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# High School Students' Perceptions of Safety Concerns Predicts School Avoidance

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Ann Marie Howard

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

High School Students' Perceptions of Safety Concerns Predicts School Avoidance

by

Ann Marie Howard

MS, Walden University, 2010  
BS, Georgia State University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Psychology

Walden University  
April 2019

## Abstract

School violence is a growing concern and an impending danger for American youth. Students' perceptions of violent school incidents may lead to fear and this fear may lead to school avoidance. Although researchers have found that teenage pregnancy and working to support family are two of the main reasons that students stay home from school, there has been no research conducted on whether students' perceptions of safety concerns, solely focusing on the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization, predict their decision to stay home from school. Therefore, based on social disorganization and resilience theories, the purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the role of high school students' perceptions of safety concerns in school on avoidance behavior, specifically, their decision to stay home from school due to thinking they may be attacked or harmed in a school building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to and from school. Archival data from a sample of 4,767 American youth, 12-18 years of age, who participated in the 2015 School Crime Supplement Survey were analyzed using logistic regression. Findings revealed that students' perception of gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization led to school avoidance. This study has important implications for positive social change: The findings can be used by government entities, communities, schools, administrators, students, and parents to inform efforts designed to maintain a safe school environment.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this great accomplishment to my children Marvin III, Joshua, Cherish, and Arthur Jr. This accomplishment is also dedicated to my grandchild, Success Immanuel Hendricks, and nephew, Jwerl E. Howard. All of you are truly my inspiration. I will always strive to be an excellent example and role model. Know you can achieve your dreams as long as you are dedicated, work hard, and stay focused. Always trust that God will provide strength and endurance to complete what you set out to accomplish.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

A high school education provides students with the access and opportunity to prepare for life experience outside of the classroom. Because of their lack of formal education, high school dropouts do not receive similar wage opportunities as high school graduates (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). It is imperative to find solutions to obstacles preventing students from obtaining their education in a crime-free environment where they have perception of being safe. High school violence influences students' psychological and physical health, interrupting the students' learning process through fear and causing chronic absenteeism (Blout, Rose, Suessmann, Coleman, & Selekman, 2012). Chronic absenteeism can lead to not completing school, which is a significant problem today. Although a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) revealed that the national high school dropout rate in the United States decreased from approximately 7 to 6 percent between 2010 to 2016, these statistics do not represent the magnitude of this problem in most states. In the state of Georgia, for example, the overall dropout rate in 2015 was 21.2% (Smith & Greenblatt, 2017).

A survey of youth in Grades 9-12 revealed that 19.6% of students reported being physically bullied while at school, 14.8% reported being cyberbullied, 8.1% reported being a victim of physical violence while attending school, 5.2% reported having a weapon while at school, and 6.9% reported being threatened by someone with a weapon (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015), p. 1). In the same survey, 18% of students reported witnessing gang activity in school (CDC, 2015). Approximately 9% of teachers reported bodily-

injury threats from students (CDC, 2015). By 2015, 30 days before the survey nearly 7 percent of students responded that they did not attend school due to safety concerns (CDC, 2015).

This study examined the predictive relationship between high school students' perceptions of safety concerns pertaining to the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and traveling to or from school with school avoidance. School avoidance refers to the students' decision to stay home from school due to thinking that someone might harm them in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to or from school. School violence not only affects students and interferes with their learning process, it also affects school staff and other community members who could also become victims (Lewallen et al., 2015). This study has the potential for positive social change. Its findings could be used as a tool to help staff, communities, and parents assist students whose perceptions of safety concerns in school affect their ability to complete their education successfully and safely.

This chapter covers the following topics: background for the study, the problem statement, purpose of the study, research question hypothesis, and theoretical frame work. Also, included in this chapter the following topics will be addressed: the nature of the study, definition, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitation, and significance of the study. The chapter will end with the summary.

### **Background**

Acts of violence including bullying, harassment, and fighting occur at schools across the nation (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Morgan, et al., 2015). Student victims sometimes experience embarrassment, humiliation, and fear (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Tomsa, Jenaro, Campbell, & Neacsu, 2013). Violence by and against youth has an

impact on all youth as well as family, and others all over the United States, creating a lasting and devastating impact in the community (Borofsky, Kellerman, Baucom, Oliver, & Margolin, 2013; Office for Victims of Crime & Department of Justice, 2003). Vervoort, Scholte, and Overbeek (2010) found that ethnic majority group members reported they were victimized more frequently in school than ethnic minority group members in general. Vervoort et al.'s (2010) study in the Netherlands explained the implementation of schools forming classrooms to create a diverse population of students in a room in order to prevent victimization. The authors also discussed the prevalence of victimization in schools located in other countries such as the United States, Ireland, China, Spain, and Italy. Other researchers revealed that students suffer psychological issues from bullying and victimization (Nazir & Piskin, 2015). Based on gender, victimization between boys and girls was less for the ethnic majority's group than for the ethnic minority's group (Vervoort et al., 2010). For example, European American boys and girls were less likely to experience victimization than African American or Hispanic boys and girls (Paige, Daniels, & Craig, 2015).

A student's perception of safety concerns and avoidance of harassment or physical attack is a significant concern. Several researchers concurred that 10% of high school dropouts cited their fear of harassment or physical attack as the primary reason that they did not return to school (Bosworth, Esperlage, & Simon, 1999; Cornell et al., 2013; Greenbaum, Turner, & Stevens, 1998). Students' perceptions of being victimized or encountering a violent incident while attending or going to or from school may increase absenteeism and may ultimately lead to dropping out of school (Mardesic, 2015). According to the NCES (2015), nearly 2.6 million students who attended school did not complete school. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) reported

that approximately 8.9 million students dropped out of high school and then obtained an alternative credential. Researchers have suggested that people who drop out of school face substantial economic, psychological, and social difficulties (Kearney, 2007; Trubow, Smink, & Young, 2011).

The gap in the literature is the extent to which high school students' perceptions of safety concerns (due to the presence of weapons and gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization in school and on their way to or from school) have led to school avoidance and completing high school. Other primary reasons why students do not attend school include teen pregnancy, working to support family, and socioeconomic status (Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009). The findings from this research are intended to create awareness about how a student's perception of safety concerns pertaining to these four incidents of violence may lead to school avoidance. Another important need is to develop and implement measures to help create a safe environment so that students can complete their education. The information obtained from this research may provide government entities, communities, schools, administrators, students, and parents with information to create and implement preventive measures, along with interventions, not only for the victims, but for the perpetrators.

### **Problem Statement**

A student's perception of safety concerns, such as the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization, may ultimately affect their school attendance (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Violence in schools has caught the attention of communities on local and national levels because of the aversive effect it has on students receiving a quality education (Mooj & Fettelaar, 2012). Researchers have suggested that there are significant relationships between fear

and avoidance and academic performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Coleman, 1998). The findings of Bowen and Bowen's (1999) study highlight the importance of addressing the concerns of students' fear of violent incidents in school and implementing safety strategies so that students have a positive experience while building a foundation for learning without concerns for incidents and situations that may potentially jeopardize their academic achievement. (Carbines, Wyatt, & Robb, 2006; Spano, Pridemore, & Bolland, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 1994; U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973). Students' misbehavior includes many violent actions (Kearney, 2008). For example, the U.S. Department of Justice (2015) reported that students experienced 1,420,900 violent incidents on school property and 778,500 violent incidents traveling to or from school for the 2013 school year. There were 4,000 instances of sexual assault; 11,000 physical, violent encounters; or altercations involving a weapon; and 7,000 robberies at schools across the country. The CDC (2014) reported that between 1993 and 2013 "a linear increase of 4.4% to 7.1% of students who did not attend high school did it for fear of safety" (p. 9). School violence may, therefore, have an adverse impact on students' conduct and their outlook on education.

A student's decision to stay home from school due to perceptions of safety may lead to school avoidance and chronic absenteeism, which may result in not completing his or her education. Studies have analyzed various factors that may contribute to students not attending or completing school such as, failing classes, becoming a parent, family responsibilities, poor attendance, uninspiring classes, and low expectations from family members (Bootsup, 2012). There are limited research studies on the perceptions of safety concerns, studies that may explain why students stay home from school and eventually drop out. Although there have been studies



on school avoidance and multiple factors leading to dropping out of school, none have focused solely on the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization. Thus, this study was designed to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns posed by the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, fear of victimization, and school avoidance.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationships between high school students' perceptions of safety concerns specifically, the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and traveling to and from school and school avoidance. For this study school avoidance refers to staying away from school due to thinking someone might attack or harm them in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to or from school.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

The research question and hypotheses for this study are as follows:

To what extent do high school students' perceptions of safety concerns (presence of guns and gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, lead to school avoidance?

*H*<sub>0</sub>1: High school students' perceptions of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, do not lead to school avoidance

*H*<sub>1</sub>1: High school students' perceptions of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, do lead to school avoidance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Resilience theory (Werner, 1984) and social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1931) provided the framework for this study. Social disorganization theory and Resilience theory are discussed extensively in Chapter 2. In this chapter the foundation for choosing the two theories to support this study is discussed.

Resilience theory includes a multifaceted field analysis, that is, using more than one strategy to examine factors of a situation, describing the strengths harbored in people as well as other systems, and the demonstrated capacity of these strengths to contribute to triumphs over adversities experienced in life (Ungar, 2013). It is a theory that, in contemporary society, calls attention to strengths, instead of weaknesses, of an individual or a system (Gunderson, Allen, & Holling, 2009). Resilience theory focuses on the question: Why do some youths build and retain an active adaptation to challenging situations encountered in life, such as violence, stress, and traumatic events, while others do not? (Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012). Besides these types of challenging situations, youth and their families may also encounter financial pressures, family issues, relationship stressors, severe health conditions, employment problems, and/or other work-related economic stressors (Iacoviello & Charney, 2014). Resilience occurs when an individual develops the mechanics to thrive over these types of stressful situations.

Resilience theory focuses on an individual's ability to understand the processes he or she experiences in life and the anticipated outcomes (Ungar, 2013). In other words, the individual

must know what she or he is experiencing, why she or he has encountered the situation, and the result of these experiences. Various conditions may explain the experience or circumstances one may face, such as an unhealthy living environment. Other factors include (a) a person's inward ability, meaning focusing on your thoughts, feelings and strengths (b) the availability of outside resources to offset harmful environmental conditions, (c) and how one implements the adaptation of change he or she has experienced despite the distress or trauma (Lee et al., 2012).

Resilience theory focuses on an individual's ability to adapt positively to traumatic situations; researchers have used different measures to explain the phenomenon of individuals being reared in an environment where there is high crime and limited resources, yet being able to maintain an optimistic outlook (Lee et al., 2012). Grotberg (1999) referenced several studies, which revealed that 50% to 67.7% of children exhibiting resilience could prevail over their first adverse experience in life, such as exposure to a violent situation within their environment. According to resilience theory, some students have learned characteristics of another culture, which mirrors students from various cultures and ethnical backgrounds, to coexist in school and adapt to the environment (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2004). For example, a European American may take on and respect characteristics of an African American when attending an urban school in order to exist together peacefully despite their differences and or outlooks about life. This adaptation has helped in developing successful learners in various institutions of learning. However, in some cases, it has been ascertained that some students could not adapt to the environment and have no ability to cope positively with a traumatic situation (Mitchell, 2014).

Thus, implementing resilience strategies can assist youth to overcome their fear of being harmed while attending school, traveling to and from school, and being able to complete high

school successfully (Mitchell, 2014). When students are intimidated in school or on their way to school, they may feel discouraged about attending school due to fear of being hurt (Hughes et al., 2015). In some circumstances, they may develop an attitude that they are not worthy of society (Mitchell, 2014).

The second theory that provided a framework for this study is social disorganization theory, which was introduced by Shaw and McKay (1931). It helps to explain how students' perceptions of safety in the school setting have led to avoidance of school. Social disorganization theory relates to ecological principles. It links the environmental characteristics of a neighborhood and the design of urban space to crime rates (Lynch & Boggess, 2015). According to social disorganization theory, crime is associated with (a) poor conditions or circumstances, (b) environmental factors at school that may contribute to safety concerns, and (c) neighborhood factors that include low socioeconomic status, lack of structural stability and community identification, and high residential mobility (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Lynch & Boggess, 2015). These three neighborhood factors are some of the main factors that lead to bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2009). With poor conditions, low socio-economic status, safety concerns at school and within the communities is there is weak social control over its members and, as a result, more violence is evident among children and adults (Lynch & Boggess, 2015). Unfortunately, the latter may contribute to young people developing aggressive behavior that includes bullying in school (Kaufman, 2013).

Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) developed the notion that one's attitude and thinking processes construct the way in which one interacts in diverse situations, and deals with his or her character and behavior. The interaction based a person's environment, economic status and

social control forms the neighborhoods as explained in social disorganization theory (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Any activity proposed by an individual creates a major significance in the individual's social life, since it relates to the current situation which is dependent upon a person's ability and access to resources (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

According to social disorganization theory which implies that students resort to violence as result to the tribulations of not being part of the in-crowd and other challenging situations that may result in a person becoming a bully or being bullied at school (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). Bullying incidents are leading to students dropping out of school. When a student develops a fear that leads to avoidance of either being in school or even being on his or her way to or from school, he or she may drop out (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013).

### **Nature of the Study**

For this quantitative study, a cross-sectional design using archival data from the 2015 School Crime Supplement (SCS) survey in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS, 2015) was used to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns in the school setting and school avoidance. The SCS survey was co-designed by the NCES and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS; Institute of Education Services [IES], 2015). The NCVS participants consisted of 4,767 individuals who completed a survey on victimization, crime, victimization at school, and students' responses to victimization and crime (National Archive of Criminal Justice Data [NAJCD], 2016).

The cross-sectional research design was the most appropriate design to use with archival data extracted from the NCVS/SCS survey because the survey data were previously collected by another researcher at one point in time. The cross-sectional design relies on existing differences

of accounts students reported in the NCVS/SCS survey. Also, the participants have existing differences, such as age, race, socioeconomic status (SES), and region of residence. This design allows me to provide a concise result of the extent of the independent variables in predicting the dependent variable. The independent variables are students' perceptions of safety concerns in school; specifically, concerns about the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization. The dependent variable is school avoidance. School avoidance was measured in the SCS survey by asking students if they avoided school (yes or no) due to the thought that someone might harm them in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or on their way to or from school within the past 6 months.

The NCVS resource guide was used to extract the existing SCS survey data that pertained to adolescents, aged 12 to 18 years, who attended a private or public school and completed the 2015 SCS of the NCVS. The data were analyzed in IBM SPSS with logistic regression to determine if there was a predictive relationship between (a) student perceptions of safety concerns pertaining to the presence of weapons and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school, traveling to and from school, and (b) school avoidance.

### **Definitions**

The following operational terms are used in this study. Each of the following terms clarifies the essential components of the research and concepts surrounding school violence. The terms are as follows:

*Fear of victimization:* In the SCS data set, fear of victimization is fear of violent crimes, simple assault, sexual assault, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery (Robers et. al., 2014)

*Perceptions of fear/avoidance:* Perceptions of fear/avoidance are defined as being afraid of physical harm, bullying, cyber bullying, or observing violent physical acts and gang activity, and avoiding these events (Bosworth, Esperlage, & Simon, 1999).

*Socioeconomic status:* Socioeconomic status (SES) “is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation.” (APA, para. 1). It is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group and is referenced as such in this study (APA, 2011).

*Educator:* For this study, educator includes teacher, administrator, principal, and counselor.

*School staff:* School staff is any personnel employed monetarily or voluntarily at school.

*Perceived risk:* Perceived risk refers to the belief in a chance of being victimized by having knowledge about local victimizations or through national incidents portrayed on the various media outlets (Addington, 2009).

### **Assumptions**

It was presumed that the NCVS/SCS survey is an accurate tool for assessing students’ perceptions of safety concerns in the school setting and avoidance behavior. The U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice created the SCS survey to collect data every 2 years from American households on victimization that occurred while in school (NAJCD, 2017) to determine (a) the number and types of crimes and consequences to provide actions to take for the crimes committed, and (b) to compare incidents and the area of occurrence. Even though many crimes occur, the Department of Juvenile Justice focused on incidents surrounding school and

traveling to and from school to study the impact these incidents have on students (NAJCD, 2017).

It was assumed that students understood the SCS survey questions and provided complete accurate truthful answers. The students who verbally asked for assistance with the questionnaire received accommodations (NAJCD, 2017). Resilience theory suggests that some students have a predisposition for handling school safety issues and may not process certain adverse events as negative (Ungar, 2013). Therefore, their perception or avoidance behavior may not be the same as someone who does not possess resilience characteristics (Dutton & Greene, 2010).

The NCVS/SCS survey data were obtained from a nationally representative sample of adolescents, ages 12-18. The NCVS/SCS survey examined violence in schools and the number of times students stayed away from school due to recent incidents of crime on school property or traveling to and from school to address the possible psychological and physical damage to students (Evans, Smokowski, & Cotter, 2014). In this study, it was presumed that students' perceptions of safety concerns regarding the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school influenced their decision to stay home from school. Given that some students are chronically absent from school and skip classes, it was essential to this study to analyze whether students' perceptions of safety within the schools they attend was a factor in their avoidance of school.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The NCVS/SCS is a national survey administered to an estimated 100,000 people, representing over 49,000 households, but, of course, it excludes millions of households. The NCVS/SCS survey includes participants, ages 12-18, from public and private schools, but



excludes participants 5-11 years old and anyone who is home schooled, and possibly those students who are completing their education in nontraditional, alternative ways, such as night school or online.

The theoretical frameworks for this study are social disorganization and resilience theories. These two theories explain, respectively, the toxic environment that one may experience and how that experience may influence engagement in criminal behavior and how an individual who is brought up in a toxic environment may develop or maintain a positive outlook and overcome the negative influences in their environment. There may be other theories to explain how students adapt or react in toxic environments. One boundary in this study is that the parents had to give permission for their children to take the SCS survey. Some parents may not have wanted their child to recollect the memories of violence their child had experienced, witnessed, or initiated in school and the parent knew of the encounter. Therefore, if all students did not receive parental permission to participate in the survey, the number of incidents of violence may be underreported and thus, misrepresented.

The population targeted from the NCVS are individuals whose households included children 12 years of age and older and who attended public and private schools (NACJD, 2016). The NCVS/SCS survey provided me with the targeted population and did not include participants outside of traditional age children who are expected to attend school. The NCVS/SCS is a national survey administered every 2 years to address violent trends throughout the United States and is used as the primary source to examine the effects of victimization and describe various characteristics of offenders. An estimated 49,000 households have been

surveyed to determine the rate of occurrences, traits, and the effect of being a victim of crime.

According to the NACJD (2016), the NCVS has four primary objectives:

The first goal was to develop detailed information about the victims and consequences of crime. The second was to estimate the number and types of crimes not reported to the police. The third was to provide uniform measures of selected types of crimes. The final goal was to permit comparisons over time and types of areas. The survey categorizes crimes as "personal" or "property." Individual crimes cover rape and sexual attack, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, and purse-snatching/pocket-picking, while property crimes cover burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft, and vandalism. The data from the NCVS survey are particularly useful for calculating crime rates, both aggregated and disaggregated, and for determining changes in crime rates from year to year (para. 2).

The NCVS survey alone was not a useful tool for this study because it addressed various incidents that occurred in school, on school property, and en route to school that students may deem to be threatening to the point where they avoid school. Therefore, the SCS survey of the NCVS was also used to analyze information and incidents pertaining to school crime safety.

The majority of SCS survey households were selected from large metropolitan areas. The study's sample from rural, urban, and major metropolitan areas may be disproportional (NCVS 2015). Therefore, the scope of the present study reflected this selection. The large metropolitan population is more likely to experience violent situations due to the urban areas and the fact that students are bused to schools (Eisman, Stoddard, Heinze, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2015). It is possible that students who attend private schools may not have experienced violent incidents relative to those who were registered in a public school (Eisman et al. 2015). Therefore,

encounters with school avoidance in private schools could be attributed to some other phenomenon.

This study is based on the data obtained from the NCVS/SCS because it is a study conducted every second year on students' perceptions of safety involving various types of criminal activity and the impact it has on avoidance behaviors. Creating a survey was not an option because of time constraints and cost. There are limited resources to conduct a nationwide survey of this caliber.

The results of the study may be generalizable to students who were impacted by victimization and those who feel unsafe in school due to violent activity in their school. While it may be appropriate to apply the results to this population, the results may not be generalizable to all students who have perceptions of violence and the avoidance characteristics of safety concerns in school because the SCS dataset did not specifically indicate the demographics, and some households in rural areas may not be represented.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are influenced by the accessibility, confidentiality, and legal uses of data as to why students stay away from school. The SCS survey contains a self-report of crime victimization data. Additional data from the survey includes students' perceptions of the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school, traveling to and from school, and on school property. Students may not reveal being a victim or witnessing criminal or violent activity in school due to fear for their safety. In addition, students may not have reported being a victim due to suppressing the incident or feeling embarrassed.

The NCVS resource guide does not address the survey's validity. However, other studies and publications have addressed its validity based on their method of analysis. My basic analysis of this instrument indicates face validity. However, the BJS (2013) data report advised researchers conducting statistical analysis to use caution when comparing one estimate to another, or estimates over time. According to the BJS (2013), there is some level of error in samples when it is based on estimation. The NCVS resource guide does address some methodology issues pertaining to reliability. The fact that the survey contains questions about students' reports of victimization or crime within the last 6 months may increase the error with accurately recalling incidents, which is discussed further in Chapter 3. Incidents recalled more than 6 months after its occurrence can be easily misconstrued or recalled incorrectly due to the amount of time lapsed (NCVS, 2015). A person will more likely remember accurately an incident when it first occurred (NCVS, 2015).

The data collected from the NCVS/SCS survey relied on self-reports from individuals 12-18 years of age who attended public or private schools in large metropolitan areas regarding certain criminal activities they have been victims of, encountered, seen, or experienced within the past 6 months. Adolescents may be intimidated by interviews, so there may have been trust issues. Therefore, youth may have been hesitant to divulge all the information, based on being embarrassed or not wanting to recall the incident.

Another limitation is the population targeted in the study. Even though NCVS/SCS is a national survey, some populations may not be represented. For example, immigrants who are in the United States illegally may not report incidents to the authorities (Addington, 2008). Therefore, this population is unknown because there are no questions on the survey to identify

status of residence. The original study targeted students who were attending public or private schools leading to a high school diploma, so students in alternative education programs, such as a GED, were excluded (NAJCD, 2017). The study excluded students who dropped out of high school due to violent encounters at school. Persons who reached age 19 were not given the survey, even if they were age 18 and attending school 6 months before the survey was administered. Also, there were racial and cultural differences to consider as limitations of the study. Large metropolitan areas normally include racial diversity, but this depends on the distribution of the survey and who volunteered to participate.

There were limitations in the design of this study due to methodological weaknesses. These include limitations of internal, external, and construct validity. Internal validity simply means one action causes another. In this study, internal validity pertains to the hypothesized relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns in school about guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization and how it predicts school avoidance. When a study is lacking internal validity, a researcher cannot make cause and effect statements based on the research; this study will not permit causal inference. Additionally, in this study, the students' perceptions of safety concerns associated with violence or victimization in school might not necessarily be related to their choice to stay away from school. There are unknown variables, such as, a student having existing psychological issues, that could affect the study that were out of the control of the researcher. The researcher may not know these variables exist due to the lack of knowledge from not being involved in the initial study, which could affect the study's results. Also, this study addresses only the dependent variable, school avoidance; thus, there

could be independent variables other than the predictor variables that may contribute to students not attending school.

The second limitation is that of external validity based on the sample. The sample was comprised of students, 12-18 years old, who attended public or private schools. The sample did not include students who were attending school online, at home, or those who previously attended school and discontinued based on perceptions of safety concern in school. The findings can be generalized only to a similar population of students.

Construct validity assesses whether the research is measuring what it is intended to measure. In this study, this limitation could affect whether there is a relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns, specifically those involving guns, gangs, student bullying, and a fear of victimization in school, and school avoidance. Students who took the survey may have had experience with violence or exposure to violence in high school, but chose to stay home from school for other reasons.

Lastly, there were no biases on the part of the researcher because the data were extracted from a secondary, existing dataset. The data analyzed came from a survey that was created and administered previously. My role as the researcher was to extract data from the dataset based on the variables that pertained to the research question.

### **Significance**

This study is of vital importance because of its potential to understand students' perceptions of safety concerns due to guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization and how this affects their decisions to stay home from school. Students who are not present in school

2 weeks or more, not due to an excused absence, have a problem with truancy (Kearney, 2008).

Poor school climate, which consists of violence and bullying in school, can increase the likelihood of students avoiding and staying home from school due to perceptions of safety concerns and feeling unsafe (Ingul, Klockner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012). Ingul et al. (2012) pointed out several findings in their study that directly relates to students engaging in other aggressive behaviors, which increases the likelihood of that student dropping out of school. This study has the potential to produce positive social change and provide school administration, faculty, staff, community, and educational psychologists with information and awareness about the school environment and implement preventive measures, including programs that will minimize the number of incidents in school. Results from this study can provide educators the resources to assist students in making decisions to pursue their high school education in a safe environment. The outcome may influence a student's career decisions, professional success, and socioeconomic status. With this information, administration and staff could collaborate to combat students' fear and create a safe environment, so the students will be able to continue their education and increase opportunities to access resources that will impact their future. Also, the results of this study may be used to contribute to providing a safer environment for students attending school and develop resources that can assist victims who have encountered violence at school.

This study is also significant to school leadership because of its potential to bring awareness of students' perception of violence along with implementing programs and policies to assist with a resolution to in-school violence, a major problem in schools across the country. It is school leaders' (school officials, teachers, staff, board members, principals, and superintendents)

responsibility to provide a safe school environment that promotes psychological and physical well-being for students and to seek solutions to the issues that can lead to failure or deterioration in our public and private school systems. The goal of the public education system is for students to receive an education and prepare them for a postsecondary school or employment, which will provide a greater opportunity for becoming self-sufficient.

Society must realize the importance and understand the possible psychological effects that cause students to stay home from school. Second, society must understand the potential consequences that may result in a student not completing school. Third, they must understand students' perceptions of safety concerns related to guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization and the impact it has on predicting school avoidance. For all three reasons, it is necessary to examine these factors in detail.

### **Summary**

Students may encounter or witness certain violent behaviors and crime victimization in school. Many incidents are reported each year of school shootings, bullying, and other crimes committed on campus. Faculty, staff, and administrators have developed various policies, such as Zero Tolerance, to combat or prevent these types of behaviors and incidents from occurring. Students may fear these incidents and their perceptions of safety concerns in school may lead them to avoid school. However, based on research on resilience theory, some students may have built resilience to this type of behavior due to their environment and are not fearful of these violent behaviors or encounters. Therefore, they may have a different perception of safety concerns in school. The primary focus of this study was to analyze students' perceptions of safety concerns related to guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization in relationship



to school avoidance. Students who witness violent behaviors or who are victims of crime while attending school can develop or suffer from psychological issues. These psychological issues can interfere with the student's concentration, motivation, and drive to attend school. A student who stays home from school can face adverse consequences, such as chronic absenteeism, which puts him or her at risk of not completing school.

A literature review exploring the current theoretical research on resilience and social organization theories about criminal and violent activity in schools is presented in Chapter 2. The research design, rationale for the design and the hypothesis is presented in Chapter 3. Detailed information on the results of the study will be presented in Chapter 4. Finally, an extensive discussion of the results, recommendations, and conclusion of the study is presented in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Institutional learning environments are essential in developing an individual's character, behavior, social skills, and knowledge (Noteborn, Dailey-Hebert, Carbonell, & Gijsselaers, 2014). However, students who experience adverse incidents in school may display avoidance. Avoiding school is a primary issue in various nations and has become of major concern among students, teachers, and educational personnel (i.e. counselors, school psychologists, teachers, principals, supporting staff) among all levels of institutions and government as well as parents (Addington, 2008; Aspy, 2004).

This study examined students' perceptions of safety concerns pertaining to specific criminal activity and behavior in school, including the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization with avoidance-related behavior, which refers to staying home from school due to thinking someone may harm them in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or walking to and from school. Such avoidance behavior could cause chronic absenteeism and lead to not completing high school (Ramirez et al., 2012). This study is highly important to identify students' perceptions of criminal activity and behavior in schools to address safety concerns that could lead to school avoidance. The problem of students' perception of safety concerns related to guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization, and their decision to stay home from school, has a negative effect on their school experience and may diminish future opportunities and endeavors (CDC, 2015). The data analyzed in this study may assist teachers, administrators, policy maker, and parents in developing measures to help improve school safety.

In this chapter, I cover the following topics in the literature: how resilience and social disorganization theory set the foundation for students who are prone to violent behavior; and how some thrive in their environment. Literature on threatening incidents, such as, guns, gangs, victimization, and bullying in high school, graduation rates, and school avoidance: is associated with the topic of study. The association of these incidents with students' perceptions of safety concerns are covered as well, including how it affects their decision to avoid school.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

In this review, an extensive literature search was completed. Books, reports and peer-reviewed articles, were identified in the following databases from 2006 to the present: PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Taylor and Francis Online, and Education Complete. Due to their continuous research commitments to find ways for students to achieve their education in a safe environment, the following government agency websites were also searched: CDC, BJS, NCES, U.S. Department of Education, and the National Institutes of Health. ; The following search terms were used: *weapons, gangs, student bullying, victimization, fear, avoidance, behavior, school, attack, harm, school building, resilience, socialization, student victimization, school safety, absenteeism, violence, guns, fighting, and psychological effects.*

Also, NCVS data, which were assessed through the NACJD (2016), were used for extracting the data from the SCS survey. The NCVS website has publications that provide information that pertains to this study thus, it was used for extracting the data from the SCS survey along with accessing a series of articles related to criminal activity in schools and students' responses. This study is unique in the fact that there is a selection of specific violent activities and behaviors from the SCS survey that were allowed for examining students'

perception of safety concerns in school relating to those incidents and how their perceptions predict school avoidance behavior.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A literature review exploring the current theoretical research on resilience and social disorganization theories pertaining to criminal and violent activity in schools is presented in this chapter. Resilience theory (Werner, 1984) is used to explain different aspects of students' perceptions of safety concerns in school pertaining to criminal activity and behavior and its association with students' decisions to avoid school or attend school despite their perceptions. An extensive background on each variable to associate the impact it has on students' perceptions and avoidance behavior is provided. The literature review includes statistics on criminal activity and behavior in school and the psychological effects students may encounter as a result.

Social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1931) and resilience theory (Werner, 1984) provide the framework for this study. Social disorganization theory is prevalent in research pertaining to criminology (Weisburd, Groff, & Yang, 2014). The indicators used for social disorganization include: overcrowded population, a constant change in population, racial and economic factors, crime rates, people who are not employed, and single-parent households (Mustaine, Tewksbury, Huff-Corzine, & Marshall, 2014). Weisburd et al. (2014) conducted a study on the importance of using social disorganization theory in research to understand and explain criminal patterns in neighborhoods and communities to implement prevention measures. Weisburd et al. also considered voting behavior and housing assistance as other indicators of social disorganization. By applying social disorganization theory to this study, it provides

understanding of contributing factors to criminal activity, such as the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization behaviors in students.

Resilience theory includes a multifaceted field analysis, which refers to using more than one strategy to examine factors of a situation, detailing the strengths harbored in people as well as other systems, and the demonstrated capacity of these strengths to contribute to triumphs over adversities experienced in life (Ungar, 2013). Resilience occurs when an individual develops the mechanics to thrive despite these types of stressful situations. It is a theory that, in contemporary society, calls attention to strengths, instead of weaknesses of an individual or a system (Gunderson et al., 2009). Resilience theory asks: Why do some youths build and retain a positive adaptation to challenging situations encountered in life, such as violence, stress, and traumatic events, while other youths do not? (Lee et al., 2012). Besides these types of challenging situations, youths and their families may also encounter financial pressures, family issues, relationship stressors, severe health conditions, employment problems, and other work-related economic stressors (Iacoviello & Charney, 2014).

### **Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory focuses on an individual's ability to understand the processes he or she experiences in life and the anticipated outcomes (Ungar, 2013). In other words, the individual must know what he or she is experiencing, why he or she has encountered the situation, and the result of these experiences. Various conditions may explain these experiences, including: (a) an unhealthy living environment and conditions that are considered a threat, (b) the inward capability and outside resources available to offset a toxic environment and conditions, and (c)

the implementation of the process of the change experienced despite the distress or trauma (Lee et al., 2012).

Although resilience theory focuses on an individual's ability to understand the processes he or she experiences in life and the anticipated outcomes (Ungar, 2013) that lead to adapting positively to traumatic situations, researchers have used different measures to explain, "why some children and adolescents maintain positive adaptation even though they grow up in deprived, troubled and threatening environments" (Lee et al., 2012, p. 54). Two instruments used to measure this phenomenon are: (a) the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM), which is a 58-item tool used to measure individual, relational, community, and cultural tools that may support resilience in adolescents age 12-23 (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2011); and (b) the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (BERS-2; Epstein & Sharma, 2004), which is used to measure interpersonal, intrapersonal, school functioning, family involvement, and effective strengths (Brownlee & Whitley, 2010). Grotberg (1999) referenced several studies that revealed 50–67.7% of children exhibiting resilience could prevail over their first adverse experience in life, such as exposure to violent situations within their environment. According to resilience theory, some students have learned the ethnically diverse requirements needed to understand various cultures and ethnic backgrounds of which their school may be comprised of and adapt to the environment (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2004). This adaptation has helped in developing successful learners in various institutions of learning. However, in some cases, it was ascertained that some students could not adapt to the environment and have no ability to cope positively with a traumatic situation (Mitchell, 2014).

Implementing resilience strategies can help youth and adolescents to overcome their fear of thinking someone may attack or harm them while traveling to and from school or even attending school to complete their high school education successfully (Mitchell, 2014). When students are intimidated in school or en route to school, they may feel discouraged from attending school due to fear of being hurt (Hughes et al., 2015). In some circumstances, they may develop an attitude that they are not worthy of society (Mitchell, 2014).

### **Social Disorganization Theory**

The second theory of this study's framework is social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1931). According to social disorganization theory, which implies that society, of which students are a part, may become desensitized to the tribulations of criminal and violent acts that may result in bullying and other incidents at school (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). Incidents of bullying are leading to students dropping out of school. When a student develops a fear from incidents occurring in school or en route to and from school, he or she may drop out (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013). Therefore, social disorganization theory may help to explain how students' perceptions of safety concerns in school settings may lead to fear and avoidance of school.

Social disorganization theory is related to ecological theories. It links the neighborhood ecological characteristics of the nature of a city and the design of urban space to crime rates, which are core principles that are considered as essential in this theory (Lynch & Boggess, 2015). According to social disorganization theory, crime associated with conditions in certain protective school factors and neighborhood factors include low socioeconomic status, lack of structural stability, neighborhood identification, and high residential mobility (Bradshaw et al.,

2009; Lynch & Boggess, 2015). These neighborhood factors are one of the main factors that lead to bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2009). In unstable environments, communities have weak social control over its members and, as a result, a higher degree of violence is evident among children and adults from such localities (Lynch & Boggess, 2015). Unfortunately, the latter may contribute to young people developing aggressive behavior including fighting and bullying in school (Kaufman, 2013).

Polish immigrants settling in the United States (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) developed the notion that an individual's attitude and thinking processes construct the way in which one interacts with diverse situations, their character, and behavior. These aggressive behavior and characteristics contribute to the formation of the neighborhoods, as explained in the social disorganization theory (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Any activity, such as, gun carrying, gangs, bullying, and victimization, proposed by an individual has a major significance in the individual's social life, based on the fact that it relates to the real situation within the daily life of the person (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

### **Key Variables and Concepts of Safety Concerns**

#### **Threatening Incidents in High Schools in the United States**

As of fall of 2018, 15.1 million students were expected to enrolled in U. S. public high schools, Grades 9 through 12 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017), which correlates approximately to 14-18 years of age. Approximately 58 million U.S. children were attending Grades 1 through 12 in public education institutions in 2017 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017). Since the early 1990s, fear and fear-related school avoidance behaviors due to school-related threatening incidents have been a growing concern for educators, students, and parents.



These incidents are typically associated with youth aggression that has taken place in the precincts of a school property, at events sponsored by the school, or during the students' commute to or from school (Kearney, 2008). Threatening incidents in high schools such as pushing, bullying, slapping, and shoving are actions contributed to inducing more emotional trauma than nonphysical incidents (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Gang-related intimidation, assault, and use of weaponry are other forms of dangerous incidents occurring in high schools. Exposure to these incidents can cause both emotional and physical traumas that may culminate in severe injury or death (David-Ferdon & Simon, 2014).

Neiman (2011) conducted a study and developed a report, *Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings from the 2009-2010 School Survey on Crime and Safety*. The principals of the public schools were primarily responsible for providing the information on the violent incidents for this study. The findings revealed that the type of violent incidents occurring on school property were fighting, threatening, robbery/theft, possession of firearms, explosives, knives, destroying property, and possession of illegal drugs (Nieman, 2011), which is consistent with the behavioral factors addressed in this study.

### **Number of Threatening Incidents**

Since 1992, threatening incidents in schools have been a growing problem (Goldberg, 2010). These incidents have not only consisted of shootings and stabbings, but they also have included bullying (Goldberg, 2010). Reported by ABC News, children who are different from their peers are typically targeted in America's schools (Debreuil & McNiff, 2010). According to a study conducted by Debreuil and McNiff (2010), at least 14 students committed suicide within

a 1-year period (Debreuil & McNiff, 2010). The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) reported over 17 suicides were reported during 2014-2015 (IES, 2018).

A report published by the IES noted that an estimated 54.9 million students attended public and private schools in 2012 in the United States (Snyder & Dillow, 2016). Information from the IES Fact sheet predicted 56.6 million students will enroll in public and private schools during fall 2018 (IES, 2018) The statistics for negative school incidents during that period were as follows:

- Students, aged 5-18 years, were victims of 31 homicides and six suicides, or approximately one homicide or suicide of a school-age youth at school per 1.5 million students enrolled during the 2005-2006 school year.
- Students, aged 12-18 years, experienced 850,100 victimizations of nonfatal crimes at school including thefts and violent crimes.
- Students, aged 12-18 years, were more likely to be victims of theft at school than away from school. On average, 33 victimizations per 1,000 students occurred at a school, 24 thefts per 1000 students occurred at school, and 23 victimizations per 1,000 students occurred away from school in 2012.
- During the 2013 school year, there were 1,051 reported firearm possession incidents at schools.

The percentage of students who reported gangs present at their school in 2013 was 13% for those who were attending public schools and 2% for those who were attending private schools. (Zhang Musu-Gillette & Oudekerk, 2016). Also, the results from Neiman's (2011) study revealed that 83% of gang related violent incidents occurred in schools. These statistics provide a

sample of the negative incidents that have taken place at school, which also includes traveling to and from school, and illustrate the dangerous encounters for school children in large urban schools in the United States.

### **Nature of Threatening Incidents**

There are many types of threatening incidents committed in the school environment. Typical adolescent behavior, such as fighting and weapons carrying, can place students in harm's way. These aggressive behaviors can also expose students to intimidation and threats, making them feel fearful and vulnerable (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999). Threatening incidents towards students and teachers can include verbal and physical aggressions, such as not obeying school rules and disrupting the class as well as fighting, bullying, threatening, insulting, gossiping, and ignoring people. Bowen, Richman, and Brewster (1998) revealed that high school students are negatively influenced by the judgment of psychological interaction in school and their confidence in the ability to achieve demands and challenges of school requirements and goals diminishes. This influence includes threatening acts that can involve students and teachers, and crime directed towards school property.

Several studies have shown differences in encountering threatening incidents between boys and girls. Estevez et al. (2008) revealed that studies by Nansel et al. (2001) and Olweus (1993) showed that regardless of country of origin, boys were more likely to participate in bullying behaviors, both as aggressors and targets. Boys were also more likely to engage in physical violence. Girls were less likely to be involved in direct violence, but were more prone to indirect bullying, such as gossiping or peer isolation. Even though boys showed a higher chance of direct and aggressive behaviors than girls, when both erratic and direct behaviors were

factored together, there were no gender differences (Andreou, 2000; Craig, 1998; Hoover & Juul, 1993).

### **Forms of School-Related Threatening Incidents and Effects on the Students**

**Physical fights.** Physical fighting typically consists of slapping, kicking, shoving, and punching. Physical fighting has contributed to fear-related school avoidance behaviors, which interrupts the focused learning of students and disrupts the entire learning environment (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003).

**Bullying.** A survey on the prevalence of bullying in the U.S. during the 2015 school year indicated that approximately 21% of students in public schools reported exposure to bullying on a daily or weekly basis (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2017). Furthermore, 9% of public schools have reported increases in bullying in classrooms every day or in a weekly fashion. The behaviors were meant to harass and intimidate the victim and induce fear or fear-related school avoidance behaviors in students (Robers et al., 2012).

Studies have identified diverse forms of bullying behaviors, which are broadly classified as direct bullying, non-physical bullying, physical bullying, and verbal bullying. Direct bullying includes teasing, threatening acts, and taunting behaviors (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). In some cases, victims were subject to hitting or mugging by one or more bullies. Verbal bullying entails calling of names, teasing, and taunting, as well as spreading unsubstantiated rumors primarily to intimate the victim or induce fear of harm (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Physical bullying encompasses kicking, hitting, destroying items of a victim, or conniving with a fellow bully to assault a victim. In addition to causing psychological trauma, physical bullying may cause physical trauma to the victim. Bullying is a primary inducer of fear-related school avoidance

behavior (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). The nonphysical, nonverbal bullying entails the use of obscene body language, gestures, and threats using manipulative friendship. Moreover, sexual harassment has shown to involve intentions of demeaning, harassing, humiliating, or embarrassing a victim based on his or her sex or sexuality.

Recent studies have found that both boys and girls are exposed to similar rates of bullying (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Robers et. al., 2012). These findings were consistent with earlier studies. In a questionnaire administered by Noaks and Noaks (2000), girls and boys alike experienced similar rates of bullying at 28% during some period of their academic journey. In the same report, Noaks and Noaks reported an increase in bullying for girls during their school years and a lower rate for boys at 25%. Girls experienced more gossip spreading than boys (Noaks & Noaks, 2000).

A study conducted by Randa and Reynolds (2014) focused on cyberbullying and the impact it has on students avoiding school using data from the 2009 NCVS/SCS survey. To look at the significant effects of cyberbullying, the researchers first examined the relationship between traditional bullying and other forms of bullying (Randa & Reynolds, 2014). The study examined the use of the internet to victimize by bullying, including physical, psychological, and verbal attacks that were communicated and carried out online or at school (Randa & Reynolds, 2014). The independent variable in the study was cyberbullying and the dependent variable was school avoidance. The researchers used logistic regression to analyze the data. Their findings revealed that cyberbullying predicted avoidance of school. The weakness in this study is the complex environment of the internet that was used. The strength of this study is that the findings support other research findings on traditional bullying (Randa & Reynolds, 2014). Therefore, based on this

study, it can be concluded that a student who is cyberbullied may have a negative perception of safety concerns in school.

**Gang violence.** It is important to note the trend of gang presence different in school types. Zhang et al. (2017) stated the following in The School Crime Safety 2016 report:

In 2015, a higher percentage of students from urban areas (15 percent) reported a gang presence at their school than of students from suburban (10 percent) and rural areas (4 percent). The percentage of students from urban areas who reported a gang presence at their school was lower in 2015 than in every survey year between 2001 (29 percent) and 2011 (23 percent). However, there was no measurable change in this percentage between 2013 and 2015. The same pattern was observed for students from suburban and rural areas, with lower percentages of students reporting a gang presence in 2015 than in all years from 2001 to 2011, but no measurable change between 2013 and 2015. (p. 64)

Two percent of students purported to have experienced extremist and cult activities, which can be referred to as gang activity, over the same period. The researchers also noted that during the 2009 school year, an estimated 20% of students, aged 12 -18 years, reported observing gang activity at school.

Gang presence in high schools has forced students who fear gangs to avoid some school activities or one or more places within a school premise due to fear of being harmed or attacked. A study by Robers et al. (2012) indicated that high school students, aged 12 - 18 years, complained that they were more in fear of being attacked or brutalized while in school (4%) than while going to or from school (3%). According to this study, students avoided some school activities and skipped classes to stay at home and away from school. Other students reported

avoiding some places within the school premises, such as the school cafeteria, some entrances, restrooms, hallways, and staircases of school buildings.

Exposure to gangs in school has resulted in negative student behavior, such as youth crime, drug sales, and violence (Sirpal, 1997). Students exposed to gang violence tend to commit crimes, use or sell drugs, and conduct various acts of violence. Students have easily become vulnerable to gang involvement (Trubow, Young, Smith, & Kallakurchi, 1999). Trubow et al. (1999) pointed out how poor academic progress can lead to gang membership:

The combination of early academic failure in learning to read and write, chronic attendance problems, English language difficulties, and the feelings of non-acceptance by students, teachers, and principals lead students to school disengagement and the need to seek a group that will accept them, (p.16).

Association with gang violence can fulfill unmet personal needs, such as the need to belong, feel loved, be part of a group or family, and feel accepted (Trubow et al., 1999). Students who are in secondary schools are more likely to be recruited by gangs (Trubow et al., 1999). Research conducted by Robers, Zang, Truman, and Snyder (2012) reported that between 2001 and 2015, students reported gang presence in school was down from 20 to 11%.

**Gun-related incidents.** A study conducted by Beland and Kim (2016) revealed that the presence of guns had a significant adverse effect on the academic goals of children in large urban centers. Students who reported fear of gun violence also admitted that those fears contributed to lack of concentration and academic progress. A study conducted by Walsh (2010) focused solely on incidents in which students possessed guns at school but did not fire the weapons. Also, Goldberg (2010) reported, “Vincent Schiraldi, Director of the Justice Policy Institution in

Washington, blamed the recent wave of school violence on the accessibility of weapons” (p. 39). Unforeseen burdens have been placed on school administrators, teachers, and security personnel to eliminate the presence of guns on school property. The school administration must be diligent in making sure that guns stay out of the schools for the safety of the children while they are at school (Walsh, 2010).

A study conducted by the Everytown (n.d.) organization found that there were 65-gun related incidents at various schools in the United States in 2017, including nonfatal and fatal assaults, guns discharged with no injuries, suicide or an attempt suicide, accidental shooting, and no injuries of any kind. This study focused on gathering the number of incidents to bring awareness to the senseless acts of violence and to make policymakers aware of the issue of guns in the hands of people who are not supposed to possess weapons.

The first step in preventing school shooting is to understand what causes a person to commit the crime. Bonnano and Levenson (2014) conducted a study investigating the effects of the aftermath of a school shooting and explored preventive measures. The authors’ primary focus was to analyze the characteristics of school shooters, which they determined were very complex. Their study’s theoretical foundation was the Levin and Madfis (2009) five-stage sequential model, which consists of five stages: (a) chronic strain, (b) uncontrolled strain, (c) acute strain, (d) the planning phase, and (e) the massacre. The authors believe that these stages accumulate in phases before the shootings occur. This model provides a basis for understanding school shooters.

Aspy, Oman, Vesely, McLeroy, Rodine, and Marshall (2004) asserted that the behavior of carrying weapons has interfered with teaching and learning because it can build up a



threatening and intimidating environment. The presence of weapons on school premises has created fear among students, leading to fear-related school avoidance behaviors.

### **Exposure to Threatening Incidents in High School and Psychological Trauma**

Students who develop fear and avoidance behaviors due to school-related threatening incidents may be at an increased risk for mental health issues. Avoiding school by being absent can be indicative of a serious physical or mental health issue (Kearney, 2007). A study by Kearney (2007) also revealed that students who are absent from school could be susceptible to other risky behaviors, such as teen pregnancy, suicide, and violence. The findings revealed that absenteeism had put students at risk of dropping out of school completely (Kearney, 2007).

The CDC conducted a study to understand school violence. The CDC (2016) Fact Sheet reported how various forms of youth violence and behaviors, such as bullying and pushing, can affect the students' emotional health more than causing physical harm. Being a victim or experiencing a criminal activity or behavior in school can lead to having psychological issues (CDC, 2016). Traumatization can occur following a physical or mental threat or assault upon a person's sense of self-worth, security, character, or the means to strive. Moroz (2005) defined psychological trauma as anything that presents harm to a person or someone close to the person who plays an important role in a student's life. Experiencing trauma can lead to the development of fear and avoidance of school. Being fearful of bullying can result in poor school performance because of a student's impaired concentration. It can also result in fear of further bullying if the student shows good performance (Navarro, 2012).

Because of trauma related to threatening incidents, students have been at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). PTSD consists of

such symptoms as feelings of hopelessness and expecting to die a violent death. PTSD is a description of symptoms that a student may have after experiencing trauma, such as being a victim of school-related threatening incidents that include bullying and fighting (Navarro, 2012). PTSD includes such emotional and behavioral problems as depression and anxiety, which can interfere with academic success and even contribute to dropping out of school.

### **Links Between Fear/Avoidance of School-Related Threatening Incidents and Academic Performance in the United States**

**Fear/avoidance.** A person who encounters a real or perceived danger of a fearful situation usually experiences a physiological stress response that prepares them for a spontaneous reaction to fight or flight (Backstrom & Windberg, 2013). A person may be faced with the decision to stay and fight to protect themselves or to flee from the dangerous or threatening situation. One or multiple encounters can lead a person to avoid the area where they are threatened or are perceived to be a threat (Schauer & Elbert, 2015).

**Incidents in school leading to fear.** The high school period is a unique time when students are transitioning into adulthood. It is the time when there is often a strong emphasis on future endeavors. In high school, the student transitions into adult-oriented academic and social challenges (Underwood & Rosen, 2013). High school is a time during which students refine their development of communication, academic, and social skills, as well as their physical abilities (Underwood & Rosen, 2013). Students exposed to school-related threatening incidents may be traumatized by these experiences, and this exposure can interrupt aspects of their normal development into adulthood (Kataoka, Langley, Wong, Shilpa, & Stein, 2012).

A study conducted by Barrett, Jennings, and Lynch (2012) examined students' fear of crime that they encountered at school and whether it had an impact on avoiding school due to fear of being a victim of these crimes. Also, Barrett et al. (2012) study examined how fear and avoiding school affected their academic progress. The researchers used data from the NCVS/SCS survey. The independent variables measured were fear of crime and avoidance in school. The dependent variables measured were skipping class, academic achievement, involvement in extracurricular activities, and future academic aspirations. A logistic regression was used to analyze the data. The results of the study concluded that students' fear leading to avoidance of school had a negative impact on their academic experience. A weakness of the study is that all the possible types of crimes, such as, rape, robbery, and sexual abuse were not addressed. Students could likely be afraid of one specific type of crime over another. A strength of this study is that it is consistent with other studies predicting that students' fear of crime results in avoiding school.

According to Randa and Wilcox (2010), the psychological well-being of a student, together with his or her academic performance, has a high chance of direct impairment by fear and fear-associated school avoidance behaviors. Fear and avoidance behaviors induce the change in the behavior of a student (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). This construct is anchored in the intuition that fear stimulates behavioral changes. These behavioral changes are based on previous experiences of victimization and prevailing environmental signals, which lead to adaptive behavior as a means to avoid and avert victimization (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). For instance, exposure to threatening incidents in high school has caused fear and avoidance. As a result, students have tended to display absenteeism, poor academic performance, avoidance of academic

activities, and have been at risk of dropping out of school (Kearney, 2006; Kearney, 2008; Kogan, Luo, Murray, & Brody, 2005; Randa & Wilcox, 2010).

### **Other Risk and Protective Factors for High School Dropout**

**Socioeconomic factors.** The NCES has indicated that since 2013, dropout rates have increased due to lack of financial stability to pay for educational expenses. Students who drop out of school have tended to earn lower wages due to lack of education and skills. This process may lead to an economic crisis (Bauman, 2008). Fifty-three percent of high school dropouts have worked for lower wages than high school graduates (Bauman, 2008). Research that examined the long-term effect of economic hardship, which has been a factor in increasing crimes in urban areas, has revealed an increased number of student dropouts (Bauman, 2008). Also, students from families with low socioeconomic status are at risk of dropping out, and these students have comprised nearly 20% of dropouts (Glennie, Bonneau, Vandellen, & Dodge, 2012). Families with poor socioeconomic status have consisted of 45.7% of youth with, 10 - 13 years, of school without completion of a formal education or equivalency credential (Bauman, 2008). This constellation of factors associated with dropouts suggests that youth may choose to leave school in order to assist in supporting their families financially (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

**Gender and ethnicity.** Males have been more likely to drop out of school than females. Data from the Digest of Education Statistics (2017) indicated that 7.11% of males were high school dropouts while female dropouts comprised only 5.1%. Seven percent of male and 3.5% of female high school students did not attend school due to fear of being victimized (Astor,

Benbenishty, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002). NCES (2018) reported there was only a small difference in the dropout rate between males and females over the past 4 decades (IES, 2018).

Students have also dropped out of school at different rates according to their ethnicity (Marquessa, 2011). NCES (2011) data showed that 24% of students of Hispanic origin, 12% of African-American students, and 7% of European American students were most likely to drop out before graduation.

**Neighborhood factors.** An association between negative school behaviors and increased neighborhood social disorganization can be made (Bowen, 1999). It is important to note that African American students who lived in neighborhoods with higher average household incomes demonstrated higher high school graduation rates and were less likely to commit violent acts (Vartanian & Gleason, 1999). Neighborhoods with higher levels of deterioration, such as abandoned buildings, drug dealing, and the infestation of violent crimes helped to dilute the concentration of students finishing high school, and students from these neighborhoods had lower grade point averages (GPAs). Thus, students who lived in better-conditioned neighborhoods may have developed a more positive behavior pattern and achieved academic success.

Researchers have found that “the prevalence of crime in neighborhoods and negative peer cultural influence had direct negative effects on a student’s sense of school coherence” (South, Baumer, & Lutz, 2003, p. 48). Furthermore, exposure to peer groups that devalue education has led to lower educational attainment. These groups are easily found in inner city neighborhoods, lower income communities, and debilitating family environments. Bowen and Van Dorn (2002) found that “increasing levels of neighborhood crime predicted increased violent school

behaviors, such as fighting and property destruction” (p .9). Other researchers have discovered that the same characteristics associated with youth committing crimes have applied to youth displaying violent behaviors (Nash & Bowen, 1999). Therefore, one may conclude that if a person lives in or is exposed to a toxic environment then there is a chance of displaying violent behavior.

**Protective school factors.** Mitchell (2014) summarized research has shown that school climate has influenced students’ school experiences including social and emotional ability and attitudes fostered by the school, and therefore, has contributed to how well the students have performed academically. These findings were consistent with earlier findings that school climate is proven to have an impact on students’ school experience and academic performance (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; Freiberg, 1999).

Teachers who have had a positive impact on students’ perception of learning, behavior, and education have been shown to increase students’ attendance, engagement in school, and additional time for studying (Rosenfield, Rachman, & Bowen, 2000). Additionally, research has found that students, who were impacted positively by teachers’ views on learning, have avoided problematic behavioral patterns and ultimately have attained better grades (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Essentially, the research conducted by Croninger and Lee (2001) suggested that teachers are the catalyst for the students’ ultimate desires to continue their education and graduate from high school with hopeful educational aspirations to obtain a bachelor’s degree, a trade, or vocational skills (Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, it is also imperative to recognize the critical nature of the relationship between students and teachers and the school climate (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). The success of students from families who are subject to lower

income or deprived of ethnically diverse environments, which may derive from lack of resources, has been reliant on the overall school climate in general (Johns, 2001).

### **Alternatives to a High School Diploma: General Education Diploma (GED)**

Program regulations governing the qualification to take the GED differ by state. In most states, it is a requirement for the GED candidate to be a resident of the state and at least 17 years old. In other states, students who are younger than 17 years old can take the test, but they are required to have a letter of parental confirmation that they are allowed to sit for the test. A letter of approval from the student's school district is also required. After a student successfully passes the GED test, he or she has completed the high school equivalency requirement that may be required to obtain a job or attend college.

Over 90% of postsecondary institutions and businesses accept the GED credential; thus, this is an indication that the GED is equivalent to a high school diploma in some form. However, data have also indicated limited wages and advancement opportunities with GED attainment as opposed to a high school diploma (Clark, Borg, Calleja, Chircop, & Portelli, 2005; Ewert & Kominski, 2014).

Understanding the dynamics that exist between school safety concerns and high school dropout rates requires an exploration of school-related threatening incidents that can lead to safety concerns. In the next section, information about Georgia High Schools is synthesized to provide an example. A description of prevalent threatening incidents, the nature of these incidents, and the effects of these incidents are covered. Finally, there is a discussion of the link between students' perceptions of safety concerns and dropout rates.

## **Georgia Public High Schools**

### **Social Context of Georgia Public High Schools**

According to a survey referenced in *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity* (2015), poverty in Georgia has been approximately 19% with 8.8% of its residents living under abject poverty lines. Food insecurity has been reported at 16.9%. The unemployment rate has been reported at 7.6%, and 36.6% of Georgia residents are low income-earning families in the working class. Across ethnic lines, there were approximately 514,000 African American and Hispanic American children who lived with nuclear or extended families who did not have full-time jobs held by any parent throughout the year.

According to data collected by the Georgia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2013), approximately 84.3% of Georgia residents held a high school degree with a relatively low transition rate from high school to a four-year college. Only 28.3% of high school graduates in Georgia had a college degree. Fifty-nine percent of college students had an education debt. Approximately 12% of youths in Georgia between 16 and 19 years of age have been school dropouts without any form of employment. More than 50% of the high school student population in Georgia are European American. Among other ethnic lines, approximately 34.9% of the student population was African-American; Latin-American students accounted for 9.1%; and about 5.8% are Asian American and other minority groups. Housing in Georgia has been a major problem with over 34% of residents being renters. Approximately 307,800 people have lived in houses that were more expensive than their earning capability. More than 16,500 people living in Georgia were identified as homeless (Mitchell, 2014).



Teen birth rates were reported as the highest in isolated rural counties, followed by metro-adjacent rural counties and urban counties. In this regard, for every 1,000 teenagers, approximately 41 gave birth every year with close to 38% of children living in families supported by single parents (Mitchell, 2014).

There were 213,417 grandparents living with and raising their grandchildren in Georgia (Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, 2015), while approximately 6,895 children lived with foster parents. These and other economic and educational problems in Georgia have led to conditions that have affected families and school-aged children. There are fewer resources at individual, family, and community levels to deal with these problems. These problems may ultimately lead to other issues addressed in this study.

### **Safety Concerns in Georgia Public High Schools**

High schools in Georgia reported physical fights as the most prevalent type of incident occurring in school, followed by bullying, pushing, shoving, and the use of weapons. The least reported incident was sexual harassment. Shiloh High School in Gwinnett County had the most incidents reported with 83 physical fights, 51 incidents of disorderly conduct, and two reports of sexual harassment (Richards, 2014). Also, in Gwinnett County, Meadowcreek High School reported 75 physical fights, 49 cases of disorderly conduct, and one sexual harassment report. These incidents lead to the onset of using Gwinnett County schools to represent the level of threatening incidents in the entire state of Georgia. There were approximately 2,105 episodes of physical fighting in 2013, which translated to at least 12 physical fights every day, all year, in an education system that has more than 100 high schools (Richards, 2014). Shiloh Middle School reported 125 physical fights and led the school system, with Parkview High School reporting a

sharp increase in the magnitude of school-related threatening incidents after reporting 30 physical fights in 2013 (Richards, 2014).

A study by the CDC (2014) stated that some of the risk factors for school-related threatening incidents include association with gangs in the neighborhood, association with other aberrant peers and groups, use of drugs, tobacco products, and alcohol. The reasons may vary based on violent history, poor academic grades, ineffective family functioning, and increased poverty levels, as is the case with a significant number of children (Robers et al., 2014). The level of threatening incidents in rural high schools is purportedly equal to the level in urban high schools (Robers et al., 2014). Studies have established that possession of some form of weaponry, such as hunting rifles, within school premises was normal in rural settings where possession of such items was culturally acceptable and disregarded as dangerous. This belief is common among rural communities (Robers et al., 2014).

### **Safety Concerns in School Settings**

According to the NCES (2013) report conducted in 2011, there was an increase in students, 12 to 18 years, of age reporting they were afraid of being attacked or harmed at school, in a school building, on a school bus, or going to and from school. The report indicated that there was a variation in reporting fears of school safety based on race/ethnicity. These findings contrast to those from 1995 to 2010 that suggested that “the percentage of students who reported being afraid of attack or harm at school decreased from 12% to 4%” (Robers et al., 2014, p. 76). Students reported a significant difference in avoiding a variety of places in school due to fear of being harm or attacked (NCES, 2013). For instance, students who are considered underclassmen, which typically refer to Grades 9 through 11, reported that some senior (12<sup>th</sup> grade) students

might prohibit them from visiting study areas, such as the library and the lavatories. When some students do not have opportunities to access resources such as a library, they may get poor grades due to a lack of decent reading materials that are important to learning. Such situations may lead to school dropouts or increased number of failures in school (NCES, 2013).

Poor performance of some students in school may lead to dropping out of school due to fear of criticism from other students who perform well, get higher grades, and who may have been their molesters in the past years (Richards, 2014). Observing or being involved in dangerous incidents can be an obstacle toward the success of some students because of safety concerns while attending school or being bullied while attending or traveling to and from school. Students are more afraid of being attacked or otherwise harmed when traveling to and from school than being at school (Mitchell, 2014).

Understanding the dynamics between school safety concerns and high school dropout rates requires an exploration of each phenomenon independently as well as a discussion of how each affects the other (Kaufman, 2013). For instance, the inability to concentrate on academic affairs may be a result of being bullied, hence, resulting in poor concentration because of injuries caused by a student experiencing torture by fellow students. Students may also lose focus and interest on academic achievement because they do not have any interest in being in a place where they do not feel comfortable (Richards, 2014).

A national survey study conducted in 2013 by David-Ferdon and Simon (2014), showed that approximately 8.1% of high school students claimed to have engaged in a physical fight with another student in school or on school property in one year. Moreover, slightly over 7.1% of students reported to have failed to go to school more than once in a month's time asserting fear

and feeling unsafe traveling to or from school (CDC, 2015). The same study revealed that 5.2% of students reported to have carried some type of weapon including a knife, gun, or a club while on school premises or traveling to or from school on one or more occasions during the prior 12 months. Before the study, 6.9% of students were threatened or injured by a fellow student with a weapon while traveling to or from school or when in school (CDC, 2015). Almost 20% of students claimed to be victims of physical bullying, and 14.8% claimed to have been cyber-bullied in the previous year (David-Ferdon & Simon, 2014). The same study identified that deaths due to high school violence were very rare, although 11 homicides of high school-aged children were reported between 2010 and 2011. These incidents occurred within school premises (CDC, 2015; David-Ferdon & Simon, 2014). An estimation was made that approximately 749,200 violent victimizations on school premises were nonfatal in 2012 among students 12 and 18 years of age (CDC, 2015). In 2014, approximately 5% of teachers reported having experienced a physical attack by a student in their school (CDC, 2015).

### **Linking Safety Concerns and the School Dropout Rate**

Linking safety issues in schools to the dropout rate is an area of concern for the future of our students, parents, teachers, and the success of the United States educational system. The professionals in the educational psychology field should devote more efforts to students' needs and identify obstacles hindering students from achieving their academic success. School safety concerns can be an obstacle for some students because they may fear becoming a victim while traveling to and from school and while attending school (Schreck & Miller, 2003).

Kokko et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study focusing on the relationship between male students' prosocial behavior and physical aggression in schools with

dropping out of school and physical violence. The authors also explored the students' socioeconomic status and aggressive behavior. Data were gathered from teachers' self-reported recollection of students' aggressive behavior. The sample was comprised of 1,025 males from 53 schools. Aggressive behavior was defined as kicking, biting, fighting, and bullying other children (Kokko et al., 2006). Results revealed that aggression predicted male students dropping out of school and violence, but prosocial behavior did not. Although this study did not include girls, it provides good representation since various studies have been conducted to show that there are gender differences in aggression, with boys being more aggressive than girls (Langford et al., n.d).

Townsend et al.'s (2008) study addressed an international issue in its comparison of bullying to dropout rates in 39 schools. Their cross-sectional longitudinal research study focused on victims of bullying and the effect of bullying on dropout rates. The researchers used a questionnaire to explore other factors contributing to dropout rates, such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and single parenting. The theoretical basis for this study suggested that victims of bullying may experience and have increased risk of psychosomatic symptoms. The results showed a significant relationship between bullying and the dropout rate. Approximately 37% of girls compared to 35 % of boys were at risk out dropping out of school due to fear of bullying (Townsend et al., 2008). This study supports the literature review research because it focuses on violent incidents in schools and compares it to the dropout rate and associates bullying outcomes with high school dropout rates. Dropping out of school can be linked to avoiding school, resulting in chronic absenteeism.

Kennemore et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study to analyze experiences of school staff who responded to students exposed to violence in school. The authors drew data from school personnel, such as administrators, teachers, counselors, school social workers, and psychologists who had interactions with and influence on students. The findings revealed that school personnel could make a difference in changing how violence has an impact on students, which could then give students a feeling of safety while attending school.

Kennemore et al. attributed personal experiences and one's environment as contributing factors in understanding the effects of exposure to violence on students. This study differed from others in the same field because it gathered information from professionals in the school to provide information on how a response to and observation of school violence can help students who are victims of violence. The authors found that the involvement of school staff plays a significant part in assisting students in how they cope with violence occurrences in the school environment. Application of this research can contribute to preventive measures by informing ways school personnel and the community can play a vital role in predicting and targeting issues deriving from students' perception of safety concerns in school. Also, school personnel are key to assisting students who are being exposed to violence to seek help to limit the effects it may have on completing their education.

### **Summary**

The literature review revealed that high school students who are exposed to threatening incidents might develop fear due to a lack of perceived safety in the school setting. Students may reduce these fears by making the decision to avoid school. This literature review suggests that chronic absenteeism can potentially lead to dropping out of school completely. The present

research studies examined students' perceptions of safety concerns and the relation to school avoidance through the lens of resilience theory and social disorganization theory. Although the current review of the literature has provided some information linking safety concerns to the likelihood of dropping out of school, there is a gap in the literature on student perceptions of safety concerns and self-reported avoidance behavior. By analyzing this problem, school systems, communities, parents, and students could be provided with insights into perceptions of school-related safety concerns to provide a safe place for students to learn.

In Chapter 3, I summarize the methods used to examine students' perceptions of safety concerns and their self-reported avoidance of school. These methods included the use of archival data obtained from the 2015 NCVS/SCS.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

School violence is a growing concern and an impending danger for our nation's youth. Fear of being a victim has the potential to jeopardize students' ability to obtain a quality education. The purpose of this study was to examine whether students' perceptions of safety concerns pertaining to the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization predict school avoidance. Using archival data, I analyzed data collected on 12-18-year-old adolescents from private and public schools in the United States who completed the 2015 NCVS/SCS (Zhang et al., 2016). The NCVS was co-designed by the NCES and BJS (IES, 2015). Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS, using logistic regression to determine to what extent students' perceptions of the presence of weapons and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and traveling to and from school, predicted their decision to stay home from school.

In this chapter I provide the research questions and hypotheses. I also provide the sampling procedures, operationalization of constructs and variables, instrumentation, information on data collection, data analysis, threats to validity, and ethical considerations.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study used a cross-sectional design to examine students' perceptions of safety concerns about the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and traveling to and from school, as predictors of their decision to stay home from school. This was an appropriate research design for this study because a cross-sectional design was originally used in the NCVS/SCS survey. The use of tests, questionnaires, and a database with numerical



data requires quantitative methods; the NCVS/SCS survey is based on answers that students provided in response to a questionnaire (Dodd, 2008). This quantitative research design included retrieval of archived numerical data from the SCS survey, an existing dataset. Creswell (2005) and Burton-Jones (2009) defined quantitative research as the collection of numerical data from participants and the use of statistical methods to analyze the data and draw unbiased conclusions. As the researcher, I followed these same procedures.

The original NCVS/SCS survey was created to survey students about victimization. The data set consists of dichotomous and nominal scale questions. The dataset includes information on geographic location, SES, current and last grade completed, and ethnicity. I extracted and analyzed data from the original SCS dataset on the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, fear of victimization, and school avoidance using IBM SPSS.

Beucher (2009) stated that qualitative research could retrieve the experiences of the people interviewed, but challenges could occur when participants don't provide information and communication problems arise, which affect the validity of the data. The validity of the data substantiated why qualitative data would not assist in achieving the purpose prescribed for the current study. Other studies on this topic may support the need for a mixed methods research: a combination of quantitative and qualitative research (Symonds & Gorard, 2010). However, mixed methods research would not fulfill the purpose of this study for the same reasons qualitative research would not fulfill the purpose. The archival data used for this study was simply quantitative, and therefore, no other method was appropriate. The quantitative method of research supports and confirms the appropriateness to use archival data because it requires a data-driven and structured process.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research question and hypotheses for this study were as follows:

To what extent do high school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, lead to school avoidance?

*H<sub>0</sub>1*: High school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, does not lead to school avoidance.

*H<sub>1</sub>1*: High school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, does lead to school avoidance.

## Methodology

### Population

Archival data were extracted from the most recent NCVS/SCS survey, which consists of 6,500 students, aged 12-18 years, who attended U.S. public or private schools and were enrolled at least six months before being administered the SCS questionnaire in 2015 (NCES, 2016).

There were an estimated 50,000 households and 100,000 adults and adolescents surveyed to determine the rate of occurrences, traits, and effects of being a victim of crime. According to the NACJD (2016), the NCVS was designed with four primary objectives:

To (a) develop detailed information about the victims and consequences of crime, (b) estimate the number and types of crimes not reported to the police, (c) provide uniform measures of selected types of crimes, and (d) permit comparisons over time and types of

areas. The survey categorizes crimes as "personal" or "property." Personal crimes cover rape and sexual attack, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, and purse-snatching/pocket-picking, whereas property crimes cover burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft, and vandalism. The data from the NCVS/SCS survey are particularly useful for calculating crime rates, both aggregated and disaggregated, and for determining changes in crime rates from year to year. (para. 2)

### **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

The original data collected from the SCS survey was part of the 2015 NCVS study as a supplemental survey; therefore, existing data were extracted from the SCS portion of the NCVS study. The NCVS is a national survey of students, ages 12-18 years, attending U.S. public or private schools. The households were selected based on the geographic area that consists of major metropolitan areas and their borders (NCVS, 2014). The decennial census determined the household size (NCVS, 2014). Interviews were conducted continuously throughout the year in a panel design that divided the NCVS sample into six rotating groups. Within each of the six rotating groups, six panels were designated, each of which was interviewed each month and every 6 months, either in-person or by telephone, for a total of seven interviews (NCVS, 2014, p.10).

**Power analysis.** It is important to have a large enough sample to achieve statistical significance in a population. Statistical power analysis is one technique that helps determine what size sample is needed for a study. G\*Power 3.0.10 was used to calculate power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). There are no formal standards for power (referred to as  $\pi$ ), or alpha (referred to as  $\alpha$ ). In most cases, researchers assess the power of their tests using  $\pi =$

0.80 and significance using  $\alpha = .05$  as a standard for adequacy. A power analysis was conducted using (a)  $\pi = .80$ , (b) effect size = .15, and (c)  $\alpha = .05$ . A medium effect size of .15 for regression analyses was used based on the convention set by Cohen (1988). At 80% power and an alpha of 0.05, the analysis revealed a minimum sample size of 610. Even though the population size (N) for the original survey was 4,767, to achieve the goal for this survey, 610 participants were needed to produce an 80% probability of finding a relationship, if one exists (Faul et al., 2007). The SCS survey population of 4,757 subjects exceeded the required minimum sample size of 610 participants for the present study.

### **Instrumentation**

This study is based on archival data from the SCS survey of the 2015 NCVS (NCES, 2015). The SCS survey is a national survey, and approximately 4,757 students aged 12 through 18 years, in U.S. public and private elementary, middle, and high schools, have taken it since 1989. The SCS survey data are open to the public, and permission is not required to use it. According to NCES (2013), the SCS survey instrument was created to collect information about victimization, crime, and safety at school and traveling to and from school. This survey is used to measure students' experience with violence or perception of crime and safety concerns at school or traveling to and from school. Participants self-rated how they perceived violent characteristics and activities while in high school or going to and from school. The complete survey covers topics such as (a) alcohol and drug availability; (b) fighting, bullying, and hate-related behaviors; (c) gun and weapon carrying; and (d) gangs at school.

The topics pursued in the present study were students' perceptions of safety concerns pertaining to the presence of guns, presence of gangs, student bullying, fear of victimization, and

staying home from school. In the SCS survey, students were asked about incidents that happened at school that made them feel bad or hurt, and they were also asked if these events were perceived as bullying in survey items 19a, 19b, 19c, and 19d. Presence of guns was addressed in items 35, 36a, 36b, and 37 by asking if the student brought, knew of another student who brought a weapon, and/or had seen another student with a weapon or possessing a loaded gun at school or on school grounds. The presence of gangs was addressed in items 30, 31, and 32. These items asked students if gangs were present on school property and if the gangs were involved with selling drugs, starting fights, or attacking other students. The answers to these items were answered in Yes or No format. The other items were answered on a nominal scale ranging from 1 to 5: once or twice this school year (1), once or twice a month (2), once or twice a week (3), almost every day (4), and don't know (5). School avoidance was measured by item 23d by asking students if they avoided school because they thought that someone might attack or harm them in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, and/or going to or from school within the past 6 months. This dichotomous question was presented in a Yes or No format.

Students were asked about victimization in questions 34 a-c. The students were asked how often they feared of being harmed or attacked in school, on school property, and traveling to and from school. Students were also asked how often they were afraid of being attacked outside of the places mentioned. These questions were answered on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 4 (*most of the time*). The SCS survey data “displays the percentages of students bullied at school or cyber-bullied anywhere by student reports of unfavorable school conditions; selected school security measures; criminal victimization at school; and personal fear, avoidance behaviors, fighting, and weapon carrying at school” (NCES, 2013, p. 2). Other crime-related variables were also

collected, including “reported presence of gangs, guns, drugs, and alcohol at school” (NCES, 2013, p. 1). Lessne and Harmalkar (2013) examined two variables from the SCS survey, bullying and cyber-bullying. Their results revealed a relationship between bullying and cyber-bullying victimization (NCES, 2013, p. 1).

### **Operationalization of Variables**

In this study, the independent variables were presence of guns, presence of gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization. The dependent variable was avoidance behavior, specifically, staying home from school due to thinking someone may attack or cause harm in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to and from school within the past 6 months. The SCS survey asked respondents whether or not they had been a victim of or participated in the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, fear of victimization and whether they decided to stay home from school. Data from the following SCS survey items were analyzed for this study: (a) Item 35A (guns) “Some people bring guns, knives, or objects that can be used as weapons to school for protection. During this school year, did YOU ever bring the following to school or onto school grounds?” a. A gun; (b) Item 38A (gangs), “Are there any gangs at your school?”; (c) Item 22 (bullying), “Bullying happens when one or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove or hurt another student. It is not bullying when students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way. Bullies are usually stronger, or have more friends or more money, or some other power over the student being bullied. Usually, bullying happens over and over, or the student being bullied thinks it might happen over and over. By this definition, have you been bullied at school, by another student this school year?”; (d) Item 34A (victimization), “How often are you afraid that

someone will attack or harm you in the school building or on school property?"; and (e) Item 33C (school avoidance), "Did you stay home from school because you thought someone might attack or harm you in the school building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to or from school?". Questions 35A, 38A, 22, and 33C were answered as either 1 = Yes, or 2 = No. Question 34A was answered on Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Most of the time).

The variables in the present study aligned with their respective operationalizations in the NCVS/SCS survey. *School* is defined by NCVS (2013) as "inside the school building, on school property, or on the way to or from school" (Robers et al., 2014, p. v). *Presence of guns* refers to students' possession of a firearm on school property or traveling to or from school (Robers et al., 2014). *Presence of gangs* refers to three or more persons in a group, organization, or association with a leader and partaking in criminal activities (Howell & Howell, 2014). *Fear of victimization* is fear of violent crimes, simple assault, sexual assault, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery (Robers et al., 2014). *Bullying* refers to spreading rumors, harassing others, calling someone derogatory names, and intimidating others (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008) on school property, in the neighborhood, or internet. *School avoidance* refers to students who stayed away from school, school related activities, or classes because they were fearful that someone might attack or harm them at school or on the way to or from school (NCES, 2016).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Johnston (2017) defined secondary data analysis as "analysis of data that was collected by someone else for another primary purpose" (p. 619). The advantages of using secondary data analysis are lack of concern about obtaining consent from the respondents or their parents, debriefing, and data collection. In addition, it provides data on a large scale and various

demographic areas (Johnston, 2017). Nevertheless, using secondary data analysis proposes some disadvantages as well. One disadvantage is the researcher being able to find and match a previous study with their area of interest or current study (Johnston, 2017). Another disadvantage of using secondary data is that the researcher is not knowledgeable of the process of the data collection as far as the limitations and participation of the respondents other than what is provided by the original source. Therefore, there is no resolution for this limitation because the data collected cannot be changed by the researcher (Johnston, 2017).

This study's use of secondary data was obtained from the 2015 SCS survey. The SCS survey data are compiled every other year and are typically published in the fall of the following year. The 2015 SCS data was the most recent dataset available. The codebook and data from the survey are public information kept in the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD, 2016). The dataset is available for researchers to conduct other studies. No permission is needed to access the data.

The variables examined were presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, fear of victimization, and avoidance behavior. Avoidance behavior consisted of staying home from school due to thinking someone might attack or cause harm in the building, on school property, on a school bus, or going to and from school. Additionally, demographic information such as age, gender, race, and income were also extracted to enable analysis of crime by various subpopulations in the NCVS/SCS survey (NAJCD, 2016).

Secondary data from the original SCS survey were analyzed with IBM SPSS using logistic regression to answer the following research question: To what extent do high school students' perceptions of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of



victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, lead to school avoidance? According to Peng, Lee, and Ingersoll (2002), logistic regression is well suited for describing and testing hypotheses about relationships between a categorical outcome variable and one or more categorical or continuous predictor variables.

### **Data Cleaning and Screening Procedures**

As previously stated, SCS is part of the NCVS; therefore, the first procedure for conducting this analysis was to extract the SCS survey data from the NCVS survey. The data initially collected for the NCVS survey were conducted in person with follow-up interviews carried out in person or by phone (BJS, 2014). All students who completed the SCS survey received the same amount of time and had the same opportunities to complete it successfully. All respondents were given a survey to enter their answers to the questions. There was assistance for respondents who needed it. The information collected was confidential and anonymous. This disclosure was stated on the SCS.

### **Threats to Validity**

Limitations to the study are affected by the accessibility, confidentiality, and legal uses of data. The data may not accurately reflect encounters that occurred 6 months earlier or due to blocking the incidents from memory. Another limitation is the geographical area of the study. The data collected from students attending large urban school districts will likely vary from those in small rural areas.

There are also limitations in the research design of this study related to design and methodological weaknesses. These include issues related to limitations of internal, external, and construct validity. Internal validity simply determines if one action causes another. The SCS

survey data do not permit causation, but can determine incidents that occurred and students' perceptions of those incidents. If a study is lacking internal validity, one cannot make cause and effect statements based on the research; the present study is descriptive in nature, but will not permit causal statements. The participants may live in a hostile or violent environment, such as in their community or home, and their perception of fear and avoidance may not be the same as another participant who may have not been victimized or exposed to criminal activity in the same environment. The participants may have perceptions of other fears, which may lead them to avoid school because of other reasons such as failing grades, isolation, and peer pressure.

The second limitation is external validity. External validity addresses the issue of being able to generalize the results of a study to other times, places, and persons. The sample of participants who elected to participate in the original study may not represent all types of students in different public and private schools. The third limitation is construct validity. Limitations of construct validity raise the question as to whether the research instrument is measuring what it is intended to measure.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Walden University's Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to conduct the research using archival data from the SCS survey of the NCVS (Approval No. 02-15-18-0158827). The data were accessible through a public database, which is accessible through the NACJD website, a part of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR; NACJD, 2016). The data are confidential in that the participants' identities are anonymous and are not associated with their responses to the questions on the survey. The archival data has remained available from 1992 until present.

### **Summary**

This quantitative study was conducted to explore students' perceptions of safety concerns (presence of weapons and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) as predictors of avoidance behavior, specifically students' decision to stay home from school due to thinking someone might attack or harm them in a school building, on school property, on a school bus, and going to or from school. Secondary data from the NCVS/SCS was analyzed to determine if predictive relationships exist between perceptions of safety concerns of four criminal behaviors and school avoidance. Logistic regression was used to test the hypothesis. The results are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationships between school avoidance and high school students' perceptions of safety concerns, specifically the presence of weapons and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and while traveling to and from school. The research question and hypotheses for this study are as follows:

Research Question: To what extent do high school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of weapons and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, lead to school avoidance?

$H_01$ : High school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, does not lead to school avoidance.

$H_{A1}$ : High school students' perceptions of the presence of safety concerns (presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization) in the school setting, and traveling to and from school, does lead to school avoidance.

Included in this chapter are the results of the quantitative study based on findings from the binominal logistic regression that was used to predict whether the presence of gangs, guns, bullying, and fear of victimization led to school avoidance. First, I examine the selected items from the NCVS/SCS survey. Then, I present the demographics of the sample data extracted from the NCVS/SCS survey and finally, the nonparametric inferential statistical results obtained from the data analyses.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, I used a cross-sectional design in which data were extracted from an archival dataset to answer the research question. The archival data came from the NCVS/SCS survey (NACJD, 2016). Therefore, recruitment of participants was not necessary. The response to the original study conducted by the NACJD included “9,372 students, ages 12-18, who were found eligible to take the NCVS survey, 5,469 students completed the NCVS survey and were selected to interview for the SCS” (NACJD, 2016, p. 11). Additional screening was conducted to exclude students who were not in Grades 6 to 12, who were home-schooled, and to exclude students who had dropped out of school during the year (NACJD, 2016). After this screening, the sample for the current study included 4,767 youth who completed the SCS survey. The data analysis was conducted as described in Chapter 3.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics for each variable are shown in Table 4.1. The missing values are not displayed in the data presented.

**Table 4. 1 Descriptive statistics for each variable***Distribution of Variables*

Variable	Number of Respondents (N= 4767)
<b>Outcome Variable</b>	
Stay home from school	
<i>No</i> (0)	4662
<i>Yes</i> (1)	42
<b>Predictor Variables</b>	
Have you seen guns at school?	
<i>No</i> (0)	100
<i>Yes</i> (1)	36
Are there any gangs at your school?	
<i>No</i> (0)	3419
<i>Yes</i> (1)	487
Have you been bullied at school?	
<i>No</i> (0)	2190
<i>Yes</i> (1)	202
How often are you fearful of being attacked at school?	
<i>Never</i> (1)	3986
<i>Almost never</i> (2)	568
<i>Sometimes</i> (3)	131
<i>Most of the time</i> (4)	13

*Note.* There were SCS respondents who were not interviewed, missing values, and “don’t know” responses; therefore, the totals for each variable may not equal the total N.

A multiple logistic regression analysis was conducted to investigate if the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization predict school avoidance. The results of this regression are presented in Table 4.2. The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) indicating that the model is correctly specified. Additionally, the -2 log Likelihood = 5.004 and the Nagelkerke R squared = .820. The analysis revealed that the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization were not significant predictors of school

avoidance ( $p > .05$ ). Controlling for the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, fear of victimization in the multiple logistic regression analysis did not contribute to the model. The estimated odd ratio did not yield a statistically significant relationship between the predictor variables and school avoidance.

**Table 4. 2 Multiple logistic regression of guns, gangs, bullying and fear of victimization**

*Logistic Regression Analysis of Perceptions of Guns, Gangs, Bullying, and Fear of Victimization as Predictors of School Avoidance*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Guns	35.945	7995.395	.000	1	.996	40792684530 00000.000	.000	.
	Gangs	18.076	5951.205	.000	1	.998	70833685.31 0	.000	.
	Bullying	-35.432	10325.982	.000	1	.997	.000	.000	.
	Fear			.000	3	1.000			
	Fear (1)	-93.966	43042.503	.000	1	.998	.000	.000	.
	Fear (2)	-75.258	41865.410	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Fear (3)	-76.139	43241.926	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Constant	38.559	41922.761	.000	1	.999	55701580530 000000.000		

*Note.* Variable(s) entered on Step 1: Guns, gangs, bullying, fear of victimization.

The multiple logistic analysis evaluated any particular students' perception of safety concerns of all the independent variables combined. The student may only have a safety concern pertaining to one of the independent variables which may be a reason the regression did not yield a favorable likelihood when analyzed together. For this reason, I analyzed each independent variable separately to predict school avoidance.

In addition, a binary logistic regression was performed separately for the dependent variable of school avoidance and each of the predictor variables (presence of guns, gangs,

bullying, and fear of victimization) because it eliminated a large number of missing data when analyzed separately. The results of the binary logistic regressions for each predictor variable are explained in the paragraphs and tables that follow.

### **Presence of Guns**

A binary logistic regression was conducted to investigate whether the presence of guns, as reported by students' responses to whether they had seen guns at school, predicts school avoidance. The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) indicating the model is correctly specified. Additionally, the -2 Log Likelihood = 40.260 and the Nagelkerke  $R$  squared = .07. The analysis revealed that the presence of guns is not a significant predictor of school avoidance ( $p > .05$ ). Presence of guns did not contribute to the model as shown in Table 4.3. The unstandardized  $B = 1.494$ ,  $SE = .935$ ,  $Wald = 2.554$ ,  $p > .110$ . Based on the results of this analysis, students' perception of the presence of guns does not lead to school avoidance.

A contributing factor to the results is the number of participants who answered this question. Even though the sample size was 4767, only 136 participants answered this question. Based on the power analysis conducted a representative sample size of 610 participants is required to yield a reliable result. Therefore, it was not enough participants who answered this question to yield a reliable result.



**Table 4. 3 Binary logistic regression of Guns***Logistic Regression Analysis of Presence of Guns as a Predictor of School Avoidance*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Guns	1.494	.935	2.554	1	.110	4.455	.713	27.829
	Constant	-3.892	.714	29.687	1	.000	.020		

Note. Variable(s) entered on Step 1: Guns. \* $p > .05$

**Presence of Gangs**

A binary logistic regression was conducted to investigate whether the presence of gangs as reported by students' response, have you seen gangs at your school, predicts school avoidance. The Homer-Lemeshow goodness of fit was significant ( $p < .05$ ) indicating the model is correctly specified. Additionally, the -2 Likelihood = 403.218 and the Nagelkerke R squared = .060. The analysis revealed that the presence of gangs is a significant predictor of school avoidance ( $p < .05$ ). Presence of gangs was found to contribute to the model as shown in Table 4.4. The unstandardized  $B = 1.767$ ,  $SE = .330$ ,  $Wald = 28.668$ ,  $p < .001$ . The estimate odds ratio favored a 5-fold increase to school avoidance,  $Exp(B) = 5.851$ , 95%  $CI(3.065, 11.171)$  for every one unit increase of students' perception of the presence of gangs. Based on the results of this analysis, students' perception of safety concerns pertaining to gangs at their school do lead to school avoidance.

**Table 4. 4 Binary logistic regression of gangs***Logistic Regression Analysis of Presence of Gangs as a Predictor of School Avoidance*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Gangs	1.767	.330	28.668	1	.000	5.851	3.065	11.171
	Constant	-5.086	.219	539.904	1	.000	.006		

Note. Variable(s) entered on Step 1: Gangs. \* $p < .05$

**Presence of Bullying**

A binary logistic regression was conducted to investigate whether students' perception of safety concerns pertaining to bullying by students' response to the question, have you been bullied at school, predicts school avoidance. The Homer-Lemeshow goodness of fit was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) indicating that the model is correctly specified. Additionally, the -2 Likelihood = 184.372 and the Nagelkerke R squared = .210. The analysis revealed that bullying is a significant predictor of school avoidance ( $p < .05$ ). Bullying was found to contribute to the model as shown in Table 4.5. The unstandardized  $B = 3.304$ ,  $SE = .494$ ,  $Wald = 44.763$ ,  $p < .001$ . The estimate odds ratio favored a positive relationship of nearly an 26% increase,  $Exp(B) = 27.226$ , 95%  $CI$  (10.342, 71.675) for every one unit increase of students' perception of bullying. Based on the results of this analysis, students' perception of bullying at their school do lead to school avoidance.

**Table 4. 5 Binary logistic regression of bullying**

*Logistic Regression Analysis of Bullying as a Predictor of School Avoidance*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Bullying	3.304	.494	44.763	1	.000	27.226	10.342	71.675
	Constant	-5.896	.409	208.022	1	.000	.003		

Note. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Bullying. \* $p < .05$

### Fear of Victimization

A binary logistic regression was conducted to investigate whether students' fear of victimization during the school year by responding to the question, how often are you fearful of being attacked at school, predicts school avoidance. The Homer-Lemeshow goodness of fit was significant ( $p < .05$ ) indicating that the model is correctly specified. Additionally, the -2 Likelihood = 338.819 and the Nagelkerke  $R$  squared = .305. The analysis revealed that fear of victimization is a significant predictor of school avoidance ( $p < .05$ ). Fear of victimization was found to contribute to the model as shown in Table 4.6. The constant  $B = .470$ ,  $SE = .570$ ,  $Wald = .680$ ,  $p < .001$ . The estimate odds ratio favored a positive relationship of 1% increase,  $Exp(B) = 1.600$ , for every one-unit increase in students' fear of victimization. Based on the results of this analysis, students' perception of safety concerns pertaining to fear of victimization at their school do lead school avoidance.

**Table 4. 6 Binary logistic regression of fear of victimization**

*Logistic Regression Analysis of Fear of Victimization as a Predictor of School Avoidance*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Fear Never			139.261	3	.000			
	Fear (1) Almost Never	2.069	.462	20.084	1	.000	7.917	3.203	19.569
	Fear (2) Sometimes	4.045	.432	87.673	1	.000	57.126	24.496	133.224
	Fear (3) Almost all the time	6.561	.661	98.643	1	.000	706.844	193.660	2579.933
	Constant	-6.091	.334	333.127	1	.000	.002		

*Note.* Variable(s) entered on step 1: Fear. \* $p < .05$

### Summary

The results of the multiple logistic regression analysis revealed that the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization were not significant predictors of school avoidance when all of the predictor variables were entered in the model at the same time. This finding confirms the null research hypothesis that the presence of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization do not lead school avoidance. When binary logistic regression analyses were conducted for each predictor variable separately, presence of guns was not a significant predictor of school avoidance. However, perception of gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization were revealed as significant predictors of school avoidance. An interpretation of these findings, as well as the implications of the study, is presented in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationships between high school students' perceptions of safety concerns, specifically the presence of guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school and traveling to and from school predicting school avoidance. Results revealed that the predictor variables did not predict students' school avoidance when analyzed together. However, when the predictor variables were analyzed separately with school avoidance, students' perceptions of the presence of gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization significantly predicted school avoidance. The predictor variable of students' perception of the presence of guns was not a significant predictor of school avoidance.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings of this study revealed that students' perception of the presence of guns was not statistically related to school avoidance. This finding can be explained by the resilience theory, which focuses on an individual's ability to understand the processes he or she experiences in life and the anticipated outcomes (Ungar, 2013). According to Zemel, Ronel, and Einat (2016), resilience is a person's will power to successfully deal with problems or challenges, especially events that impact their mental ability, and then take the negative experience and use it positively. A person can develop resilience by becoming aware of their innate ability to survive (Lau & Van Niekerk, 2011). As applied to this study, students may attend school in poor neighborhoods with higher rates of crime and expect for gun incidents to occur at school and in their neighborhood. Therefore, the students could be aware of their

environment and persevere regardless of the risks. Even though students may consider guns as dangerous and an act of violence, their perception of safety concerns in school may not jeopardize their school attendance due to staff and resource officers who ensure or monitor safety measures.

Walsh (2010) revealed that the presence of guns had a significant adverse effect on the academic goals of children in large urban centers. Students who reported fear of gun violence also admitted that those fears contributed to a lack of concentration and academic progress. The study conducted by Walsh (2010) and this current study did not confirm that students' perceptions of guns led to school avoidance. However, both studies contribute to an understanding of the incidents occurring in school that lead to other adverse effects, such as poor academic progress and lack of concentration, which may ultimately impact successfully completing school.

The findings of students' safety concerns about guns can also be explained by social disorganization theory, which implies that society, of which students are a part, may become desensitized to the potential of criminal and violent acts at school (Borum et al., 2010). The findings may be a result of students living in high crime areas, experiencing unstable home environments, and low socioeconomic status. Students may consider violent behavior as part of their norm; therefore, they may not perceive it as a safety concern in school. In addition, students may be conditioned to the prevalence of gun incidents in their neighborhood, and develop a resilience or tolerance to cope with incidents at school.

Students' safety concerns pertaining to the presence of gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization were significantly related to school avoidance. This finding may imply that some

students have not built a resilience to these occurrences or are not conditioned to these types of criminal activities or behaviors. This may be the case because their living conditions, family life, or neighborhood environment may not be conducive to gangs. Another explanation could be that students may not have encountered incidents with guns at school and therefore, they do not have a negative perception of that occurrence, but they have experienced gangs, bullying, and victimization. Although some students may have built a resilience to gangs, guns, bullying, and victimization activities because it is prevalent in their surroundings, other students may not have built a resilience or tolerance because they lack a stable family life, resources in the community, or emotional and social competent skills (LeMoine & Labelle, 2014).

A study conducted by Randa and Reynolds (2014) focused on bullying and the impact it has on students avoiding school. To look at the significant effects of cyberbullying, the researchers first examined the relationship between traditional bullying and other forms of bullying (Randa & Reynolds, 2014). The results of their study yielded the same results as my study in relation to bullying. Both studies used the same NCVS/SCS survey data. Additionally, both studies found that bullying can lead to school avoidance.

Another study conducted by Barrett et al. (2012) examined students' fear of crime that they encountered at school and whether it had an impact on avoiding school due to fear of being a victim of these crimes, and how fear and avoiding school affected their academic progress. The researchers used the data from the NCVS/SCS and ran a logistic analysis comparing fear of victimization and avoidance. Their study confirmed my findings that fear of victimization leads to school avoidance.

Additionally, a study by Robers et al. (2012) indicated that high school students, ages 12 - 18 years, complained that they were more in fear of being attacked or brutalized while in school (4%) than while going to or from school (3%). According to this study, students avoided some school activities and skipped classes to stay at home and away from school. Robers et al.'s study examining student's perception of gangs in school indicated that fear of victimization leads to school avoidance which was confirmed in this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are influenced by the accessibility, confidentiality, and legal uses of data as to why students stay away from school. The SCS survey contains a self-report of crime victimization data, including students' perceptions of the presence of guns and gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization at school, traveling to and from school, and on school property. Students may not reveal being a victim or witnessing criminal or violent activity in school due to fear for their safety (Langton, Berzofsky, Krebs, & Smiley-McDonald, 2012). In addition, students may not have reported being a victim due to suppressing the incident or having feelings of embarrassment or fear of retaliation. A significant number of students answered "No" when asked survey questions in reference to the selected variables of school avoidance, guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization. This may be a possible indication that students reported the perception of these behaviors accurately, or not, for various reasons, such as fear of retaliation. Students may fabricate or not accurately report information on a survey because they may not want their parents to have access to the information (Kamenetz, 2014). Also, students may not want to reveal the accuracy of their experiences due to lack of maturity in the sense that



students may not comprehend the seriousness of the incident and the consequences (Kamenetz, 2014).

The NCVS/SCS resource guide does not address the survey's validity factors. However, other studies and publications have addressed its validity based on the findings associated with their method of analysis. Basic analysis of this instrument does indicate face validity. The NCVS resource guide does address some methodology issues pertaining to reliability. The fact that the survey contains questions about students' reports of victimization or crime within the last 6 months may increase the error with accurately recalling incidents. For example, students may have intentionally blocked out bad memories or recollection is misconstrued based on the time lapse.

Another limitation is the population targeted in the study. Even though NCVS/SCS is a national survey, some populations may not be represented. For example, immigrants who are in the United States illegally may not report incidents to the authorities (Addington, 2008). Therefore, this population is unknown because there are no questions on the survey to identify status of residence. Another limitation is that the original study targeted students who were attending public or private schools leading to a high school diploma; therefore, students in alternative education programs, such as GED, were excluded (NAJCD, 2017). The study also excluded students who dropped out of high school due to violent encounters at school. Persons who reached age 19 were not given the survey, even if they were age 18 and attending school 6 months before the survey was administered. Also, there are racial and cultural differences to consider as limitations of the study. Large metropolitan areas normally are comprised of racial diversity, but this depends on the distribution of the survey and who volunteered to participate.

Metropolitan areas have a large population of urban areas which may have high crime neighborhoods and largely populated with African Americans and Hispanics (Potter, 2015).

There are limitations in the design of this study due to methodological weaknesses. These include limitations of internal, external, and construct validity. Internal validity simply means one action causes another. In this study, internal validity pertains to the hypothesized relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns in school pertaining to guns, gangs, student bullying, and fear of victimization, and school avoidance. When a study is lacking internal validity, one cannot make cause and effect statements based on the research; the findings from this study do not permit causal inference. Additionally, in this study, the students' perceptions of safety concerns associated with violence or victimization in school might not necessarily be related to their choice to stay away from school. There are unknown variables that could affect the study and that are out of the control of the researcher. The researcher may not know these variables exist due to the lack of knowledge from not being involved in the initial study, which could affect the study's results. Also, this study only addressed the relationship between the predictor variables of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization and the dependent variable of school avoidance. Thus, there could be other factors that may contribute to students not attending school. However, the results of this study reveal there is a positive relationship between students' perception of gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization, and school avoidance. The results did not yield a relationship between students' perception of guns and school avoidance.

The second limitation is external validity because of the sample. The sample was comprised of students, ages 12-18 years, who attended U.S. public or private schools. The

sample does not include students who were attending school online, at home, or those who previously attended school and discontinued based on perceptions of safety concerns in school. The findings can be generalized only to a similar population of students.

Construct validity assesses whether the research is measuring what it is intended to measure. In this study, this limitation affects whether there is a relationship between students' perceptions of safety concerns, specifically those involving guns, gangs, student bullying, and a fear of victimization in school leading to school avoidance. Students who took the survey may have had experiences with violence or were exposed to violence in high school, but chose to stay home from school for other reasons. My biases were limited because the analyzed data came from an existing secondary dataset that was created and administered previously. My role as the researcher was extracting data from the existing dataset based on the variables that pertained to the research question.

Additionally, students who witnessed or experienced guns, gangs, bullying, and/or fear victimization at school may not report the incidents at school nor on the NCVS/SCS survey. Based on a study examining the reporting of criminal activity, over 50% of adolescence, ages 12-17, do not report crimes for reasons such as their fear of being retaliated against, getting the offender in trouble, and not considering the crime important enough (Langton, et al., 2012). Therefore, students may intentionally not have answered questions related to these incidents on the NCVS/SCS survey.

### **Recommendations**

Further research should be conducted in the same format as the current NCVS/SCS survey, but with a broader representative sample. The sample should not exclude individuals

who were not enrolled in school at the time of the survey because those students may have dropped out of school due to perceptions of safety concerns and their encounters can be valuable to understanding this phenomenon. The ages of the individuals should be extended to the maximum high school age, which is 21 (Collier, 2013). This age is suggested based on the maturity level of the chosen participants in the NCVS/SCS survey. Students who are older may be more willing to provide accurate information than 12 to 17-year-old students who have been found to not report crimes (Langston et al., 2012). I recommend including students who are ages 12-21. This age group would then include older students, potentially with a level of maturity who may regard providing accurate information as important.

The existing survey instrument is comprised of questions that yield yes or no responses. Three questions about guns, gangs, and bullying from the NCVS/SCS survey were used: 1) Have you seen guns at school? 2) Are there any gangs at your school? and 3) Have you been bullied at school? There should be methodological changes to such questions to cover more possible situations that reflect students' full experience. For example, the question pertaining to guns could include sub questions asking students if they are afraid of guns or afraid someone will bring a gun to school. This should be the same for categorical question about fear of victimization, as well. Fear of victimization has four categorical responses. These responses may not have covered all possible scenarios the students encountered.

Future studies should be conducted on interviewing students about whether or not they actually experienced criminal activities they witnessed and the impact it has on avoiding school or their decision to drop out of school. For example, if a student was a victim of gun violence instead of observing an incident of gun violence. The NCVS/SCS survey instrument can be

utilized as well because the purpose of the survey was to examine students' perceptions and experience pertaining to criminal behavior in school. Conducting a study on actual experiences of the students will provide a more vivid picture of their school climate.

Even though my study did not conduct research on high school dropout rate, there have been limited studies focusing on the direct impact of how guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization impacts the high school dropout rate. Some researchers have focused on students' emotional and social experiences as a factor in the dropout rate (Erktin, Okcabol, & Ural, 2010), while others focused on school climate pertaining to teacher, peer, and family relationships (Erktin et al., 2010). Additionally, since many of the studies are focused in large metropolitan areas, future research should target samples in rural areas. Recent studies confirm a vast majority of violence is restricted to schools located in large metropolitan areas is not accurate as numerous incidents occur in rural areas as well (Cantor, 2002; Potter, 2015).

With the growing immigration population, researchers should also focus on making sure these households are represented. Future research should be conducted on the growing immigration population and their perception of safety concerns and school avoidance. The immigration population is vital to study this phenomenon because they would provide a more inclusive portrait of various cultures in the high school population.

Another, suggestion for future research is to compare ethnicity and gender with students' perception of guns, gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization as predictors of school avoidance. It is important to determine whether or not there are gender differences in perceptions of these incidents that lead to school avoidance because this would provide information about how males and females react and view each incident. Comparing ethnicities who are more than likely to be

impacted by this phenomenon will provide information on what group is impacted and how it reflects their community, neighborhood, and family environment. For instance, an African American student who lives in the suburbs versus the city may have different perceptions of the activities based on culture, tradition, and environment.

### **Implications**

According to the results of this study, students' perception of gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization impacts their decision to stay away from school. Several implications for social change can be suggested based on the study's findings. In reference to resilience theory, which focuses on an individual's ability to understand the processes he or she experiences in life and the anticipated outcomes (Ungar, 2013), schools should eliminate use of negative terms such as youth at risk, disadvantaged, or troubled youth (LeMoine & Labelle, 2014) and promote positive terms when associating adolescents with their current state or situation. Lemoine and Labelle (2014) suggested that "using terminology such as "marginalized youth; "youth with multiple barriers; or "youth in challenging context" (p. 4). These terms take the focus off the individual being solely responsible for finding a resolution and move the focus to the community and government to find solutions. For example, a student may attend a school in an impoverished crime infested neighborhood and expect to be in an environment conducive to fighting, bullying, guns and gangs at school as well as in the neighborhood. Therefore, students are aware of their environment and persevere regardless of the risks. Even though students may be from a lower socioeconomic status or impoverished neighborhood, it does not have to be labeled as such.

Based on social disorganization theory, there are implications pertaining to the environmental characteristics that may determine students' perceptions of guns, gangs, bullying,

and fear of victimization in school and the impact it has on school avoidance in urban communities. Students cope with certain conditions that are conducive to violence whether it is in the household, neighborhood, or specific community. Based on this study's findings, students' perception of guns is not likely to lead to school avoidance. Therefore, students may not perceive guns as a safety concern due to viewing schools as a safe haven where there are measures in place to keep guns off the premises. However, the study's findings reveal that students' perception of safety concerns pertaining to gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization may lead to school avoidance. This perception of safety concerns can be conducive to having these activities in schools and the community.

### **School Resources**

Students' perceptions of school safety can have an impact on their decision to avoid school along with contributing to psychological issues (Bohn, 2011). Students may show signs of distress, such as, anxiety, insomnia, and low academic performance in school (National Association of School Psychologist [NASP], 2015). Additionally, these symptoms can be a sign of a student experiencing PTSD. PTSD is a description of symptoms that a student may have after experiencing trauma, such as being a victim of school-related threatening incidents that include bullying and fighting (Navarro, 2012). The psychological issues in turn may cause disturbances in the family and community. It is important for parents as well as school officials to have an open dialogue with students when these types of behaviors are noticed (NASP, 2015).

Furthermore, students' perceptions of safety concerns play a significant role in their psychological well-being. Fear of gangs, bullying, and victimization while attending school can result in poor performance because of a student's impaired concentration (Navarro, 2012).

Reducing a student's fear and having a positive perception of school climate will decrease anxiety and depression, which results from psychological trauma (Navarro, 2012).

Staff should reiterate to students the services that are available to them through school-based resources such as school counselors and social workers. As discussed in the literature review, Kennemore et al. (2010) found that school personnel could make a difference in changing how violence has an impact on students, which could then give students a feeling of safety while attending school. School counselors are equipped with the skills to bond with students in a different manner than teachers and act as liaison between the two (Abid, Vlaicu, Bălăuță, & Buică, 2018). School counselors are in schools to assist with overcoming obstacles to achieve their academic success or goal (Abid et al., 2018). School counselors are trained to identify students' emotional needs (Trump, n.d.). Therefore, counselors have the ability to notice a change in students' behavior then work with the student to collaborate and come up with a resolution. Also, school counselors provide other outside resources that will assist students with their issues. School counselors are not present just for the victims, they are there to notice any change in behavior that may lead to someone committing an act of violence (Trump, n.d.).

School social workers presence has decreased in schools and has been replaced by other jobs despite the growing need. With mass violent incidents increasing in schools there is a growing need to maintain social workers in schools. Social workers just as school counselors act as a liaison between teachers, school administrators, and families (Cuellar, Elswick, & Theriot, 2018). Social workers are trained to support school faculty, students, and staff after a crisis and provide resources to combat psychological issues resulting from violent incidents (Cuellar, et al., 2018). Social workers and school counselors alike play an important role in students' perception



of safety concerns knowing that there are resources and professionals available to assist them with prevention and intervention efforts. Also, school social workers continuously research and implement evidence-based research programs and strategies to prevent and intervene with violent acts and behavior, such as the child centered approach, positive behavior support (PBS), and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies (O'Brien, Berzin, Kelly, Frey, Alvarez, & Shaffer, 2011). Social workers not only support students, but they also support family, community, and administration.

### **Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

Studies show that teacher-student relationships have an impact on students' emotional and social support (Longobardi, Prino, Marengo, & Settanni, 2016). Students who have a positive relationship with their teacher are more likely to achieve academic success, engage in school activities, and experience a positive classroom environment (Longobardi et al., 2016). When students have a positive perception of the classroom environment, they are more apt to share ideas and interact with other students respectfully (Longobardi et al., 2016).

Positive teacher-student interaction support can also be seen as a means to help or control students' behavior in the classroom to prevent gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization. Students who have a positive teacher-student relationship are more likely to treat classmates in the same manner. Students who develop this sense of emotional and social support are not likely to engage in behavior that will jeopardize their teacher-student relationship. However, students who are isolated, display aggressive behavior, and disinterested in engaging in school activities tend to not have a teacher-student relationship (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Therefore, the teacher-student relationship is essential to protective school factors not just to provide emotional and

social support for the resilience of vulnerable students (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), but to avoid or discourage disruptive behaviors (Longobardi et al., 2016). This strategy more likely provides students with a positive perception of school safety.

### **Neighborhood Factors**

Several studies have revealed how a disadvantaged neighborhood context, such as low socio-economic status and single-parent households, contribute to juvenile delinquency (Kingston, Huizinga, & Elliott, (2009). Students who live in neighborhoods with a high crime rate, lack of support, and resources, which are important to developing healthy relationships, may not be equipped with skills to form a bond with others (Kingston et al., 2009). These neighborhood factors may have an influence on a student's perception of safety concerns in schools especially if the school is located within a disadvantaged community.

There are additional negative consequences related to disadvantaged neighborhoods that may contribute to juvenile delinquency. Low socio-economic status and poverty can be barriers to adequate education because of a lack of resources (Kingston et al., 2009). Also, an adolescent may witness violence in the family and then display violent behavior outside the home (Al Odhayani, Watson, & Watson, 2013).

### **Understanding Students' Perception of Safety Concerns and School Avoidance**

The results of this study concluded that students' perception of gangs, bullying, and fear of victimization may lead to school avoidance. School avoidance is a growing concern because of its impact on students' academic performance and safety concerns. Therefore, one might ask, how are students expected to achieve academic success if they feel unsafe at school? An unsafe school environment is one of the many factors of students' perception of safety concerns (Potter,

2015). Even though incidents of guns, gangs, fear of victimization, and bullying occur, students are expected to attend school by law and they are taught that obtaining a high school diploma will lead to better opportunities in life (Potter, 2015). However, a student's experience in school is based on their neighborhood, family, and educational environment (Potter, 2015). If a student lives in a high crime neighborhood and experiences family violence, their school environment may not produce much hope of a brighter future if they encounter similar incidents while attending school. Parents may get discouraged as well because of their lack of control and resources to send their child to a better school. Therefore, truancy becomes an issue due to students and parents' conditions of circumstance (Potter, 2015).

Recent studies show there is a relation between fear of victimization and the dropout rate (Cornell, Huang, Gregory, & Fan, 2013). Even though there are other indicators that explain the dropout rate pertaining to victimization, including bullying and fighting, concluded to be one of the main contributors to students dropping out of high school (Cornell, Huang, Gregory, & Fan, 2013). Most studies on victimization, including the secondary data analyzed in the current study, were conducted in urban areas where there tends to be a large population of minorities and a high crime rate. Understanding that some school districts lack quality education and resources can bring awareness and focus on how to overcome these disadvantages to implement a safe school environment in all neighborhoods for students to successfully complete their education.

### **Conclusion**

To address students' perception of safety concerns pertaining to guns, gangs, bullying and fear of victimization and school avoidance, the findings from my study suggest a need for school, community, and family violence prevention and intervention programs to incorporate a

safe school environment that will decrease the number of violent incidents in school. Not only is the teacher-student relationship essential to decrease disruptive behavior, but parental involvement and positive neighborhood and community factors are also essential in combating students' perception of school safety concerns pertaining to school avoidance (Peguero, 2011). Addition to these methods, my study reveals the need for resources within the community for prevention and intervention programs to reduce criminal activities in school, such as promoting school activities and family support. Once prevention and intervention programs are implemented to reduce the number of incidents of criminal behavior and activities, schools, parents, and communities can improve other areas that contribute to demoralization of the educational environment. Considering that my research has shown that gangs, bullying, and victimization can lead to school avoidance, it is possible these incidents may cause various psychological issues in students such as depression and anxiety. To eliminate students' negative perceptions and incidents from reoccurring it is suggested schools need to provide students with counseling, social workers, an acceptable teacher-student ratio in classrooms, and security for a sense of safety to support their psychological wellbeing. Additionally, my research suggests implementing intervention and prevention programs to address reducing gangs, guns, bully and fear of victimization, not only by the school and the administration, but also in collaboration with parents, community, lawmakers, politicians, and law enforcement.

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