0.002	0.002	0.301	166.105	0.000
<b>Feeling safe in their home</b>	0.058	0.003	0.003	0.296	243.571	0.000

**Table 3. Regression equation: taken a handgun to school dependent and 8 other variables as independent variables (sample is only those who carried a gun to school)**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
<b>Bullied</b>	0.054	0.003	0.001	2.209	1.341	0.248
<b>Got arrested</b>	0.475	0.226	0.225	2.005	194.425	0.000
<b>Carried a handgun in the community</b>	0.398	0.159	0.157	2.08	123.785	0.000
<b>Assaulted others</b>	0.395	0.156	0.154	2.087	124.064	0.000
<b>Not going to school</b>	0.064	0.004	0.002	2.191	1.864	0.175
<b>Feeling safe at school</b>	0.115	0.013	0.012	2.253	8.904	0.003
<b>Feeling safe in their community</b>	0.025	0.001	-0.001	2.235	0.310	0.578
<b>Feeling safe in their home</b>	0.069	0.005	0.003	2.204	2.222	0.137

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