

School Fairness and Repeated Bullying Victimization Among High School Students

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Suzanne Overstreet¹, Julie Sriken²,
David S. Lapsey Jr³, and Susan McNeeley⁴ 

Abstract

Recent research has shown a link between fairness in terms of school rules and discipline and negative student outcomes, including delinquency, violent behavior, and victimization. The current study examines how fairness at school impacts bullying victimization—operationalized as repeated physical, psychological, or verbal victimization—among high school sophomores. We tested this hypothesis using one wave of the Educational Longitudinal Study (2002). The findings of negative binomial regression analyses indicate bullying victimization is more prevalent among students who believe that their schools are unfair. A number of student characteristics were also significantly related to experiencing bullying. Implications for policy and practice are outlined.

Keywords

bullying, school violence, victimology

¹Indiana University Southeast, New Albany, IN, USA

²Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

³Campbellsville University, Campbellsville, KY, USA

⁴Minnesota Department of Corrections, St. Paul, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Suzanne Overstreet, Indiana University Southeast, 4201 Grant Line Road, New Albany, IN 47150, USA.

Email: soverstr@iu.edu

Introduction

Research shows bullying has short- and long-term negative effects on the physical and psychological health of victims (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Nansel et al., 2001; Rivers et al., 2009; Salmon et al., 1998; Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Wolke et al., 2000) and bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009), while bullies are also prone to persistent antisocial behavior in adulthood (Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Wolke et al., 2000). Between 15% and 20% of students in American school systems have been bullied either in school or electronically (Lynn Hawkins et al., 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), while roughly 30% of youth report that they have bullied others, and approximately 70% of both students and school staff report they have witnessed bullying in their schools (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Preventing in-school bullying is vital, as exposure to bullying is associated with adverse health and psychosocial outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem issues, absenteeism, poor general health, and suicidal ideation, and behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Nansel et al., 2001; Rivers et al., 2009; Salmon et al., 1998; Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Wolke et al., 2000). Importantly, 80% of bullying incidents involve at least one witness, and research indicates those who witness bullying also report heightened feelings of depression, anxiety, hostility, and inferiority (Rivers et al., 2009).

Several personal characteristics appear to put youth at higher risk. Students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Olweus, 1994; Rose et al., 2009, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). Foreign-born students or those who speak a different language are more likely to be targeted (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000; Maynard et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2006). Younger students are more commonly victimized (Flisher et al., 2006; Olweus, 1994; Smith et al., 1999). Bullying appears to be higher among female students (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Pontes et al., 2018); however, this depends upon the type of bullying being examined. Female students may be more likely to experience verbal and relational bullying such as name calling and rumors while male students may experience greater physical bullying (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). A review of 28 studies examining the relationship between bullying and socioeconomic status (SES) found a significant but weak positive association between victimization and low SES (Tippett & Wolke, 2014). Finally, while several studies have identified racial and ethnic differences in bullying victimization (but for null results, see Connell, El Sayed, et al., 2015), there is little consensus about

which groups are more likely to be targeted (Bauman et al., 2013; Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; for a review, see Albdour & Krouse, 2014).

Recent research has suggested that the school context can support or prevent bullying (e.g., Gregory et al., 2010; Stutzenberger, 2020). In particular, the current study explores bullying using school fairness as the theoretical framework. An important aspect of school climate (see Wang & Degol, 2016), school fairness refers to the consistency and fairness of discipline practices within the school, and has been linked to a number of student outcomes including delinquency, academic achievement, school avoidance, victimization, and bullying perpetration (Arum, 2005; Fissel et al., 2019; Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory et al., 2010; Hurd et al., 2018; James et al., 2020; Mayer & Leone, 1999; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Moon et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020; Payne, 2008; Sanches et al., 2012; Stewart, 2003; Stutzenberger, 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Way, 2011; Welsh, 2003).

We hypothesize that students reporting perceptions of greater school fairness will also report significantly less bullying victimization. We use a cross-sectional, nationally-representative sample of 10th graders to estimate the relationship between perceived school fairness and bullying victimization, increasing generalizability of the evidence that school fairness contributes to bullying victimization. In this way, we aim to determine the usefulness of school fairness policies and practices for reducing bullying victimization. In addition, due to the mixed findings regarding which students are most likely to experience in-school bullying—especially in regard to racial and ethnic differences—additional studies are needed to provide clarity. By replicating these prior studies using a large sample of adolescents, the current study aims to improve our understanding of previous mixed findings and help develop policies for reducing bullying (see McNeeley & Warner, 2015).

The School Environment: Organizational and School Fairness

In addition to student characteristics, the school environment can also contribute to victimization. These aspects of the school environment include respect for students and teachers, fairness and clarity of rules, morale, and administrative leadership quality. Indeed, in their review of 693 studies examining correlates of in-school violence, Turanovic et al. (2019) identified school climate as one of the factors that was most strongly related to victimization. Turanovic et al. (2019) found a positive school climate was significantly negatively

correlated with measures of total victimization, bullying victimization, violent victimization, aggressive/delinquent behavior, school bullying perpetration, and violent offending. In particular, we focus on a specific aspect of school climate: organizational fairness within schools.

Originally developed to explain supervisor and employee behavioral outcomes, organizational fairness has since been frequently used to explain outcomes in criminal justice (Wolfe & Lawson, 2020). Organizational fairness often refers to perceptions that individuals within an organization are treated fairly (Barsky et al., 2011). Scholars who conduct organizational research find individuals who react emotionally to the fairness of treatment in the workplace have perceptual and behavioral consequences such as prosocial behaviors and job satisfaction (Barsky et al., 2011; Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). This theoretical framework has since been used to explain the relationship between fairness and practitioner outcomes within the criminal justice literature. For instance, a recent review of 143 studies revealed organizational fairness had a positive impact on several criminal justice practitioner work outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, compliance, view of supervisor, attitudinal/emotional reactions, role-related perceptions, and internal factors; Wolfe & Lawson, 2020).

Similarly, fairness has been applied to the policing literature in terms of procedural justice. According to Tyler (1990), an individual's belief that the criminal justice system is fair, unbiased, and transparent is related to their decision to comply with or break the law. The concept of procedural justice has been linked with organizational fairness outside of the school environment. For example, within correctional facilities, incarcerated people who view the rule enforcement system as unfair are less likely to follow institutional rules (Alward et al., 2021; Mears & Reisig, 2006; Pizarro & Narag, 2008; Reisig & Mesko, 2009). If rule breaking, including behaviors that harm other people, are more likely in unfair environments, victimization may also be more likely among individuals within those environments. Furthermore, individuals who feel formal agents of social control are insufficient to keep them safe may turn to methods they believe will be protective; such as aggressive behavior, posturing, and violently retaliating to perceived slights (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Jacobs & Wright, 2006); however, these behaviors actually increase risk of violent and non-violent victimization (McNeeley & Wilcox, 2015a, 2015b; Stewart et al., 2006).

A related concept, distinct from organizational justice and procedural justice, is school fairness, which refers to the degree to which students perceive school rules as fair, consistent, and predictable. School fairness has primarily been used as a dimension of the construct of school climate; however, more recently, scholars have begun focusing on a single measure of school

climate—*perceived fairness*—to explain in-school student behaviors (e.g., Fissel et al., 2019; James et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). Research conducted on school environment, a well-studied construct, shows that an individual's perception that their school's rules and rule enforcement are unfair is related to a number of negative in-school behaviors such as aggressive behavior, classroom disruption, poor academic achievement, and school avoidance, which are in turn correlated with bullying victimization (Fissel et al., 2019; Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; Hurd et al., 2018; James et al., 2020; Moon et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020; Payne, 2008; Sanches et al., 2012; Stewart, 2003; Syvertsen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Way, 2011; Welsh, 2003).

Specifically, school fairness has been linked to lower victimization, delinquency, and misconduct (Arum, 2005; Fissel et al., 2019; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory et al., 2010; Mayer & Leone, 1999). For example, Fissel et al.'s (2019) study of Kentucky high school students revealed that in-school delinquency was more likely to occur in schools with higher levels of perceived injustice in regard to rule enforcement. Fewer studies have specifically examined the relationship between school fairness and bullying. Additional studies have established that school fairness is negatively related to criminal victimization (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory et al., 2010; Mayer & Leone, 1999). This link between school fairness and criminal victimization is notable, as students who experience criminal victimization also report being bullied in school at a rate twice as high as students who did not report being victims of crime (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

A handful of studies have explicitly linked school fairness and bullying. Gregory et al.'s (2010) study of high school students in Virginia found school fairness was negatively associated with student and teacher reports of the level of non-criminal bullying that occurred in their school. Most notably, Stutzenberger's (2020) doctoral dissertation examining verbal bullying among middle school students in Kentucky showed that students' perceptions of rule fairness at their schools were negatively related to verbal bullying. The study also showed that the bully's motivation was relevant when understanding the effect of school context. For example, school fairness was significantly related to students being verbally bullied because of their social class, opinions, and name, but not because of their appearance.

Thus, there is an apparent link between school fairness and bullying victimization at school, as well as evidence that bullying is related to the broader school climate (for a review, see Turanovic et al., 2019). This study uses a nationally-representative data source to test the hypothesis that students who perceive their schools as unfair are more likely to experience bullying.

Our study operationalizes bullying as repeated physical, psychological, and verbal aggression, thereby encompassing the measures of bullying and criminal victimization that were examined in prior studies (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory et al., 2010; Mayer & Leone, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and included in prior definitions of bullying (e.g., Sampson, 2009).

Methods

Data

The current study conducts secondary analysis using previously-collected data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). This study was conducted by the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The data were made publicly available on the ICPSR (2005) website. The ELS:2002 is a longitudinal study designed to provide trend data regarding crucial transitions experienced by students as they proceed through high school. The data include information about students, their teachers, their friends, and their parents in several domains such as academic performance, experiences, attitudes, and occupational and educational goals. While the overall project was longitudinal in nature, the current study uses only the 2002 wave and therefore is cross-sectional.

The ELS:2002 base year data were collected about a nationally-representative sample of U.S. sophomore high school students in 2002 (USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). These data were collected from students, parents, teachers, school administrators, librarians, and observation of school facilities. The ELS:2002 used a two-stage sample selection process. First, a national sample of schools was selected using stratified probability proportional to size, resulting in a sample of 1,221 eligible public, Catholic, and other private schools from a population of roughly 27,000 schools consisting of sophomore students.¹ Second, of the eligible schools, 752 participated in the study. From these schools, 17,591 eligible sophomores were selected, and 15,362 completed a base year survey. Responses were also received from 13,488 parents, 7,135 teachers, 743 principals, and 718 librarians.

Sample Characteristics

Our sample consists of 10,978 participants with complete information on the dependent and independent variables. Participants were nearly evenly divided

between male (48.64%, $n=5,340$) and female students (51.36%, $n=5,638$). Mean age for the sample was 16.11 ($SD=0.01$) and the majority of participants were White (61.21%, $n=6,720$). Among the non-White participants, Hispanic ethnicity of any race was most frequently reported (13.98%, $n=1,535$), followed by Black (11.33%, $n=1,244$), Asian or Pacific Islander (7.95%, $n=873$), multiracial racial identity (4.73%, $n=519$), and American Indian or Alaskan Native race (0.79%, $n=87$). About one-fifth (21.10%, $n=2,316$) of the participants were in the lowest SES quartile, 22.57% ($n=2,478$) were in the second quartile, 25.53% ($n=2,803$) were in the third quartile, and 30.80% ($n=3,381$) were in the highest SES quartile.

Measures

Bullying. Bullying has been defined in a number of ways by various sources, specifically in reference to youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior, there is an observed or perceived power imbalance, and the behavior is repetitive or there is a high likelihood for repetition. Olweus (1997) notes bullying is a subset of aggressive behavior characterized by repetition and an imbalance of power. Bullying has also been defined as assault, tripping, intimidation, rumor-spreading, isolation, demands for money, destruction of property, theft of valued possessions, destruction of another's work, and name-calling (Sampson, 2009). The current study combines these definitions by measuring bullying as repeated verbal, psychological, or physical aggression.

Bullying victimization was measured using seven items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .647$) that asked about the count of victimization experiences during the school year. The seven questions asked: "In the first semester or term of this school year, how many times did any of the following happen?"

- (1) "I had something stolen from me at school."
- (2) "Someone threatened to hurt me at school."
- (3) "I got into a physical fight at school."
- (4) "Someone hit me."
- (5) "Someone used strong-arm or forceful methods to get money or things from me."
- (6) "Someone purposely damaged or destroyed my belongings."
- (7) "Someone bullied me or picked on me."

The response set was a 3-point Likert type scale (1 = never, 2 = once or twice, and 3 = three or more). To capture the repetitive nature of bullying (Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Olweus, 1999; Sampson, 2009) and differentiate it from rare or occasional experiences of school victimization, we recoded the scale into two categories, "0 to two times," and "three or more times." The majority of the sample reported no repetitive experiences of any of the seven types of bullying (83.72%, $n=9,191$). As the number of bullying types increased, the number of participants experiencing them decreased such that 10.19% ($n=1,119$) reported experiencing only one type of bullying, while only 0.12% ($n=13$) reported experiencing all seven types of bullying.

To create a single bullying variable, we summed the items such that the new bullying variable was a count of the types of bullying that a student experienced three or more times in the 10th grade. The possible range was 0 to 7, and higher scores indicate that the student reported more types of bullying experiences. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 1. The mean bullying victimization score was 0.27 ($SD=0.76$).

We also performed a supplemental analysis in which the seven items making up the bullying variable were recoded into two categories: "0 times" (coded as 0) and "one or more times" (coded as 1). The variables were then summed to create a variety score, as they were in the main analyses. The goal of the supplemental analysis was to include students who have either: a) experienced several of the seven bullying victimization forms once, or b) have experienced any of the bullying victimization forms twice. The mean number of forms of victimization was greater than in the initial measurement of bullying ($M=1.30$, $SD=0.01$).

School unfairness. The independent variable was school unfairness, which was measured using five items (Cronbach's $\alpha=.671$) asking participants to report their perceptions about their school. Students were asked "Thinking about your school over the last year, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

- (1) "Everyone knows what school rules are."
- (2) "School rules are fair."
- (3) "Punishment is the same no matter who you are."
- (4) "School rules are strictly enforced."
- (5) "If a school rule is broken, students know what kind of punishment will follow."

Participants responded using a 4-point Likert type scale (0=strongly agree, 1=agree, 2=disagree, and 3=strongly disagree). The ranking was such that higher scores reflected higher levels of perceived unfairness. We created a

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics ($N = 10,978$).

	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	Range
Bullying victimization	0.27	0.76	0–7
School unfairness	1.24	0.49	0–3
Gender			
Female student	50.58%	—	—
Male student	49.42%	—	—
Race/ethnicity			
White	61.21%	—	—
Black	11.33%	—	—
Hispanic	13.98%	—	—
Other	13.47%	—	—
SES			
Highest quartile	30.80%	—	—
Third quartile	25.53%	—	—
Second quartile	22.57%	—	—
Lowest quartile	21.10%	—	—
Language spoken			
English	85.20%	—	—
Other language	14.80%	—	—
Disability			
No	89.53%	—	—
Yes	10.47%	—	—

single school unfairness variable comprising the mean of the scores across the items. As the school unfairness variable was the mean of participant scores across the original items, the possible range for the new variable was 0 (Strongly agree that school is fair on all five types of fairness) to 3 (Strongly disagree that school is fair on all five types of fairness). The mean school unfairness rating was 1.24 ($SD = 0.49$).

Control variables. Demographic information came from the dataset items which reported students' sex, race, SES quartile, disability status, and native language. First, participants' sex was a binary variable with a score of 1 indicating the participant was male. Second, race was coded into four categories: White non-Hispanic (reference group), Black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and other race. Third, SES was a composite variable provided in the original dataset.² This variable was constructed from items measuring father/guardian's education level, mother/guardian's education level, family income, father/

guardian's occupation prestige score, and mother/guardian's occupation prestige score. The occupation prestige scores were based on the occupational prestige ratings developed from the 1989 General Social Survey (ICPSR, 2005). In a second step, quartiles were created based on the weighted distribution of these SES data. Fourth, to assess whether participants may be perceived to have a disability, parents/guardians were asked: "In your opinion, does your tenth grader have a learning, physical, or emotional disability?" Responses were coded No=0 and Yes=1. Finally, native language was a binary variable in which a score of 1 indicates the student's native language was not English.

Analysis Plan

We performed analyses using Stata SE 16.1. The dependent variable, bullying victimization, was a variety score that provided a count of different types of bullying experienced by the respondent. As such, we used negative binomial regression to predict the extent to which an individual experienced bullying victimization.

Results

Table 2 displays the results of a multivariate negative binomial regression predicting bullying victimization. In this model, the intercept represents White, female students, in the highest SES quartile, whose native language was English, and who were not perceived to have disabilities. The reference group had an incidence rate ratio significantly different from zero ($b = -3.094$, $p < .001$) due to a low rate of bullying victimization (4.5%). The results show that school unfairness was significantly related to bullying victimization ($b = 0.842$, $p < .001$); a one-unit increase in perceived school unfairness more than doubled the incidence rate of victimization.

Moreover, the relationship between bullying and each control variable was significant. Compared to White students, Hispanic students had a 21% greater rate of bullying ($b = 0.191$, $p < .05$). Male students had twice the rate of bullying than female students ($b = 0.720$, $p < .001$). Students who did not speak English as a native language had almost a one-third smaller rate of victimization than students whose native language was English ($b = -0.334$, $p < .001$). For each decrease in SES quartile, students had a 9.8% increase in the rate of bullying ($b = 0.094$, $p < .001$). Finally, students perceived to have a disability had an 84% higher rate of victimization compared with those who were not perceived to have a disability ($b = 0.611$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Negative Binomial Model Predicting Repetitive Bullying Victimization.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	IRR	<i>SE</i>	95% CI
School Unfairness	0.842***	0.050	0.744 to 0.940	2.321***	0.115	2.106 to 2.559
Black	0.028	0.086	-0.141 to 0.196	1.028	0.089	0.868 to 1.217
Hispanic	0.191*	0.086	0.022 to 0.360	1.211*	0.104	1.022 to 1.433
Other Race	0.103	0.083	-0.061 to 0.267	1.108	0.093	0.941 to 1.306
Male Sex	0.720***	0.053	0.616 to 0.825	2.055***	0.109	1.852 to 2.281
SES	0.094***	0.024	0.046 to 0.141	1.098***	0.027	1.047 to 1.151
Other Language	-0.334***	0.089	-0.508 to -0.161	0.716***	0.063	0.602 to 0.852
Disability	0.611***	0.076	0.463 to 0.759	1.843***	0.139	1.589 to 2.137
Intercept	-3.094***	0.089	-3.269 to -2.919	0.045***	0.004	0.038 to 0.054

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Supplemental Analysis

Table 3 displays the results of the multivariate negative binomial regression predicting the alternative measurement of bullying victimization. The reference group (White, female students, in the highest SES quartile, whose native language was English, and who were not perceived to have disabilities) had an incidence rate ratio significantly less than zero ($b = -0.666$, $p < .001$) with a 51% rate of bullying victimization. School unfairness remained significantly related to bullying victimization ($b = 0.465$, $p < .001$); a one-unit increase in perceived school unfairness increased the incidence rate of victimization by nearly 60%.

The relationship between bullying and each control variable remained significant, although, compared to the main analysis, there was a difference in which racial groups had higher victimization than White students, as well as difference in the incident rate ratios for all control variables. Students who identified as “other race” had a 9% greater rate of bullying ($b = 0.086$, $p < .05$) than White students. Male students reported 51% more bullying victimization than female students ($b = 0.409$, $p < .001$). Students who did not speak English as a native language had an 11% lower rate of victimization than students whose native language was English ($b = -0.119$, $p < .01$). Bullying victimization increased 4.3% for each decrease in SES quartile ($b = 0.042$, $p < .001$). Lastly, there was a 39% increase in the rate of victimization among students perceived to have a disability ($b = 0.329$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Negative Binomial Model Predicting Alternative Measure of Bullying Victimization.

	<i>b</i>	SE	95% CI	IRR	SE	95% CI
School Unfairness	0.465***	0.022	0.421 to 0.509	1.592***	0.036	1.524 to 1.663
Black	0.030	0.036	−0.041 to 0.102	1.031	0.037	0.960 to 1.107
Hispanic	0.054	0.038	−0.020 to 0.127	1.055	0.040	0.980 to 1.136
Other Race	0.086*	0.036	0.016 to 0.156	1.090*	0.039	1.016 to 1.169
Male Sex	0.409***	0.022	0.365 to 0.452	1.505***	0.034	1.440 to 1.572
SES	0.042***	0.010	0.022 to 0.062	1.043***	0.011	1.022 to 1.064
Other Language	−0.119**	0.038	−0.193 to −0.045	0.888**	0.033	0.825 to 0.956
Disability	0.329***	0.034	0.264 to 0.395	1.390***	0.047	1.301 to 1.484
Intercept	−0.666***	0.037	−0.739 to −0.593	0.514***	0.019	0.478 to 0.553

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Discussion

This study hypothesized that bullying victimization is higher in schools with unfair or inconsistent enforcement of school rules. Consistent with this hypothesis, the results show students who perceived that their schools were fair were less likely to report having been bullied—measured as repeated physical or verbal victimization. This is in line with prior research on school fairness and the school climate more broadly (e.g., Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; Hurd et al., 2018; James et al., 2020; Moon et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020; Payne, 2008; Sanches et al., 2012; Stewart, 2003; Syvertsen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Turanovic et al., 2019; Way, 2011; Welsh, 2003), especially research indicating that violence and victimization is negatively related to school fairness (Arum, 2005; Fissel et al., 2019; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory et al., 2010; Mayer & Leone, 1999). In particular, while a recent study linked perceived school rule fairness to verbal bullying victimization (Stutzenberger, 2020), the current study provides several important additional contributions to the literature. The current study’s measure of bullying victimization incorporates the aggressive and repetitive nature of bullying, includes both physical and verbal forms of bullying, and examined older students.

However, it is important to note the cross-sectional nature of this study. Because temporal order between the independent and dependent variables cannot be established, it is possible that the significant relationship observed here is due to victimization’s effect on perceptions of the school environment. Students who experience bullying by others—especially bullying that constitutes criminal victimization—may feel their school is not doing a good job at

enforcing rules in a consistent manner (see, e.g., Mulvey et al., 2018). More research on the potentially cyclical relationships between the school environment and negative outcomes such as bullying or violence at school is needed.

Still, the results suggest improving fairness in terms of school rules and discipline could reduce bullying in schools. An authoritative style—first described in terms of parenting (e.g., Baumrind, 1968)—has been identified as particularly positive in the school environment (e.g., Gregory et al., 2010; Pellerin, 2005). Implementing authoritative school practices—as opposed to authoritarian or permissive practices—may improve school climates; reduce inconsistency and thus discrimination in the use of school discipline; and reduce violence, victimization, and bullying at schools (see Gregory et al., 2010; Heilbrun et al., 2018). Recent work has identified some strategies for successfully implementing an authoritative style in schools (Omdal, 2018): fostering a shared responsibility for change, formal training of school staff on the desired practices, providing support systems, and close involvement of highly engaged leaders.

In addition to reducing bullying victimization and the harm that can stem from it, improving school fairness may have other benefits. For example, experiences of unfairness—such as perceived racial discrimination—have been linked to physical and mental health problems (e.g., Burt et al., 2012; Krieger, 2014). As another example, consistent enforcement of school rules is linked to teachers' attitudes and job satisfaction (Kapa & Gimbert, 2018; Perie & Baker, 1997; Way, 2011). An authoritative style emphasizing positive student-teacher relationships may be especially effective in improving outcomes among minority students (see Thapa et al., 2013), further reducing racial disparities in negative outcomes such as violence, victimization, and bullying.

The results also revealed a number of surprising findings regarding the relationship between personal characteristics and bullying victimization. First, in contrast to prior research showing bullying is more common among White students (Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2016) or similar across racial groups (Connell, El Sayed, et al., 2015), the findings of this study showed certain racial groups were more likely to experience bullying, although the results differed according to the measurement of bullying victimization. In the main analysis, Hispanic students were more likely to experience bullying than non-Hispanic White students, while the supplemental results showed students belonging to another race (non-White, non-Black, and non-Hispanic) were more likely to experience bullying. More research is needed to understand whether, how, and why people from certain racial or ethnic groups may be targeted for bullying. Importantly, we were unable to examine school-level contextual factors such as the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body.

It is possible that the relationship between race/ethnicity and bullying victimization found here could be due to the negative factors that plague schools serving less-well-resourced communities, which often have high proportions of minority students.

Next, contrary to expectations and prior research (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000; Maynard et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2006), students with native languages other than English were less likely to report being bullied. This could be explained by target congruence (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996); as argued by McNeeley (2022), non-English speakers may experience less victimization due to fewer antagonistic interactions with potential attackers. Finally, bullying was more likely among those with higher household SES levels, while the opposite relationship has been established in prior studies (for a review, see Tippet & Wolke, 2014). Scholars interested in bullying should explore bullying perpetrated among and against students with higher socioeconomic statuses, as it is possible that this could have been underreported in prior research.

As with all research, there are limitations of the study that must be acknowledged. First, there are some limitations associated with our measure of bullying. In order to incorporate the repetitive nature of bullying, we used a variety score that counts the number of forms of victimization the respondent experienced multiple times. However, we cannot be sure that the individual was victimized repeatedly by the same person, and therefore it is unknown whether the repetitive nature of the victimization fits the definition of bullying. Relatedly, the survey questions did not incorporate an aspect of imbalance of power (see Olweus, 1999). Additionally, the survey asked respondents if they had been “bullied” without providing a definition of the term, which could result in low validity. Finally, the dataset did not include measures of cyberbullying, direct verbal bullying, or relational bullying such as social exclusion or rumors.

Next, we were unable to conduct multilevel analyses to account for clustering of students within schools. This means we could not test whether school-level measures of fairness had contextual effects on bullying. However, prior research shows the extent to which students feel their environments are unsafe or unfair are equally predictive or more predictive of negative outcomes such as delinquency than objective measures are (Moon & Morash, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2005), and most recent studies testing similar hypotheses have also used single-level analyses (e.g., James et al., 2020; Stutzenberger, 2020). Similarly, we were unable to include more information about the school context. For example, security strategies such as guards and metal detectors are known to impact students’ views of their school as well as objective measures of school

safety (e.g., Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020) and would therefore be an important control variable. Existing research assessing how school climate along with other aspects of the school environment impact student outcomes such as bullying victimization is highly robust and should be incorporated when examining organizational and school fairness (see Connell, Barbieri et al., 2015; Fissel et al., 2019; Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; Hurd et al., 2018; James et al., 2020; Moon et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020; Payne, 2008; Sanches et al., 2012; Stewart, 2003; Syvertsen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Way, 2011; Welsh, 2000, 2003).

An additional limitation of the current study is that, because we used a cross-sectional dataset, we were unable to account for dynamic changes regarding SES or parental levels of education and occupation. Finally, we examined the ELS: 2002 because it is a large, nationally representative dataset that includes several important control variables. However, given that the data are 20 years old, there may have been important changes to school environments since the survey was administered; thus, it is possible that the findings reported here may not still be generalizable to all schools. In addition, newer data is more likely to include cyberbullying (Bartolo et al., 2019; Cross et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2016). For this reason, replications with newer data are vital. It is important to highlight, however, existing studies on this topic that used more recent data have reported similar results (Farina, 2019; Jeong et al., 2013; Konishi et al., 2017). For example, a study by Jeong et al. (2013) that examined school environment and bullying victimization using data collected from 2005 to 2007 found school fairness significantly and negatively predicted bullying victimization. A more recent study by Konishi et al. (2017) that assessed school climate and bullying using data from 2008 reported similar findings. Finally, Farina (2019) examined the same issue using recent School Climate Supplement data and found that a more positive school climate was associated with less bullying.

Conclusion

In sum, the current study examines how fairness at school impacts bullying victimization using one wave of the ELS (2002). This study reports several important findings. First, results suggest that students who perceived that their schools were fair were less likely to report having experienced bullying. Second, findings indicate that Hispanic students were more likely to experience bullying than non-Hispanic White students. Third, this research found that students with native languages other than English were less likely to report being bullied. Finally, bullying was more likely among those with higher household SES levels.

The results of this study suggest that improving fairness in terms of school rules and discipline could reduce bullying in schools. For instance, implementing authoritative school practices (identified as particularly positive in the school environment) rather than authoritarian or permissive practices may improve school climates; improve teachers' attitudes and job satisfaction; and reduce inconsistencies with regards to discipline, violence, victimization, and bullying at schools. Further, results show that students with native languages other than English were less likely to report being bullied. This could be explained by target congruence theory (see Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996). Specifically, a recent study by McNeeley (2022), suggests that non-English speakers may experience less victimization due to fewer antagonistic interactions with potential attackers.

Based on the present study, there are several suggestions for future research. Additional research should examine the potentially cyclical relationships between the school environment and negative outcomes such as bullying or violence at school. In addition, more research is needed to understand whether, how, and why people from certain racial or ethnic groups may be targeted for bullying. Specifically, future studies should examine school-level contextual factors such as the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body. Future research in this area should also explore bullying perpetrated among and against students with higher socioeconomic statuses. Finally, it is critical that future research replicate the current study using newer data.

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ORCID iD

Susan McNeeley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8923-6973>

Notes

1. No school identifiers were provided in the public dataset.
2. The time period in the child's life in which the parental education information was gathered was at the time of the survey in 2002. It is important to recognize that parental levels of education are not static, but we cannot take any dynamic change into account because the data are cross-sectional.

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Author Biographies

Suzanne Overstreet is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Indiana University Southeast. Her research focuses on victimology, juvenile justice, and intimate partner violence. Her recent work has been published in *Social Problems*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, and *Homicide Studies*.

Julie Sriken is a doctoral candidate in community research and action in the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University. Her recent work can be found in *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, and *Deviant Behavior*.

David S. Lapsey Jr is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Campbellsville University. His research interests focus on policing, criminal justice organizations and processes, and criminal investigations. His work has appeared in *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, and *Homicide Studies*.

Susan McNeeley is a senior research analyst at the Minnesota Department of Corrections. In addition to corrections, her research interests include criminological theory and victimology. Her recent work has been published in *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, and *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.