Fear, Avoidance, and Weapon Carrying at School:
Understanding the Roles of Rule Legitimacy and Campus Disorder

Problem

In light of numerous tragedies of mass violence on American campuses, school safety issues have emerged at the forefront of our nation's attention in research and policy development.

While research on the *objective* risks of harm and effectiveness of existing safety tactics is emphatically underway, **we have yet to fully understand what drives the *subjective* fear of being victimized while at school and subsequent constrained behaviors.**
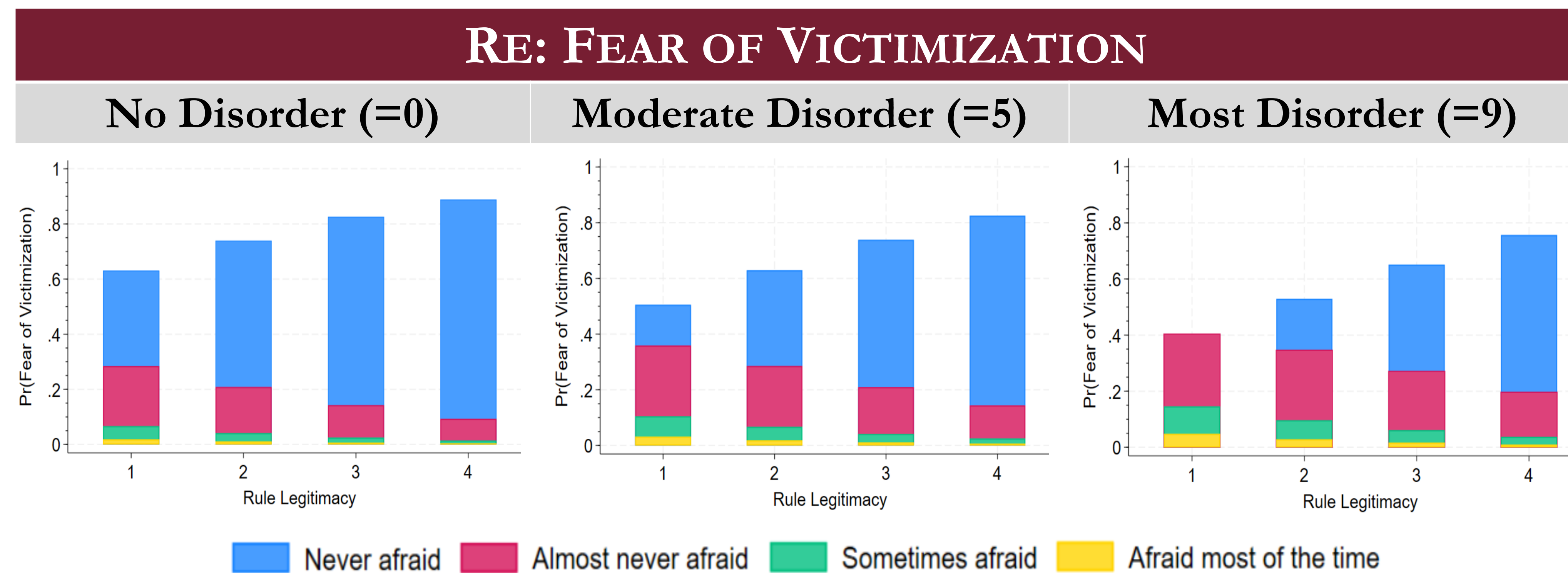
Beyond physical target hardening measures, teachers, administrators, and other school authorities play pivotal roles in maintaining social order and school safety. **However, very little research has examined how the enforcement and efficacy of school rules affect students' feelings of fear and safety.**
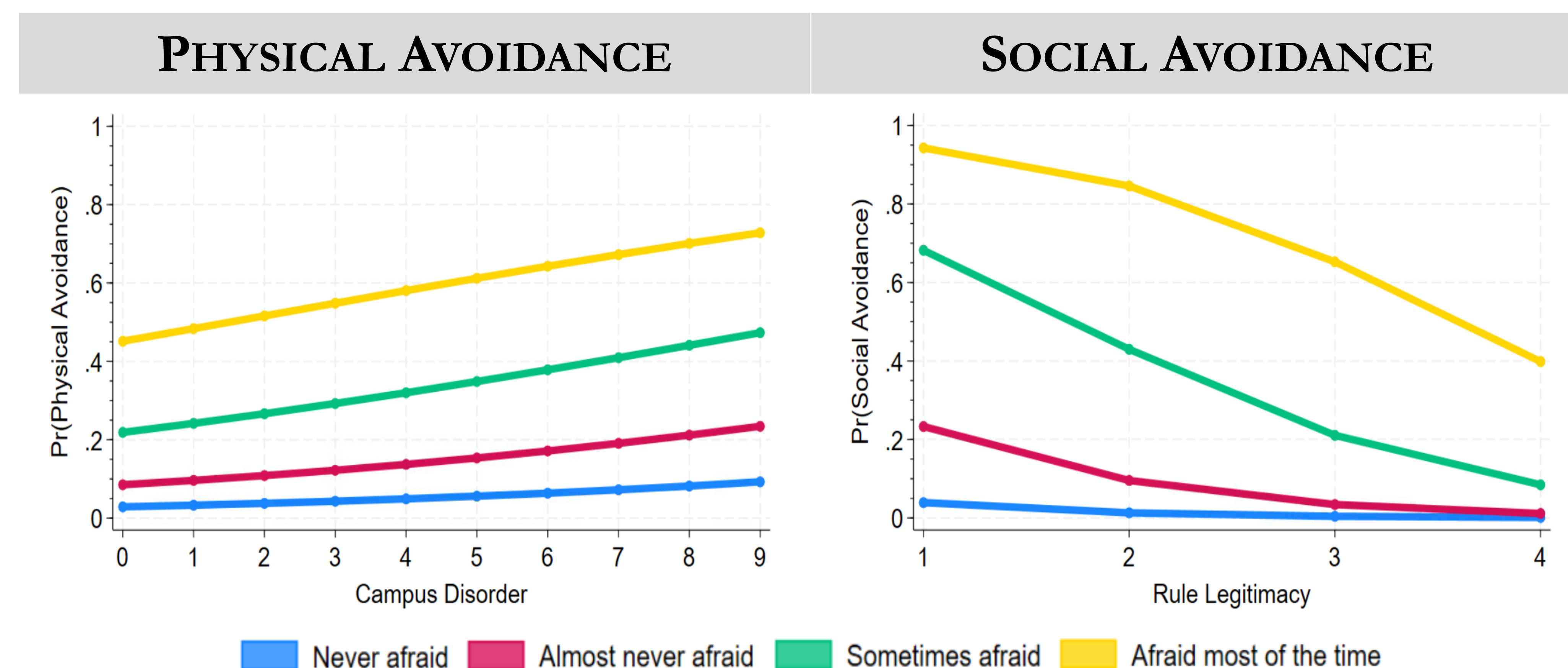
Research Questions

1. How do students' perceptions of school rule enforcement (i.e., rule legitimacy) and campus disorder influence their **fear of being victimized** at school?
2. How do rule legitimacy, campus disorder, and fear of victimization impact students' engagement in **fear-related behaviors**:
   a. Physical avoidance?
   b. Social avoidance?
   c. Weapon carrying?

Methods

- Data from **2019 NCVS School Crime Supplement**
  - Ordinal logistic regression for *fear* outcome
  - Binary logistic regression for *behavioral* outcomes
- **Sample:**
  - 9,254 students
  - Ages 16 – 18, 49.3% female, and 75.2% White
  - 12.7% previously victimized/bullied at school
  - Avg. of 6 (max. 9) types of school safety measures

RE: FEAR OF VICTIMIZATION

No Disorder (=0) | Moderate Disorder (=5) | Most Disorder (=9)

Legend: Never afraid / Almost never afraid / Sometimes afraid / Afraid most of the time

RE: BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES	Physical Avoidance	Social Avoidance	Weapon Carrying
Greater rule legitimacy	No Effect	↓ (68%)	↓ (48%)
More campus disorder	↑ (15%)	No Effect	No Effect
More often afraid of harm at school	↑ (3.3x)	↑ (8.4x)	No Effect
Previously victimized at school	↑ (4.4x)	↑ (4.5x)	No Effect
More school safety measures	↑ (26%)	No Effect	No Effect

PHYSICAL AVOIDANCE

Legend: Never afraid / Almost never afraid / Sometimes afraid / Afraid most of the time

SOCIAL AVOIDANCE

Legend: Never afraid / Almost never afraid / Sometimes afraid / Afraid most of the time

Findings

- Students are **more frequently afraid** of being harmed at school when they (a) perceive school rules as less legitimate or (b) observe more disorder.
- Students are **more likely to avoid physical spaces** when they observe higher levels of campus disorder.
- Students are **less likely to avoid social activities or classes** and **to bring a weapon** to school when they have more favorable perceptions of rule enforcement.
- **Fear** and **prior victimization** predict a significant increase in the odds of avoidance but NOT whether a student will carry a weapon.
- The odds of avoidance or weapon carrying do NOT significantly differ across student demographics. However, **non-White students are more frequently afraid** of being harmed at school.
- **School safety measures** have null effects on fear, social avoidance, and weapon carrying but may have adverse effects on physical avoidance.

Implications

- **Regularly evaluate and update** school rules and disciplinary protocols to ensure objectivity and clarity.
- **Set clear expectations** and provide feedback to school staff regarding how to address misconduct in a firm, unbiased manner.
- **Identify disorder hotspots** on campus, then devise targeted supervision and prevention efforts to reduce physical avoidance.
- **Consider unintentional consequences** of relying solely on target-hardening strategies to reduce misconduct and violence.
- **Conduct future research** to identify other individual and situational factors that drive weapon carrying at school, as well as to determine if fear and constrained behaviors demonstrate reciprocal effects.

Acknowledgements

Sarah R. Wouters | Florida State University, College of Criminology and Criminal Justice