



Exploring Adolescents Perceptions of School Safety and Experiences of Violence in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

School safety is a critical concern for educators, policymakers, and parents alike. Ensuring that students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use is essential for creating a conducive learning environment. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of students about school safety and their experience of violence – physical, emotional and online harassment. The study employed a quantitative approach, using a multi-stage stratified sampling with random selection of schools based probability proportional to enrolment from the sampling framework. A total of 299 schools from all 14 regions of Uzbekistan with $N = 22,854$ students in the 6th, 9th and 11th grades, participated in the study. Results showed that despite the fact that the majority of students perceived school as a safe place, there was a constant proportion of students (varying from 1 to almost 2 out of every 10 students) who believed that schools are not safe due to students' risky, violent and discriminatory behaviours. Boys, 6th graders and working students were more prone to believe that. Similar results were found about their experience of violence during the last month. It is of crucial importance to implement evidence-based programs that address issues related to bullying prevention, conflict resolution, mental health support, and substance abuse prevention to help foster a culture of safety within schools.

Keywords: school, safety, violence, adolescence, school climate

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a key period in life for establishing foundations for adulthood health and well-being (Kieling et al., 2011). Research currently available in the literature indicates that a significant percentage of adult mental health issues start in mid-to-late adolescence and add to the burden of mental disease that exists in youth and later life. (Das et al., 2016). While school can be a safe place for children and adolescents, it can also become or be perceived as a risky environment, causing discomfort, stress and other negative emotions.

The role of school climate in safety is very important. Thapa et al. (2013) outline that a positive school climate, characterized by respectful relationships and supportive interactions, is linked to reduced incidents of aggression and improved adolescent mental health. This finding is corroborated by research conducted by Gage et al. (2014), which highlights that students in schools with higher levels of social-emotional support report feeling safer and more engaged. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2009) assert that school climate improvements are directly related to reduced disciplinary actions and better student behavior.

Moreover, interventions aimed at building social skills among students can contribute to safer school environments. Espelage et al. (2015) detail how programs focusing on conflict resolution and empathy training effectively reduce instances of peer victimization. These programs are echoed by research from Wilson and Lipsey (2007), who show that social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions have a lasting impact on reducing violence and promoting a sense of belonging. DeVoe and Bauer (2011) further found that schools integrating community partnerships and parent involvement see a marked reduction in safety-related issues, while Nickerson and Brock (2013) highlight the importance of trauma-informed practices to support students affected by violence.

While adolescents have described school as a source of self-esteem, a location that promotes greater awareness of the outside world, a place to hang out with friends, a place for emotional support, and a place to escape toxic home environments, schools were also portrayed as places where violence and abuse occurred—a situation that is all too common—which can undermine their ability to serve as a protective environment (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health & UNICEF, 2022). Based on similar studies, adolescents faced numerous daily pressures at school, including feelings of loneliness, experiencing bullying, and not feeling connected to the school (WHO & UNICEF, 2021).

School safety during adolescence is a critical area of concern due to its impact on students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Adolescents are at a pivotal stage of development where environmental stability is crucial. Research underscores that a safe school environment fosters positive educational outcomes and promotes healthy psychological growth (CDC, 2021).

School safety is fundamentally linked to adolescent development, as it shapes their ability to engage positively with their educational environment and influences their mental and emotional growth. A safe school environment allows adolescents to focus on their academic and social activities, fostering a sense of security that is critical for healthy development. When adolescents feel safe at school, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, and they tend to have better mental health and academic performance outcomes. Conversely, exposure to violence or even the perception of an unsafe environment can create chronic stress, impacting cognitive development, increasing anxiety levels, and contributing to poor academic achievements (Kieling et al., 2011; Das et al., 2016).

To reinforce the above connection, Bradshaw et al. (2013a) emphasize that bullying prevention programs significantly reduce incidences of violence and improve students' perceptions of safety. Similarly, Cornell and Mayer (2010) argue that comprehensive safety protocols, including surveillance and staff training, are fundamental to creating a secure educational atmosphere. These findings align with those of Astor et al. (2018), who stress the importance of training school staff in recognizing and responding to threats in order to build a cohesive safety culture.

Though there are studies related to the perception of school safety and experiences of violence at school settings, there aren't any national studies conducted in Uzbekistan to understand the scale of this phenomenon.

1.1 Aim and objectives

This paper is focused on exploring the perceptions of school safety among school adolescents and their experiences of violence¹.

The specific objectives are:

- To examine the perceptions of the adolescents about school safety and the role of demographic factors in shaping that perception;
- To assess the scale of experiencing physical or emotional violence or online harassment.

1.1.1 Research questions

To reach the objectives of the study the researchers raised the following research questions:

- What is the adolescents' perception of school safety and how do gender, age and alike factors influence this perception?
- What is the scale of experiencing violence among school adolescents?

2. Methods

The present research employed quantitative methodologies, namely a cross-sectional survey.

2.1. Sampling and sample

In order to prevent any potential biases in the sample, this study implemented multi-stage stratified sampling, which involved the random selection of schools based on a probability proportional to enrolment from the sampling framework. The survey involved 299 schools from all 14 regions of Uzbekistan (refer to Table 1), with a total of $N=22,854$ students in the 6th, 9th, and 11th grades. The representation of institutions from urban and rural areas, adolescent boys and girls, and 6th and 9th graders was nearly equal. The number of pupils who participated from the 11th grade was slightly lower. Intact classes were selected for participation in this study.

Table 1. Regional distribution of participants

	Frequency	Valid per cent
Republic of Karakalpakstan	1,353	5.9
Andijan	2,060	9.0
Bukhara	1,067	4.7
Jizzakh	936	4.1
Kashkadarya	2,121	9.3
Navoi	715	3.1
Namangan	1,896	8.3
Samarkand	2,581	11.3
Surkhandarya	1,628	7.1
Syrdarya	452	2.0
Tashkent	1,943	8.5
Fergana	2,468	10.8
Khorezm	1,276	5.6
Tashkent city	2,358	10.3
Total	22,854	100.0

¹ This paper is part of a larger study on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of school adolescents in Uzbekistan.

2.2. Research instrument

The questionnaire served as the primary tool for collecting quantitative data. It was developed following a review of methodological approaches and research instruments commonly used to assess adolescents' perceptions of school safety, along with general personal information such as demographic details, disability status, and employment. The initial draft was translated into Uzbek, Russian, and Karakalpak and was reviewed by a broad working group. A pilot test was conducted with 166 respondents across two schools in Tashkent city (urban area) and one in the Tashkent region (rural area) to ensure its suitability for the local context. After analyzing feedback from the pilot phase, addressing issues—primarily simplifying the questionnaire and refining the language used in translations—and reviewing the collected data, the final version of the questionnaire was approved. The final questionnaire had satisfying validity, with a Cronbach $\alpha > .7$.

2.3. Data collection

Before starting data collection, data collectors received training on the entire data collection process, including administering the questionnaire, addressing potential ethical issues in the field, and managing and securely sharing data. Various tools were utilized to maintain the quality of data collection. On-site data collectors were instructed to prepare and submit daily reports, notify in advance before heading to the field, and confirm locations.

2.4. Data analysis

The dataset was analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26. The findings from the database were presented using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, crosstabs, etc.). Data disaggregation was performed for each question in the questionnaire. The key variables for data disaggregation were gender (M/F), level of urbanization (urban/rural), employment (working/non-working students), and parents residing outside the house for more than one month (yes/no). Cross tabulations were the primary data disaggregation method used.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) models, which are intended to properly represent the target populations within a given margin of sampling error, were used as the method of choice. A student's sampling weight can be thought of as the inverse of their likelihood of selection, with non-response adjustments taken into account. After one school was deemed out of scope, the original sample frame of 300 schools was reduced to 299 schools. Three elements made up the weighting that was done for this analysis:

1. Weight of a school within a specific region
2. Weight of a class in the same grade
3. Weight of a student within the selected class

2.5. Ethical considerations

This study upheld and applied in practice the fundamental standards of ethical research with children: (a) that subjects are not placed at undue risk; (b) that participation is voluntary, and subjects are provided with and agree to informed consent prior to their participation; and (c) that written protocols are in place to assure subjects' confidentiality or anonymity. Both parents and students received an information sheet and an informed consent/assent form for their participation in the study. The informed assent form was written in a simple and child-friendly language. To ensure that adolescents were free to choose if they would participate in the study, it was emphasized that even if their parents had consented, they were not obliged to

participate without suffering any sanctions. Also, a list of local psychologists and their contact numbers was provided to both parents and adolescents in case they became distressed or were deemed to be needing protection assistance. This research has received ethical clearance from the international organizations' ethical committee.

3. Results and Discussion

Only grades 6, 9, and 11 were chosen for this study in accordance with the research approach; these grades represent the youngest, middle, and older adolescents, respectively. 34 per cent of the students in these three grades were in grade 6, 33 per cent were in grade nine, and 32 per cent were in grade eleven (the lowest percentage). In grades 6 and 9, the gender mix was nearly equal; however, in grade 11, there were 10 per cent more girls than boys.

Five per cent of the pupils who participated in the research reported that they were employed. Of those who reported that they were employed, 31 per cent were employed in a full-time position that lasted eight hours per day, while 58 per cent were employed for less than eight hours. Additionally, adolescents fared better than their female counterparts in terms of employment: males comprised 79 per cent of employed students, while girls comprised only 20.6 per cent. Of the working students, 51 per cent resided in urban areas, while 49 per cent resided in rural areas. The majority of working pupils were adolescents in grades 9 and 11, with 42 per cent and 52 per cent of the total, respectively. It is important to note that 8 per cent of sixth-grade students reported that they were employed, with a modest number of them working full-time.

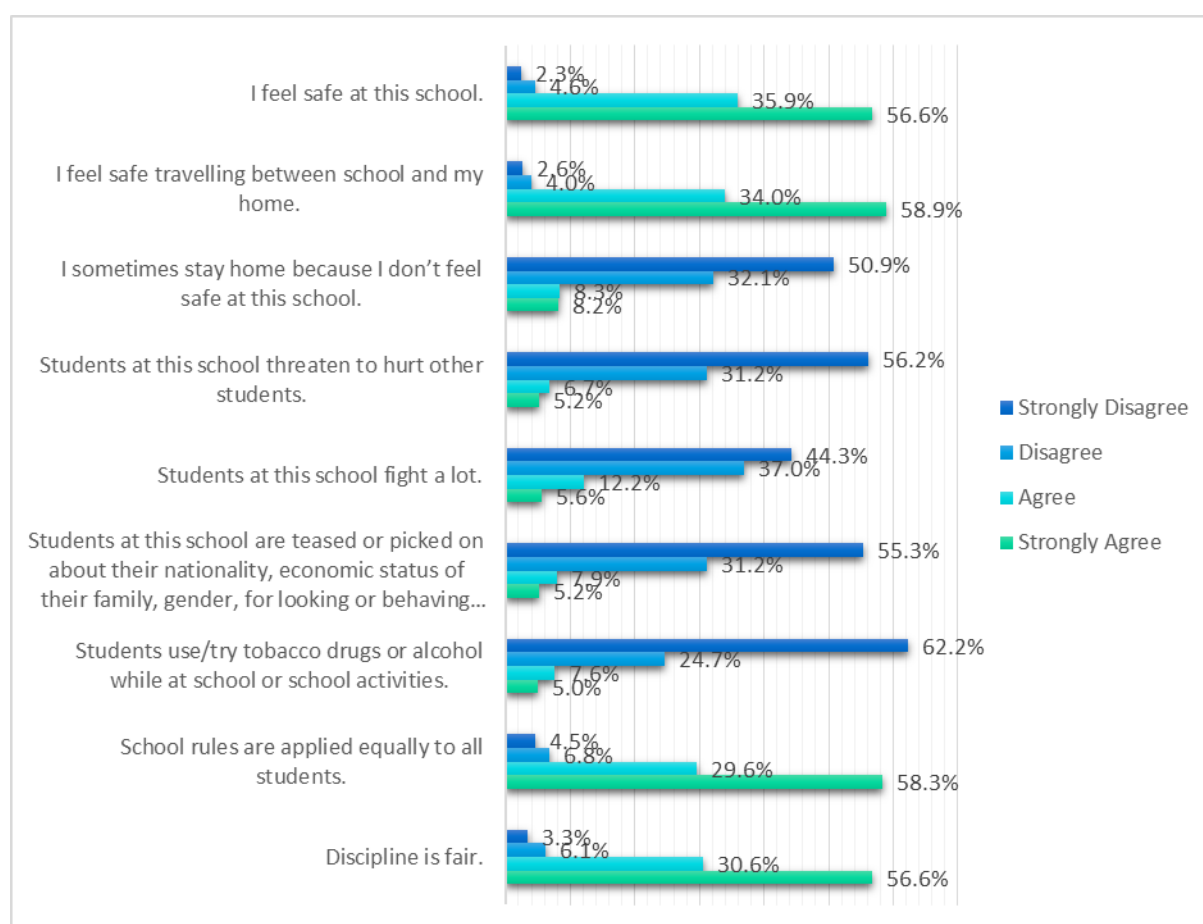
Table 2. Demographic data of the adolescents

Settlement type	Urban	51%
	Rural	49%
What is your gender?	Male	49%
	Female	51%
What grade are you in at school?	Grade 6	34%
	Grade 9	34%
	Grade 11	32%
Do you work?	Yes	5.0%
	No	95.0%
Is it a full-time job (8 hours per day) or part-time job (less than 8 hours per day)?	Full-time	36%
	Part-time	58%
	No answer	10%

Academic achievement and adolescent development are significantly impacted by school safety. In addition to having better mental health, students who feel safe at school are also less likely to participate in dangerous behaviors. A general sense of connectedness is influenced by that sense of safety. The majority of teenage girls and boys who took part in this study said they felt comfortable traveling from home to school (92.5 per cent) and at their schools (92.9 per cent). Nonetheless, 16.5 per cent of students admitted that they occasionally stayed at home because they didn't feel comfortable at school. Regarding student interactions, violent behavior, and bullying, 17.8 per cent of participating students reported that their peers fight a lot, 13.1 per cent that they are teased or picked on because of their nationality, family's economic status, or other reasons, 12.6 per cent that they use or try drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, or engage in other risky activities while in school, and 11.9 per cent that other students have threatened to harm them. Because of this, a consistent percentage of kids—between one and nearly two out of every ten—appears to hold the opinion that schools are unsafe because of students' dangerous, violent, and discriminatory behaviors. Finally, according to Graph 1, 10 per cent of teenagers said that rules and discipline are not enforced equitably to all students.

Compared to girls, teenage boys thought other students' behavior and the school atmosphere were riskier. For example, 40.8 per cent of girls agreed that students fight a lot, whereas 59.2 percent of boys strongly agreed with this statement. When students are teased for various causes, there is an equivalent difference. Additionally, sixth graders were more likely to think that bullying occurred in their schools. Less middle-class ninth-graders agreed that discipline is fair and that school regulations are applied fairly. The majority of working students thought that schools were less safe (by more than 10 per cent).

Graph 1. Perception of school safety



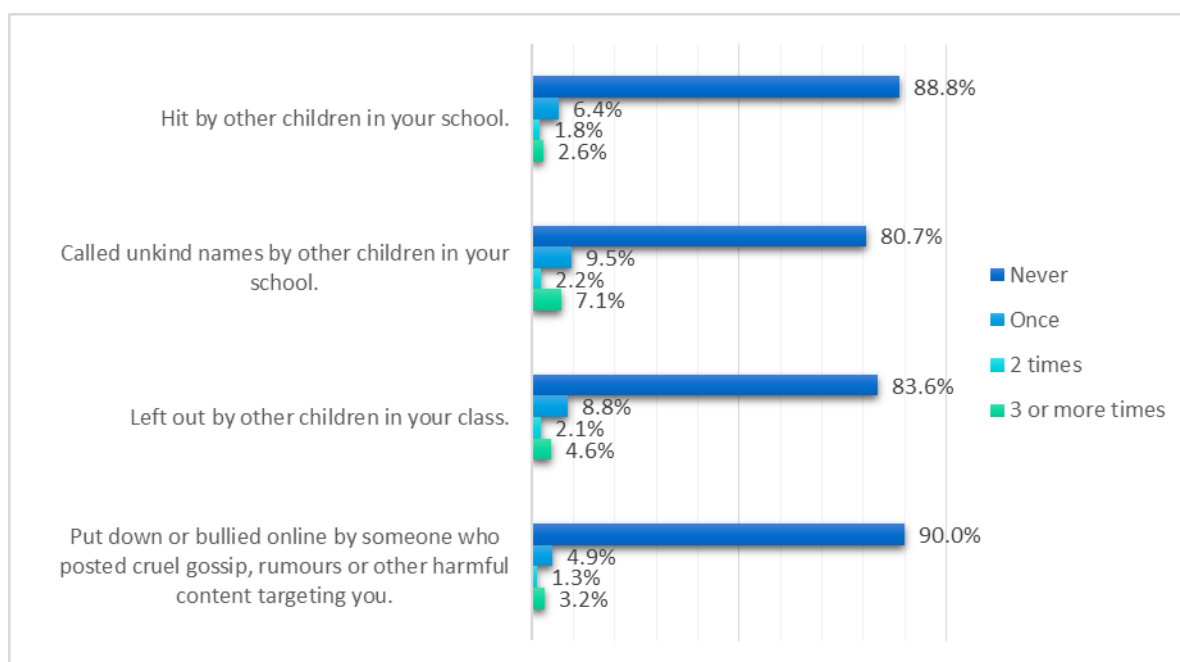
These findings of this study align with other researches indicating that school safety is a crucial factor for adolescents' well-being, academic performance, and avoidance of risky behaviors. For instance, research conducted by Thapa et al. (2013) emphasizes that students in schools with positive climates—characterized by fairness, respect, and effective disciplinary measures—are less likely to experience aggressive behaviors or engage in risk-related activities. Similarly, a study by Cornell and Mayer (2010) in the United States found that students who feel safe at school demonstrate higher academic achievements and improved mental health, underscoring that a sense of safety fosters a general sense of connectedness and engagement with school. In this study, the high percentage of students who feel safe traveling to and from school (92.5 per cent) and within school (92.9 per cent) suggests that most adolescents experience a baseline level of security. However, the 16.5 per cent who occasionally stay home due to feeling unsafe indicates a subset of students for whom school does not represent a secure environment, reflecting similar findings in other studies where pockets of insecurity exist despite overall positive perceptions of school safety (Bradshaw et al., 2013b).

Comparing gender-based perceptions of safety, the findings here resonate with those reported by Gage et al. (2014), which reveal that boys are often more likely than girls to perceive a higher level of peer violence and risky behavior. In this study, boys were significantly more likely to report that their peers engage in fighting and risky activities. Additionally, socio-economic status and employment appear to impact students' perceptions of school safety, as working students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds viewed schools as less safe. This finding is consistent with the work of DeVoe and Bauer (2011), who found that socio-economic factors and employment can create additional stressors that influence perceptions of school safety. The observation that middle-class ninth-graders feel school discipline is less equitable aligns with research suggesting that students from different socio-economic backgrounds may experience school rules and disciplinary actions differently, impacting their sense of fairness and overall school climate (Cohen et al., 2009).

Almost two out of every ten teenagers who took part in the study reported that they had at least once in the preceding month been called cruel names by other students at their school (18.8 per cent). Accordingly, 15.5 percent of them said they felt excluded from their class and 10.8 per cent said they had been hit by other students. There was slightly less online bullying in these schools, with 9.4 per cent of teenagers reporting that they had at least once experienced being put down or harassed online by someone who posted hurtful rumors, gossip, or other content (Graph 2). Adolescent boys, working students, students whose parents have been living or working far from home, and sixth graders participating in this study had a higher probability of being hit at least once or called cruel names (by at least 7 per cent).

Peer victimization, exclusion, and bullying—both in-person and online—are common issues faced by adolescents. Bradshaw et al. (2013a) highlighted that approximately one in five adolescents experience bullying, consistent with this study's finding of 18.8 per cent of teenagers reporting name-calling at school. Additionally, Gini and Pozzoli (2009) found that students who experience social exclusion, as reported by 15.5 per cent of participants here, are more likely to suffer from mental health challenges and lower academic performance, further underscoring the adverse impact of social rejection in educational settings. Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2014) report that 10-15 per cent of students experience cyberbullying, which is comparable to the 9.4 per cent of adolescents in this study who experienced online harassment. However, it should be mentioned that some social media are not used in Uzbekistan, which may lead to less online harassment. Furthermore, research by Olweus (2012) suggests that certain groups—such as boys, working students, and those with absent parents—are at a higher risk of victimization, matching this study's finding that these demographics are more likely to experience physical aggression or name-calling. Together, these findings emphasize the need for comprehensive anti-bullying policies that address both physical and online environments and provide targeted support for vulnerable groups.

Graph 2. Experience of violence. "How often during last month were you."



4. Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the complex nature of adolescents' perceptions of school safety and the prevalence of bullying, violence, and risky behaviors within the school environment. These perceptions highlight the urgent need for policies aimed at creating safer school climates that support students' well-being and development. Ensuring a positive and inclusive environment is essential for fostering a sense of security and connectedness among students. Schools should implement evidence-based programs addressing bullying prevention, mental health support, conflict resolution, and substance abuse awareness, which can significantly improve the safety and well-being of adolescents within school settings.

To address the specific concerns identified in this study, targeted policies should be designed to support vulnerable groups more susceptible to victimization, such as working students, those with absent parents, and younger adolescents. These policies could include comprehensive anti-bullying protocols that cover both physical and online environments, ensuring that all forms of harassment are effectively prevented and managed. Additionally, providing regular training for teachers and staff on trauma-informed practices and conflict resolution can create a supportive framework for students, reducing the incidence of bullying and improving the overall school climate.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that a fair application of school rules and equitable discipline are key components in enhancing students' perceptions of safety. Policymakers should focus on establishing transparent, fair disciplinary measures that are applied consistently across all demographics to foster a sense of justice and inclusivity. Schools can benefit from implementing peer-support programs and student-led initiatives that empower adolescents to play active roles in promoting positive behaviors, respect, and inclusion within their school communities.

In conclusion, the study calls for a collaborative approach involving schools, parents, community organizations, and policymakers to create and sustain a safe, supportive educational environment. By integrating social-emotional learning programs, mental health

resources, and community partnerships, schools can significantly improve safety perceptions among adolescents. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing the academic performance, mental health, and social development of students, ultimately leading to better outcomes for adolescents as they progress into adulthood.

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