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Reaffirming the significance of context: The Charlotte School Safety Program

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Abstract

This study reexamined the Charlotte School Safety Program, a school resource officer-delivered fear of crime reduction initiative. Initial evaluation of the program (Kenney & Watson, 1998) found increased perceptions of safety and reduced fear of crime for school youth, although structural properties of the study setting were not considered. Reanalysis of the data with a multivariate model generated qualifying findings that suggested the program may be less effective than previously determined. Minimal attention to environmental factors and the social setting reaffirmed the importance of addressing context in the criminological enterprise and the related issue of delivering empirically sound policy recommendations.

Introduction

"One of the most important things that criminologists often fail to address is the context within which they (their projects or topics) are operating. This is true whether they are proposing a new theory, testing an existing explanation, investigating an emerging phenomenon, or evaluating an intervention or program." (Lab, 2003, p. 39)

Consideration of the environmental, cultural, and social characteristics (i.e., the context) of a study's setting is a textbook standard of the criminological research process, especially for positivistic criminologists attempting to substantiate inference. Recent attention to the issue of context (Lab, 2003), however, suggested that criminologists often considered the potential effects of social setting only in a marginal fashion. One of the most straightforward forms of oversimplification is neglect of theoretically relevant structural properties that can condition perceived outcomes of various criminal and juvenile justice system initiatives (Kornhauser, 1978; Reiss & Tonry, 1986). Disregarding correlates of crime and other variables specific to a study's setting can lead to findings that suggest erroneous levels of program impact. In short, structural property indicators (e.g., poverty and population demographics) or environmental realities (e.g., unemployment rate and peer group influence) are vital to models determining program effectiveness in order to avoid arbitrary policy recommendations.

This article reconsiders findings from the Charlotte School Safety Program (CSSP), an evaluation that endorsed program continuation despite minimal attention to context. After briefly reviewing the original study, issues specific to the context question were identified and employed in a multivariate model. Findings of the reanalysis were considered in terms of their implications for school safety programs similar to the Charlotte initiative and the social science axiom of realizing an absence of spuriousness in determining causal inference.

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School safety and disorder

The American public generally believes that school disorder is a widespread and common problem, a view reinforced since 2000 through media accounts of sensational crimes at a handful of schools (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Tucker, 2001). Many school administrators and teachers also claim that school safety has become a serious problem and that the situation is out of control (Anderson, 1998), a view expressed in policy actions such as the Federal Safe and Drug Free Schools Act (1994).

The sense of alarm, however, appears at odds with existing school victimization estimates and even the individual experiences of students. According to several studies using nationally representative data to estimate school crime (Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Kaufman et al., 1999; Maguire & Pastore, 1996; Mansfield, Alexander, & Farris, 1991; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995), much of the victimization occurring at schools was not very serious-petty theft, scuffling, and the like. The prevalence of victimization was also quite low. Bastian and Taylor (1991), for instance, concluded that only 9 percent of students reported being victimized in the prior six months, only 2 percent of which experienced violent crimes. A decade later, studies indicated that violent victimization rates at schools had significantly *decreased*, as had the percentage of students who reported victimization (Kaufman et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2003).

Fear of crime at school

Although a relatively small proportion of students report victimization, fear of being victimized is more prevalent. There was a significant increase in the percentage of students fearing victimization between 1989 and 1995, a period wherein a greater number of students reported avoiding "risky" locations within their schools (Kaufman et al., 1999). Nolin and colleagues (1995) found that 25 percent of students reported being fearful of bullying, physical attacks, and robbery while at school or on their way to or from school, yet only 12 percent of these students were victims and just 4 percent had suffered an actual physical attack. More recent research reported an alarming 39 percent of middle school students and 36 percent of high school students claimed feelings of vulnerability in the school setting (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001). Overall, women, minorities, and younger students generally reported greater instances of fear of victimization.

Although very little empirical research existed on what caused fear of crime among school-aged children (e.g., Hale, 1996), the dire consequences of student fear appeared to be widely appreciated among policymakers. A handful of empirical studies identified significant correlates of student fear, most notably differential association as indicated by delinquent peer group (Alvarez & Bachman, 1997; May & Dunaway, 2000; Welsh, 2001). The influence of delinquent peer contact on one's own fear is perhaps not surprising, since delinquency and association with delinquent peers are correlates of victimization (e.g., Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Schreck, Fisher, & Miller, 2004; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003; Schreck, Wright, & Miller, 2002). The assumption is that delinquent peers share anecdotes of personal and observed danger with friends thus spreading fear to others through the social learning process (see Hale, 1996; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Similarly, those students whose friends are victimized may be more likely to witness such events thereby contributing to their own fear. This "vicarious victimization" would affect perceptions of risk which tend to be more important than actual risk (Ferraro, 1995).

Students who reported feelings of hostility and alienation toward school also tended to be more fearful of crime (Alvarez & Bachman, 1997; May & Dunaway, 2000; Welsh, 2001). These feelings indicated a lack of social integration and participation in school functioning, which consequently leads to fewer sources of protection from crime and therefore greater fear of victimization. Schreck and colleagues (2002) found that strong social bonds indeed inhibited victimization and Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) also found that schools with unclear and unfairly enforced rules have problems with widespread crime and disorder. Besides inadequate rule enforcement implying a higher actual risk of victimization, one may also expect that such schools will possess many fear-inducing incivilities as well (e.g., litter, unsupervised students idling about, visible crime). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that students who feel that rules are unfair will also be more afraid.

More recently, Schreck and Miller (2003) investigated the relationship between community and school disorder, student characteristics, school security techniques, and fear of crime. Consistent with the extant literature, women, minorities and students with delinquent peers reported the greatest fear of crime. Other significant predictors of fear of crime at school included previous victimization, alienation toward school, attendance at public school, and the presence of gangs. This last finding was echoed in previous research (Miller, Ventura, Tatum, Gibson, & Schreck, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2001) which suggested that the presence of street gangs could be extremely disruptive to the school environment, creating fear among students and increasing the level of violence in schools. Interestingly, Schreck and Miller (2003) also found that the presence of security measures (e.g., metal detectors, locked doors, supervised hallways) increased the probability of student fear of crime. Perhaps any exposure, be it direct or indirect, to the presence of criminal activity causes students to believe the threat of victimization is greater than it in fact may be.

School districts across the country implemented numerous programs aimed at reducing fear, often without the benefit of theoretical insight and best practices awareness. Consequently, successful fear reduction was not universal,