

# The Impact of Trusted Adults and Friends on Fear and Avoidance Behaviors at School

David C. May<sup>1\*</sup>, Makeela J. Wells<sup>2</sup>, Megan Stubbs-Richardson<sup>3</sup>,  
Tawny N. Evans-McCleon<sup>4</sup> and H. Colleen Sinclair<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8275-6773>

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Auburn University  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3455-041X>

<sup>3</sup>Social Sciences Research Center, Mississippi State University  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8636-497X>

<sup>4</sup>Division of Education, Mississippi State University-Meridian  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4629-1416>

<sup>5</sup>Social Research and Evaluation Center, Louisiana State University  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5921-595X>

\*Correspondence author E-mail: [dmay@soc.msstate.edu](mailto:dmay@soc.msstate.edu)

---

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

David C. May, Makeela J. Wells, Megan Stubbs-Richardson, Tawny N. Evans-McCleon & H. Colleen Sinclair (2023). The Impact of Trusted Adults and Friends on Fear and Avoidance Behaviors at School. *Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior*, 3: 2, pp. 277-298. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JCCB.2023.v03i02.01>

---

**Abstract:** Limited research has explored how having a trusted adult or friend in a school setting impacts students' perceptions of school safety and their safety-related behaviors at school. We use data from 447 public high school students in a southeastern state to explore that relationship. Results indicate that those youths who had a trusted adult at school were less fearful than their counterparts while having a trusted friend did not affect either fear of crime or avoidance behaviors. Youths who had been victims of bullying were both significantly more fearful of victimization and were significantly more likely to engage in avoidance behaviors. Implications for school policy and research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Social support, school safety, fear of crime, avoidance behaviors

## Introduction

Although schools remain one of the safest places for children, some students (and their parents) are fearful of victimization at school (Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Gutt & Randa, 2016; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Vidourek, King, & Merianos, 2016). One of

the most prevalent activities inciting that fear is bullying. Bullying victimization can be defined as any unwanted pattern of behavior used to threaten, intimidate, or frighten an individual that occurs repeatedly over time where power differentials exist between the bully and victim (Olweus, 1994, 1997, 2003). In 2019, data from the National Crime Victimization Survey's (NCVS) School Crime Supplement revealed that 22% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported experiencing some form of school bullying (Burns *et al.*, 2022). Bullying behavior can be physical (e.g., fights), verbal (e.g., name calling), and relational (e.g., social isolation). With today's technological advances, a new form of bullying has emerged, cyberbullying, which occurs electronically using cellphones, laptops, and social media platforms (Gutt & Randa, 2016; Shaheen, *et al.*, 2019; Wood, Smith, Varjas, & Meyers, 2017). Compounding this fear of victimization is the fact that students are more likely to adopt school avoidance behaviors (e.g., absenteeism and school dropout; Gutt & Randa, 2016; Hutzell & Payne, 2012) and often are reluctant to report their victimization to school officials (Petrosino, Gukenberg, Devoe, & Hanson, 2010).

Despite the prevalence of bullying and fear among students, limited research has examined measures schools can take to reduce fear of victimization among students. To date, only one study of which we are aware has explored the impact of an empathetic adult on the relationship between bullying victimization, fear of harm at school, and avoidance behavior. Gutt and Randa (2016) found that the presence of an empathetic adult at school reduced both the levels of fear and avoidance behaviors among students. Although this study provided valuable insight into the effects of an empathetic adult on bullying victimization and its associated behaviors, it did not examine the role of a trusted, or empathetic, friend on the relationship between fear of harm at school and avoidance behaviors.

Thus, the goal of the current study is to explore the influence of both a trusted adult and trusted friend on fear of victimization and adoption of avoidance behaviors at school. The overall hypothesis of the study is that adolescents who are less likely to have a trusted adult or friend are more fearful of harm or afraid of an attack at school and more likely to adopt avoidance behaviors, both before and after experiencing victimization. Analyses begin by examining the association between gender, race, age, and victimization and whether students have a trusted adult or friend at school. We then examine these variables' relationship with fear of victimization and their subsequent impact on avoidance behaviors at school. Our study adds to the existing literature because we examine the relationship between fear and avoidance at school and having a trusted adult and friend to talk to at school. Furthermore, we also examine whether fear serves as a mediating variable between the presence of trusted adults and friends at school and avoidance behavior.

## Fear of Victimization among Students at School

Fear is a natural emotional response to an actual or perceived threat and serves as a coping mechanism for individuals (Lane, *et al.*, 2014). Fear has been shown to function as means of survival in various ways, including sending a warning signal to avoid danger. Fear of crime and/or victimization can be defined as an “emotional response to a danger or threat of a crime incident” (Lane, *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). In other words, it refers to an emotion that results from an actual or perceived threat that is produced by criminal activity or victimization.

Although research on fear of crime is vast, studies exploring fear of crime and victimization among adolescents are limited at best (Lane *et al.*, 2014). Most research shows that few students experience fear while attending school (Akiba, 2010; Connell, 2018; May, 2001; Wallace & May, 2005). However, several correlates have been analyzed to understand fear of victimization among adolescents at school, including age (or grade level; Akiba, 2010; Connell, 2018; Gutt & Randa, 2016; May, 2001; May & Dunaway, 2000; Randa, Reyns, & Nobles, 2019; Swartz, Reyns, Henson, & Wilcox, 2011; Wallace & May, 2005); gender (Akiba, 2010; Connell, 2018; May, 2001; Wallace & May, 2005); race and ethnicity (Akiba, 2010; May, 2001; Connell, 2018; Wallace & May, 2005); and prior victimization (May, 2001; Swartz, *et al.*, 2011; Wallace & May, 2005). General findings on fear of victimization among adolescents are similar to findings associated with fear of crime among adult samples.

Existing literature examining the relationship between age (or grade level) and fear of crime and victimization among adolescents has been mixed, with some studies finding a significant relationship between age and fear of victimization (Connell, 2018; May, 2001; May & Dunaway, 2000; Randa, *et al.*, 2019; Swartz, *et al.*, 2011; Wallace & May, 2005) while others find no relationship (see Gutt & Randa, 2016). When research reveals that age, or grade level, influences fear of crime at school, those in lower grade levels, or younger adolescents, are more fearful of victimization at school. For example, using longitudinal analyses, Swartz and colleagues (2011) found that progressing from 7th to 10th grade decreased the level of fear of victimization. More recently, Randa and colleagues (2019) revealed that fear of victimization decreases with age.

Research exploring the relationship between gender and fear of victimization among adolescents has been mixed as well. Research conducted by Wallace and May (2005) found that gender did not influence the level of fear of victimization among students at school. However, Akiba (2010), using a nationally representative sample, found that male students were significantly more likely to fear school violence than female students. Similarly, recent research conducted by Connell (2018) found that male students had lower odds of perceptions of safety. Generally speaking, however, females tend to be more fearful of victimization than males, regardless of the type of

victimization (Lane, *et al.*, 2014; May, 2001). May and Dunaway (2001) concluded that gender interacted with prior victimization in impacting fear of victimization, with results revealing that females who experienced prior victimization were more fearful at school than those who had not experienced prior victimization. Oftentimes females may view themselves as physically vulnerable and less capable of warding off physical assault. A second explanation for greater levels of fear of victimization among women and girls is that they are socialized to both be more fearful and report more fear than men (Lane *et al.*, 2014).

The relationship between race and ethnicity and adolescent fear of victimization has also been less conclusive. One body of research reveals that race and ethnicity significantly influence fear of victimization among adolescents (Akiba, 2010; May 2001; May & Dunaway, 2001). More specifically, Akiba (2010) found that race and ethnicity were significantly related to fear of school violence, with students of color being more fearful than White students. Additional findings show that American Indian and Alaska Native students had higher levels of fear compared to their counterparts (Akiba, 2010). May and Dunaway (2000) and May (2001) found that race and gender interact to influence fear of nonsexual victimization among adolescents, with Black males being more fearful of victimization than White males. Higher levels of fear of school victimization may be a result of racial and ethnic students' greater likelihood of experiencing violence personally or vicariously as well as experiences with racism and discrimination both within school settings and in the general public (see Peguero, Connell, & Hong, 2018). A smaller body of research shows that race has no impact on the level of fear of in-school victimization among adolescents, however (see Connell, 2018; Swartz, *et al.*, 2011).

Prior victimization has been found to be the one of the strongest predictors of adolescent fear of victimization, with those previously experiencing victimization being fearful that victimization will occur again (Wallace & May, 2005). Although prior victimization has been shown to be a strong predictor of fear of crime, May (2001) found that being a prior victim was not significantly associated with fear among adolescents, regardless of gender or race. Thus, he concluded that perceiving the likelihood of being a victim is more influential among adolescents than actually experiencing victimization. Swartz and colleagues (2011) found that both previous victimization and perceived risk were significantly related to fear of in-school victimization; however, the effect of perception of risk was greater than previous victimization.

### **Fear and Avoidance Behaviors**

School victimization (e.g., bullying) has a significant impact on fear and school avoidance. School avoidance refers to an occurrence in which a student is absent

from school or school-related events as a means to circumvent negative interactions in a school environment (Hutzell & Payne, 2012, 2018). The fear and victimization hypothesis asserts that individuals who have experienced some form of victimization will be fearful of future victimization and, as a result, will adapt their behavior and lifestyle to prevent further victimization (Gutt & Randa, 2016; May, 2001; Randa & Wilcox, 2012). In essence, fear serves as the mediator between victimization and adaptive or avoidance behaviors.

Research exploring the relationship between fear of an attack or harm at school and school avoidance has overwhelmingly revealed a relationship between the two, with students fearful of harm at school being more likely to adopt avoidance behaviors (Baly *et al.*, 2014; Gutt & Randa, 2016; Hutzell & Payne, 2012, 2018; Randa & Wilcox, 2012; Vidourek, *et al.*, 2016). For example, Hutzell and Payne (2012) examined school avoidance behaviors resulting from fear and bullying victimization and found that, after controlling for demographic factors, academic achievement, and school type, students who experienced bullying were more likely to adopt avoidance behaviors when compared to non-bullied students. They also found that students who experience verbal (e.g., name-calling) and physical (e.g., pushing) forms of bullying were more likely to adopt avoidance behaviors than students experiencing other types of bullying were. Vidourek and colleagues (2016) also found that bullied students were six times more likely than non-bullied students to avoid school. Additionally, they found that females, 5th to 8th graders, and students attending public schools also reported higher levels of avoidance.

Randa and Wilcox (2012) assessed the influence of school disorder, victimization, and fear on avoidance at school, with fear serving as a mediating factor between bullying victimization and avoidance behaviors. They found that personal victimization, bullying in particular, influences a student's behavior; however, fear did not fully explain this effect. Rather, school disorder and bullying victimization have a direct impact on avoidance behaviors at school. Bullying victimization was found to be an important risk factor for school avoidance, particularly in schools characterized by the presence of gangs, guns, and/or drugs (Randa & Wilcox, 2012). Baly and colleagues (2014) observed that students who experienced multiple bullying victimizations were less likely to attend school due to fear for their safety. Several consequences of avoidance behaviors have been identified. Students who avoid school are more likely to have low or poor academic achievement and suffer from high levels of absenteeism (Barrett, Jennings, & Lynch, 2012; Hutzell & Payne, 2012, 2018).

Although there exists significant support for the relationship between fear and school avoidance, a small number of studies have found no relationship between the two (Glew, *et al.*, 2005; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstandt, 2001). For example,

both Wolke and colleagues (2001) and Glew and colleagues (2005) analyzed data on elementary school students and found no significant relationship between bullying victimization and avoidance behaviors.

### **Social Support for Students at School**

Social support, from either adults or peers, can influence a student in many positive ways, including positive academic performance, and can serve as buffer against involvement in delinquent behaviors (e.g., alcohol, drug, and tobacco use; Flaspohler, *et al.*, 2009; Gutt & Randa, 2016). More specifically, positive support in schools from adults, whether teachers, counselors, or administrators, can serve as a motivator for positive behavior among students (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020). Previous research has shown that positive student-teacher relationships increased the likelihood of students talking about their problems with their teachers, including bullying victimization. The effect of student-teacher relationships has been found to differ between bullied and non-bullied students, with bullied students having weaker social networks with teachers than non-bullied students (Furlong & Chung, 1995). It may be that some students who have experienced bullying victimization fail to disclose their victimization to teachers because they are uncertain how teachers will respond. Students who feel more comfortable with, and view teachers more positively, are more likely to disclose victimization (Akiba, 2010; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Vidourek, *et al.*, 2016).

Most literature on social support for students at school has examined the impact of student-teacher relationships on educational and academic success; however, there have been some studies focusing on the behavioral, emotional, and mental impact of these relationships. These studies demonstrate that students who feel that they have teacher support are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors, less likely to display depressive symptoms, and less likely to consider dropping out of school (Davis, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Mueller, 2001).

A more limited body of research has also explored the relationship between teacher social support and fear of and actual experience with bullying victimization. Akiba (2010) found that student-teacher bonding lowered the level of fear among 15-year-olds. Vidourek and colleagues (2016) found that roughly 36% of bullying victims notified a teacher about their victimization. Racial, ethnic, and gender differences have also been found among students seeking help from school personnel. Girls and White students who experienced bullying were more likely to seek help from school personnel than their male and non-White counterparts, suggesting that girls and White students may have stronger student-teacher relationships (Baly, *et al.*, 2014).

Although these studies address the influence of teacher-student relationships on various behaviors, they fail to adequately explore the impact of such relationships on

fear at school and avoidance behaviors adopted by students. As previously mentioned, only one study to date has examined such a relationship. Gutt and Randa (2016) sought to determine the role of an empathetic adult or teacher in reducing school fear and avoidance behaviors among students. They analyzed the 2011 National Crime Victimization Survey's School Crime Supplement (NCVS-SCS), which collects interview data every two years from students between the ages of 12 and 18. Their findings suggest having an empathetic teacher reduces the impact of bullying victimization on fear at school; however, having an empathetic adult other than a teacher did not have a significant effect on avoidance behaviors (Gutt & Randa, 2016).

Friendship and peer support at school are also essential in the development of adolescents and their sense of belonging in school settings. Negative peer support could potentially increase both experiences with bullying victimization and the adoption of school avoidance behaviors while positive peer support may serve as a buffer against bullying victimization and associated consequences, such as school avoidance behaviors (Shaheen, *et al.*, 2019; Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020). Additionally, the support of a close friend may serve as a means for victimized students to share their experiences and develop coping strategies (Hutzell & Payne, 2018).

Studies on the effects of peer (or friendship) support on experiences with victimization, fear of victimization, and avoidance behaviors has been limited at best (Flashpohler, *et al.*, 2009; Hutzell & Payne, 2018; Sacco & Nakhaie, 2007; Shaheen, *et al.* 2019; Sobba, 2019). Regarding victimization experiences among students, Flashpohler and colleagues (2009) found that students who felt supported by their peers were less likely to experience bullying or be bullies themselves; however, Shaheen and colleagues (2019) found that social support from friends was not significantly related to experiences with bullying victimization. Regarding the relationship between peer support and fear of victimization, students who perceived positive support and closeness from their peers may be less likely to fear harm or attack while at school (Sacco & Nakhaie, 2007; Sobba, 2019). Prior research on the impact of peer support on school avoidance behaviors has been limited; some research has suggested, however, that positive peer influence had no significant effect on school avoidance for either bullied or non-bullied students. However, results did reveal that bullied students who engage in school activities were less likely to avoid school (Hutzell & Payne, 2018).

### **The Current Study**

The current study begins to address the gap in the literature around the effects of having *both* adult and friend support at school on the fear of victimization and school avoidance behaviors. The hypotheses tested herein are as follows:

- H<sub>1</sub> Given their impact on fear of crime and other important variables, we expect that there will be demographic differences in whether or not students have a trusted adult or trusted friend who provides them social support at school. We expect that, controlling for victimization experience, girls, Whites, and older students will be more likely to have both a trusted adult and a trusted friend at school.
- H<sub>2</sub> Those students with trusted adults and trusted friends at school will be less likely to be fearful of attack or harm at school.
- H<sub>3</sub> Those students with trusted adults and trusted friends at school will be less likely to have avoided school in the past year.
- H<sub>4</sub> Those students that are fearful of attack or harm at school will be more likely to have avoided school in the past year.

## Data Sources

In the spring semester of the 2015-2016 academic year, the authors administered self-report surveys to 447 students from the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades at a large, public high school in the Southeastern United States. In February, each student in grades 9 through 11 was given a parental consent form and asked to take that form home for parental review and signature. Parents were made aware of the nature of the research in two ways: (1) through invitation to attend a presentation on the study and (2) through the parent notification system via phone and/or email, informing them that their student would be bringing the consent form home for their signature. A total of 1,397 students were invited to participate. Consent forms were received from 556 students. Of those who returned consent forms, 467 (84.0%) of the students and their parents agreed to participate in the study and 89 (16.0%) students/parents declined to participate. One in three (33.4%) of the students in the three grades under study thus participated in this research.

## Methods

Surveys were administered on three separate days at the high school, with teachers receiving a list of students scheduled to participate in data collection for that day. At the beginning of each period, a member of the school's faculty or administration would announce over the public address system that teachers should send participating students to the high school auditorium, where the research team had set up 50 laptop computers. After checking their name against the list of students who had returned a consent form, students were led into the auditorium and asked to find a laptop computer. A member of the research team then explained the nature of the study, its confidentiality, and described how the student would participate. Students then logged



in to complete the survey through the Qualtrics website. Both participating students and non-participating students who returned their consent form were given their choice of a water bottle, set of earbuds, or a flash drive. Participating students were also given a \$10 gift card of their choice to Walmart, Amazon, or iTunes.

At the start of the survey, students were each given a definition of the four types of bullying (See Appendix) and were then asked how often they experienced bullying victimization. Following the answer to that question, students received several questions inquiring about their victimization experience and a number of questions about their demographics and school related items (e.g., adult and friend support, school safety and avoidance measures). For the purpose of this study, any student that had been victimized by one or more forms of bullying was coded as (1) and students that had not been victims of any of the four types of bullying were coded (0). We describe the variables relevant to the current study below.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables (N = 447)**

| <i>Variable</i>                             | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Std. Dev.</i> |
|---|----------|----------|-------------|------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                               |          |          |             |                  |
| Male  | 197      | 44.3     |             |                  |
| Female                                      | 248      | 55.7     |             |                  |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>                       |          |          |             |                  |
| Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander | 6        | 1.3      |             |                  |
| Black/African American                      | 265      | 59.3     |             |                  |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native           | 3        | 0.7      |             |                  |
| Hispanic                                    | 4        | 0.9      |             |                  |
| White                                       | 125      | 28.0     |             |                  |
| Multiracial                                 | 44       | 9.8      |             |                  |
| <b>Victim of Aggression</b>                 |          |          |             |                  |
| Yes   | 376      | 77.8     |             |                  |
| No  | 99       | 22.2     |             |                  |
| Age (in years)                              |          |          |             |                  |
| Minimum – 14; Maximum – 19                  |          |          | 15.95       | 1.27             |

## Independent Variables

Given their relationship with fear, victimization, and reporting behaviors at school, we included the respondent's gender (Male coded 1), race (coded as two dummy variables, with Black as the reference group), age (an interval level variable with scores ranging from 14 to 19 years of age), and the respondent's self-reported victimization

experience (victims coded 1) as control variables. The results presented in Table 1 reveal that a majority (55.7%) of the sample was female and Black (59.3%), mirroring the demographic attributes of the high school where the data were collected. Almost four in five respondents (77.8%) indicated that they had been a victim of physical-, verbal-, relational-, or cyber-bullying.

**Table 2: Frequencies and Descriptive for Mediating and Dependent Variables**

| <i>Variable</i>  | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|----------|
| <b>At school, there is an <i>adult</i> you can talk to, who cares about your feelings and what happens to you?</b>   |          |          |
| Strongly Disagree  | 40       | 9.5      |
| Disagree   | 43       | 10.2     |
| Neither Agree nor Disagree   | 73       | 17.3     |
| Agree  | 153      | 36.3     |
| Strongly Agree   | 113      | 26.8     |
| <b>At school, there is a <i>friend</i> you can talk to, who cares about your feelings and what happens to you?</b>   |          |          |
| Strongly Disagree  | 20       | 4.8      |
| Disagree   | 23       | 5.5      |
| Neither Agree nor Disagree   | 52       | 12.4     |
| Agree  | 165      | 39.2     |
| Strongly Agree   | 161      | 38.2     |
| <b>How often are you afraid that someone will attack or harm you in the school building or on school property?</b>   |          |          |
| Never  | 273      | 70.4     |
| Rarely   | 90       | 23.2     |
| Sometimes  | 11       | 2.8      |
| Often  | 7        | 1.8      |
| All of the time  | 7        | 1.8      |
| <b>Did you avoid any <i>classes</i> because you thought someone might attack or harm you?</b>  |          |          |
| Yes  | 33       | 7.8      |
| No   | 388      | 92.2     |
| <b>Did you <i>stay home</i> 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 and from school?</b> |          |          |
| Yes  | 31       | 7.5      |
| No   | 385      | 92.5     |
| <b>Did you avoid any <i>activities at your school</i> because you thought someone might attack or harm you?</b>  |          |          |
| Yes  | 52       | 12.5     |
| No   | 365      | 87.5     |

## Dependent Variables

Given that we are examining the mediating effect of a trusted adult or friend on both fear of victimization at school and avoidance of activities at school due to fear, we used several variables to examine these relationships. The descriptives for those variables are presented in Table 2. These variables are operationalized below.

### *Trust in Adult at School*

Trust in an adult at school was operationalized by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: “At school, there is an adult you can talk to, who cares about your feelings and what happens to you.” Responses were coded so that those responding “strongly agree” were coded (5) while those indicating they “strongly disagree” with the statement were coded (1). Over half (63.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

### *Trust in a Friend at School*

Trust in a friend at school was operationalized by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: “At school, you have a FRIEND you can talk to, who cares about your feelings and what happens to you.” Responses were coded so that those responding “strongly agree” were coded (5) while those indicating they “strongly disagree” with the statement were coded (1). The vast majority (77.4%) either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

### *Fear of Attack or Harm at School*

Fear of attack or harm at school was operationalized by asking respondents to indicate how often they “...were afraid that someone would attack or harm them in the school building or on the school property.” Responses ranged from never (coded 1) to all the time (coded as 5). The vast majority (93.6%) indicated they “never” or “rarely” were afraid of an attack or harm at school.

### *Avoidance Behaviors*

To measure whether students avoided activities at school because of their fear, we asked a series of three questions. The wording for these questions is included in Table 2. Responses were summated to create an avoidance index, with scores ranging from 0 (respondent had not avoided any activities) to 3 (respondent had avoided participating in all the activities under study). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .723, indicating the scale was a reliable measure of avoidance.

### Analytic Strategy

We began the multivariate analyses by using multivariate ordinary least squares regression to regress trust in an adult at school and trust in a friend at school on the control variables (Table 3). We then regressed the fear of attack or harm on the control variables and trust in an adult at school and trust in a friend at school (Table 4). Finally, we regress the avoidance behaviors scale on the control variables, trust in an adult and a friend at school, and fear of attack or harm (Table 5). Those regression models, and a discussion of the results of each model, are discussed in the Results section below.

**Table 3: Multivariate Linear Regression Results of Regressing Trust in Adult at School and Trust in Friend at School on Demographic and Victimization Variables**

| Variable             | Trust in Adult<br>Trust in Friend |       |        | Trust in Friend |       |         |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|--------|-----------------|-------|---------|
|                      | B(S.E.)                           | Beta  | t      | B(S.E.)         | Beta  | t       |
| Male                 | -.127(.124)                       | -.051 | -1.030 | -.259(.104)     | -.121 | -2.477* |
| White                | -.039(.139)                       | -.014 | .280   | .314(.118)      | .134  | 2.670** |
| Other Race           | -.275(.189)                       | -.074 | -1.456 | -.041(.159)     | -.013 | -.258   |
| Age                  | .048(.048)                        | .049  | .989   | .001(.041)      | .001  | .013    |
| Victim of Aggression | -.078(.143)                       | -.027 | -.546  | .267(.121)      | .106  | 2.200*  |
|                      |                                   |       |        |                 |       |         |
| R <sup>2</sup>       | .013                              |       |        | .048            |       |         |
| F                    | 1.061                             |       |        | 4.125***        |       |         |
| df                   | 419                               |       |        | 418             |       |         |

\* p<.05

\*\* p<.01

\*\*\* p<.001

### Results

The results of those multivariate linear regression models regressing trust in an adult at school and trust in a friend at school on the control variables are presented in Table 3. None of the control variables had a statistically significant association with trust in an adult. Three of the control variables, on the other hand, had a significant impact on trust in a friend at school. Girls ( $B=-.259$ ,  $p<.05$ ), Whites ( $B=.314$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and those respondents who were victims of bullying ( $B=.267$ ,  $p<.05$ ) were significantly more likely than their counterparts to have a trusted friend at school.

Next, we regressed fear of an attack or harm at school on the control variables and the two “trust” variables. The results of that multivariate linear regression model are presented in Table 4. Those respondents who were victims of aggression ( $B=.332$ ,

$p < .001$ ) and those respondents who indicated that they did not have a trusted adult at school ( $B = -.146$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significantly more likely than their counterparts to fear an attack or harm at school. Having a trusted friend at school did not have a significant impact on the fear of an attack or harm at school.

**Table 4: Multivariate Linear Regression Results of Regressing Fear of Attack/Harm at School on Demographic Variables, Victimization, and Trust in Adult and Friends at School**

| <i>Variable</i>           | <i>B(S.E.)</i> | <i>Beta</i> | <i>t</i>  |
|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|
| Male                      | -.050(.089)    | -.027       | -.591     |
| White                     | .007(.101)     | .004        | .074      |
| Other Race                | .135(.136)     | .050        | .990      |
| Age                       | -.020(.034)    | -.028       | -.584     |
| Victim of Aggression      | .332(.104)     | .516        | 3.200***  |
| Trust in Adult at School  | -.146(.042)    | -.200       | -3.449*** |
| Trust in Friend at School | .073(.050)     | .086        | 1.463     |
|                           |                |             |           |
| R <sup>2</sup>            | .063           |             |           |
| F                         | 3.931***       |             |           |
| Df                        | 416            |             |           |

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 5: Multivariate Linear Regression Results of Regressing Avoidance Behaviors on Demographic Variables, Victimization, Trust in Adult and Friends at School, and Fear of Attack/Harm at School**

| <i>Variable</i>               | <i>B(S.E.)</i> | <i>Beta</i> | <i>t</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------|----------|
| Male                          | -.041(.067)    | -.030       | -.606    |
| White                         | -.105(.076)    | -.071       | -1.394   |
| Other Race                    | .101(.104)     | .050        | .978     |
| Age                           | -.033(.026)    | -.061       | -1.261   |
| Victim of Aggression          | .178(.080)     | .111        | 2.234*   |
| Trust in Adult at School      | -.027(.032)    | -.049       | -.835    |
| Trust in Friend at School     | -.060(.038)    | -.092       | -1.566   |
| Fear of Attack/Harm at School | .150(.037)     | .202        | 4.064*** |
|                               |                |             |          |
| R <sup>2</sup>                | .093           |             |          |
| F                             | 5.054***       |             |          |
| Df                            | 400            |             |          |

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

In the final model, we regressed avoidance behaviors on the control variables, the two “trust” variables, and fear of attack or harm at school. The results of that multivariate linear regression model are presented in Table 5. Victims of bullying ( $B=.178, p<.05$ ) were significantly more likely to avoid school activities because they were afraid someone would attack them, as were those students who were most fearful ( $B=.150, p<.001$ ). Neither having a trusted adult nor having a trusted friend at school had a significant impact on school avoidance behaviors.

## Discussion

To date, one study has examined the role of a trusted adult on the relationship between fear and school avoidance; however, this study did not investigate whether a trusted friend may mediate the effects of student fear on school avoidance behavior. Therefore, the main goal of the current study was to fill the gaps on social support and bullying victimization by exploring whether having a trusted adult and trusted friend served as a buffer for students experiencing fear of harm who may engage in school avoidance behaviors. Drawing on the fear of crime and victimization literature, it was expected that adolescents who were less likely to have a trusted friend or adult would be more fearful of harm or an attack at school and more likely to adopt avoidance behaviors after experiencing victimization. The results of this study suggest that a trusted adult is an important component of school safety and reducing fear of crime at school. Students who have a trusted adult at school are less fearful of harm at school, and thus are less likely to avoid school activities because of fear. Results also suggest that further efforts to reduce student fear at school may also increase attendance at both academic and extracurricular events, likely creating a more positive overall school experience among students. Researchers should continue to explore these interdependent factors to increase both school safety, perceptions of school climate, and academic performance.

In this study, we tested four hypotheses. We found partial support for our first hypothesis. While none of the demographic or victimization variables had a significant on the respondent’s trust in an adult at school, gender, race, and victimization experience all influenced whether or not the student had a trusted friend to rely on for social support at school. Girls, Whites, and those students that had been victims of aggression were significantly more likely to have a trusted friend than their male, Black, and non-victimized counterparts. This finding seems to suggest that girls, Whites, and victimized students may be more open to sharing their experiences with a trusted friend because of similar experiences with victimization. Future research is needed to better understand why these relationships matter for these groups, and not for others.

We also found partial support for our second hypothesis, in that students who had a trusted adult at school were significantly less fearful than their counterparts. While

future research is needed to further explicate this finding, these results suggest that students with a trusted adult at school may be more willing to disclose their victimization to that adult who may, in turn, intervene on the behalf of the student (see Gutt & Randa, 2016). Adult intervention could take place in a number of ways, including working with the school administration to remedy disorder or bullying, conversations with students about the reality of crime at school and their understanding of its prevalence, and/or reporting of known bullies to school administrators. Additionally, those students who had been victims of bullying were significantly more fearful than their non-victimized counterparts were. This can be explained by the fact that prior victimization has been shown to increase levels of fear of future victimization (Wallace & May, 2005).

On the other hand, having a trusted friend at school did not impact a student's fear of victimization. This may be explained by student's beliefs that a trusted friend may not be able to intervene in a similar fashion as a trusted adult (see Shaheen, *et al.*, 2019). It could also be the case that a trusted friend shares the same victimization experiences and fears that the respondents experienced. In that case, having a trusted friend does not reduce either fear or avoidance (see below) and may increase those attitudes and behavior, as some evidence suggests that when friends are co-victimized, they are more likely to ruminate and focus on the negative co-victimization processes rather than identify solutions (Peters *et al.*, 2011). One way to better understand this relationship (and its negligible impact on fear and avoidance) may be to ask adolescents about their peers' fears and avoidance behaviors. We expect that those youths who have trusted friends who are not fearful will be less likely to be fearful and avoid school; however, this is an empirical question that is both beyond the scope of this study and ripe for future research

We also did not find any support for our third hypothesis. Neither having a trusted adult at school nor having a trusted friend at school impacted whether a student had avoided school in this study. This seems to suggest that prior experiences with bullying may trump whether a student has a trusted adult or friend. Additionally, this finding may be explained by the level of participation in school activities, whereby victimized students who participate in school activities are less likely to adopt avoidance behaviors. In other words, student participation may serve as a buffer, or protective factor, against avoidance behaviors (see Hutzell & Payne, 2018).

Finally, as numerous other studies have found, students that were fearful of an attack or harm at school were significantly more likely to have engaged in avoidance behaviors, a finding that supports our fourth hypothesis. Additionally, those that have been victims of aggression were also significantly more likely to avoid school as well. This finding suggests that students who have experienced bullying previously may both be more fearful at school (when they attend) and avoid school, when possible, to prevent any future victimization (see Gutt & Randa, 2016; Hutzell & Payne, 2012, 2018).

Interestingly, none of the demographic variables affected fear or avoidance among this sample. These results suggest that fear of an attack or harm and prior victimization have a greater influence on avoidance behaviors than demographic variables (Lane, *et al.*, 2014; Wallace & May, 2005). In a way, this is good news, as school administrators have greater power to impact both fear and victimization experiences than any demographic variable. Thus, schools that effectively reduce both fear and likelihood of victimization will likely increase attendance, academic performance, and overall school climate by doing so (Baly *et al.*, 2014; (Barrett, Jennings, & Lynch, 2012; Hutzell & Payne, 2012, 2018).

### Study Limitations and Future Research

Although the current study provides some insight into the impact of social support on the relationship between fear and avoidance behaviors at school, there are some limitations that should be addressed. First, data for the current study was collected from a sample of students attending a public high school in one southeastern state. Thus, these results presented here may not be generalizable to all high school students in the sampled state or high school students in other states. Nevertheless, some researchers have suggested that reduced generalizability may no longer be as severe a limitation in school settings because of contextual, neighborhood and environmental factors on school climates (Connell, 2018). A second limitation of the study is that a large percentage of the total variance in dependent variables remains unexplained. Although this may be a limitation, the aim of the current study was to explore the presence of a relationship between the key variables of interest. Thus, having a large amount of unexplained variation means that those factors explaining fear and avoidance are not measured in this study, and thus should encourage researchers to consider other factors in explaining these relationships. A third limitation is the lack of specificity in the type of trusted adult in this research exploring the effects of a trusted adult on the relationship between fear and school avoidance behaviors. Future research should examine whether the type of trusted adult (e.g., teacher, principal, or counselor) matters in the relationship between fear and school avoidance behaviors. For example, a student may view a trusted principal as having more authoritative power (e.g., suspending an aggressor) than a trusted teacher to resolve any issues stemming from both student fear and avoidance behaviors. Finally, the current study does not assess whether the influence of a trusted friend or adult on the relationship between fear and avoidance behaviors differ by the type of bullying a student experiences. For example, a student experiencing physical bullying may assume a trusted adult has more authority to intervene than a student experiencing cyber bullying does. Future studies should attempt to unravel these relationships as well.



## School Policy Implications

The results presented here suggest several important implications for policy and future research. First, and perhaps most importantly, we believe the results presented here support the call by May (2014), who argues that:

...efforts to encourage an 'open reporting climate' where students feel empowered to report the presence of a victimization (and, intuitively, other actions that threaten the school environment) can be successful if properly designed and targeted. These efforts should begin with encouraging students to take ownership of their school, developing positive relationships between students and adults in the school, and building self-efficacy among students.

May (2014) further argues that including students in the decision-making efforts of school administrators is an essential step to foster an open reporting climate, as this inclusion will create a larger sense of "buy-in" from the entire student body. Because many students may not feel that teachers and/or administrators value their input, they may feel that teachers and administrators will not respond to their reports of victimization and other harmful behaviors and thus do not feel they can trust the adults in their schools as sources for help. May (2014) argues that student empowerment will produce student ownership in solving safety problems at school which should also increase discussions between students and adults about safety, thereby potentially decreasing both fear and school avoidance behaviors.

A second finding from the current study needs future attention. May (2014) argues that schools exert considerable influence over the extent to which students are encouraged to report weapons possession; it likely is also the case that schools influence whether students feel they can trust the adults in the school. Importantly, with effort, schools can take steps to change students' perceptions of the school climate, which can increase levels of school safety. Our findings, in conjunction with earlier studies on this topic, indicate that students' fear of crime (and subsequently avoidance behaviors) are influenced by both victimization and whether students have a trusted adult at school. Nevertheless, as the findings from this study demonstrate, not all students feel they have a trusted adult at school. For these students particularly, but for all students generally, allowing students an anonymous way to report victimization at school may be an important factor in both encouraging student reporting of their own victimization and reducing fear and avoidance of school (May, 2014). Unfortunately, we were not able to test this measure in this study. Future studies, however, should examine how the ability to report misbehavior anonymously interacts with a variety of factors including those explored in this paper.

The findings presented here support and compliment previous studies in this area that highlight the relevance of school climate, social bonding, and the development of

social capital and self-efficacy in the development of safe schools. This emerging body of research has reduced the calls for target hardening approaches such as security guards, school police, and metal detectors, all of which have demonstrated at least some impact on increased levels of fear and avoidance in schools (Connell, 2018; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013; Schreck & Miller, 2003). Additional research is needed, however, to more fully understand the circumstances and factors that will be the most effective in encouraging students to report victimization in schools. This research is important because it can play a major role in developing strategies for reducing both fear and avoidance behaviors most likely to occur in our schools.

### References

- Akiba, M. (2010). What predicts fear of school violence among US adolescents? *Teachers College Record*, *112*(1), 68-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811011200110>
- Baly, M. W., Cornell, D. G., & Lovegrove, P. (2014). A longitudinal investigation of self- and peer reports of bullying victimization across middle school. *Psychology in the Schools*, *51*(3), 217-240. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21747>
- Barrett, K. L., Jennings, W. G., & Lynch, M. J. (2012). The relation between youth fear and avoidance of crime in school and academic experiences. *Journal of School Violence*, *11*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2011.630309>
- Burns, E., Mann, R., Yanez, C., & Synergy Enterprises Inc. (2022). *Student reports of bullying: Results from the 2019 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2022/2022031.pdf>
- Connell, N. M. (2018). Fear of crime at school: Understanding student perceptions of safety as function of historical context. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *16*(2), 124-136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016680407>
- Davis, H. (2003). Conceptualizing the role and influence of student-teacher relationships on children's social and cognitive development. *Educational Psychologist*, *38*, 207-234. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3804\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3804_2)
- Flaspohler, P. D., Elfstrom, J. L., Vanderzee, K. L., Sink, H. E., & Birchmeier, Z. (2009). Stand by me: The effects of peer and teacher support in mitigating the impact of bullying on quality of life. *Psychology in the Schools*, *46*(7), 636-649. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20404>
- Furlong, M. J., & Ching, A. (1995). Who are the victims of school violence? A comparison of student non-victims and multi-victims. *Education and Treatment of Children*, *18*, 282-299. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42899414>
- Glew, G. M., Fan, M. Y., Katon, W., Rivara, F. P., & Kernic, M. A. (2005). Bullying, psychosocial adjustment, and academic performance in elementary school. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, *159*(11), 1026-1031. doi:10.1001/archpedi.159.11.1026

- Gutt, T. A., & Randa, R. (2016). The influence of an empathetic adult on the relationship between bullying victimization and fear at school. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 39(2), 282-302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2014.956328>
- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children's school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development*, 72, 625-638. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00301>
- Hutzell, K. L., & Payne, A. A. (2012). The impact of bullying victimization on school avoidance. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 10(4), 370-385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204012438926>
- Hutzell, K. L., Payne, A. A. (2018). The relationship between bullying victimization and school avoidance: An examination of direct association, protective influences, and aggravating factors. *Journal of School Violence*, 17(2), 210-226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2017.1296771>
- Lane, J., Rader, N. E., Henson, B., Fisher, B. S., & May, D. C. (2014). *Fear of Crime in the United States: Causes, Consequences, and Contradictions*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- May, D.C. (2014). *School safety in the United States: A reasoned look at the rhetoric*. Carolina Academic Press.
- May, D. C. (2001). The effect fear of sexual victimization on adolescent fear of crime. *Sociological Spectrum*, 21, 141-174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170119080>
- May, D. C., & Dunaway, R. G. (2000). Predictors of fear of criminal victimization at school among adolescents. *Sociological Spectrum*, 20(2), 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/027321700279938>
- Mischel, J., & Kitsantas, A. (2020). Middle school students' perceptions of school climate, bullying prevalence, and social support and coping. *Social Psychology of Education*, 23, 51-72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-019-09522-5>
- Mueller, C. (2001). The role of caring in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students. *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(2), 241-255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2001.tb01110.x>
- Olweus, D. (1994). Bullying at school: basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 35(7), 1171-1190.
- Olweus, D. (1997). Bully/victim problems in school: Facts and intervention. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 12(4), 495-510. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03172807>
- Olweus, D. (2003). A profile of bullying in school. *Educational Leadership*, 60(6), 12-17.
- Naylor, P. & Cowie, H. (1999). The effectiveness of peer support systems in challenging school bullying: Perspectives and experiences of teachers and pupils. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22(4), 467-479. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1999.0241>
- Peguro, A. A., Connell, N. M., & Hong, J. S. (2018). Introduction to the special issue "school violence and safety". *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 16(2), 119-123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016680404>
- Perumean-Chaney, S. E., & Sutton, L. M. (2013). Students and perceived school safety: The impact of school security measures. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38(4), 570-588. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-012-9182-2>

- Peters, E., Riksen-Walraven, J. M., Cillessen, A. H. N., & de Weerth, C. (2011). Peer rejection and HPA activity in middle childhood: Friendship makes a difference. *Child Development, 82*, 1906-1920.
- Petrosino, A., Gukenburg, S., DeVoe, J., & Hanson, T. (2010). *What characteristics of bullying, bullying victims, and schools are associated with increased reporting of bullying to school officials?* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2010-No. 092). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. Retrieved from <http://ies.edu.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- Randa, R., & Wilcox, P. (2012). Avoidance at school: Further specifying the influence of disorder, victimization and fear. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 10*(2), 190-204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204011423765>
- Randa, R., Reynolds, B. W., & Nobles, M. R. (2019). Measuring the effects of limited and persistent school bullying victimization: Repeat victimization, fear, and adaptive behaviors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 34*(2), 392-415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516641279>
- Sacco, V. F., & Nakhaie, M. R. (2007). Fear of school violence and the ameliorative effects of student social capital. *Journal of School Violence, 6*(1), 3-25. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v06n01\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v06n01_02)
- Schreck, C. J., & Miller, J. M. (2003). Sources of fear of crime at school: What is the relative contribution of disorder, individual characteristics, and school security? *Journal of School Violence, 2*(4), 57-79. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v02n04\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v02n04_04)
- Seldin, M., & Yanez, C. (2019). *Student Reports of Bullying: Results from the 2017 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey* (NCES 2019-054). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Shaheen, A. M., Hamdan, K. M., Albqoor, M., Othaman, A. K., Amre, H. M., & Hazeem, M. N. A. (2019). Perceived social support from family and friends and bullying victimization among adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 107*, 104503. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104503>
- Sobba, K. N. (2019). Correlates and buffers of school avoidance: a review of school avoidance literature and applying social capital as a potential safeguard. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 24*(3), 380-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1524772>
- Swartz, K., Reynolds, B. W., Henson, B., & Wilcox, P. (2011). Fear of in-school victimization: Contextual, gendered, and developmental considerations. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 9*(1), 59-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204010374606>
- Vidourek, R. A., King, K. A., & Merianos, A. L. (2016). School bullying and student trauma: Fear and avoidance associated with victimization. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 44*(2), 121-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2016.1132869>
- Wallace, L. H., & May, D. C. (2005). The impact of parental attachment and feelings of isolation on adolescent fear of crime at school. *Adolescence, 40*(159), 457-474.

- Wolke, D., Woods, S., Stanford, K., & Schulz, H. (2001). Bullying and victimization of primary school children in England and Germany: Prevalence and school factors. *British Journal of Psychology*, *92*(4), 673-696. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712601162419>
- Wood, L., Smith, J., Varjas, K., & Meyers, J. (2017). School personnel social support and nonsupport for bystanders of bullying: Exploring student perspectives. *Journal of School Psychology*, *61*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.12.003>

## Appendix

### *Survey Instrument*

We are interested in how students *get along* with one another. Please think about your relationship with other STUDENTS AT YOUR SCHOOL DURING THE PAST SIX MONTHS. For each of the statements, please answer questions using the scale provided.

PA Some students engage in physical aggression, such as hitting, kicking, and shoving other students. Physical aggression may also include any other attempts that have the potential to cause physical harm to another person. (PA = Physical Aggression).

VA Some students engage in verbal aggression, such as calling others names to hurt feelings, making fun of others to cause harm, or making threats of harm. Verbal aggression may also include any other attempts to cause psychological harm. (VA = Verbal Aggression).

SA Some students engage in social aggression, such as spreading rumors about other students, purposely leaving people out of social groups or social events, turning people against each other, or giving the silent treatment. Social aggression may also include any other attempts to cause social harm. (SA = Social or Relational Aggression).

CA Some students engage in cyber aggression, such as posting negative things about others online or posting/sharing inappropriate pictures by electronic means (e.g., by use of cell phones, social media, social applications, or internet access). Cyber aggression may also include any other attempts to cause harm by electronic means. (CA = Cyber Aggression).

(Note: Items are shown for one type of aggression at a time.)

CSB01 How often do you do this? \_\_\_\_\_.

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

|       |      |        |           |                           |                 |
|-------|------|--------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 0     | 1    | 2      | 3         | 4                         | 5               |
| Never | Once | Rarely | Sometimes | Almost all of<br>the time | All of the time |