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Individual and Contextual Factors Associated with Immigrant Youth Feeling Unsafe in School: A Social-Ecological Analysis

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Abstract Despite the increasing proportion of immigrant youth in U.S. school districts, no studies have investigated their perceptions of their school. This study examines factors associated with perceptions of school safety among immigrant youth within individual, family, peer, and school contexts. Data were drawn from Wave II of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (n = 4288) and hierarchical logistic regression analyses were conducted. African–Americans, females, and youth with limited English proficiency were more likely to perceive their school as unsafe. Youth who reported that family cohesion was important and those who had close friends perceived their school as safe. Also, those who experienced illegal activities in school reported feeling unsafe. Assessment and intervention in schools needs to consider individual and contextual factors associated with perceptions of school safety. Additional research is needed to examine individual and contextual factors related to immigrant youths' perceptions of school.

Keywords Immigration · Safety · School · Social-ecological framework · Youth

Introduction

A safe school environment is critical to youths' academic success. For some youth, however, school safety is a serious concern, creating a barrier to learning [1, 2]. Although violent incidences in schools (e.g., rampage shootings) are rare, subtle violence occurs daily, sometimes undermining youths' sense of security. A recent national survey of public school districts revealed that a higher percentage of youth reported being afraid of harm in school than outside of school (4 vs. 2 %) [3]. In response to the growing concerns about school safety, youths' perceptions of their school have been researched extensively over the years.

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One notable study is Hong and Eamon's [4], which investigated perceptions of unsafe school environments among a national sample of early adolescents. Findings demonstrated the importance of examining factors beyond the individual, such as family, school, and neighborhood. Despite the increasing presence of immigrant children in U.S. school districts, the study excluded factors that are particularly relevant to immigrant youth, for whom English proficiency (or lack thereof), immigration status, racial/ethnic conflicts, and discrimination are just some of the relevant factors that may affect perceptions of school.

Understanding immigrant youths' school perceptions is important for several reasons. Currently, 25 % of youth in the U.S. have at least one immigrant parent, and within 30 years, that proportion is estimated to increase to 33 % [5]. Moreover, the U.S. school system has long been perceived by immigrants as an avenue for improving social and economic prospects [6]. In reality, however, many immigrant youth face discrimination, and hostility, hampering their educational success [6] engendering psychosocial distress and school-related fears. Drawing from the social-ecological framework, we investigate multiple, contextual factors associated with immigrant youths' perceptions of school safety.

Theoretical Framework

Psychosocial models have long been used as guiding frameworks for developing programs to target individual characteristics, such as psychological states. However, psychosocial models alone are insufficient to inform the development of assessment and intervention strategies beyond the individual level. An examination of the complex web of influences in multiple contexts that shapes youths' behaviors and attitudes is critically important to the development and implementation of school safety programs and policies. A social-ecological framework guides the understanding of an array of factors that may foster or inhibit individual attitudes and behaviors [7], and in this case, factors related to immigrant youths' school perceptions. The social-ecological theory is a systems framework in which an individual's behaviors and attitudes are shaped by transactions occurring in multiple contexts, such as family, friend/peer group, school, and neighborhood. Understanding the interrelations between individual youth characteristics and multiple level contexts is particularly useful in exploring the complex dimensions of immigrant youths' school perceptions and for the development of culturally relevant school-based prevention and intervention strategies.

Literature Review

Individual Context

Research on this topic has largely descriptive and focused on socio-demographic characteristics, such as age/grade, sex, and race/ethnicity. In terms of *age/grade*, Milam et al. [8] found in a sample of 3rd–5th graders in a mid-Atlantic urban school system that 5th graders reported feeling less safe than did 3rd and 4th graders. Consistent with Milam et al.'s [8] findings, Astor and Meyer [9] also revealed that older youth were far more likely than their younger counterparts to perceive school as dangerous. On the other hand, May and Dunaway [10] reported that students in lower grades were significantly more fearful than those in higher grades.

In addition to age, there appears to be inconsistent findings regarding differences in youths' school perceptions by sex, which was not found to be significant in two studies [10, 11]. Mooij and Fettelaar [12] found that boys were more likely than girls to report feeling safe in school, whereas Hong and Eamon [4] reported greater school-related fears among boys, compared to girls.

With regards to *race and ethnicity*, Robers et al. [3] suggest that a higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino youth reported school-related fears than White youth, although other studies indicate no racial/ethnic differences [4, 13]. Alternatively, Graham et al. [14] found that minority youth are likely to perceive their schools as safe when there are diversity and cross-ethnic friendships.

Among immigrant youth, factors such as *length of residence* and *English proficiency* can influence how they perceive their school, although no studies to our knowledge have investigated this association. Youth with limited English skills and those who are recent immigrants are at an elevated risk of discrimination, hostility, victimization, and physical attacks in school [15], and may perceive their classroom and school as unsafe.

We hypothesize that higher grade level, male sex, racial/ethnic minority status, shorter residence in the U.S., limited English proficiency, and low family socio-economic status (SES) will be significantly associated with feeling unsafe in school.

Family Context

Relationship with family in the home can also influence youths' school attitudes and behaviors [16, 17]. Researchers have documented that parenting behaviors and positive parent–child relations are positively related to youths' social adjustment [18, 19], and attachment theorists have long posited that children without secure attachments

with their caregivers perceive their social environments more negatively [20]. Close parent–child relations are significant for immigrant youth, particularly those residing in an impoverished neighborhood where they are repeatedly exposed to crime and violence in their school. Likewise, Latinos and Asians of various national origins tend to be more family-oriented than Whites [21], and their relationship with their parents is an integral component in buffering the effects of school dangers and in facilitating school engagement [21]. We hypothesize that immigrant youth who report family cohesion will perceive their school as safe.

Friend Context

Relationship with friends represents another important protective factor related to immigrant youths' perceptions of school. Adolescence is a period where youth rely on friends and peers for social support [22], which can also influence school perceptions [23], which can be compromised if they have problems in school [23–29]. Research also shows that youth with positive interactions among friends and peers are likely to feel safe in school [30]. For immigrant youth, close friendships can also engender a sense of safety and lead to positive educational and psychosocial outcomes. We hypothesize that immigrant youth who report having close friends will perceive their school as safe.

School Context

Youths' *school* is another relevant context. Youth who are victims of theft, or encounter alcohol, drugs and fighting in school are likely to feel unsafe [31] and may even become armed as a result [32]. Immigrant youth are more likely to attend schools in low-income neighborhoods where they encounter criminal activities, exposure to violence, and racial/ethnic conflicts [33], increasing their risk of crime victimization and undermining their sense of security. On the other hand, minority and immigrant youth in a diverse school are more likely to feel safe. For example, Juvonen et al. [34] report that higher racial/ethnic diversity was associated with positive peer interactions, increasing feelings of safety among African–American and Hispanic/Latino students. We hypothesize that immigrant youth who observe cross-racial/ethnic friendships at school will perceive their school as safe, while those exposed to crime victimization at school will perceive their school as unsafe.

Research Study and Hypotheses

The present study explores the covariates of feeling unsafe in school among immigrant youth within individual, family, friend, and school contexts. We hypothesize that students in higher grade, who are male, members of racial/ethnic minorities, who have been in the U.S. a shorter length of time, with limited English proficiency, low family SES, and exposure to crime victimization in school are more likely to feel unsafe in school. On the other hand, students with family cohesion, close friendships, and cross-racial/ethnic friendships are likely to feel safe in school.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Data were drawn from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) [35], a large scale dataset of immigrant parents and their adolescent children in San Diego and Miami. Adolescents from more than 70 countries were interviewed. The CILS survey includes information on national origin, family relationships, and social and psychological adaptation among a racially/ethnically diverse sample of immigrant youth in the U.S., (N = 5262) who were originally interviewed during the 1992–1993 school year.

Data were collected at three waves (Wave I = 1992, Wave II = 1995, and Wave III = 2006). Wave I includes a total sample of 5262 adolescents from 77 different countries enrolled in 8th and 9th grades in the Miami/Ft. Lauderdale and San Diego school districts. The majority of the sample (89.1 %, N = 4686) were originally from Asian or Latin American countries. Three years later, a follow-up survey was conducted in Wave II, which comprised a total of 4288 adolescents who were about to graduate from high school. A final follow-up survey, Wave III, was conducted with 3613 adolescents in 2001–2003. For the present study, Wave II data were used, which includes 2070 males and 2218 females. The Wave II survey was conducted via face-to-face and paper-and-pencil interviews, using the Youth Adaptation and Growth Questionnaire II and Parent Interview Questionnaire.

Measures

Dependent Variable

The variables were derived from the CILS, Youth Adaptation and Growth Questionnaire II, 1995 [35]. The outcome variable asked participants to answer the question, "I don't feel safe at this school". The response categories ranged from 1 = Agree a lot to 4 = Disagree a lot; however, because "Agree a lot" and "Disagree a lot" had low frequencies, the responses were collapsed into two categories, "Agree" and "Disagree".

Independent Variables

Utilizing the social-ecological framework, we entered variables representing individual, family, friend, and school contexts into four models. Items representing the individual factors include grade level (“What grade are you in?”), race/ethnicity (“Which of the races listed do you consider yourself to be?”), biological sex, residency status (“How long have you lived in the U.S.?”; 1 = all my life, 4 = <5 years), English proficiency (“How well do you speak English?” and “How well do you understand English?”; 1 = very little to 4 = very well), and family SES (“Compared to three years ago, do you think that your family’s economic situation now is?”; 1 = much better to 5 = much worse). Only students in grades 9–12 were included. Residency status was recoded and consisted of three categories: “All my life,” “10 or more years” and “9 or fewer years.” Responses for both English proficiency variables were collapsed into “Well” and “Not Well.” Responses for family SES variables were also recoded as “Better,” “Same,” and “Worse.”

Family context includes three items representing family cohesion, asking the respondents, “Family members like to spend free time with each other”, “Family members feel very close to each other”, and “Family togetherness is very important.” Response options for both items range from 1 = never to 5 = always. Because “Never,” “Once in a While,” and “Always” had low frequencies, these variables were collapsed into three categories: “Often or Always,” “Once in a while to never,” and “Sometimes.”

Friend/peer context consists of two items, asking the respondents, “How many close friends do you have in school? (Write number)” and “How many of these close friends have parents who came from foreign countries, that is who were not born in the U.S.”. Response option for the latter item range from 1 = none to 3 = many or most. The close friend variables were recoded as: “No friends,” “1 or 2,” “3 or 4,” and “5 or more”. Having friends whose parents come from another country was also collapsed into “Many or most,” “Some,” and “None.” This was done because when tested there was no significant difference between responses in the “many or most” categories.

School context comprises seven items, asking the respondents, “I had something stolen from me at school” (1 = never, 3 = more than twice), “Someone offered to sell me drugs at school” (1 = never, 3 = more than twice), “Someone threatened to hurt me at school” (1 = never, 3 = more than twice), “I got into a physical fight at school” (1 = never, 3 = more than twice), “Students make friends with students of other racial and ethnic groups” (1 = agree a lot, 4 = disagree a lot), “Fights often occur between different racial or ethnic groups” (1 = agree a lot, 4 = disagree a lot), and “There are many gangs in school” (1 = agree a lot, 4 = disagree a lot). Response categories for the last three items were dichotomized as “Agree” and “Disagree” because “Disagree a lot” and “Agree a lot” response options had low frequencies.

Analyses

We addressed missing data using multiple imputation ($k = 20$) and the EM algorithm in SAS. Missing data for key variables ranged from 0 to 5.5 %. With the assumption that data are missing at random, the expectation maximization algorithm gives unbiased estimates of missing data [36–38]. Based on the extant research findings, social-ecological framework, and our proposed hypotheses, the variables were grouped into four models representing individual, family, friend, and school contexts. To test our hypothesis that certain individual level variables will be related to feeling unsafe in school, we included individual level variables, such as grade, race/ethnicity, biological sex, living in the U.S., speak English, understand English, and family SES in Model 1. To test our hypothesis that immigrant youth who report family cohesion will be more likely to feel safe in school, we added family level variables representing family cohesion (i.e., family time, close family, and family togetherness) in Model 2. To test our hypothesis that having close friends will be related to feeling safe in school, we added friend level variables, such as close friendships and having foreign friends in Model 3. And finally, to test our hypothesis that cross-racial/ethnic friendships in school will be associated with feeling safe in school, and exposure to crime victimization at school will be associated with feeling unsafe in school, we added several variables representing crime victimization (e.g., something stolen, offered to sell drugs, threatened, and many gangs present in school) and other school level factors (i.e., physical fights, cross-racial/ethnic friendships in school, and fights among races) in Model 4.

Results

Results of the descriptive data are presented in Table 1 and hierarchical logistic regression results are shown in Table 2. The reference group is “Youth feeling safe at school”. Model 4 provides a statistically significant prediction of youths’ perceptions of school safety, −2 Log Likelihood = 4171.124, $\chi^2 = (37, N = 4118) = 461.37$, $p < .00$. The Nagelkerke R^2 indicated that the final model accounted for 10.6 % of the variance in feeling safe in school.

Model 1 presents data for the individual context variables. Adjusting for other covariates, we found that African–Americans were 1.51 times more likely to report feeling unsafe at school ($p < .01$) compared to Whites.

Table 1 Percentages for the study variables ($N = 4118$)

Variable	%
Dependent Variable	
School unsafety	
No	75
Yes	25
Independent Variables	
Individual context	
Grade	
9th Grade	.3
10th Grade	1.2
11th Grade	49.1
12th Grade	49.4
Race/ethnicity	
White	14.3
African–American	6.6
Asian	25.8
Multiracial	11.4
Hispanic/Latino	23.5
Other	18.4
Sex	
Male	48.3
Female	51.7
Lived in U.S.	
All my life	46.6
10 or more years	39.7
9 or fewer years	13.7
Speak english	
Well	98.4
Not Well	1.6
Understand english	
Well	99
Not Well	1
Family SES	
Better	44.8
Same	53.1
Worse	2.1
Family context	
Family time	
Often/always	41.9
Sometimes	31.0
Once in a while/never	27.1
Close family	
Often/always	56.7
Once in a while/never	24.5
Sometimes	18.8
Family togetherness	
Often/always	66.7
Sometimes	18.8
Once in a while/never	14.5

Table 1 continued

Variable	%
Friend context	
Close friends	
None	4.3
1 or 2 friends	20
3 or 4 friends	24.4
5 or more friends	51.3
Foreign friends	
None	6.3
Some	32.1
Many or most	61.6
School context	
Something stolen	
Never	53.6
Once or twice	38.5
More than twice	7.9
Offered drugs	
Never	73.5
Once or twice	14.9
More than twice	11.6
Threatened	
Never	82.2
Once or twice	14.5
More than twice	3.3
Physical fight	
Never	84.4
Once or twice	12.0
More than twice	3.6
Friends with other races	
Agree	89.6
Disagree	10.4
Fights among races	
Agree	41.8
Disagree	58.2
Many gangs	
Agree	38.8
Disagree	61.2

Furthermore, sex was found to be significant in Model 4; that is, girls were more likely to feel unsafe than boys (OR = .11; $p < .01$). Also, lack of English proficiency was also associated with feeling unsafe in school in Model 4 (OR = .35; $p < .05$).

In Model 2, which added family context variables, we found that youth who reported that family togetherness is important once in a while or never (OR = 1.47; $p < .05$) had significantly higher odds of feeling unsafe at school compared to those who reported that family togetherness is often or always important.

Table 2 Hierarchical logistic regression analyses of immigrant youth feeling unsafe in school ($N = 4118$)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR
Intercept	−.24 (.31)	–	−.24 (.31)	–	−.21 (.31)	–	.06 (.34)	–
Individual context								
Grade (9th Grade)								
10th Grade	.45† (.27)	1.49	.48† (.27)	1.58	.43† (.27)	1.51	.45 (.29)	2.12
11th Grade	−.18 (.17)	.79	−.18 (.17)	.83	−.16 (.18)	.25	−.05 (.19)	1.28
12th Grade	−.32† (.17)	.69	−.31† (.17)	.72	−.30† (.18)	.22	−.10 (.19)	1.22
Race/ethnicity (White)								
African–American	.21** (.08)	1.51	.18* (.08)	1.44	.17** (.08)	1.41	.30*** (.09)	1.83
Asian	.02 (.06)	1.03	−.01 (.06)	.99	.01 (.06)	1.01	−.10 (.07)	.82
Multiracial	.10 (.07)	1.23	.09 (.07)	1.19	.08 (.07)	1.18	.19 (.08)	1.15
Hispanic/Latino	.06 (.06)	1.13	.06 (.06)	1.13	.05 (.06)	1.11	.06 (.07)	1.12
Other	.00 (.07)	1.00	−.01 (.07)	.99	−.01 (.07)	.98	−.07 (.07)	.88
Sex (Male)								
Female	.06 (.04)	1.12	.05 (.04)	1.10	.04 (.04)	.94	.11** (.04)	1.26
Lived in U.S. (9 or fewer years)								
All my life	−.05 (.05)	.84	−.06 (.05)	.81	−.05 (.05)	.83	−.032 (.06)	.85
10 or more years	−.07 (.05)	.82	−.08 (.05)	.80	−.08 (.05)	.81	−.09† (.06)	.80
Speak english (well)								
Not well	.23 (.17)	1.59	.25 (.17)	1.63	.25 (.17)	1.64	.35* (.18)	2.02
Understand english (well)								
Not Well	-.06(.21)	.89	-.06(.21)	.88	-.05(.21)	.90	-.05(.23)	.91
Family SES (better)								
Same	−.17* (.09)	.92	−.17* (.09)	.89	−.15† (.09)	.89	−.07 (.09)	.89
Worse	.26† (.16)	1.41	.22 (.16)	1.31	.17 (.16)	1.22	.01 (.17)	.96
Family context								
Family time (often/always)								
Once in a while/Never			.05 (.07)	1.06	.038 (.07)	1.03	.02 (.07)	.99
Sometimes			−.06 (.06)	.94	−.047 (.06)	.95	−.06 (.06)	.91
Close family (Often/Always)								
Once in a while/Never			.13† (.08)	1.48	.13† (.08)	1.47	.06 (.09)	1.31
Sometimes			.13* (.06)	1.47	.13* (.061)	1.47	.16* (.06)	1.44
Family togetherness (often/always)								
Once in a while/never			−.07 (.09)	.88	−.08 (.09)	.88	−.12 (.09)	.84
Sometimes			.02 (.07)	.97	.03 (.07)	.97	.06 (.07)	1.00
Peer context								
Close friends (None)								
1 or 2 friends					−.08 (.08)	.68	−.04 (.08)	.77
3 or 4 friends					−.00 (.07)	.74	.03 (.08)	.83
5 or more friends					−.22*** (.07)	.60	−.22** (.07)	.64
Foreign friends (many or most)								
None					−.13 (.11)	.87	−.14 (.11)	.85
Some					.11† (.07)	1.11	.11 (.07)	1.09
School context								

Table 2 continued

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR	β (SE)	Exp (β) OR
Something stolen (More than twice)								
Never							−.31*** (.06)	.51
Once or twice							−.06 (.06)	.65
Offered drugs (more than twice)								
Never							−.21*** (.06)	.63
Once or twice							−.04 (.07)	.74
Threatened (More than twice)								
Never							−.35*** (.09)	.45
Once or twice							−.09 (.09)	.59
Physical fight (More than twice)								
Never							.22** (.09)	1.72
Once or twice							.09 (.10)	1.51
Friends with other races (Disagree)								
Agree							−.00 (.06)	.99
Fights among races (Agree)								
Disagree							−.29*** (.04)	.56
Many gangs (Agree)								
Disagree							−.46*** (.04)	.40
-2LL	4600.985		4576.225		4462.896		4171.124	
R-Square	.0076		.0136		.0168		.1060	
df	15		21		26		37	

For Model 2, change in -2LL = 24.76, $df = 6$, $p < .00$; Model 3, change in -2LL = 113.33, $df = 5$, $p < .00$a; and Model 4, change in -2LL = 291.77, $df = 11$, $p < .001$

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In Model 3, which added friend context variables, we found that having more close friends, especially those whose parents were also immigrants was significantly related to youths' feeling safe in school. Compared to having five or more friends, a one-unit increase in having no friends was associated with 1.67 (1/.60) times higher odds of feeling unsafe in school ($p < .00$).

Model 4, which added school context variables, we found that compared to youth who reported never having something stolen, youth who reported having something stolen from them in school more than twice had 1.96 (1/.51) higher odds of feeling unsafe at school ($p < .00$). Youth who reported being offered drugs more than twice at school had 1.59 (1/.63) times higher odds of feeling unsafe ($p < .00$). Similarly, youth who reported being threatened more than twice at school had 1.59 (1/.63) times higher odds of feeling unsafe ($p < .00$). Youth who reported having never gotten into a physical fight at school had 1.72 times higher odds of feeling unsafe at school compared to those who had gotten into a fight more than twice ($p < .01$). Further, youth who reported that fights between races occur at their school had 1.79 (1/.56) times higher odds of feeling unsafe at school ($p < .00$). And finally, youth who reported many gangs at school had 2.50 (1/.40) times higher odds of feeling unsafe at school ($p < .00$).

Discussion

Our aim was to explore immigrant youths' perceptions of school unsafety, applying the social-ecological framework. As this framework postulates, youths' school perceptions is

a result of a complex interplay between characteristics of the individual and transactions within and among family, friend/peer, school, and neighborhood contexts. The social-ecological framework is particularly relevant to understanding factors associated with immigrant youths' school perceptions. Immigrant youth are less likely to engage in school violence and more likely to academically outperform their native-born classmates and peers [39]. However, broader level factors, for instance, heated and controversial social and political debates on U.S. immigrant policy can impact their relationships and interactions with their family, friends, classmates, and peers, which can affect their school performances and how they perceive their school [39]. Therefore, to provide a safe school environment for immigrant students, researchers, practitioners, and school administrators need to move beyond targeting individual level factors as a means of achieving behavioral change and closely examine the complex web of influences that affect their school perceptions.

Within the individual context, we found that African–American youth reported perceiving their school as unsafe, which was consistent with past research and our hypothesis. African–Americans are more likely to feel disconnected from their school, be discriminated against, and receive stricter discipline than Whites [40, 41], which can undermine their perception of safety. We also found that girls perceived their school as less safe than boys, which is inconsistent with previous studies and our hypothesis [4, 12]. Sexual harassment and assaults are major areas of concerns for many female students, which can reinforce school fears [9]. Moreover, we found that youth who lacked English proficiency were more likely to feel unsafe than their proficient peers, which is consistent with our hypothesis. Immigrant youth who lack English skills may be subject to ridicule, bullying, and fights by their classmates and peers. These youth may also be less likely to receive support from their teachers, which can add to fears. Contrary to our hypotheses, our findings indicate that shorter length of time in the U.S. and low family SES were not associated with perceptions of unsafety in school.

We found that youth who said family closeness was less important were more likely to feel unsafe than those saw it as important, which partially supports our hypothesis. Youth who are close to their family are also more likely to display social competence and establish positive peer relationships [42], thereby feeling safer in school.

Youth with more close friends were less likely to feel unsafe than those with no close friends, which is consistent with Biag's [30] findings and our hypothesis. Also concurrent with the *friendship protection hypothesis*, which posits that friendship can protect youth against victimization [43], youth with close friends may be less prone to victimization and may perceive their school as safe as a result.

We found that youth who had something stolen in school, were offered drugs, were threatened, were involved in physical fights, and observed racially-based fights and gang presence felt unsafe, which supports our hypothesis. Not surprisingly, frequency of crime victimization and exposure to illegal activities can threaten youths' ability to fulfill their potential in school and generate psychological/emotional distress, which can reinforce negative school perceptions [44]. On the other hand, youth who perceived ease of making friends with other races felt safer in school, which is also congruent with Juvonen et al.'s [34] findings and our hypothesis.

Limitations and Research Implications

There are also limitations. Given the available variables in the CILS dataset, we were only able to measure immigrant youths' feeling unsafe in school with a single item. This seriously limits an in-depth understanding of the factors that might impact safety concerns differently. Researchers might build on this study by measuring other variables, such as fear of attack/harm on school property. Furthermore, many of the single item indicator's categories were collapsed to accommodate low frequency. We were unable to examine every category of the variables and had to combine some similar categories.

In addition, relevant community/neighborhood level factors (e.g., neighborhood violence) were not included in the dataset. Immigrant youth are more likely to reside in violent neighborhoods, which can undermine their sense of school safety. Thus, future studies might investigate community/neighborhood factors, such as neighborhood violence, crime and neighborhood disorganization, which might adversely affect immigrant youths' perceptions of their schools.

And finally, the cross-sectional research design is another serious limitation, which precluded assessing causality. Although CILS followed a sample of youth at three waves, the school safety item was only included in the second wave. Future research might build on our findings by longitudinally investigating factors associated with immigrant youths' perceptions of school safety.

Practice Implications

The policy mandate of safe schools reflects that students' fundamental need to feel safe is paramount. Perceived safety affects school attendance and performance and should be universal. However, youth from vulnerable populations are at increased risks of feeling unsafe.

Perceptions of school safety are affected by exposure to violence and harassment for certain at-risk populations.

Our findings have related policy and practice implications. Addressing school policies and practices related to school safety can contribute to the overall well-being and school performance of minority and immigrant youth. Assessing individuals and groups of students in relation to perceived safety is a component of professional assessment for school personnel, who can play an important role in addressing problems such as violence. Considering that many African–Americans, females, and youth with limited English proficiency perceive their schools as unsafe, it is imperative that school officials and other professionals actively engage in promoting a safe and culturally sensitive learning environment. This can be best achieved when schools employ culturally sensitive practices into daily routines [45, 46]. This could also include promoting an understanding of the importance of diversity by integrating race/ethnicity, gender and culture across classrooms and curriculum [47] and by implementing programs that reduce attitudinal biases [48].

Given the importance of family for immigrant youth, practitioners can assist parents in becoming appropriately involved in their children's schools, which can improve youths' perceptions of their schools [46]. However, these parents' involvement in their children's school may be limited by language difficulties, cultural barriers, and lack of understanding of U.S. schools. Practitioners, in collaborations with school officials and cultural brokers can strive to involve parents in their children's schooling by familiarizing them with instructions and practices of U.S. schools [49].

Also considering the importance of close friends in improving immigrant youths' perceptions of their school, practitioners might help them form positive peer relationships using Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which aims to facilitate youths' mastery of social-emotional competencies. Research points out that SEL has been linked to decreased stress and anxiety among youth, and has been applied to prevent specific behavior problems, such as bullying [50]. However, practitioners need to first consider whether SEL is developmentally and culturally appropriate for immigrant youth.

The presence of theft, illicit drug use and sales, fighting, and gang presence may be caused by policies, or lack thereof. To illustrate, "Zero-Tolerance" policies have arisen in response to school misbehaviors, criminal activities, and violence. However, study findings consistently reveal they are ineffective [51]. Macro-level social workers, in particular, are integral in improving youths' school perceptions by advocating for effective policies. Efforts to improve school environments in Massachusetts have led to new educational legislation. As a subsection of the gun violence reduction bill, *An Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools,* was signed into law in August of 2014 [52]. Social workers might advocate for similar measures in states whose schools have many immigrant students.

Conclusion

Throughout the U.S., youth are keenly aware of escalating violence in their schools. Immigrant youth are particularly vulnerable to perceived and real violence as they navigate new environments, relationships, and cultural differences [53]. Further, female youth and those from minority backgrounds are more likely to be targets of violence and, as this study eludes to, particularly in schools [15, 54]. In this investigation, several potential risk and protective factors at the individual and social-contextual levels that could contribute to or mitigate the perception of an unsafe school amongst immigrant youth were identified. Female immigrants, African–American youth and those with limited English proficiency reported feeling unsafe, whereas immigrant youth with positive family and peer affiliations/interactions were more likely to feel safe in school. Further research, policies, and practices aimed at identifying and intervening in the area of school safety should continue to examine the nuances in individual and contextual factors related to perceptions of an unsafe school with the goal of promoting safe school cultures for all.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Statements Because Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) is a publicly available dataset, which does not allow for identification of the participants, the present study was exempted from Institutional Review Board oversight.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Human Participants/Animals Because CILS is a publicly available dataset, there are no ethical issues with regards to human participants/animals in the present study.

Informed Consent Because CILS is a publicly available dataset, there are no ethical issues with regards to informed consent in the present study.

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