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

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

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.

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