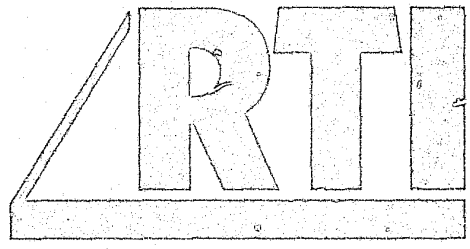

RESEARCH TRIANGLE INSTITUTE

Summary of Findings

YOUTHS' VICTIMIZATION EXPERIENCES, FEAR OF ATTACK OR HARM, AND SCHOOL AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that crime in our nation's schools has reached epidemic proportions, and that in consequence students' ability to learn is seriously compromised. However, much of the public's concern about this issue is based on anecdotal evidence. This study uses data from the School Crime Supplement to the 1989 National Crime Survey to examine the relationship among youths': (1) victimization experiences at school and elsewhere, (3) fear of attack or harm at or on the way to or from school, and (4) school avoidance behaviors.

In general, most youth do not perceive fear of attack or harm to be a pressing problem, and most do not avoid sites at or near school as a consequence. Youth who do exhibit school avoidance behaviors tend to come from relatively poor families, live in inner cities, attend public schools, and to be enrolled in the initial grades of middle school. They are likely to have recently been personally victimized by violence, either at school or elsewhere, and by larceny (although only at school); and they are also likely to have family members who have themselves been victimized. However, in this study males were no more likely than females to exhibit avoidance behaviors; nor were they likely to come from any particular ethnic background.

Because of the cross-sectional nature of the data used, and because the model we examined was incomplete, we were able to make only a modest contribution to our understanding of the determinants of school avoidance behaviors. While such behaviors are relatively uncommon, we believe that schools should make considerable efforts to identify and allay the concerns of the youth who are afraid for their safety. All youth have as fundamental a right to feel secure at school as at home.

I. Background

There is a substantial and growing body of literature suggesting that threats to personal safety are a very real concern to students throughout our nation's public schools. Fear of victimization is associated with school failure (Toby, 1983; Toby, Smith and Smith, 1985), since anxiety is thought to decrease students' capacity to concentrate (Wayne and Rubel, 1980) and learn (Toby, 1980). Apprehensive students are more likely to have: fewer friends, lower grades, poorer concentration, a lower self-perception of their reading ability, and poorer attitudes towards school (McDermott, 1980; Wayne and Rubel, 1980). They are also thought to be likely to avoid places at or around school where their safety may be compromised: in some cases they may even stay home to avoid school completely (Rosenbaum and Heath, 1990). Not surprisingly, it has been suggested that youths' fear of school crime--and its consequences--are one of the most important issues facing education (Rubel, 1980). This concern is articulated in popular as well as professional literature. In a recent article in the Atlantic, Zinsmeister (1990) writes that as the "primary public institution" in children's lives,

> schools must be sanctuaries, where at a minimum physical safety is guaranteed....The individual improvement and social training that are a school's mission cannot credibly take place in an atmosphere of terror. And terror is not too strong a word.

It is clear that fear of victimization potentially has a negative impact on youths' ability to learn. In this paper we examine the association among youths' victimization experiences at school and elsewhere, their fear of victimization, and school avoidance behaviors youth may exhibit to cope with their fears.

A. Risk of Victimization among Youth

There is some evidence of the validity of youths' fear of victimization. Between 1985 and 1988, the violent crime rate was more than twice as high for teenagers as for the adult population; also, during that period, 37% of all crimes of violence to children aged 12-15, and 17% of all violent crimes to youth aged 16-19, occurred inside a school or on school

property (BJS, 1991). Because the rate of reporting such crimes to the police is low (McDermott, 1979; NIE, 1978), and because adolescents are much less likely than adults to report victimizations to police (BJS, 1991), the true incidence of violent crime among youth at school may be considerably higher. There is some speculation, however, about how recent a problem violence in schools is. Newman (1980) observes that violence has been endemic to schools in the Western world for centuries, and that the historical record indicates that the problem has, if anything, subsided considerably. Garafalo and colleagues (1987) assert that the available data do not support the contention that violence in schools is either severe or widespread. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) concur, and comment that while relatively minor victimizations are prevalent, physical injuries occur only very infrequently. The impact of even minor victimizations on youth, however, may have severe negative consequences.

Personal larceny crime is also a major problem in schools, especially in public schools. Larceny and theft tend to occur more frequently in schools than on the street (Dodson and Evans, 1985). Several studies, including the Safe School Study (SSS) that was conducted in 1978, reported that theft was the crime most often experienced by youth interviewed. In a typical month, 13% of junior high school students reported being victimized (Dodson and Evans, 1985). Theft victimization appears to peak among 12 and 13 year olds (Dodson and Evans, 1985). Those who reported being victimized in the SSS tended to have fewer close friends, lower grades, higher rates of suspension from school, and more experiences of neighborhood crime. Thus, both personal violent and non-violent crimes are likely to have adverse effects on youth in school.

B. Fear of Victimization

Regardless of whether they have personally been victimized by violent crime, many youth, like adults (Rosenbaum and Heath, 1990), seem to experience a pervasive fear that they may be physically assaulted or harmed (NIE, 1978; McDermott, 1980; Wayne and Ruble, 1980). Indeed, since 1978 the National Institute of Justice has recognized "fear of crime" as a

salient social problem (Rosenbaum and Heath, 1990). McDermott (1980) and Maltz (1972) suggest that the fear of crime may generate anxiety that exceeds the probability of harm; in other words, one may be statistically more likely to be in an automobile crash than to be a victim of violent crime, but may fear crime much more than an automobile accident.

The fear of crime is perhaps one of the most stressful emotions that people experience. One reason for such a wide-spread fear of crime is the perception that random and unpredictable factors affect the likelihood of victimization (Riger, 1985). Essentially, people may perceive that there is little they can do to prevent victimization and, thus, they may be apprehensive a good deal of the time. Both the experience of being victimized and the anticipation of victimization can be very stressful events. Personal characteristics, such as physical vulnerability, may further increase the fear of crime that an individual experiences.

A variety of background characteristics have been linked with fear of school crime. Junior high students are more likely than their peers in senior high to report apprehension, which may be a function of the former group's more general feelings of vulnerability (McDermott, 1980; Wayne and Rubel, 1980). While females in high school report higher levels of fear than males, these rates are approximately equal for younger students (McDermott, 1980), although high school males may be more reluctant than females to admit their concerns about crime (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). It should be noted that this finding is consistent with the elevated level of fear of crime that women generally express relative to men (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Riger, 1985). Research is inconclusive concerning the relative fear experienced by youth of different races, possibly because such fear is also a function of the racial balance and degree of racial tension in the schools youth attend (McDermott, 1980). There is, however, a fairly well established link between fear of crime and city size that is constant across all social groupings (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Fear of crime is greater in large cities and suburban areas than rural areas.

C. Coping with Fear

As a means of reducing fear, youth and adults tend to engage in a variety of behaviors intended to protect themselves from crime. There is an abundant literature linking fear of crime with avoidance behaviors (e.g. Gordon, Riger, LeBailly, and Heath, 1980; Lavrakas, Rosenbaum, and Kaminski, 1983, Rosenbaum and Heath, 1990). Some students avoid those areas that present the greatest risk to their safety; namely hallways, stairs, restrooms, locker rooms, and the school cafeteria. Of these, restrooms are cited most frequently as an area students avoid. Classrooms, on the other hand, are reported as being relatively safe areas (NIE, 1978; Riger, 1985; Sydnor, Davis, and Wells, 1982), probably because they are more likely to be supervised by adults (Garafalo, Siegel, and Laub, 1987). Such is often not the case with areas outside the school and the routes students take to and from school, which Lalli and Savitz (1976) and McDermott (1980) have reported induce a higher level of fear than any site within the school building.

Moos (1981) suggests that avoidance behaviors are but one of several coping strategies youth could adopt. Other strategies include efforts to manage their affective response to threats (e.g., to reduce their feelings of vulnerability by persuading themselves that they are unlikely to be victimized), to act directly on the source of the threat (e.g., confronting a bully in the school yard), or avoiding threatening individuals, thus reducing exposure to risk (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

D. Relationship Among Victimization, Fear of Victimization, and Avoidance Behavior

Researchers have examined a number of aspects concerning the links between school crime, the fear of school crime, and the avoidance behaviors that such fear engenders. There is some evidence that the victims of physical attack are more likely to express fear of future victimization and either to avoid places at school they consider high risk or to stay home and avoid school completely (NIE, 1978; Bush, 1982). Not surprisingly, the relationship among these constructs is far from linear. Both McDermott (1980) and Riger (1985) describe as tenuous

the association between previous victimization and fear of crime. Skogan and Maxfield (1981) and Rosenbaum and Heath (1990) conclude that fear of crime may only marginally be associated with an objective lack of safety. As examples, the authors assert that those who perceive the greatest fear are among the least likely to be victimized and further that the magnitude of such fear far exceeds any relevant personal victimization experience. This finding has been supported by research with other target populations, e.g. the elderly (Akers et al., 1987). Rosenbaum and Heath (1990) identify two additional elements that together contribute to fear of crime, namely: an awareness of the experiences of others (sometimes called "vicarious victimization") (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981) and the media. It would seem that in particular, two types of vicarious victimization experiences would be salient for youth, that of immediate family members and that of peers. The results of one study have suggested that fear arising from vicarious victimization may exceed that derived from personal experience (Lavrakas, Rosenbaum, and Kaminski, 1983), although this finding is questionable (e.g., Riger, 1985). While the media may also affect fear of crime, insofar as crime news focuses on the community in which the school is located or in which the youth resides, Rosenbaum and Heath (1990) suggest that its effects are probably more muted than the effects of vicarious experience.

E. Objectives of this Paper

In this paper we examine the links between adolescents' personal and vicarious crime experiences, their fear of attack or harm either at school or on the way to or from school, and their efforts to avoid attack or harm by staying away from places in or around school that they perceive may threaten their safety. Study data are drawn from the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, conducted in 1989. While we believe fear of attack or harm to be a more proximal cause of school avoidance behaviors than actual personal and vicarious victimization experiences, we recognize that each construct may well affect avoidance behaviors independently of the other. We do not expect any of the relationships we discover to be particularly strong; many of the victims of personal crimes, and even those who acknowledge fear of crime, do little or nothing to reduce their future risk of

exposure (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). We also recognize that the model we present is incomplete, and that there are many other determinants of school avoidance behaviors, as well as multiple school-related sequelae to personal experience with victimization, that we cannot assess.

When prevalent, we believe school avoidance behaviors and their determinants to be strong indicators either of a school's failure to provide an adequate learning environment, or of stress in the student's personal life, or both. In any event, identifying schools where fear is pervasive or where individual students do not feel secure would enable the education system to focus on the removal of a key barrier to effective education.

II. Results

Fear in schools is indicative of problems endemic to our school system and society as a whole. There is a substantial level of public concern for youths' safety at school, which has been exacerbated in recent years by perceived increases in the availability of both guns and drugs. It is generally believed that both violent and non-violent crimes at and near school - and the fear they generate - are damaging to a positive school climate and impede youths' ability to learn. The results of this study, however, would seem to call into question the importance of this issue as a pressing social problem. Generally speaking, the data do not suggest any great epidemic either of school crime or of avoidance behaviors, and certainly do not reflect the much higher incidence of school avoidance behaviors reported by the Safe Schools Study (NIE, 1978).

Consider the following:

- Approximately 1 youth in 80 reported staying home at least once out of fear of attack or harm at school in the six months prior to the interview;
- only 1 youth in almost 40 reported staying away from the most frequently avoided site, school restrooms;
- only 1 youth in 14 reported any one of the 10 school avoidance behaviors identified;

- over half the youth who reported any school avoidance only reported one such behavior;
- only 1 youth in 50 had experienced violent personal victimization at school, a figure that is less than the more than 1 in 40 who had experienced violence elsewhere; and,
- only 1 youth in about 20 reported being afraid of attack or harm at school, and about 1 in 25 reported being afraid of attack or harm on the way to or from school, either "sometimes" or "most of the time" (as opposed to "never" or "almost never").

These findings clearly indicate that violent school crime and the fear of school crime cannot be said to have reached epidemic proportions across the country, at least as of the end of the last decade, when the SCS was administered. That is not to say that violent crime is not a very real concern to that minority of youth who have suffered its effects either because they are victims of violence or because they do not consider the school building or yard to be a safe place for them. Furthermore, schools in certain cities may have a very high incidence of crime, thereby affecting a larger number of youth in a concentrated area. Youth who have been victimized clearly require our attention. The same is true of these youths who express any appreciable degree of fear of attack or harm who avoid specific places at school, like cafeterias or restrooms, and as a consequence, whose health may be jeopardized.

A. Profile of Youth at Risk

Perhaps the primary use of this study's results is to develop a profile of youth who are at elevated risk of school avoidance behaviors. This profile would provide school staff with a good start in identifying youth at risk. As indicated by our final regression analysis, such youth are likely to:

- come from relatively poor families;
- live in inner cities;
- attend public (rather than private) schools;
- be enrolled in the initial grades of middle school;
- have recently been the victims of personal violence, either at school or elsewhere;

- have recently been the victims of personal larceny, although only at school;
- have family members who have themselves been victimized; and,
- express fear of attack or harm at or on the way to or from school.

Most of the risk factors listed above are to be expected. It is hardly surprising, for instance, to learn that the youth who are most likely to report avoidance behaviors are those who attend inner-city public schools serving areas with large numbers of low income families. Nor is it surprising to learn that the youth feel most vulnerable when they have newly entered middle school. It may also be expected that youth who report school avoidance behaviors also report fear of attack or harm either at or in transit to or from school; the links between victimization, fear of attack or harm, and school avoidance behaviors were well established by the Safe Schools Study (NIE, 1978). What may be somewhat less self-evident is the strength of the independent contributions to school avoidance behaviors of youths' personal and vicarious victimization experiences: recall that these experiences are only partially mediated by youths' stated fear of attack or harm. Again, one might expect that victimization experiences at school would induce avoidance behavior; and that violent victimization experiences outside of school would contribute to fears of attack or harm either on the school grounds or on the route to or from school. However, this study also demonstrates both the saliency and negative effects that experiences of vicarious victimizations of other household members have on youth.

Two socio-demographic characteristics that are missing from this list are worthy of discussion. First, boys were no more likely to report avoidance behaviors than girls. It is noteworthy that Bastian and Taylor's (1991) analysis of the SCS revealed that males and females were also equally likely to report at least one victimization at school. Second, although our initial models indicated that Whites were slightly less likely to report avoidance behaviors than African-Americans, who in turn were less likely to report them than either Hispanics or our heterogeneous "other" category, race per se did not emerge in our final model as playing a substantive, discrete role as a determinant of avoidance behavior. However, this latter finding

should be interpreted with caution. What we do not know, unfortunately, is the racial balance of the schools these youth attended: that is, whether these youth (regardless of ethnic background) were members of their school's majority or minority racial/ethnic group. Baker, Mednick, and Carothers (1989) suggest that youths who are members of a school's minority groups are more likely to be victimized; thus, they may be more likely to exhibit avoidance behaviors.

B. Policy Implications

The risk factors for school avoidance behaviors that have emerged from this study have some clear implications for crime prevention programs in our nation's schools. We begin with the twin premises that the resources available to schools for additional programs are limited, and that most schools where violence is endemic have probably already adopted some measures to control the level of violence. Many measures that may be undertaken to reduce the threat to students' safety - such as assigning staff to monitor all areas of the school or installing television monitors to provide surveillance - may be prohibitively costly as well as unacceptably intrusive. In addition, such devices may be iatrogenic - that is, they may generate the very fear they seek to alleviate. Further, in the great majority of schools such measures would be unnecessary, because the proportion of youth exhibiting any particular fear avoidance behavior is so low.

We thus suggest as an alternative prevention strategy that schools individually begin an effort to identify and develop programs to serve those youth who do avoid specific sites at school or on the way to or from school. Such a strategy would seem particularly appropriate for inner city, public middle schools serving low-income families. Identification of these youth would be relatively burden-free, and could be carried out by means of a confidential questionnaire administered by a school's counseling department. Perhaps questions based on the youth profile discussed in the previous section could serve as screeners to identify youth who may be in need of further attention. The instrument used could be quite brief, but should include questions about specific sites that students may avoid, the fear of attack or harm youth perceive either at or on the way to or from school, their personal victimization experiences, and those of the people with

whom they live. It is clear that simply asking youth about their level of fear of attack or harm alone would be insufficient, because this variable only partially mediates the potentially traumatic and lasting effects of their victimization experiences.

While an instrument of this nature would be helpful in identifying vulnerable youth, we believe that schools should seriously consider implementing primary prevention strategies targeting all youth. We believe that schools should start to teach conflict mediation skills, like drug education, in the elementary grades. Teaching such skills represents the best for reducing school crime because it provides both aggressors and potential victims with the means to handle conflict more effectively. Perhaps specially trained school or police department staff could teach conflict resolution in classrooms or small group settings.

Youth involved in any violent victimization, either as aggressor victim, are clearly in need of closer attention. Youth who manifest violent behavior targeting school property also need guidance and support, and could well benefit from services similar to those provided through increasingly prevalent Student Assistance Programs. The purpose of these programs, which are staffed by teachers, counselors, and other school personnel, is to identify, and coordinate and monitor services for, youth at high risk for drug abuse. Additionally, schools may want to consider implementing the same kind of stringent sanctions concerning violent behavior that many have adopted for drug possession and use.

We are concerned that youth be given the opportunity to express and resolve not only their personal victimization experiences at school and on the streets but the victimization experiences of family members as well. Such assistance could be provided either through individual or group counseling or through peer support groups. Because young adolescents are the most likely to report fear of attack or harm (Bastian and Taylor, 1991), students entering middle school could be linked with older students who would volunteer and be trained as mentors. These older student mentors would help youth to feel more connected to the school

and would be someone to whom the youth could turn for help when perceiving a threat to their safety.

Probably the youth most in need of services are those few who indicated that they had stayed home out of fear. We were surprised that more of these youth did not indicate that they also avoided places at or around school. We conclude that these youths' anxiety may either be linked to a specific individual (or gang) and thus not to any particular site, or that their fear may be more general and undifferentiated; that is, the whole school may seem unsafe. Regardless, these youth need specialized assistance in learning how to cope with threats to their physical safety and how to avoid or at least reduce substantially the opportunity for violent victimization. If their fears cannot be allayed, they should perhaps be given the opportunity to transfer to a safer school nearby if one is available.

In conclusion, the low incidence of school avoidance behaviors students report here, and their attendant fear of attack or harm is somewhat reassuring but, does not absolve schools from the responsibility of identifying and helping youth who express such fear and manifest what may be maladaptive behaviors to cope with it. Our children have as great a right to a safe environment at school as they do at home.

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