

ABSENTEEISM AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY

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Students feeling safe while at school is an essential precondition for learning and optimal physical, emotional, and social development. However, less is known about the association between school safety and chronic absenteeism, a pervasive public health problem in the United States public school system correlated with adverse student outcomes later in life. The current study utilized a pre-post design to evaluate whether students with unfavorable school safety perceptions at the beginning of the school year were more likely to be chronically absent at the end of the school year. The study also examined the intersection between gender, race, age, and a dichotomous outcome, indicating whether students were chronically absent. Participants included 135 K-8 students (53.3% female, 85.2% Black) and 33 teachers (75.9% female, 34.5% Black, 51.7% White) from six, predominately Black, open-enrollment urban charter in New Orleans, Louisiana. Students reported on their perceptions of school safety at the beginning of the year, and chronic absenteeism data were collected from student's homeroom teachers at the end of the year. Students who rated school climate worse and who were older were marginally significantly more likely to be chronically absent. Student gender and race were not statistically significantly related to chronic absenteeism. The study implications, limitations, and guidance for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* school safety, school climate, chronic absenteeism

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## **Absenteeism and Students' Perceptions of School Safety**

Safety is a critical component of a supportive classroom environment in which all students can achieve academic success. Not only is perceived safety crucial for learning, but students feeling safe while at school is an essential precondition of healthy physical, emotional, and social development (Williams et al., 2018). Recent conversations surrounding school safety primarily focus on single, high-profile school violence episodes that have generated universal media coverage (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). However, school violence and students' perceptions of school safety is not a new problem. While exposure to school shootings and the trauma that it brings forth is understandably felt across the student body, teachers, and community, there is also evidence that day-to-day occurrences in schools also significantly influence students' psychological wellbeing (Cornell & Mayer, 2010).

Feeling safe at school has been linked to increased classroom engagement and academic success (Williams et al., 2018). In addition, studies have indicated that perceived school safety serves as a protective factor against depressive symptoms (Nijs et al., 2014). Students who feel safer in school also have greater psychological outcomes such as positive self-concept and internal locus of control, meaning that students have favorable perceptions of themselves and believe that their actions and choices determine their life outcomes (Nijs et al., 2014). To foster meaningful relationships and achieve academic success, children must attend school consistently. However, if students do not receive adequate support and encouragement from their teachers or do not feel safe in the school environment, they are more likely to be absent (Filippello, 2019). The current

study evaluates the relationship between students' safety perceptions while at school and their attendance records.

### **The Complexities of Chronic Absenteeism**

Chronic absenteeism is a pervasive public health problem in the United States public school system that can have detrimental consequences (Stempel et al., 2017). According to the National Education Association, chronic absenteeism is defined as a student who is absent 10% or more of school days throughout the school year (Lara et al., 2018). During the 2015-2016 school year, The US Department of Education reported 15% of students were chronically absent nationwide and a staggering 8 million students missed nearly a month of school (Lara et al., 2018; Maciag, 2018). Absenteeism is related to numerous adverse short-term outcomes for school-aged children, including increasing the chance of dropping out of school, low grades, and poor standardized test scores across all grade levels (Stempel et al., 2017).

However, absenteeism also has long-term implications that persist beyond academic failures. Chronically absent youth are more likely to partake in delinquent behaviors such as violence, risky sexual behaviors, and substance abuse (Van Eck et al., 2017). Additionally, consistent patterns of chronic absenteeism in elementary school have been established as a predictor of school dropout in middle and high school (Rasasingham, 2015). Consequently, students that drop out of school are at a higher risk of enduring economic, marital, social, and psychiatric problems in adulthood (Rasasingham, 2015). Furthermore, absenteeism may serve as a risk factor for potential suicide attempts and teenage pregnancy (Kearney, 2008). The risk factors associated with chronic absenteeism jeopardize students' academic success and predict unfavorable



outcomes later in life. Therefore, research must include the metric of chronic absence as an integral component of the efforts to help students succeed in school and beyond.

While very important, absenteeism is also a complex variable to measure. School administrators and teachers must consider *why* a student might not be attending school consistently. Broadly, absences are differentiated based on whether they are excused or unexcused (Melvin et al., 2019). Excused absences are typically when a parent or guardian reports that their child will not be present in school for reasons such as illness, family emergency, or doctor's appointments. An unexcused absence is when children miss school for any reason not accepted by the school (Melvin et al., 2019). There is evidence that the risk of academic setbacks is more significant for students with unexcused absences compared to those with excused absences (Melvin et al., 2019).

Absenteeism can be further broken down into four categories. According to Heyne et al. (2019), the first two types of absenteeism are school refusal, child-motivated refusal to attend school, and school withdrawal, which is when absenteeism is predominately motivated by parental factors (Heyne et al., 2019). The third type of absence is school exclusion, which is when a child is absent due to school-based decision-making, most commonly for disciplinary reasons (Heyne et al., 2019). Lastly, the fourth type is truancy, which encompasses unwarranted absence from school that is most likely concealed from a parent or guardian (Heyne et al., 2019). In research and practice, it is challenging to determine whether an absence is excused or unexcused because there are no standardized definitions of these terms. Therefore, policies and procedures vary throughout the United States (Melvin et al., 2019). However, the fact

remains that no matter the reason, absenteeism serves as a risk factor for disadvantageous student outcomes (Melvin et al., 2019).

Although it has been established that chronic absenteeism is linked to undesirable outcomes, there are specific demographic group variances that need to be taken into account. Researchers have analyzed whether absenteeism rates differ across a spectrum of genders, races, and ages to implement targeted prevention and intervention practices in schools. Preliminary research has indicated that rates of chronic absenteeism vary for males and females of certain races; absenteeism rates are generally equal across genders (Kearney, 2008). However, male students between the ages of 11 and 13 most frequently reported feeling unsafe at school (Nijs et al., 2013).

Additionally, chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income, Black students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). When comparing Black students to their peers, it was found that Black students are more likely to have unexcused absences and less likely to have excused absences than their peers across grade levels and regardless of gender (Rasasingham, 2015). Black students are also twice as likely to be chronically absent (Simon et al., 2020). Furthermore, Black students are subject to disciplinary action at exponentially higher rates than their White counterparts (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Research utilizing administrative datasets also highlights that Black students are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Studies indicate that this is primarily due to neighborhood and community factors that low-income students are disproportionately exposed to compared to their more affluent peers, such as acts of violence, high crime levels, and maltreatment (Gottfried, 2014; Rasasingham, 2015).

Lastly, middle school-aged students (ages 11-14) and high school-aged students (ages 15-17) were reported to have higher levels of absenteeism than elementary school students (ages 5-10) (Stempel et al., 2017). Nevertheless, students with elevated rates of absenteeism in elementary school are at greater risk of later school absenteeism (Simon et al., 2020). Research supports that chronic absenteeism begins to rise in middle school and increases through high school senior year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Taken together, Black students and particularly Black boys in upper-grade levels are at an increased risk of chronic absenteeism because of the disproportionate rates of punishment and exclusion from school they experience due to their race and community factors.

### **School Safety as a Risk Factor for Chronic Absenteeism**

Evaluating school safety may provide a new avenue in which to understand and prevent absenteeism. Prior research on students' perceptions of school safety is limited and often viewed within the school climate's more extensive framework. School climate is the quality and character of school life experienced by teachers, students, parents, and school administration (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). Positive opinions about school climate are linked to higher academic achievement and reduced behavioral issues (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). These outcomes are affected by other school-climate-related factors such as student-teacher relationships, connectedness to the school community, and higher autonomy levels (Hendron & Kearney, 2016).

In one study linking school climate and truancy, Berman et al. (2018) investigated whether school environment conditions and community characteristics simultaneously impacted academic performance and absenteeism among K-8 students enrolled in Baltimore City Public Schools. Berman et al. (2018) sorted the questionnaire data to align

with five school climate categories established by the National School Climate Center: safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, environment, and leadership/staff relations. In addition, the statistical analysis also included community-level characteristics such as poverty, neighborhood violence, juvenile arrest rates, and annual household income (Berman et al., 2018). The results indicated that unfavorable perceptions of school facilities and student-teacher relationships were significant contributors to increased absences across all grade levels (Berman et al., 2018). Furthermore, student self-reported data about peer victimization correlated with increased absences and a one-point decrease in GPA (Berman et al., 2018). In sum, this study suggests that students are more likely to attend school when they view it as a structurally sound, healthy, and safe environment that fosters learning.

### **Absenteeism Across School Types**

The United States is currently experiencing a chronic absenteeism epidemic. However, research has largely overlooked the charter school sector when evaluating chronic absenteeism data (The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Charter schools are independently operated public schools with the intent of reducing the achievement gap and providing high-quality, open-enrollment schooling options to empower vulnerable communities (Chabrier et al., 2016). Since its establishment in 1991, charter schools have continued to rise in popularity and now serve more than 3 million students across 45 states and the District of Columbia (Kingsbury et al., 2020). Charters are independent schools of choice, meaning that families are granted the option to pursue other educational opportunities that span beyond the school district's predetermined geographic school assignments (Jacobs, 2011).

Charter schools do not charge tuition and advertise that each child will receive a fair application review process regardless of their race, economic status, or gender (Jacobs, 2011; Welner, 2013). While autonomy is advantageous, this means that charter schools in some states are immune to federal and state regulations that public schools must adhere to (The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Therefore, certain charter schools may not have to abide by specific truancy regulations, which results in a vacancy of absenteeism data to analyze (The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). The admissions process also varies depending on the specific charter. The vast majority of charter schools are open enrollment, meaning that they have no admissions criteria and are available to all students. However, some schools have implemented admissions criteria related to their particular academic model, such as mandatory exams or interviews (New Schools for New Orleans, 2019). These requirements discourage parents, especially parents with limited educations themselves, from even applying to the top achieving charter schools, thus, further tipping the scale in favor of White, affluent children (Welner, 2013).

Even given these chronic inequities, charter schools predominantly serve low-income students of color (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Recent data indicates that 68.7% of students enrolled in charter schools are students of color compared to 52.4% of students attending district public schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). Additionally, 59.3% of charter school students were reported to be economically disadvantaged students (EDS), while only 54.4% of district public students were EDS (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020). The

growth in popularity of charter schools has been robust in large urban communities where most students live below the poverty line and are nonwhite (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2016).

Charter schools with large proportions of minoritized children have been shown to offer a less comprehensive curriculum and fewer academic resources than those serving a majority White population (Jacobs, 2011). Furthermore, charter schools with a majority of Black, low-income students are often characterized as low-performing, undesirable places to attend because of underwhelming standardized test scores and higher truancy, violence, and dropout rates (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2016). Given the intersection between race, income, and absenteeism, understanding absenteeism in the context of urban charter schools is critical.

### **Current Study**

The current study uses data collected from six urban charter schools serving a majority Black and low-income population in a mid-sized Southeastern city. The current study's goal is to evaluate whether students' perceptions of school safety at the beginning of the year impact their attendance at the end of the year, considering gender, race, and age. First, based on prior research, I infer that our data will indicate that male students will miss more days of school than female students across all grade levels. Second, I hypothesize that Black students will have more reported absences than their peers across grade levels. Additionally, I predict that older students will have more teacher-reported absences than younger students. Also, I hypothesize that students are more likely to be chronically absent if they did not feel safe in school. Lastly, I predict that students who reported feeling unsafe at school at the beginning of the year will have higher absenteeism rates at the end of the year than their peers who felt safe from the start.

## **Methods**

### **Procedure**

The current study is draws upon a longitudinal research project designed to gauge how teachers and students at six open-enrollment charter PK/K-8 schools in New Orleans, Louisiana responded to various trauma-informed interventions, including teacher training, coaching, and organization support in trauma-informed approaches. This study utilizes data from the Safe Schools NOLA (SSNOLA) project, a study funded by the National Institute of Justice examining trauma-informed approaches' effectiveness. Data were collected at four different time points throughout the school year. Each student/teacher was randomly assigned to two random timepoints per school year, which allowed a planned missingness design across the four-year-long study. The current study analyzes responses from the baseline year of the survey before the intervention began. Data from the student's first active time point was used for their beginning of year data as long as it was collected in either October or December. Data from the student's second active timepoint during the latter half of the school year was used as their end-of-year data as long as it was collected in either March or May. Students with missing data from either time point were excluded from the study. The current secondary analysis data included student self-report surveys, homeroom teacher ratings of students, school rosters, and teacher self-report surveys. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

### ***New Orleans Context***

Today, charter schools have become a standard tenant of the education system in urban settings throughout the United States. However, New Orleans or Orleans Parish is

the only city in the US that has shifted to an entirely charter-dominated public-school system (Adamson et al., 2015). Orleans Parish is predominately Black, with 59% of the city's residents and 80% of the students enrolled in the public-school system identifying as African American (New Orleans Equity Index, 2017). The 2019 median household income in Orleans parish was \$45,615.00, which resulted in more than one-third of children in Orleans Parish residing below the poverty line (Babineau et al., 2018). Furthermore, 83% of New Orleans students are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which is significantly higher than the national average of 51% (Babineau et al., 2018). Lastly, during the 2018-2019 school year, 12.48% of students in Orleans Parish were reported to be chronically absent (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019).

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans public school system was wholly decimated and replaced with a majority charter school system evaluated in terms of a three-tier system, from most to least selective (Adamson et al., 2015). Today, 82 of the city's 86 public schools are charter schools, making it the largest share of students enrolled in charters of any city in the United States (New Orleans Equity Index, 2017). Charters were founded on the idea of educational autonomy executed through a citywide school-choice system (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2015). As a result, families can apply and attend, upon acceptance, any school in the city regardless of where they live (Babineau et al., 2018).

However, even with open enrollment, research has indicated that many high-achieving Tier 1 schools implement admissions policies that primarily benefit middle-class applicants and penalize impoverished families. Whereas 89% of White students and



73% of Asian students in New Orleans attend Tier 1 schools, only 25.3% of Black students have access to these schools (Adamson et al., 2015). White students only make up 9% of the city's open-enrollment public schools, mainly because 25% of children in Orleans parish attend private schools, making New Orleans a city with one of the highest proportions of privately educated children in the nation (New Orleans Equity Index, 2017; Adamson et al., 2015). Private schools act as an additional avenue for more advantaged students to opt-out of public school, further separating Black and White students (Adamson et al., 2015). The demographic and achievement data above suggest that White and wealthy families appear to have considerably more access to the most successful and effective schools in Orleans Parish. In contrast, Black, low-income families are at a disadvantage.

## **Participants**

### *Students*

This study consisted of 135 students in grades 3-8 from six charter schools in Orleans Parish. K-2 students were excluded from this study to reduce the likelihood of unreliable data because the self-report measures require at least a third-grade level reading comprehension ability. Informed consent was obtained from all student participants in the study. Of the study's student population, 63 students identified as male and 72 students identified as female. Majority of the students identified as Black or African American ( $n= 115$ ). Lastly, this study included 57 students enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade and 68 students in 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade.

### ***Teachers***

The current study included 33 homeroom teachers from six charter schools in Orleans Parish. Data were collected at four time points throughout the school year. Each teacher was randomly assigned to two timepoints per school year, which allowed consistent and random subsampling throughout the study's length. The sample included a majority of female teachers (75.9%). Unlike the student population, most teachers identified as White (51.7%), and teachers who identified as Black or African American were the second-largest racial demographic group (34.5%). In this sample of educators, most teachers only had between 1-5 years of teaching experience (55.2%).

Furthermore, less than half of the teachers completed any form of post-graduate education (37.9%). Of these educators who went to graduate school, only a tiny portion received a traditional education degree (17.2%). In comparison, most other teachers received their certification through alternative programs such as Teach for America and AmeriCorps (72.4%). See Table 1 for a description of the sample.

### ***Schools***

The six PK/K-8 schools participating in this study are part of the NOLA Public School System. Each school operates as an open-enrollment institution and serves predominately Black, low-income students. Based on the school, state, and district truancy data provided by the Louisiana Department of Education, the average rate of chronic absenteeism between these six schools was 28.62% (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019). Furthermore, each of the participating schools received a School Performance Score (SPS) between 64.9 and 48.8, equivalent to a C or lower letter grade (Louisiana Department of Education, 2020). SPS is calculated by the Louisiana

Department of Education (LDOE) annually using a combination of state standardized assessment scores and metrics such as graduation rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2020). Furthermore, at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, each school in this study was labeled as "urgently in need of intervention" and received a D or an F in at least one of the following intervention categories: Hispanic/Latino students, students with disabilities, discipline, Black students, economically disadvantaged students, ELL students, and homeless students (Louisiana Department of Education, 2020). While these statistics seem alarming, they are relatively standard and only rank slightly below the average open-enrollment charter schools in Orleans Parish (Teach New Orleans, 2019).

## **Measures**

### ***Demographics***

Student and teacher self-reported demographic data were gathered from the earliest time point that it was available each year between October and December (timepoint 1). If student self-reported demographic information was left blank, it was supplemented by the information on their school's official roster. Participants who identified as male were coded as 0 and female as 1. The two students who identified as "other" (2.74%) were dropped from the database. The survey asked students and teachers to check off as many racial identities as applied to them. Students who did not identify as Black or African American were coded as 0. Students identified as Black or African American were coded as 1. Lastly, student-reported grade level was used as a proxy for student age coded as a continuous variable. Teachers also disclosed their years of teaching experience, type of teacher certification or training, the highest level of education, and the grade that they taught.

### *School Safety*

Student's perceptions of school safety were reported at the beginning of the school year between October and December (timepoint 1) and at the end of the school year between March and May (timepoint 2). Perceptions of school safety were measured via the SSNOLA Student Survey, adapted from the Delaware School Climate Student Survey (DSCS-S). The DSCS-S asks students questions about different school climate categories such as teacher-student relations, student-student relations, respect for diversity, the fairness of rules, and school safety (Bear et al., 2011). The SSNOLA student survey is comprised of 111 questions, and the school safety subscale includes three items (questions 67, 82, and 87) measured along a 5-item Likert scale coded as 1=*Disagree A LOT*, 2=*Disagree*, 3=*Neither*, 4=*Agree*, 5=*Agree A LOT*. The mean school climate score of the participant's responses demonstrates their perception of school safety. A higher numeric mean score translates to a more positive perception of school safety. Bear et al. (2011) conducted a study to determine the reliability and validity of the DSCS-S. The results indicated the DSCS-S school safety subscale has a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = 0.79$  for the total sample population and high reliability across racial, gender, and grade-level groups (Bear et al., 2011).

Additionally, the results demonstrated evidence of the survey's concurrent validity. Scores for each of the five subscales and the total scale correlated across groups and school levels with academic achievement and suspensions/expulsions (Bear et al., 2011). A Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .86$  for timepoint one and  $\alpha = .79$  for timepoint two in the current study.

### ***Chronic Absenteeism***

The teacher reported student chronic absenteeism rates were reported at the beginning of the school year between October through December (timepoint 1) and at the end of the school year between March and May (timepoint 2). Chronic absenteeism is defined as when a student is absent 10% or more of the time, or 15-18 days throughout the year (Lara et al., 2018). The SSNOLA teacher survey is adapted from the Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation- Checklist (TOCA-C), a teacher checklist created to serve as an efficient means of rating their students' behaviors. In the current study, chronic absenteeism is measured by one survey question asking, "Has this child been present in your classroom for a majority of the time? (i.e., at least eight days during the *last three weeks of school*)." This question serves as the outcome variable. A teacher response of "no" is coded as 0, and an answer "yes" is coded as 1. Koth et al. (2009) conducted a study to evaluate the reliability and factor structure of TOCA-C. Scores obtained from the TOCA-C had an alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = .96$  (Koth et al., 2009). Also, the study took into account administrative timing differences, and the results suggested that the measure was reliable at both the fall and spring administrations (Koth et al., 2009). Lastly, the study provided evidence of the TOCA checklist version's validity compared to the interview version, which is seen through the high correlation between the subscales, all scoring above .80 (Koth et al., 2009).

### **Analytic Plan**

The current study aims to evaluate whether students' perceptions of school safety at the beginning of the year will impact their attendance at the end of the year, considering gender, race, and age. I will perform two chi-square tests to examine the

relationships between gender and chronic absenteeism and race and chronic absenteeism. I will also run an independent-samples t-test to compare grade level to rates of chronic absenteeism. Additionally, I will perform an independent samples t-test to assess whether mean school safety scores are lower for chronically absent students than their non-absent peers. Next, I will assess students' perceptions of school safety and how that influences absenteeism rates by running a logistic regression because of the dichotomous outcome variable. Finally, I will evaluate whether there is a statistically significant relationship between student-rated feelings of security during the school day at timepoint 1 and student absenteeism at timepoint 2, holding student absenteeism at timepoint 1, and gender, race, and age constant. Given that this is a relatively new area of study, I will interpret both statistically significant (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ) and marginally significant (i.e.,  $p < .10$ ) findings.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The sample as a whole was composed of a relatively equal distribution of male and female students ( $M = .53$ ,  $SD = .50$ ). This student population's racial demographics mirrored a typical New Orleans charter school, with 85.2% of the participants identifying as Black or African American. Additionally, the study was relatively young and included more students enrolled in elementary school than students enrolled in middle school ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ). In this study, the school safety subsection's average score measuring perceived school safety was 3.35 on a scale of 1-5 ( $SD = 1.03$ ). Lastly, only 6% of the students who participated in this study were reported by their teachers to be chronically absent. Means and standard deviations of the study variables are presented in Table 2.

### **Covariates and Levels of Chronic Absenteeism**

Several significant trends emerged between the study covariates and levels of chronic absenteeism. Contrary to my hypothesis, there was no difference between males' and females' attendance rates,  $X^2(1, N= 135) = .29, p= .59$ . The results did not show any significant association between identifying as Black or African American and being chronically absent from school  $X^2(1, N= 135) = .70, p= .40$ . However, there was a significant difference in age of students that were not chronically absent ( $M=5.02, SD=1.69$ ) and those that were chronically absent ( $M= 6.13, SD= 1.80$ ),  $t(133) = 1.77, p=.08$ . Lastly, as predicted, students who reported feeling unsafe at school at the beginning of the year had higher absenteeism rates at the end of the year than their peers who felt safe from the start. Students that were not chronically absent had marginally higher mean perceived school safety score ( $M=3.39, SD=1.01$ ) compared to their peers who were reported to be chronically absent ( $M=2.61, SD=1.09$ ),  $t(130) = -1.10, p = .05$ .

### **Logistic Regression**

Logistic regression was run to predict levels of chronic absenteeism from mean perceptions of school safety survey scores, gender, age, and race. The first logistic model excluded mean school climate survey scores, which resulted in Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .07$ , indicating that gender, race, and age only accounted for 6.8% of the chronic absenteeism variance. When mean school safety scores were included in the regression, the variance level nearly doubled to Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .13$ . In other words, mean school safety scores, gender, age, and race explained 12.9% absenteeism variance. There was a marginally significant relationship between mean school safety scores and chronic absenteeism ( $b = .63, se = 1.91, p = .10$ ). Additionally, the odds ratio for the mean school safety score was

$\text{Exp}(B)=1.86$ . This means that a student is 1.86 times more likely to be chronically absent for every unit decrease in mean school safety score. This finding supports my primary hypothesis that students who reported feeling unsafe at school at the beginning of the year will have higher absenteeism rates at the end of the year than their peers who felt safe from the start. All other predictors were not significantly related to chronic absenteeism (see Table 3).

### **Discussion**

It is not feasible to expect students to perform well at school if they do not feel safe. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) proposed that feeling safe at school is critical to classroom learning and healthy development (Williams et al., 2018). When students feel safe at school, they are more likely to demonstrate increased classroom engagement levels, reduced levels of depression, and develop a growth mindset (Nijs et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Furthermore, increased perception of unsafe schools was associated with decreased academic performance (Berman et al., 2018). Students also need to attend school consistently to develop meaningful bonds with their peers and teachers. However, if teachers fail to create a safe school environment for their students to flourish in, they are more likely to be absent from school (Filippello, 2019). The purpose of the current study was to examine whether students with unfavorable school safety perceptions at the beginning of the school year were more likely to be chronically absent after the school year, holding gender, race, and age constant.

Initially, I predicted that male students were more likely to be reported as chronically absent from school than female students. However, data indicated that there was no statistical relationship between gender and chronic absenteeism. My hypothesis



was founded on prior research that suggested that Black males are disciplined at disproportionately high rates and are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Unfortunately, school discipline and absenteeism literature have focused mainly on the elevated risk of suspension or expulsion of Black males, excluding the experiences of Black females from the discussion (Blake et al., 2011). In reality, Black girls often experience exclusionary discipline outcomes more than many males across the country (Annamma et al., 2019). In fact, over the last decade, Black girls have had the fastest growing suspension rates of all students in the US (Annamma et al., 2019). The data set used in the current study does not include an explanation as to why a child was absent. However, this finding could be why the results indicated no significant association between chronic absenteeism and gender.

The insignificant findings in this study between gender and absenteeism can also be interpreted through an intersectionality lens. This framework is based on the belief that social identities such as race and gender intersect in a clear-cut manner that mutually reinforces one another (Harrison, 2015). Intersectionality theory also can shed light on the inequalities found within certain racial or gendered groups. Harrison (2015) conducted a study to further analyze African American girls' racialized experiences at school. Through qualitative methods, Harrison conducted interviews, observations, and group meetings with four adolescent Black females during the school year. The results indicated that one of the most prevalent areas of Black-White discourse was in clothing. Participants recalled differences in the ways that teachers reacted and disciplined student's attire along racial lines. The misguided perceptions that Black girls are aggressive, loud, and intentionally deviating from conventional femininity have led many

teachers to conclude that Black girls need more social corrections. As a result, Black female students are more likely to feel ostracized at school. Future research should examine the complex intersectional relationships between adolescent's race, sex, and school absenteeism (Klein et al., 2020).

Contrary to my hypothesis, Black students did not have significantly more reported absences than their peers who did not identify as Black or African American. The insignificant relationship between race and absenteeism also contradicted prior research findings that chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among Black students, regardless of age and gender (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). However, it is essential to note that 85.2% of the students in this study identified as Black or African American. When analyzing the eight chronically absent students, six of them identified as Black or African American. Although our study's racial demographic percentages closely resembled a typical New Orleans charter school, this insignificant outcome was most likely due to the small number of students in the chronically absent sample.

In line with my hypothesis, the data did show that there was a significant age difference between the students that were reported to be chronically absent and the students that were not. The majority of the chronically absent students were enrolled in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This finding suggests that age does affect rates of chronic absenteeism. These outcomes also further support previous studies that concluded that middle and high school students were at a greater risk of being chronically absent than elementary school students (Stempel et al., 2017).

Chronically absent students had lower mean school safety scores than their peers who were not chronically absent. This finding aligned with my initial hypothesis that

students were more likely to be chronically absent if they did not feel safe in school. This finding is consistent with previous research by Berman and colleagues (2018), which indicated that for each 10% increase in the surveyed student's perception of school safety, chronic absenteeism increased by 3.61%. Furthermore, prior studies also show that rates of chronic absenteeism were significantly lower in school environments that the students deemed to be "positive climates" compared to the schools with a "moderate" or "negative" climate profile (Van Eck et al., 2017). Analyzing student perceptions of school climate presents an opportunity to take preventative measures to reach students at a higher risk of being chronically absent. The current study further emphasizes the importance of looking at specific school climate components, such as perceived school safety, to reduce truancy.

Following my initial hypothesis, students who reported feeling unsafe at school at the beginning of the year had more reported absences at the end of the year than their peers who felt safe from the start. Although there was a marginally significant relationship between mean school climate scores and chronic absenteeism, gender, age, and race were not significantly related to chronic absenteeism. This inconsistency is primarily attributed to the limited sample of students reported to be chronically absent ( $n=8$ ). According to a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, 7.1% of students that missed school over the last 30 days did so out of fear for their safety and wellbeing while at school (Eaton et al., 2012). Furthermore, even though our study did not support prior research about the intersectionality between gender, age, race, and chronic absenteeism, charter schools with majority Black, low-income students are frequently plagued with higher dropout rates and levels of truancy (Abdulkadiroglu et al.,

2016). Based on this study's findings and prior research, schools should take a deeper look at the various factors that contribute to student perceptions of school safety to reduce chronic absenteeism.

### **Study Limitations**

Several limitations must be considered when contextualizing the findings from this study, the most prominent being that our study was not consistent with the chronic absenteeism data for New Orleans students. Since only eight students were reported to be chronically absent, this small sample size may have impacted the ability to produce statistically significant findings from the analysis. However, the study did produce marginally significant outcomes for the relationship between students who reported feeling unsafe at school at the beginning of the year had more reported absences at the end of the year than their peers who felt safe from the start. Future research should replicate these methods with a larger sample of students in different urban school settings.

In addition, the teacher reported SSNOLA survey did not provide a space to explain why that particular student had missed school. It is important to note that students could have received an excused absence for extenuating circumstances such as illness. Besides, there was no space to note whether the child was absent due to school disciplinary measures such as suspension. Future studies should factor in these circumstantial reasons when analyzing why a particular student was absent from school.

### **Study Implications and Future Directions**

The New Orleans Public School system is a unique school district composed of privately-operated charter schools that run under their own set of procedures. Charter

schools in Orleans Parish are expected to submit attendance data to the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) every two weeks (Jewson, 2021). However, as a decentralized charter system, the district has no standardized protocol to track this data, making it very difficult to hold schools accountable (Jewson, 2021). Furthermore, the prospect of funding may deter schools from reporting accurate data to the school board because chronic absenteeism can affect enrollment, which could result in decreases in funding that the school receives from the state calculated on a per-pupil basis (Hasselle, 2021). The current study relied on teacher-reported data about whether or not their students were present in the classroom. With this in mind, levels of chronic absenteeism may even be worse than the data is indicating. The school board should not penalize schools for reporting accurate truancy data about their student body. Instead, they should be receiving support from the state to implement policies that will increase daily attendance.

The current Louisiana truancy laws state that only after five or more reported unexcused absences are the schools required to send written notification to the student's parents or legal guardians (Louisiana Believes, n.d.). If the student has 15 or more unexcused absences, the school can request that the student be discharged for non-attendance (Louisiana Believes, n.d.). Chronic absenteeism is most common among students at or below the poverty line (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Schools with many students below the poverty line are most vulnerable to high absenteeism rates (Lara et al., 2018). Research must widen its scope to control for gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status to identify students that are most at risk when tailoring chronic absenteeism interventions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Lastly, schools should reframe the supports offered to their at-risk students by adopting an intersectionality framework that incorporates culturally responsive pedagogies (Harrison, 2015). In a study conducted by Filippello and colleagues (2019), findings indicated a relationship between low self-determination levels in students and increased school absences. Additionally, the students who felt that their basic psychological needs were not being met were more likely to skip school (Filippello, 2019). An intersectionality stance encourages youth to take action and advocate for policies and programs that are designed to support all young adolescents grounded in examining the intersections of their multiple identities (Harrison, 2015). This framework also motivates schools to approach absenteeism from a dimensional or spectrum perspective (Kearney, 2019). Students should feel safe and supported while at school, which means support staff must understand how students' identities interact with the identified precursors of absenteeism.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, the current study's goal was to measure the relationship between students' perceptions of safety while at school and their attendance records. Any child out of school is terrible. Even though the current study only identified eight chronically absent students, these youth missed essential opportunities to grow academically, socially, and personally. It is clear from the present study that several factors that are not malleable to intervention may place children at higher risk of being truant, including their age. However, I also found that the chronically absent students' average school safety score was 2.61 out of 5. School safety serves as an amenable risk factor and is something that we can address. Future research should continue to investigate the relationship between

chronic absenteeism and standard profiles of youth school climate perceptions to implement preventative strategies to combat specific school climate concerns and reduce chronic absenteeism.

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**Table 1.***Teacher and Child Demographic Information*

Variable	Teacher <i>N</i> (%)	Student <i>N</i> (%)
Gender		
Male	6 (20.7%)	63 (46.7%)
Female	22 (75.9%)	72 (53.3%)
Race		115
Black or Africana American	10 (34.5%)	(85.2%)
Hispanic or Latino	3 (10.3%)	17 (12.6%)
White	15 (51.7%)	6 (4.4%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0%)	9 (6.7%)
Asian	2 (6.9%)	0 (0%)
Native American or Pacific Islander	0 (0%)	1 (.7%)
Grade Level		
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	7 (22.5%)	32 (23.7%)
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 (19.4%)	30 (22.2%)
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4 (12.9%)	17 (12.6%)
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 (19.4%)	22 (16.3%)
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4 (12.9%)	18 (13.3%)
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	4 (12.9%)	16 (11.9%)
Years of Teaching		
<1 year	2 (6.9%)	
1-5 years	16 (55.2%)	
6-10 years	8 (27.6%)	
11-15 years	2 (6.9%)	
>20 years	1 (3%)	
Highest Level of Education		
Completed College	11 (37.9%)	
Some Graduate School	7 (24.1%)	
Completed Graduate School	11 (37.9%)	
Teacher Certification or Training		
Traditional Education Degree	5 (17.2%)	
Alternative Certification Program	21 (72.4%)	
Other	3 (10.3%)	

*Note.*  $N_{\text{teachers}} = 33$  and  $N_{\text{students}} = 135$ . Missing data across demographic variables ranged from 0%-3%; valid percentages are presented.

**Table 2.***Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	135	.53	.50
2. Race <sup>b</sup>	135	.85	.36
3. Grade Level	135	5.1	1.72
4. School Climate	132	3.35	1.03
5. Chronic Absenteeism <sup>c</sup>	135	.94	.24

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> 0= Male and 1=Female;

<sup>b</sup> Are you Black or African American? 0= No and 1=Yes;

<sup>c</sup> 0=No and 1=Yes



**Table 3.***Logistic Regression Predicting Chronic Absenteeism*

Variable	B	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Step 1			.07
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.04	.97	
Race <sup>b</sup>	.93	.30	
Grade Level	-.32	.18	
Step 2			.13
Gender	.01	.91	
Race	.83	.36	
Grade Level	-.32	.22	
School Climate <sup>c</sup>	.63	.10	

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>0= Male and 1=Female;

<sup>b</sup> Are you Black or African American? 0= No and 1=Yes;

<sup>c</sup> 0=No and 1=Yes